

## The Neutral in Irish Folk Tradition

THE CONVERSION OF IRELAND to Christianity presents some remarkable and noteworthy features which are not without some considerable bearing upon the development of Irish folk tradition.

Penetration into Ireland by the Christian message and, we may assume, by Christian missionaries, came early. By the end of the fourth century of our era there already were Christian communities in the South of Ireland, while the main mission of Saint Patrick and the general turning by the Irish to the Christian faith began early in the fifth century and appears to have been virtually complete by the end of that century. The change seems to have come about with remarkable ease; there was no serious opposition, no compulsion, no persecution, no martyrdoms. Here we must assume a compatibility between Christianity and whatever form of religion it displaced. There seems to have been a complete lack of bitter hostility or antagonism; instead, it is evident that there was a ready and willing acceptance of the new gospel. And that this was not due to indifference among a people unused to or incapable of religious or spiritual feeling is clearly shown by the enthusiasm, the almost instinctive asceticism, the missionary zeal of the converts.

Ireland lay outside the Roman Empire. This affected the introduction of Christianity especially in two ways. Firstly, the Christian message and its messengers had none of the official authority and support which it had acquired in the Roman realms through the conversion of Constantine (A.D. 312). Secondly it came into a society which had a language and a very considerable culture of its own, undominated by Latin learning and Roman civilisation; this was, incidentally, the first contact in the West between the Christian message and an independent region with a culture of its own, which, although in some respects barbaric was in others highly developed and highly sophisticated.

It is, I think, rather remarkable, one might say astonishing, that in the confrontation of Christianity and the pre-Christian Irish culture, each side freely, even gladly accepted the other. The Irish people accepted and advanced the new faith with enthusiasm and the Church accepted and fostered the native culture and learning. The ancient schools of law, medicine and literature flourished beside the new schools of scripture, philosophy, theology and classical learning. Kings and lords endowed churches and monasteries. Bishops and abbots had poets, artists and craftsmen working in the native styles. Soon the monks were writing down the ancient Irish sagas, composing poems in the Irish language and revelling in the intricacies of Irish visual art.

Indeed, the surviving visual art of Early Christian Ireland, the metalwork, the sculpture in stone, the illuminated manuscripts, provides visible evidence of what was happening in other spheres also. In art, christianity brought no sudden intrusion of the classical modes of the Graeco-Roman world. Instead,

early Irish Christianity adopted and adapted to its uses the native art which had sprung from a fruitful grafting of the Iron Age La Tène mode on the earlier Bronze Age forms. This art was so vivid and so vigorous that it survived for another five or six hundred years, easily absorbing elements from outside while remaining recognisably itself.

In the same way, although not always as readily recognisable, ancient beliefs, laws, customs and habits lived on from paganism into Christianity. No doubt such elements of belief and behaviour as were directly contrary or hostile to Christian usage were quietly swept under the carpet of oblivion. But great areas of secular belief and custom lived on in symbiosis or at least in peaceful co-existence with Christian ethics and doctrine.

One consequence of this welding of the Christian and the pre-Christian is the survival in Irish folk tradition of many elements which, although condemned by later moralists and theologians, are according to that tradition neutral, that is to say, neither good nor bad in themselves, but are morally acceptable or reprehensible according as they are approached, invoked or employed for a good or for a bad purpose.

Over the centuries the moral precepts of the Church had grown more detailed, more formalised, more strictly severe. But, the Reformation, with its mutual recriminations and accusations of laxity, heresy, venality and corruption by Reformer and Counter-Reformer alike, brought such a hardening of attitudes that by the end of the sixteenth century there was general condemnation of all that the theologians covered with the blanket term of „superstition“—which usually included everything that the particular theologian did not himself believe.

Such matters as divination, fortune-telling, astrology, prophecies, omens, second sight, interpretation of dreams, water-divining, divining by pendulum, by casting lots or spinning a top, were condemned outright by at least some influential churchmen as snares or inventions of the Devil.

All forms of „magic“ were equally condemned as diabolical, including many forms of protection and of healing. One could multiply the lists of things condemned and forbidden; indeed, many strict theologians held that everything was forbidden, unless expressly permitted.

In Ireland, however, the effect of these prohibitions was not as great as in most places. From the middle of the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century a large majority—80% or more of the population—did not accept the religion of the rulers. „Cujus Regio eius Religio“ failed almost entirely. Consequently, religious disabilities were enforced upon the people, ranging at different times from active persecution with fire and sword to discrimination in legal, economic and social matters. For instance, around 1730 a Catholic could not own land, enter a profession, hold any public office, carry arms or receive any education. He had to practice his religious exercises in secret and could build no church. Priests and bishops were regarded as criminals and could be imprisoned or transported overseas if discovered.

Consequently, formal religious teaching was interrupted and the faithful, left largely to their own devices, continued innocently to believe and to practice many things forbidden elsewhere.

An interesting example of this is found in cursing. The act of cursing was regarded as in itself neutral, and good or bad in its intent and purpose. The survival of ritual cursing must be seen against the background of life in Ireland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when a large majority of the people had no legal standing or protection and might be exploited, distrained, evicted, plundered, mocked and abused, often tortured or put to death, without any redress. Such circumstances called for the invocation of unseen powers against the oppressor and the tyrant and encouraged the belief that this invocation was morally justified when practised by innocent victims.

The curse, it was believed, must fall somewhere. If the person cursed was guilty, it fell upon him. If however, he was innocent it fell back on the curser. Hence, idle or careless cursing was not merely ineffective, it was positively dangerous. The curser must be absolutely convinced that his cause was just.

Cursing rituals usually included some form of action. A blacksmith could lay a curse by turning the anvil about while repeating the malediction. In certain places there were 'cursing stones' which were turned or moved ritually while the words were spoken. In an observance called *The Fire of Stones* the fire was allowed to go out and a pile of stones put on the hearth in its place, each stone with an imprecation. When the pile was completed the imprecator prayed fervently that the blight of the curse should remain until these stones blazed into fire. Then the stones were flung separately away into inaccessible places, the sea, lakes, bogs and so on, so that they could never be assembled again.

This curse was sometimes used by people evicted from their homes, and many tales are told of the curse afflicting the tyrant's heirs „down to the seventh generation“.

The cult of holy wells was very strong in Ireland and still is practised. People visit certain wells, as it were on a minor pilgrimage, where they say prayers and perform rituals. There are, perhaps, as many as 3,000 known holy wells in Ireland, of which, perhaps, about three hundred are still frequented.

At these wells, a very usual part of the devotions is the walking about around the well—usually there is a beaten or paved pathway—while reciting set prayers. This is regarded by the public in general as a normal form of Christian practice. At many wells, however, the tradition still persists that if the normal clockwise or right-hand wise circuit is reversed and performed anticlockwise or left-hand wise, a curse instead of a blessing is called down. That this belief is ancient is shown by its mention in early texts, e.g. in the Metrical *Dindsenchas* (Todd Lecture Series, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin 1913), p. 230 from the *Book of Leinster* which was compiled from earlier sources about 1150.

Thus, the holy well, with its prayer and ritual, could be seen as a source of good or of evil, according to the intent of the petitioner.

The practice of magic, that is, trying to influence the course of nature by the aid of preternatural powers, has been utterly condemned by moral theologians. In a recent work, Heinzl's edition, *Summa Theologia Moralis* (1959, vol. 2, p. 146), states „Qui ad obtinendum effectum adhibet medium vanum et inutile, quod neque a natura neque ab ecclesia neque a Deo ad hunc effectum producendum institutum est, hunc exspectare non potest nisi a daemone“.

There is here no place for the neutral. He who is not with me is against me, and what is not from God must be from the devil.

The Irish tradition, however seems always to have accepted magic as being neutral, good or bad as it was used for good or evil. Thus the same, or a similar action, rite, formula could be used to avert ill fortune to oneself or one's friends, or to bring ill fortune on one's enemies, to protect and increase one's crops and livestock or to cause loss to another's—often these were connected; there were magical ways of transferring the profit of corn, of butter, of animal offspring to one's own possession by stealing them from others—your neighbour's crop failed while yours doubled, his cows aborted while yours had twin calves. This was, we are told, especially common as regards butter—one woman's churning failed while another's dairy flowed with cream and butter. There were charms and spells to quell storms and to raise storms, to heal illness and to cause illness, to avert or to cause death.

Many of the spoken charms were in the form of prayers, invoking or mentioning God and the Saints; many spoken curses had the same form, many were, in fact, inverted blessings.

Special „power“ was attributed to certain people e.g. the priest, the poet, the blacksmith, by virtue of their office. Some had „power“ from birth, such as the seventh son or daughter of a seventh son although, interestingly, it was held that women could inherit „power“ but could not bequeath it. Some learned „power“ from a practitioner, or by going through certain rituals. There were various „wise“ men and women who could prophecy and foretell the future, cure illness and diseases, cast good or evil spells and counter the „power“ of others.

Here we must mention that in Ireland there were no witches. As we know, in most parts of Europe, and especially from about 1400 to about 1750, there was a concerted attempt by Church (Catholic and Protestant) and State to root out witchcraft and witches, and many thousands of people were accused, tried and put to death.

In Ireland this is unknown. There were in Ireland, as far as can be discovered, only four witch trials. All of these were among English and Scottish settlers; only one was in pre Reformation times. The Irish way was to counter curse with prayer and magic with magic (cf. St. John Seymour: *Irish Witchcraft and Demonology*, Dublin 1913).

A similar acceptance of the neutral is found in the folk mythology. Christian theology would hold that all spirits not divine or angelic are diabolical, but the Irish folk tradition admits numerous supernatural creatures which are neither

good nor bad. Chief among these are the „Good People“ or „The Hill People“ (*Daoine maithe*, *Daoine si*). These resemble humans so closely in form and stature that they may easily be mistaken for them. They live in hills or in burial mounds or other ancient remains. Their behaviour is like that of humans. They eat, drink, sleep, dance and sing. Often they induce mortals to join in their games and revels. They reward those who are kind to them and punish those who injure them. Sometimes they steal away human children or young adults to reinforce their ranks.

Their origin proclaims their moral neutrality. They are those angels who in the great heavenly revolt would take sides neither with the Archangel Michael nor with Lucifer. Too bad for Heaven but too good for Hell, they are sent to live here on Earth until the world comes to an end.

Otherworld creatures such as the *leipreachán*, a small man-like spirit who makes shoes for the good people, and the mermaid, are not harmful or malicious if left in peace.

Even the more dangerous otherworld creatures, such as the *dallachán*—a headless apparition who delights in frightening people, the *púca* or fairy horse which invites people to mount on his back and then rushes them through thickets and swamps to throw them off somewhere far from home, or the water monsters found in so many lakes—are, to a large extent, figures of fun, engaged in practical jokes rather than murder and mayhem. These are very different from the evil creatures such as ghouls, vampires and werewolves found in other European traditions.

During the period from the later eighteenth century to the earlier twentieth century, religious discrimination in Ireland in general relaxed and disappeared. The Catholic Church was again free to organise, to direct education, to order life.

This was a period, especially in the nineteenth century, when social respectability combined with religious puritanism to discourage not only wrong-doing but also everything regarded as „common“ or „vulgar“, and under the influence of this dual force many things, beliefs, customs, practices, hitherto regarded as harmless or even beneficial fell under the ban of the moralist or the puritan, the straight-laced or the squeamish, and were discontinued, so that now many ancient practices are dead and only the memory of them remains.