

Celtic and Roman Missions in the early Middle Ages

Introduction

No-one is quite sure how Christianity came to the British Isles. Probably, as in so many other cases, Roman merchants and soldiers brought it. Archaeological remains, such as mosaics in Roman villas, suggest that it stayed primarily among the Romano-British settlers, rather than spreading among the Celtic inhabitants of these islands. It was also limited primarily to the larger Roman towns of southern England.

Yet it was the Celtic Christians of a later century who would evangelise the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders, and in turn play a major part in the evangelisation of the Germanic peoples of Europe.

In this paper we will look at the various stages involved in the mission history of the Celts, including the role played by Roman missionaries to England, and compare and contrast the mission methods of the two groups. We will then look at the principles applied by both groups, and consider their relevance for contemporary mission.

Prehistory

Not much is known about early British Christianity. The church in Britain was large enough to have 3 bishops attend the Council of Arles in 314. Germanus of Auxerre, a French bishop, intervened in a theological dispute in the early 400s, and found a structured church with well-off clergy. The theologian Pelagius, against whom the great Augustine of Hippo thundered at this time, was possibly Welsh (Pelagius translates 'man of the sea', or Morgan).

The Romano-British engaged in some mission among the pagan Celts. Between 390-410, Ninian, a Romanised Celt, began mission in Galloway. He founded a church and monastery at Whithorn, and undertook preaching journeys from there. The churches he founded deteriorated without clear leadership, though some remnant of Christian confession survived for a period.

St Patrick (389-461), probably from a Christian Romano-British family in Avon, was abducted by Irish slave raiders at the age of 16. During his time in Ireland he was converted, probably as he reflected on the Christian teachings he had received during childhood. After 6 years he escaped, returning home and possibly to France to receive some theological training, but returned in 432 to Ireland, this time voluntarily, to preach Christ. Other missionaries, mainly monks, joined him and in 30 years, despite considerable opposition, the Irish tribes were more or less converted to Christianity.

The next glimpse we get is around 100 years later. Gildas, a church leader, lived in the Romano-British region of the west of Britain, and wrote around 530-540. The Roman legions had left Britain in 440, and in the intervening period Anglo-Saxon peoples from Denmark and north Germany had invaded and settled in what is now England, pushing the Celtic Britons into Wales and the southwest. Gildas and St David worked to revitalize the British monasteries, which in turn strengthened the Irish church, but there was no attempt by the British church to share the good news with the hated, pagan, Anglo-Saxon invaders. Gildas was rather pessimistic about the state of the church of his day, but, though he never knew it, he lived on the threshold of a revival.

In 563, the Irish prince Columba was exiled, probably for causing a number of deaths in the family. He founded a monastery at Iona, an island off the west coast of Scotland. From here he worked among the Scots, founding a number of other monasteries as centres and bases for mission.

Roman mission to England

In 597 Columba died. In the same year, Pope Gregory the Great sent a group of 20 monks, led by one Augustine, to convert the kingdom of Kent.

Why did he do this? There are several possible reasons, none of which are mutually exclusive.

- The legend of a group of fair-haired slaves on sale in Rome. He was told that they were Angles, and replied "Angli sunt, angeli fiant" (they are Angles, let them be angels).
- Gregory took an interest in other remote regions, such as Spain. The Irish monk Columbanus certainly wrote to Gregory, and may have told him about the situation in England.
- The Frankish Christian princess, Bertha, had married the Saxon king of Kent, Ethelbert.

Augustine and his group were well received by Ethelbert. Their life and preaching made a deep impression upon the Saxons, and by the end of the year, he reported to Gregory that the king and 10,000 of his subjects had been baptised.

An interesting glimpse of early missiological reflection is revealed in a letter sent by Gregory to abbot Mellitus in 601, who was being sent to join Augustine in Canterbury.

Quotation 1 : letter of Gregory to Mellitus (Bede EH I.30)

We don't know how far these instructions were followed, although certainly many of the oldest English churches are built on sites formerly used in pagan worship.

In the 620s, the Northumbrian (English) king, Edwin, married a Kentish Christian princess. Her chaplain, Paulinus, accompanied her north to York. In 627 was able to preach before the king and his assembled nobles. The resulting story gives us insight into the state of Anglo-Saxon paganism at the time, and suggests reasons why the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity.

Quotation 2 : Paulinus before Edwin of York (Bede EH II.13)

We don't know if these specific words were ever uttered, but Bede gives us a clear idea of the kind of thinking that was going on.

Tribal paganism often has a clear territorial dimension. The Anglo-Saxons, by coming to England, were separated from their homelands, and thus their traditional religion was losing its hold on the people.

We see here that issues of power were at stake, a significant dimension in any primal religion – “the religion that we hitherto confessed *seems valueless and powerless* these new teachings *are better and more effectual*”.

The issue of power encounter is one that has re-emerged in mission in recent years. Here it can be seen to be an aspect of Roman mission. As we will see later, it also played a significant part in Celtic mission.

The more philosophical reply of the nobleman in the above quotation shows that such reflections are not the domain only of 'civilised' peoples, but are part of the universal human make-up.

The Anglo-Saxon tribes were unifying as they settled in England, and moving from tribal leaders towards monarchy. The 'bretwalda' (overlord) of a number of kings would eventually be replaced by a single king over all the English. Christianity, with a single God, fitted this social reality better than a pantheon of tribal gods.

We see that a number of factors combined to make the Anglo-Saxon peoples open to the possibility of conversion to Christianity. Stable societies rarely convert *en masse*; it is those in a state of flux that are more open to change and new ideas.

After the conversion of Edwin and the nobility, Paulinus and Edwin toured the kingdom of Northumbria in a 36-day marathon of teaching and baptising, Paulinus preaching and Edwin translating. This process of mass conversion, seen already in Kent, was thus repeated. We will examine the *pros* and *cons* of this a little later.

Celtic mission to England

Edwin's rival to the title of king of Northumbria, his nephew Oswald, was in exile at Iona at this time. Not only was it safe and distant, but also Columba (perhaps because of his background) already had a reputation at the patron saint of warriors.

While at Iona, Oswald was converted. In 633, the pagan Saxon king of Mercia, Penda, and the British king Cadwalla, killed Edwin in battle. Paulinus fled south with the queen, the Roman mission to Northumbria collapsed, and many of the 'converted' Northumbrians relapsed.

Oswald returned to Northumbria, repulsed Penda and killed Cadwalla, and became the new king of

Northumbria. He also desired that his kingdom should be Christian, but instead of inviting Roman missionaries north, he contacted the monastery at Iona for help.

The first monk who was sent returned to Iona, complaining that the Anglo-Saxons were too rough and primitive to be converted. He was censured by one Aidan, who said that he should have been gentler with them, and that it was better to love than to condemn. Guess who got to be the next missionary to Northumbria?

Oswald had established his capital at Bamburgh, and so Aidan established a monastery on the nearby island of Lindisfarne, as a base from which to travel, teach and preach.

In both Celtic and Roman mission to the Anglo-Saxons, it can be seen that the initial strategy was to convert the king and nobility, thus securing a safe environment within which to work. The problem was that the mass conversions which followed (cf both Augustine at Canterbury and Edwin in York) were undoubtedly influenced by considerations other than the purely spiritual (who would refuse the Edwin and Paulinus 'roadshow'?).

On more than one occasion, the death of a king who had been converted to Christ led to mass apostasy and a pagan backlash against the missionaries. The problem is, what else were the monks to do? They needed a safe environment within which to work, otherwise their lives were in danger, and how better to obtain this than by beginning with the 'boss'?

This highlights an issue in mission strategy, which is whether to begin with the 'influencers' (whether rulers or otherwise), thus affecting a large number at once, or do you concentrate on developing a grass-roots movement, so that the church is less susceptible to changes in power and influence?

Two quotations, one about Aidan, and the other about his successor Cuthbert, will help to identify and illustrate some key characteristics of Celtic mission strategy:

Quotation 3 : The life of Bishop Aidan (Bede EH III.5)

Quotation 4 : Cuthbert's life and teaching (Bede IV.27)

From these quotations, the following characteristics of Celtic mission emerge:

- pilgrimage, wandering, going to remote places, simple lifestyle
- personal evangelism and pastoral care
- the importance of Scripture

One further dimension, not illustrated by the above, is the confrontational approach followed by the Celtic Christians, along the lines of the 'power encounter' mentioned earlier. This includes many healings attributed by Bede to Oswald (EH III.6,8-13). We may not think of healings as being confrontational, but consider their place in the ministry of Jesus. His healings (and exorcisms) were signs of the Kingdom of God, taking authority over all powers of evil.

Their confrontational approach is also revealed in the following quotation:

Quotation 5 : Cuthbert and the monks in distress (Bede : Life of Cuthbert 3)

This shows that the approach of the Celtic missionaries cannot be said to mirror the advice given by Pope Gregory to Augustine of Canterbury, mentioned earlier. A further example of this will be given later.

The Council of Whitby, and Celtic-Roman synergy

During the first half of the seventh century, the Roman and Celtic churches expanded across England. The Romans concentrated on the south, and the Celts evangelised Mercia. The two churches could have settled down to a peaceful coexistence, but the isolation and independence of the Irish church had led to the development of some different practices, such as the form of the tonsure, and the method of calculating the date of Easter.

These differences were not exactly crucial, but in 664, the Celtic church celebrated Easter on 14th April, and the Roman church on 21st April. One group was celebrating the resurrection of Christ, while

the other were preparing for the solemnity of Holy Week. On a single island, this situation was plainly unsatisfactory, and the bretwalda, Oswy (Oswald's younger brother), called together a synod, which met at the monastery in Whitby, North Yorkshire, in order to resolve the differences.

The Celtic group were convinced of the antiquity of their beliefs and practices, but Wilfrid, a Lindisfarne monk who had studied in Rome, and a master debater, led the Roman party. As he put it, who was right - a small, isolated church on the edge of the world, or the whole of Western Christendom, at its head the Pope, the descendant of Peter?

Oswy pronounced in favour of the Roman methods, perhaps unsurprisingly. As bretwalda, he was seeking links with the larger and more established kingdoms on the continent, where Roman practice was universal. The Celtic party were dismayed, but gradually were won over. Eventually even Iona adopted Roman practices.

The debate in and of itself was trivial, but the implications were significant. The united English church combined Celtic energy and vitality with Roman order and discipline, and led the mission efforts among the Germanic peoples of Frisia and the Rhineland.

Our first example is Wilfrid (634-709), who after Whitby was made archbishop of York. In 670 he fell out with the king, Oswy's successor, Ecgrith, who deposed him. Wilfrid set off to Rome to appeal, but his boat was blown off course while crossing the Channel, and he landed in Frisia, as yet unevangelised.

Wilfrid stayed there for 9 years, before finally arriving in Rome. His appeal was upheld, but upon his return to England, Ecgrith refused to reappoint him. Wilfrid went to Sussex, the only part of England still pagan, and converted them by teaching them to fish during a famine.

When Ecgrith died in 685, Wilfrid returned to York, only to be ejected again, and he ended his life at a monastery he founded in Ripon, North Yorkshire.

Wilfrid is a good example of the combined Celtic-Roman Christianity. In his organisation and discipline, he was Roman to the core. But his turbulence, wanderlust, and driving power to evangelize wherever he had opportunity, were all Celtic traits.

Willibrord (658-739), also known as Clement, was a monk from Wilfrid's monastery at Ripon. In 690, he too went to work among the Frisians, with 11 colleagues. There he founded monasteries, as centres of prayer, discipline and learning, from which the monks would journey to evangelize, and return for rest and renewal.

Our final example is Wynfrith (680-754), also known as Boniface, apostle of Germany. A monk in Wessex, in 722 he was consecrated bishop of the German frontier (which had no churches!). As did Willibrord, Boniface related directly to the Pope, and received assistance direct from Rome. The French churches were in no position to offer any help, and he knew that any new churches would survive only if well organised and supported.

As well as this classically Roman characteristic, Boniface showed a Celtic dimension of confrontation in his missionary methods. One of his first acts upon arriving in the area was to chop down the sacred oak of Thor, at Geismar in Hesse, thus demonstrating the superiority of the Christian God. Thor, god of fertility and war, was expected to reply with a lightning bolt. He didn't, and Boniface constructed a church out of the wood. Here we see another example of the 'power encounter' approach mentioned earlier.

God's "yes" and "no"

Celtic is in vogue. One of the characteristics imputed on the ancient Celtic church is a supposed sensitivity to culture. Yet our study suggests that if anything, the Romans were more 'contextual', whereas the Celts were the confrontational fundamentalists!

History is never as clear-cut as we would like it to be. But both the Celtic and Roman attitudes reflect an important dimension of the gospel, which is that it is both God's 'yes' and his 'no' to us. Christ is both saviour and judge. Before God, we stand utterly in want, and yet utterly forgiven.

So it is in relation to culture. Culture shares in both the 'imago Dei', and in our total depravity or fallenness. In the Celtic and Roman missions to Britain and northern Europe, we see examples of both God's acceptance of cultural norms, and also his challenge to be central therein.

To close, we will consider three examples of how the gospel and Anglo-Saxon culture interacted, some of which we will be happier about than others.

- Relics. Wilfrid brought back from Rome many relics of the apostles and martyrs, such as bones and fragments of wood. Placed in churches, they were attributed with miraculous healing power. They were in effect Christo-magic charms, replacing pagan charms.
- Pilgrimages to the grave of martyrs and saints, replaced the pre-Christian tradition of holy processions. Many of the pilgrimage routes in England originated in this way.
- Baptism in flowing rivers. Rivers and springs were venerated as abodes of gods and spirits, and many Anglo-Saxon villages were founded at wells and springs, not just for practical reasons of accessibility. Baptism at such places, marking the passage from old to new, death to life, was therefore both crucial and risky. But immensely powerful.

Conclusion

The Celts were vigorous, energetic, and passionate. The Romans brought order and discipline. The Celtic missionaries were committed to scripture, to challenge, and to loving those whom they sought to win. The Romans thought deeply about how to remove obstacles to the acceptance of the gospel. When these two fused, it produced a church and mission vigorous and strong enough to evangelise Europe. May this combination lead to similar mission today.

Questions for discussion

1. What strengths or weaknesses do you perceive in Gregory's advice to Augustine?
2. Does Coifi's confession reveal a legitimate reason for conversion?
3. How valid is the Celtic 'confrontational' approach to mission? What role can 'power encounter' play?

© Richard Tiplady
November 1996

Celtic and Roman Missions in the early Middle Ages

Quotations

1. Letter of Gregory to Mellitus (Bede EH I.30)

Therefore, when by God's help you reach our most reverend brother, Bishop Augustine, we wish you to inform him that we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there.

For if these temples are well built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.

And since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to demons, let some other festival be substituted in its place They are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of all gifts for the plenty they enjoy.

If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually, step by step, and not in one leap.

2. Paulinus before Edwin of York (Bede EH II.13)

(King Edwin) summoned a council of the wise men, and asked each in turn his opinion of this strange doctrine and this new way of worshipping the godhead that was being proclaimed to them.

Coifi, the chief priest, replied without hesitation:

"Your majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching; for I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects has been more devoted to the service of the gods than myself; yet there are many to whom you show greater favour, who receive greater honours, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods had any power, they would surely have favoured myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them".

Another of the king's chief men signified his agreement with this prudent argument, and went on to say: "Your majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thegns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came.

Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it".

The other elders and counsellors of the king, under God's guidance, gave similar advice.

3. The life of bishop Aidan (Bede EH III.5)

He never sought or cared for any worldly possessions, and loved to give away to the poor who chanced to meet him, whatever he received from kings or wealthy folk. Whether in town or country, he always travelled on foot unless compelled by necessity to ride; and whatever people he met on his walks, whether high or low, he stopped and spoke to them. If they were heathen, he urged them to be baptized; and if they were Christians, he strengthened their faith, and inspired them by word and deed to live a good life and to be generous to others.

His life was in marked contrast to the apathy of our own times, for all who walked with him, whether monks or lay-folk, were required to meditate, that is, either to read the scriptures or to learn the Psalms.

4. Cuthbert's life and teaching (Bede EH IV.27)

He used mainly to visit and preach in the villages that lay far distant among high and inaccessible mountains, which others feared to visit and whose barbarity and squalor daunted other teachers. Cuthbert, however, gladly undertook this pious task, and taught with such patience and skill that when he left the monastery it would sometimes be a week, sometimes two or three, and occasionally an entire month, before he returned home, after staying in the mountains to guide the peasants heavenward by his teachings and virtuous example.

5. Cuthbert and the monks in distress (Bede, Life of Cuthbert 3)

(A number of monks from the monastery at Jarrow, near the mouth of the Tyne, were in danger of being swept out to sea on a small raft used for crossing the river. Bede takes up the story...)

While the monks opposite were watching in sorrow, the peasants began to jeer at their way of life, as though they deserved such misfortune for spurning the life of the ordinary man and introducing new, unheard-of rules of conduct. Cuthbert stopped their insults.

"Do you realize what you are doing? Would it not be more human of you to pray for their safety rather than gloat over their misfortune?"

But they, boors both in thought and speech, fulminated against him.

"Nobody is going to pray for them. Let not God raise a finger to help them! They have done away with the old ways of worship, and now nobody knows what to do".

Celtic and Roman Missions in the early Middle Ages

Prehistory

Ninian (fl.390-410)

Patrick (389-461)

Gildas (fl.530-540)

Columba (521-597)

Roman mission to England

Augustine in Kent (arr. 597)

Paulinus and Edwin (fl. 627-633)

Roman methods

Celtic mission to England

Aidan (d.651)

Cuthbert (d.687)

Celtic methods

The Council of Whitby, and Roman-Celtic synergy

Whitby (664)

Wilfrid (634-709)

Willibrord (658-739)

Wynfrith/Boniface (680-754)

God's 'yes' and 'no'