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Borsje, J.

DOI

[10.1163/15743012-02401007](https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02401007)

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Religion & Theology

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Citation for published version (APA):

Borsje, J. (2017). The Secret of the Celts Revisited. *Religion & Theology*, 24(1-2), 130-155. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02401007>

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BRILL

RELIGION & THEOLOGY 24 (2017) 130–155

*Religion
& Theology*

brill.com/rt

The Secret of the Celts Revisited*

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Abstract

What makes the Celts so popular today? Anton van Hamel and Joep Leerssen published on the popularity of imagery connected with pre-Christian Celts, Van Hamel seeing the holistic worldview and Leerssen mysteriousness as appealing characteristics. They explain waves of ‘Celtic revival’ that washed over Europe as reaction and romanticising movements that search for alternatives from contemporaneous dominant culture. Each period has produced its modernized versions of the Celtic past. Besides periodical heightened interest in things Celtic, Van Hamel saw a permanent basis of attraction in Celtic texts, which accommodate ‘primitive’ and romantic mentalities. This article also analyses Celtic Christianity (through *The Celtic Way* by Ian Bradley and *The Celtic Way of Prayer* by Esther de Waal) on the use of Celtic texts and imagery of Celtic culture. Two case studies are done (on the use of the Old-Irish *Deer’s Cry* and the description of a nineteenth-century Scottish ritual). Both the current search for ‘spirituality’ and the last wave of ‘Celtic revival’ seem to have sprung from a reaction movement that criticizes dominant religion/culture and seek inspiration and precursors in an idealized past. The roots of this romantic search for a lost paradise are, however, also present in medieval Irish literature itself. Elements such as aesthetics, imaginative worlds and the posited lost beauty of pre-industrial nature and traditional society are keys in explaining the bridges among the gap between ‘us’ and the Celts. The realization that Celtic languages are endangered or dead heightens the feeling of loss because they are the primary gates towards this lost way of (thinking about) life.

* This study is subsidised by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). With thanks to Gerard Wiegers, “Bridges and Breaches in European Spirituality” (Utrecht, 13–16 January 2010) conference attendees and the editors of this volume for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am indebted to Christian Greer for the correction of my English.

Keywords

Celts – romanticization – counterculture – blessings – prayers – ritual – Christianity

People appear to be attracted to religious phenomena associated with the Celts. Every year, modern Druids gather at Stonehenge to celebrate the summer and winter solstices.¹ Pilgrimages are made to the island of Iona, where Saint Colum Cille (or Columba) established his monastery in the sixth century. Many sites on the internet show a multitude of texts, images, and events, all connected with Celtic spirituality. Past, present, and future are encompassed in this interest, as displayed in the Dutch magazine *Vier!*:

There was a song for the milking of the cow, as there was for the smothering of the fire. All day long blessings and prayers sounded at the far end of the inhabited world, gurgling up from a lost Celtic civilization. Today they sound again – with a beckoning perspective.²

Especially since the economic boost in Ireland in the 1990s, called “The Celtic Tiger,” the label “Celtic” appears to sell. The Dublin telephone directory is evidence enough: there are apparently “Celtic cleaners, cars, telephones, insurance, [and] computers.”³ A renewed interest in “Celtic culture” was noticeable in the second half of the twentieth century as part of a wider search for new inspiration in the East, the pre-Christian West, indigenous cultures, and alternative philosophies, as expressed in New Age circles and ecological movements. We will see that as far as the Celts are concerned, this was not the first

1 For more on modern Druids, see, e.g., Ronald Hutton, “The Origins of Modern Druidry,” *Mount Haemus Lecture for the Year 2000*, http://druidry.org/pdfs/first_mt_haemus_lecture.pdf; James R. Lewis, “Celts, Druids and the Invention of Tradition,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, eds. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 479–493 (with thanks to Markus Davidsen for sending me the latter article).

2 “Voor het melken van de koe was er een liedje, net als voor het doven van het vuur. De hele dag klonken er aan het uiteinde van de bewoonde wereld zegenspreuken en gebeden, opborrelend uit een verdwenen Keltische samenleving. Tegenwoordig klinken ze opnieuw – en met een wenkend perspectief,” Bert van der Kruk, “Keltische spiritualiteit doordrenkte het leven van alledag: ‘De wereld is van God en de schepping is goed!’” *Vier!Magazine* Herfst (2009), 78–80.

3 Ruairí Ó hUiginn, “Celtic Twilights and Political Reality,” in *Aspects of Celticity*, eds. Riitta Latvio, Petri Pietiläinen, and Kirsi Ylännö (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Celtic Studies, 2000), 105–118, there 106.

wave of renewed interest, and presumably neither will it be the last. What makes the Celts so popular today? Why do people seek inspiration in Celtic spirituality? What is Celtic? What is spirituality?

To start with the last question, spirituality is an old term that has become fashionable in the last few decades in order to describe (new) religious trends either within or outside or even as opposed to “established” religions. The usefulness and neutrality of this term as an analytical tool has been rightly criticised.⁴ I employ the term as a synonym to “religion.” “Celtic religion” and “Celtic spirituality” are inclusive terms that refer to all forms of religion associated with the Celts, whereas “Celtic Christianity” is a more exclusive concept because it refers to various historical and modern kinds of Christianity associated with the “Celts.”

When we speak of Celts, we refer to those population groups who inhabited parts of Europe and Asia Minor who spoke a Celtic language. The main sources for their world views are inscriptions (sometimes pre-Christian) and texts (dating from a period after the arrival of Christianity) in Celtic languages and in Celtic Latin. The texts give most of the information, and especially Ireland has yielded a rich textual treasure. Here, writing in the vernacular started relatively early – from the seventh century onwards. We owe this textual treasure to Christianity because this literate culture introduced the art of writing texts in manuscripts in the fifth century.

The study of these texts – their edition, translation, and interpretation – is done by scholars called Celticists. These Celticists are often unhappy when they consider the current interest in things Celtic. They feel intellectual frustration about modern misrepresentation of these old sources. They also experience emotional indignation about the colonisation of the past and the indifference towards the languages in which the texts were written.⁵

4 See the excellent article by Ulrike Popp-Baier, “From Religion to Spirituality – Megatrend in Contemporary Society or Methodological Artefact? A Contribution to the Secularization Debate from Psychology of Religion,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3 (2010), 1–34. She suggests “self-controlled religiosity” signifying “a combination of (or oscillation between) critique, consumption, accommodation and sometimes even commitment with regard to religion” as a transitional analytical concept to raise awareness of the complexities and varieties of contemporary individual orientations in the modern “religion” discourse (Popp-Baier, “From Religion,” 26–28).

5 See, e.g., John Carey, “Recent Work on ‘Celtic Christianity,’” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 42 (2001), 83–87, where he reviews Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 2000) and Thomas O’Loughlin, *Journeys on the Edges: The Celtic Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), as welcome contributions to the field.

This contribution is, however, not about the chasm between scholarly and popular interest in Celtic spirituality, but is an attempt to answer the question of why Celtic spirituality is so popular today. Two eminent Dutch scholars, Anton Gerard van Hamel, Professor in Germanic and Celtic Studies, and Joep Leerssen, Professor in European Studies, have formulated answers to this question before me. Their noteworthy views (published in Dutch articles), which focus on imagery concerning pre-Christian Celts, are summarised in order to make them accessible to an international readership. Then I compare their findings with best-selling publications on Celtic Christianity by two authors, Esther de Waal and Ian Bradley. Finally, I formulate my own views on possible reasons for the popularity of Celtic Spirituality.

1 Celts and Romanticism

In 1938, on the eve of the Second World War,⁶ Anton van Hamel tried to unravel the causes for the popularity of the Celts.⁷ Interestingly, he brings in a religious notion:

It is undeniable that a Secret of the Celts exists, a mystical power that protects the life of a spirit [that is, the spirit of the Celts, JB] against many adversities and afflictions, whose attractive force so often appeared to be irresistible to persons and population groups.⁸

This “Celtic spirit” is present in Celtic literature, especially medieval Irish sagas.⁹ Irish literature is the oldest narrative Celtic material and was least influ-

6 For more on this, see Maartje Draak, “Anton Gerard van Hamel (Hilversum, 5 juli 1886–Utrecht, 23 November 1945),” *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden (1945–1946)* (Leiden: MNL, 1947), 70–80, there 72–74.

7 Anton Gerard van Hamel, “Het geheim der Kelten,” *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde te Leiden (1947–1948)* (Leiden: MNL 1949), 15–32.

8 “Het is niet te miskennen, dat er een Geheim der Kelten bestaat, een mystieke macht, die door vele tegenspoeden en noden heen het leven beschermt van een geest [d.i. de geest der Kelten, JB], welks aantrekkingskracht zo dikwijls voor personen en voor bevolkingsgroepen onweerstaanbaar bleek,” Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 16. (Thanks to Kees Veelenturf for his help in unravelling Van Hamel’s sentence.) It is on the basis of his belief in this mystical power that Van Hamel remained hopeful concerning the revival of the Irish language.

9 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 15.

enced by external factors, in his view.¹⁰ Van Hamel notes three characteristics of this spirit.¹¹ First, the literature is characterised by traditionalism: form and content must obey traditional rules. Second, the Celtic world view can be described as the complex perception of wholeness or unity. Every being, animate and inanimate, has its own power and is limited by this. The course of life is ruled by these powers that automatically influence and limit each other. A disturbance in the balance of these powers leads to catastrophe. Third, the Celtic perception of nature is also characterised by this unity: the borders between humanity and nature are fluid.¹² A recurring characteristic in these three points is the absence of a personal element.¹³ Van Hamel identifies the “Celtic spirit” here as a “primitive mentality” – a way of thinking in which rational and necessarily abstracting dissection does not dominate and is not automatically applied when a complex impression is perceived.¹⁴ We recognise here the influence of ideas of the French Jewish philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). It is this complex “holistic” way of looking at life that Van Hamel sees as the cause of the attractiveness of Celtic literature and which strikes a chord within us on an emotional level.

His theory aims to explain why this way of thinking is so appealing and in so doing borrows elements not only from Lévy-Bruhl but also from the evolutionary views of the history of religion, as expounded by the Scottish Christian/Presbyterian and later agnostic anthropologist Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941).¹⁵ I leave the current condemnation of this philosophy aside in order to follow Van Hamel’s line of reasoning.¹⁶

10 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 15.

11 Van Hamel develops these three characteristics from views proposed in Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Dent, 1867), whom he severely criticises while nonetheless admitting that he had some valuable intuitive insights.

12 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 19–23.

13 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 24.

14 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 25.

15 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 24–25.

16 For more on evolutionism in Van Hamel’s theories, see Jacqueline Borsje, *From Chaos to Enemy: Encounters with Monsters in Early Irish Texts. An investigation related to the process of Christianization and the concept of evil*, *Instrumenta Patristica* 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 74–75. I discussed Van Hamel’s views and “primitive” mentality further in “European Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Irish Magic” (invited lecture, presented at *Voces Celticae: Ómós do Scoláireacht Eorpach na Gaeilge / Honouring European Scholarship in Irish*, Symposium organised by the European Cultural Foundation and Foras na Gaeilge, Farmleigh, Dublin, Ireland, 7–8 November 2008).

On the one hand, Van Hamel situates the complex “holistic” world view historically in the European past and, on the other hand, psychologically in the childhood of every person. This way of looking at life by “the Celts” was superseded by analytical thinking, which Van Hamel sees as being developed by Romanic and Germanic peoples.¹⁷ The analytical way of thinking became dominant and led to progress, but Van Hamel also notes a human desire for synthesis, for a harmonic reunion of the material that has become fragmented by analysis. This human desire for synthesis stems from the inner sense of the unity of the world, which is central to “primitive” thinking. This sense of unity is also experienced in childhood until we learn and realise that we are an isolated, individual being. Van Hamel posits that the “primitive” mentality lives on in every person and culture!¹⁸

Nothing that has been an essential part of our growth becomes ever extinct, and that also goes for the memory of the lost paradise of the complex world view.¹⁹

The world view depicted in Celtic literature responds to the nostalgic need for this lost paradise, he argues. Van Hamel points out two waves of “Celtic popularity” connected with Arthurianism and Ossianism that washed over Europe in the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.²⁰ These were periods of reaction (to the Renaissance and the Crusades, and to the Enlightenment) and romanticism.²¹ The new literary products of Romanticism, however, distorted the older material, as it was pressed by contemporary desires and needs.

There is a lot to be said about Van Hamel’s views, of which some are now outdated,²² but his description of the nostalgia for the lost paradise of complex wholeness-thinking in traditional societies is something that we should bear in

17 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 24–25. Joep Leerssen, “Mythe, magie en mystificatie: Keltofilie tussen Romantiek en ‘New Age,’” in *Kelten en de Nederlanden van prehistorie tot heden*, Orbis Linguarum 1, ed. Laurant Toorians (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 223–238, there 231, points out that this nineteenth-century tripartition of Western Europe in three culture groups holds to a certain extent for linguistics, but is far too simplified for ethnic identities. It is important to realise that Van Hamel does not connect these mindsets with racial causes but with cultural-historical reasons, Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 28.

18 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 24–25.

19 “Niets sterft af, dat ooit een essentiële element van onze groei was, ook niet de herinnering aan het verloren paradijs van de complexe wereldbeschouwing,” Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 26.

20 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 28–29.

21 Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 26–27.

22 Even though Ireland was on the outskirts of European civilisation, we know now that

mind when we read modern publications on Celtic spirituality. Other important points are his views on permanent and periodical interest: the appeal of Celtic texts resides permanently in the human mind due to our “primitive” and romantic mentality.²³ The production of mediated, “modernised” forms of Celtic heritage is, in his view, connected with historical periods of reaction and romanticism.

There are more periods of heightened interest in “Celtic culture” than identified by Van Hamel. Ian Bradley distinguishes six movements of “Celtic revivalism,” with the first in the eighth to ninth centuries and the sixth in the closing decades of the twentieth century, “which so far shows no sign of waning.”²⁴

The question of why this newest wave of interest in Celtic spirituality, which started around 1970, has surged is the subject of an article by Joep Leerssen.²⁵ This is especially true of people in alternative and heterodox circles who appear to have become enchanted by the Tolkien-like atmosphere ascribed to the Celts.²⁶ Leerssen points out that the Celts were tribal population groups, focused on warfare and warrior honour.²⁷ The mystification of them as “a people of imagination, magic, symbols and spiritual wisdom” is to be traced back to an invention of tradition, which occurred on the eve of Romanticism.²⁸ He refers to the poems of Ossian, produced by James Macpherson (1736–1796), whose so-called translations were figments of his own imagination, based upon fragments of old sources. The poems were such a big hit because they were written according to eighteenth-century taste.²⁹

external factors did influence Irish literature. We would not, furthermore, base our views on only one genre, such as the sagas. Moreover, the analytical mind is clearly at work in Irish texts and is, for instance, to be witnessed in medieval etymology, in which words are dissected and a creative play of sound and meaning is exhibited. But, unlike modern etymology, no priority is given to any of the various etymological exercises; they all appear to be valid; cf. Rolf Baumgarten, “A Hiberno-Isidorian Etymology,” *Peritia* 2 (1983), 225–228, there 226. Perhaps we could see this last phenomenon as a form of what Van Hamel calls “unity thinking.”

23 “Romantiek is er natuurlijk nooit niet,” “Romanticism is of course never absent”; Van Hamel, “Geheim,” 27.

24 Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), viii.

25 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 228–229.

26 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 229; references to a “Tolkien culture” and “Tolkien-like enchantment” on 226 and 235 respectively.

27 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 229.

28 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 229–232.

29 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 232–233.

Leerssen ascribes the perceived mysteriousness to a lack of knowledge concerning the Celts. The chasm between scholarly interest and popular literary-cultural “Celtomania” started to open up around 1820.³⁰ Many publications on the “mysterious” heritage of the Celts appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³¹ Wild theories came to light and Leerssen shows how these live on in modern New Age publications.³² Leerssen, who studied bardic poetry from the Early Modern Irish period (ca. 1200–ca. 1650), sees a different image emerging from these Celtic texts, pointing out “a large quantity of realism, sarcastic humour even, a sharp observing view on reality and a cynical-ironical rather than a rapturous attitude.”³³ Leerssen concludes that these new publications on the Celts are driven by the contemporary need to depict the Celts “of the Old Age” as the great precursors of the current New Age.³⁴

When we consider this last remark, it seems that one of the reasons for the current popularity may be a desire or need to find pre-Christian European roots for modern phenomena. Van Hamel’s complex holistic world view that, in his view, is present in Irish sagas is echoed in later New Age appeals for holistic thinking. Leerssen’s occult, mysterious image of the Celt fits well within current popular culture, such as computer and board games, books, and films set in a medieval-like fantasy world or in a modern alternative world, where Celtic warriors, druids, witches, and other sorcerers have a legitimate place. Leerssen suggests that all ideals that are different from mainstream Jewish and Christian civilisation and rational scholarship seem to fall in the category “Celtic.”³⁵ Just as Van Hamel noted a pattern of reaction against dominant culture in romantic periods, so, too, does Leerssen point out that countercultural engagement inspired the last wave.

Van Hamel’s and Leerssen’s articles focus mainly on images portraying pre-Christian Celtic culture. We will, therefore, now consider in what way the “Celts” are represented in publications dedicated to Christianity.

30 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 234.

31 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 233, where the author points out the influential publications of Ernest Renan (*La poésie des races celtiques*, 1859) and Matthew Arnold; on the latter see also the above-discussed publication by Van Hamel.

32 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 233–237.

33 “[E]en grote dosis aan werkelijkheidszin, sarcastische humor zelfs, een scherp observerende kijk op de werkelijkheid en een eerder cynisch-ironische dan dweepende houding,” Leerssen, “Mythe,” 237.

34 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 237.

35 Leerssen, “Mythe,” 238.

2 Celtic Christianity and Pre-Christian Religion: Breach or Bridge?

Turning to popular modern publications on Celtic Christianity, we need to investigate which sources they use and how they use them. Furthermore, we will study which image they portray of the Celts and how they describe the Christianisation. Was it a breach or a bridge?

For this purpose we will consider two bestsellers: *The Celtic Way* by Ian Bradley³⁶ and *The Celtic Way of Prayer* by Esther de Waal.³⁷ The sources employed for these works are texts from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and range from the medieval to the modern. Blessings and prayers predominate, but various poems are also discussed. From this, we can deduce that “Celtic” is not just a historical category to these authors: modern publications from the so-called Celtic countries are included, which need not even be written in a Celtic language.

How do they use these sources? We consider two examples: a text from medieval Ireland and a ritual from nineteenth-century Scotland. The first sample is the Old-Irish³⁸ *Deer's Cry*, also known as *The Breastplate of Saint Patrick*, which translated into English runs as follows:

1. TODAY I GIRD MYSELF³⁹
with a mighty power:
invocation of the Trinity,
belief in the Threeness,
confession⁴⁰ of the Oneness,
in the Creator's presence.

36 Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1993). The Dutch version is entitled *Keltische spiritualiteit: Een oud geloof met perspectieven voor de toekomst* [*Celtic spirituality: An old belief with perspectives for the future*] (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1997).

37 Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996). For the Dutch version, see Esther de Waal, *De Keltische manier van bidden* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1999).

38 The Old-Irish period is from about 600 to about 900, and the Middle-Irish period from about 900 to about 1200.

39 Alternatively, this line may be translated “Today I bind myself.”

40 Carey translates here “affirmation” and in stanza 8 “proclamation,” but the same Irish word (*fáisitiu* in the dativus singularis) is used. I have replaced his translations with the primary meaning given in the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (see <http://www.dil.ie/index.asp> s.v.).

2. TODAY I GIRD MYSELF

with the power of Christ's birth together with his baptism,
 with the power of his crucifixion together with his burial,
 with the power of his resurrection together with his ascension,
 with the power of his descent to pronounce the judgment of Dooms-
 day.

3. TODAY I GIRD MYSELF

with the power of the order of the cherubim,
 with the obedience of angels,
 with the ministry of the archangels,
 with the expectation of resurrection for the sake of a reward,
 with the prayers of patriarchs,
 with the predictions of prophets,
 with the precepts of apostles,
 with the faith of confessors,
 with the innocence of holy virgins,
 with the deeds of righteous men.

4. TODAY I GIRD MYSELF

with the strength of heaven,
 light of the sun,
 brightness of the moon,
 brilliance of fire,
 speed of lightning,
 swiftness of wind,
 depth of sea,
 firmness of earth,
 stability of rock.

5. TODAY I GIRD MYSELF

with the strength of God	to direct me.
the might of God	to exalt me,
the mind of God	to lead me,
the eye of God	to watch over me,
the ear of God	to hear me,
the word of God	to speak to me,
the hand of God	to defend me,
the path of God	to go before me,

the shield of God to guard me,
the help of God to protect me,
 against the snares of demons,
 against the temptations of vices,
 against the envious ones by nature (?),⁴¹
 against everyone who wishes me ill,
 far and near,
 among few and among many.

6. TODAY I INTERPOSE ALL THESE POWERS BETWEEN MYSELF
and every harsh pitiless power which may come against my body
and my soul,
against the incantations⁴² of false prophets,
against the black laws of paganism,
against the crooked laws of heretics,
against the encirclement of idolatry,
against the spells of women and smiths and druids,
against every knowledge which harms one's⁴³ body and soul.

7. MAY CHRIST PROTECT ME TODAY
 against poison,
 against burning,
 against drowning,
 against wounding,
 that many rewards may come to me.

May Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

41 Carey translates "against the tendencies (?) of nature." The manuscripts read *irnechtaib*, *foirmdechaib*, *formdechaib*. I base my tentative translation on the Dictionary (see above, n. 40), s.v. *formtech*, "envious," where this text is quoted as an example. What is mentioned here might refer to people who possess the evil eye and, therefore, are envious by nature. For such posited possessors of the evil eye, see Jacqueline Borsje (with a contribution by Fergus Kelly), *The Celtic Evil Eye and Related Mythological Motifs in Medieval Ireland*, Studies in the History and Anthropology of Religion 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 56, 197–199, 225–233.

42 Carey translates "predictions," but the Dictionary (see above, n. 40) translates *tinchetal* as "the act of casting spells, incantation." Many of the examples in the Dictionary ascribe this act to druids.

43 Carey translates "a man's."

Christ to my right, Christ to my left,
 Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit, Christ where I stand,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,
 Christ in every eye which looks on me,
 Christ in every ear which hears me.

8. TODAY I GIRD MYSELF

with a mighty power:
 invocation of the Trinity,
 belief in the Threeness,
 confession of the Oneness,
 in the Creator's presence.

9. Salvation is of the Lord, Salvation is of the Lord, Salvation is of Christ,
 may your salvation, Lord, be always with us.⁴⁴

The *lorica*, or “breastplate,” is a textual genre with which people believed to be able to protect themselves against dangers. They recited or sung such a text and/or carried the text on their body. Esther de Waal sees in this text “a tremendous credal affirmation of the unity of the universe and of men and women within it.”⁴⁵ She tells us that this protective text goes back to the time of the druids when, according to tradition, Saint Patrick used it on Easter Eve in the year 433.⁴⁶

Bestsellers are usually easy to read, and this goes hand in hand with simplification. We can see from these few lines how this works. In stanza 6, women are singled out as a source of evil, together with druids and smiths. This is glossed over by De Waal's mention of “the unity of men and women.” Moreover, Saint Patrick lived in the fifth century; the text is dated to the eighth century, and the ascription to Patrick stems from the eleventh century.⁴⁷ De Waal is aware that

44 John Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1998), 130–135. For further details on this text, see Jacqueline Borsje, “Druids, Deer and ‘Words of Power’: Coming to Terms with Evil in Medieval Ireland,” of which a long version appeared in *Approaches to Religion and Mythology in Celtic Studies*, eds. Katja Ritari and Alexandra Bergholm (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 122–149, and a short version in *Coping with Evil in Religion and Culture: Case Studies*, eds. Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Lourens Minnema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 25–49.

45 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 26.

46 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 136; cf. 21–26.

47 See Borsje, “Druids,” 131 (long version); 33 (short version).

the ascription to Saint Patrick is not a historical fact. She describes the genre of hagiography as a mix of history, mythology, psychology, and spirituality.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, she dates the event and generally describes the miracles of the saints as if they were historical.⁴⁹ What she does can be called a remythologising (as opposed to demythologising). She presents miracles as “historical narratives” to be used by the readers as spiritual examples. This has consequences to which I will return.

Ian Bradley also regularly refers to the *Deer's Cry*.⁵⁰ Similar to Esther de Waal, he mentions the translation by Noel Dermot O'Donoghue (1920–2006) that attempts to echo “the sound and flow of the original.”⁵¹ When Bradley quotes the text,⁵² however, he uses a nineteenth-century versification, which is based on translations only. This is the version of Cecil Frances Alexander (1818–1895), which is used in modern liturgy and can be found on various sites on the internet. The structure of the original text has been changed and the contents have been adapted in order to create a hymn to be sung in church. The rendering of stanza 6 is a good example of this adaptation:

Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,
Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft [...].⁵³

What we see is a more abstract rendering of the dangers. Satan replaces the whole variety of powers feared by medieval Christianity. The dangers surrounding the Christians have shifted from dangerous words associated with concrete people (prophets, pagans, heretics) to dangerous abstract entities (heresy, knowledge, idolatry). The dangers are, to a certain extent, internalised. The line concerning women, smiths, and druids has vanished altogether. “The wizard's evil craft” is all that remains of the concrete human threat perceived by Christians.

48 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 149.

49 See, for instance: De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 100.

50 Bradley, *Celtic Way*, 31–33, 42, 45, 48–49.

51 Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, “St. Patrick's Breastplate,” in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), 45–63, there 46–49.

52 Bradley, *Celtic Way*, 33, 45, 48–49, without referring to his source.

53 http://www.prayerfoundation.org/st_patricks_breastplate_prayer.htm; downloaded on 6 December 2010.

This freeness with the sources is, incidentally, also found in modern pagan circles. In a paganised version of the *Deer's Cry*, the line mentioning women, smiths, and druids is obviously missing:

I arise today
 Through the strength of heaven:
 Light of sun,
 Radiance of moon,
 Splendor of fire,
 Speed of lightning,
 Swiftmess of wind,
 Depth of sea,
 Stability of earth,
 Firmness of rock.
 I arise today
 Through the God's strength to pilot me:
 The God's eyes to look before me,
 The God's wisdom to guide me,
 The God's way to lie before me,
 The God's shield to protect me,
 From all those who shall wish me ill,
 Afar and a near,
 Alone and in multitude.
 Against every cruel merciless power that may oppose my body and soul.
 The Gods with me, The Gods before me, The Gods behind me,
 The Gods in me, The Gods beneath me, The Gods above me,
 The Gods on my right, The Gods on my left,
 The Gods when I lie down, The Gods when I sit down, The Gods when I
 arise, The Gods to shield me,
 The Gods in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
 The Gods in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 I arise today.⁵⁴

This version is shortened whereby the medieval character of the text with its repetitive, litany-like lists has been diminished. Christian elements are removed and the invocations are now addressed to anonymous supernatural

54 Draco Belfire, *Celtic Pagan Adoption of St. Patrick's Breastplate*; <http://hubpages.com/hub/Pagan-Prayer>; downloaded on December 6, 2010.

entities, indicated by “the God” or a plural form. The text has a “lighter” flavour: with the removal of all but two of the dangers and evils, its protective character is less emphasised. The original text is, however, rooted in a world view of life as a daily battle with physical and spiritual dangers against which one wishes to protect oneself. The Irish original is a form of verbal armour which the speaker puts on in the morning, indicated by a verb meaning “I bind myself” or “I gird myself.” The author used an alternative translation where again a “lighter” image is given of rising from one’s bed. The paganised version effectuates a more positive and less beleaguered atmosphere, which suits modern desires for positive thinking and less emphasis on supernatural evil or personal faults characterised as “sin” in Judaism and Christianity. The shortening itself, also applied in modern Christian versions on the internet, may be another concession to modern life insofar as it is characterised by short attention spans.

There are many more examples of adaptations of the *Deer’s Cry* to be found in publications and on the Internet, but these two versions should suffice as examples of the phenomenon under review, namely, that texts are adapted to modern needs and desires.⁵⁵

The second sample from nineteenth-century Scotland shows how difficult the source material is. *Carmina Gadelica*, the collection of charms and prayers by Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912),⁵⁶ is a kind of Bible in Celtic Christianity circles.⁵⁷ It is important to note that the transition from pre-Christian to Christian culture is mostly described as a bridge in the two bestsellers. The Scottish collection serves as one of the sources for this. De Waal summarises some baptismal rites for babies performed by midwives or nurses, and then she adds a quotation on “other customs”:

When a child was born it was handed to and fro across the fire three times, some words being addressed in an almost inaudible murmur to the fire-god. It was then carried three times sun-wise round the fire, some words being murmured to the sun-god.⁵⁸

55 For an example in Esther de Waal’s book, see *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 30, 187 n. 28.

56 Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations with Illustrative Notes on Words, Rites, and Customs, Dying and Obsolete: Orally Collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and Translated into English*, 6 vols. (1900; repr. Edinburgh: Floris, 2006). For more on this collection, see Meek, *Quest*, s.v. *Carmina Gadelica*, and *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael*, ed. Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart (Port of Ness: Island Book Trust, 2008).

57 Donald E. Meek, “Alexander Carmichael and ‘Celtic Christianity,’” in *Life and Legacy*, 82–95, there 82.

58 De Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*, 32 (without page reference).

I was very surprised to read of such a Scottish ritual in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the source text gives this intriguing description,⁵⁹ however, it looked suspicious to me. As a result, I wrote to an expert, Dr. Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart. He let me know that Volume 3 of *Carmina Gadelica* goes back to two types of material, interleaved with each other: firstly, Carmichael's written notes and, secondly, typewritten neat transcriptions of these notes combined with additions that are not by Carmichael himself. The fire story does not appear as a note in Carmichael's handwriting, but only in typed copy.⁶⁰

We find something that approaches this ritual in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources. For instance, after a journey through Scotland in 1772, Thomas Pennant (1726–1798) notes the following ritual in his book:

It has happened that, after baptism, the father has placed a basket, filled with bread and cheese, on the pot-hook that impended over the fire in the middle of the room, which the company sit around; and the child is thrice handed across the fire, with the design to frustrate all attempts of evil spirits, or evil eyes.⁶¹

The formulation "It has happened" makes one doubt whether this is an eyewitness account and whether it was a general custom. Procedures of carrying fire around the child (and the mother) as a protective ritual seem to have been more general, judging from the literature.⁶² Reference is also made to an exorcistic ritual in which a child, eighteen months old, is passed through a burning hoop in order to cure it from an affliction which was believed to have a supernatural

59 The description ends with a comment on its alien character: "These dedications to the fire- and sun-gods are indicative of far-away lands and far-away times; but of what land and of what time?" (Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica*, Vol. 3, 2).

60 "The fire story does not appear as a note in Carmichael's own handwriting, but only in typed copy. As to who typed out the material (and maybe added to it), it's probably either his daughter Ella before her death in 1928 or else his grandson James Carmichael Watson," Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, email message, 23 November 2009.

61 Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland MDCCCLXXII*, Part 2 (London: White, 1776), 46, condemns the ritual as a "purification" of "idoltrous origin," comparing it with a motif in the Bible, in which Israelites "made their children pass through the fire to Moloch." Alexander Campbell's (1788–1866) version of this ritual (*A Journey from Edinburgh through Parts of North Britain* [London: Longman and Rees, 1802], 260) may be based upon Pennant's book, although he adds a few details (the linen in which the child is wrapped and the oatmeal dish consumed by those present).

62 See George Henderson, *Survivals in Belief among the Celts* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1911), 208–215.

cause.⁶³ What matters here is that none of these sources mention dedications to a Fire or Sun God.⁶⁴

This dedication may very well be an example of the invention of tradition. The collection by Carmichael needs to be approached with care, which we can also deduce from the words of another expert, Professor Ronald Black:

Everyone agrees that Alexander Carmichael really existed. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for the contents of *Carmina Gadelica*. The problem is best summed up in the words of a person who should have known better, namely my wife, who cheerfully remarked to me just a few weeks ago: “Oh, I thought he made it all up!”⁶⁵

This is of course an overstatement. The collection consists, however, not only of genuine charms and prayers, but also of “improved” texts; sometimes words have been made up,⁶⁶ at other times text was added or deleted. This was done by Carmichael himself and, after his death, by others. It is thus not a simple source to get access to Scottish beliefs; one needs the help of the careful studies by Celticists who are aware of the romanticising cultural and political context of Carmichael and who know Scottish Gaelic. Carmichael was not a “second Macpherson,” but his collection is a “consciously reconstructed package” with as main line the “ecumenical, tolerant, syncretistic – and also civilised and cultured – nature of the ‘Spiritual Celt.’”⁶⁷

63 Henderson, *Survivals*, 209–211.

64 Pennant, *A Tour*, 260. I am greatly indebted to Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart for these references (e-mail messages, 18 January 2010). Further research is needed.

65 Ronald Black, “I Thought He Made It All Up: Context and Controversy,” in *Life and Legacy*, 57–81, there 57.

66 See, for instance, Ragnall MacilleDhuibh (Ronald Black), “God of the Moon, God of the Sun,” *West Highland Free Press*, 5 January 1996: “Alexander Carmichael’s famous collection of Gaelic folklore, ‘Carmina Gadelica,’ the first two volumes of which were first published in 1900, is full of strange things. The prayers, charms, cures and incantations have a strange beauty – and dignity – all of their own. In them are many strange words, words that Carmichael misheard, perhaps, or misremembered, or could not get down on paper fast enough. His texts were collected before the era of the tape-recorder, after all, and as many of them were meant to be chanted quickly, privately and under the breath, it is a wonder that they were collected at all.” See also Black in *Life and Legacy*, 68–69.

67 Meek in *Life and Legacy*, 82, 84. See also the contribution by Black to this volume and, in general, see Patrick Sims-Williams, “The Visionary Celt: The Construction of an Ethnic Preconception,” *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 11 (1986): 71–96.

Let us turn our attention now to the question of which image of the “Celts” and their culture the bestsellers give. Esther de Waal calls the Celtic tradition “our own tradition”; it is “ancient or elemental” for “any of us.”⁶⁸ What we find in the furthest fringes of the Western world, she maintains, is a basic, primal, fundamental, and universal form of Christianity.⁶⁹ This is a Christianity from before the fragmentation, when the religion was still whole. This wholeness is an important “deep point” within Christian tradition which resonates with a “deep point” in oneself. There was, for instance, no separation between prayer and living: “praying and working flow into one another, so that life is to be punctuated by prayer, become prayer.”⁷⁰ This life was rural, corporate, heroic, and full of imagination.⁷¹ Celtic Christianity is unique in its absorption of pre-Christian culture.⁷² The Celtic world view is both “very familiar and very mysterious,” and is comparable to the world view of other traditional and aboriginal peoples. Celtic Christianity may also be prophetic, because it presents a life and a world view that is different from today and therefore may inspire us towards a different, better way of life. Unlike “our” way of life, this world view is not highly individualistic, competitive, and inward-looking. It confronts us with a “wholistic approach to the world,” which heals the breaches and fractures.⁷³

On every page, a deep love for the beauty and contents of Celtic texts resounds; Esther de Waal is full of reverence and respect towards the tradition. It is easy to imagine how this calm, loving description of an appealing yet lost way of life, combined with applications to modern life, is attractive to modern readers.

68 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 1–2.

69 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 2–3.

70 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 3.

71 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 4.

72 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 4. See also 37, where she quotes Robin Flower in the second sentence: “Already by the sixth and seventh centuries the monastic writers were turning to the native *filidi* (*sic*; the correct form is *filid*), poets, when they wanted to put anything down in writing. ‘By the seventh century the monks had accepted the pagan tradition and put it on one level with the historical material which came down to them under the sanction of the fathers of the church.’ This simplified view is outdated. See, for instance, Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth Monographs 3 (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990), and on Robin Flower, see, e.g., Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “Early Irish Hermit Poetry?” in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*, Maynooth Monographs 2, eds. Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach, and Kim McCone (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1989), 251–267.

73 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 6.

If we compare Esther de Waal's bestseller with that of Ian Bradley, then we can see that the two books move along similar lines. Both authors are aware of the criticism of romanticism, which they seem to want to counteract by pointing out how hard life was for the "Celts."⁷⁴ The criticism is not, however, directed at how life is portrayed but at how the people and the texts are described in a selective, idealising way. I think this was done with good intentions. The authors aimed to write spiritual guides: nasty things in the texts and faults of ancestors are not inspiring.⁷⁵ Following in the footsteps of hagiographers by retelling impressive and endearing myths on the saints without further comment tends to give a black-and-white image and to distort the colourful descriptions in the sources. Male saints may curse their opponents, for instance, or be misogynistic as we would expect given their time and age.

Idealisation is a form of romanticism. The "Celts" were neither superhumans nor noble savages; their texts are not so sacred that we cannot comment upon them. The authors create new myths for modern times. Reading of a different pace of life, the mutual help of neighbours, and rituals, texts, and symbols that accompany life may very well be inspirational in the modern world which is oversaturated with electronic communication. Nevertheless, in creating myths, one needs to be careful and distance oneself from elements that history has taught us to be wary of. For instance, anti-Judaistic and anti-Semitic elements are part of the Christian tradition, and Celtic Christianity is no exception to this. Thus, the vinegary wine offered to Jesus on the cross has been seen as a symbol for "the bitter gall of Jewish faith."⁷⁶ De Waal quotes this view without any comment in a passage about the influence of Celtic myth and legend on the portrayal of Jesus. This is not only misrepresenting Celtic mythology but also neglecting to criticise the Christian tradition.

Ian Bradley has gone a different road after his best-selling publications. In *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, he has taken a more critical stance and distances himself somewhat from his earlier publications. This

74 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 59, 69, 105, 107; Bradley, *Celtic Way*, 46.

75 De Waal (*Celtic Way*, 148) only once mentions the antagonism that the missionaries will have encountered. She does not evade the problem of evil and destructive forces, but applies these more to today than that she locates them in the past (e.g., De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 27).

76 De Waal, *Celtic Way*, 128. On this anti-Judaistic motif, see William Chester Jordan, "The Last Tormentor of Christ: An Image of the Jew in Ancient and Medieval Exegesis, Art, and Drama," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* New Series 78 (1987): 21–47, and William Chester Jordan, "The Erosion of the Stereotype of the Last Tormentor of Christ," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* New Series 81 (1990): 13–44.

process was not painless to him and he asks his readers for understanding.⁷⁷ When he describes the above-mentioned six waves of “Celtic” revivalism, he also analyses their romanticising tendencies. He, in fact, turns the tables and accuses historians of romanticism as well.⁷⁸ He ascribes romanticism in historical periods mainly to non-Celtic “outsiders.” Similar points have been made by critics of Celtic Christianity, such as Donald Meek.⁷⁹

3 The Secret of the Celts Revisited

What makes “Celtic Spirituality” so attractive? Van Hamel referred to traditionalism, holism, and the special relation to nature, as found in Irish sagas. Leerssen pointed out the image of the mysterious, spiritual Celt, constructed in the eighteenth century. Bradley lists as recurrent themes the perceived exotic and peripheral quality of Celtic Christianity, its different and “alternative” nature, its perceived closeness to native pre-Christian and pagan religions, its syncretistic elements, its friendliness to the natural world, its simplicity, its deep spirituality, and the image of medieval Celtic Christians as “paragons of a pure and primitive faith.”⁸⁰ For busy city dwellers, the description of a lost paradise of a traditional, rural world may evoke a positive, nostalgic response.⁸¹

I want to make two points concerning this “lost paradise,” starting with the word “lost.” An important factor in the popularity of the Celts is the fact that we are dealing with threatened languages and traditions. Some of the Celtic languages are now virtually dead, and others have become minority languages. There are no longer any native speakers of Manx and Cornish, although revivalists have learned to speak these languages. Of the surviving Celtic languages – Welsh, Breton, Irish and Scottish Gaelic – Welsh would appear to be the most successful. A language is a unique way for the human mind to express itself; when it dies, a way of thinking, a way of living is irretrievably lost.⁸² This loss speaks to our imagination. Dutch linguist Pieter Muysken somewhat ironically

77 Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, ix.

78 Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 25; but cf. 36: “Historians are cynical creatures who are always looking for hidden agendas with dubious motives.”

79 Meek, *Quest*, e.g. 82–86.

80 Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, viii–ix; cf. also Meek, *Quest*, 23–37.

81 Interest into Celtic spirituality, incidentally, is also present in rural surroundings.

82 On dying traditions, see, e.g., Bart Jan Spruyt, “De angst voor onherstelbaar verlies: over geloof, cultuur en identiteit,” in *Splitsen of knopen? Over volkscultuur in Nederland*, eds. Hester Dibbits et al. (Rotterdam: NAI, 2009), 87–93.

refers to the “myth of the last speaker,” who is usually female. He adds that people love such things as “the last female speaker of the most southern language of the world.”⁸³ Myths or not, dying languages and traditions evoke the wish for conservation and for keeping these cultural expressions alive. They also evoke nostalgia which often contains idealisation: the dying tradition is perceived as intrinsically good or even sacred. The romanticising mind may create a paradise lost in its wish for conservation. The wish to re-use or revive traditions may lead to the invention of tradition.

I turn now to “paradise.” The term “Celt” was devised by outsiders; it is only in the eighteenth century that people started to refer to themselves as Celts.⁸⁴ Often, non-Celtic outsiders are said to be the ones who have romanticised “the Celt” and Celtic tradition. Ian Bradley refers to the Venerable Bede (672/673–735), who describes Ireland as a particularly holy place “so far away at the ends of the earth.”⁸⁵ Thus we encounter the characteristics of remoteness, sacredness, and being special already in the eighth century. This image is, however, also painted by “insiders.” Ireland is a special place, according to the Irish literary tradition on *The Invasions of Ireland*: Ireland and Paradise have a similar nature, and harmful beasts do not live there. This is explained by their “corresponding” position on the earth: Paradise is in the southern quarter of the East and Ireland is near the West in the northern part.⁸⁶

My point here is that we need to acknowledge that the tendency to romanticise is already part of the medieval Irish tradition. While hagiography romanticises the achievements of the saints and the image of Christianity, there is also a tendency to romanticise the pre-Christian past in Middle-Irish texts.⁸⁷ The

83 Pieter Muysken was interviewed in Frederique Melman, “Laatste woorden,” *vPRO Gids* nrs 51/52 (2009): 24–25.

84 See Joep Leerssen, “Celticism,” in *Celticism*, ed. Terence Brown (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), 1–20, there 5; Leerssen roughly dates the construction of “the Celt” to the period from 1650 to 1850. Joep Leerssen (e-mail message, 13 January 2010) kindly let me know that Breton people were the first to use the word “Celt” as an ethnic designation in the contemporaneous sense.

85 Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 25–28, there 27.

86 See the Latin beginning of a version of this compilation: *Mín(i)ugud gabál nÉrenn* [...], “An Explanation of the Takings of Ireland [...]” Rudolf Thurneysen, *Zu irischen Handschriften und Litteraturdenkmälern*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Philologisch-Historische Klasse, Neue Folge, Bd. 14, nr. 3 (1913): 3–9, there 6. Rolf Baumgarten, “The Geographical Orientation of Ireland in Isidore and Orosius,” *Peritia* 3 (1984): 189–203, there 189, dates this text to the eleventh century. For more on this “paradisical” tradition concerning Ireland, see Borsje, *From Chaos*, 152–159.

87 See, for instance, John Carey, “The Three Things Required of a Poet,” *Ériu* 48 (1997): 41–58;

roots of the image of Celts and things Celtic ultimately go back to the sources in the Celtic languages themselves: here we find appealing descriptions of elves, druids, mists, large standing stones (which are not Celtic),⁸⁸ and various traditions on “magic.” These texts are directly accessible and yet complicated, which makes them easily into something “mysterious.”⁸⁹ The beauty of these texts, the sound of Celtic languages and music, the sight of Celtic art and the wild or rural landscape – these aesthetically pleasing elements, together with the nostalgia for a lost past, have a direct appeal to those who witness them. Both outsiders and insiders, scholars and non-scholars alike, have produced writings romanticising “Celtic” phenomena and this is an ongoing process, just as the study of Celtic culture is an ongoing process.

Is there a Secret of the Celts? I see the mystic, protective power posited by Van Hamel as another form of romanticism. That some of the Celtic languages have survived until the present day is thanks to the living speakers and the revival movements. One of the appealing elements of the literature that we encountered was the perceived unity or wholeness that would characterise the world view in them. Both Van Hamel and the bestsellers posited this.⁹⁰ Whether there truly is such a way of thinking in the medieval texts is a matter for further research, but we would do well to realise that these texts may also represent a reconstruction of the past. Moreover, we are dealing with a symbolic universe transmitted through literature. If studied more closely, we see that the medieval Irish corpus of texts is multi-layered and multi-voiced. The literature is a complex conglomerate; the language is difficult and the contents are challenging, which explains why Celtic culture is so attractive to

Jacqueline Borsje, review of L. Toorians, ed., *Kelten en de Nederlanden van prehistorie tot heden*, *Celtica* 24 (2003), 336–340, there 339–340, and Borsje, “Human Sacrifice in Medieval Irish Literature,” in *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 31–54, there 53–54. For the idealisation of hermits and nature in the ninth century, see Ó Corráin, “Early Irish Hermit Poetry?”

88 Cf., e.g., Lewis, “Celts, Druids,” 483.

89 To a certain extent, the “strangeness” and obscure passages disappear in the modern reception history here treated, because the authors select those passages that they see fit to be included in their spiritual guide books and apply them to modern life (this process is also described by Nienke Vos concerning the writings of desert fathers and mothers; see elsewhere in this volume).

90 For a critique of Van Hamel’s ideas on Celtic religion, see Jacqueline Borsje, “Monotheistic to a Certain Extent. The ‘Good Neighbours’ of God in Ireland,” in *The Boundaries of Monotheism: Interdisciplinary Explorations into the Foundations of Western Monotheism*, *Studies in Theology and Religion* 13, eds. Anne-Marie Korte and Maaïke de Haardt (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 53–82, there 76–80.

scholars. Celtic texts and art have survived because of their beauty and their direct appeal to people at various times. This attractiveness is not lost when the texts are translated into non-Celtic languages.

To conclude: the popularity of the “Celts” today is part of a wider countermovement in which alternatives for parts of the current dominant culture are sought. Old(er) traditions concerning pre-Christian and Christian “Celts” are invested with a new meaning that emphasise the alternative reaction. We could compare this process with the contemporary use of the term “spirituality,” which is often employed to indicate an alternative to dominant official religions, both in the past and in the present. An ideal is created that serves both as a tool for criticism and as a source of inspiration on how to live a good life. Modern spirituality or religious movements thus search for pre-Christian and/or Christian European roots and predecessors.

The “new coat” that dresses the Celtic past is one of the reasons why Celtic spirituality is so attractive today, especially to people who are concerned about certain characteristics of modern culture and who seek an alternative. The adaptations to modern desires and needs are bridges that people can cross so as to approach Celtic heritage, either real or constructed.

Beneath the “new coat” we may discover at least three factors that might explain current popularity. The above-mentioned aesthetic quality of Celtic texts, art, and music is the first factor. Second, we encounter a world of imagination in Celtic narrative texts that has its parallels in modern popular fiction and as such has not lost its attraction. The sea with its many islands is a world of mystery where voyagers experience adventures. They find hermits, monsters, saints, and beautiful women on islands. Some of these islands are an Other World without death, decay, and sin, full of beauty and joy. This Other World is sometimes also part of Ireland and entered through a mist or an elf mound or is located under water or under the earth. An ideal, romanticised world, be it the land of the elves or the promised land of the saints, is portrayed in comparison and contrast with normal human society. Hence, the paradise lost motif and the quests to find it are part and parcel of Celtic literature. A final factor of attraction is the depiction of a pre-industrial, traditional society surrounded by wild and teeming nature. These inherent characteristics of the literature are in accordance with the above-outlined desires and needs of modern spirituality movements and serve as a bridge towards people of our age.

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