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Women of Spirit and Power:
Could Sister Fidelma be Real?

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ABSTRACT: Women's roles in the Western Christian church, and the differences in those roles by region and across time, are of current interest. There is evidence of a Christian tradition, called Celtic, in the British Isles and in Brittany that differs from the dominant Roman tradition. Through the use of a fictional character, I examine the historical evidence for women in religious leadership in the early Irish church to explore the differences in women's roles in the Celtic and Roman traditions in the British Isles in the fourth to seventh centuries.

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Sometimes academic research presents itself disguised in a fictional character, in this case through Sister Fidelma, the central character of a series of popular mystery novels set in seventh century Ireland. The author, Peter Tremayne, is the pen name of the Celtic scholar Peter Berresford Ellis. In the novels, Sister Fidelma is a young, vowed religious woman, an advocate (lawyer) in the court of the five kingdoms of Ireland and sister to the king of one of those kingdoms.[1] Using Sister Fidelma in the role of detective, Ellis immerses the reader in seventh century Ireland exploring Irish culture, laws, and highlighting differences between the Roman and Celtic Christian religious traditions. My long-standing interest in women in religious leadership was piqued upon reading these novels and I wondered: could someone like Sister Fidelma have really" existed? Would an

[1] For more on Sister Fidelma, see http://www.sisterfidelma.com/ (accessed on 31 May 2019)

examination of the history of the Irish church in the fourth to seventh centuries reveal evidence of people working in contexts that would be familiar to the fans of the novels? Or, would it show that the author of these popular novels had created a romanticized context only loosely based on what the historical records show?

I approach these questions by pursuing three avenues of inquiry related to the sites and environment that were encountered in the novels. First, is there evidence for a distinctive "Celtic Christian Church"? Second, since Sister Fidelma took her vows at Kildare, I will examine some of the hagiographic narratives about St. Brigit, one of the best-known Irish saints who is said to have founded the abbey at Kildare. In examining the historical evidence the role of women in Irish culture and in the church will be highlighted. Finally, I will look at St. Hilda, a real woman about whom there is solid historical evidence and who hosted the Synod of Whitby held in 664 CE.

The Celtic Christian Church

Recent interest in Celtic Christianity has focused on the ideal of a culture in balance with nature, with cherished sacred places, where males and females were treated as equals, and where the new Christian faith seamlessly absorbed the local pagan beliefs and practices. For many people, this is an attractive alternative to the standard history of Western Christianity. As historian Philip Sheldrake puts it, for early Celtic Christians "the natural landscape was both a concrete reality where people lived and, at the same time, a doorway into another, spiritual world."[2] The creator of Sister Fidelma subscribes to this romantic view of the Christian tradition in Ireland during the fourth through seventh centuries. For Ellis, the role of women in Ireland in the first centuries of the Common Era is:

> … by no means a passive or subservient one as emerges in other European cultures. … They could govern, took prominent roles in political, religious and artistic life, even becoming judges and law-givers; they could own property

[2] Philip Sheldrake, Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality. (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 7.

> which marriage could not deprive them of; they chose when they wanted to marry and, more often than not, who they wanted to marry; they could divorce and, if they were deserted, molested or maltreated, they had the right to claim considerable damages.[3]

But Ellis also acknowledges that the presence of laws that were relatively favorable to women did not mean that they were "automatically applied… in the early period of recorded history. The position of women in Celtic myth, law and early history now seems to constitute an ideal."[4] Another scholar, Donald Meek, takes issue with Ellis' description by providing this description of life within the religious communities in Ireland at this time:

> Although the early churches of Britain and Ireland admitted women as nuns, they did not grant them independent legal status. Society was avowedly patriarchal, and women who "made it to the top" as abbesses were the exceptions that proved the rule. … it is likely that the church helped to raise the status of women in early Ireland, but this does not mean that it emancipated them … The "Celtic Church" offered no escape from, or counterbalance to, the claims of patriarchy. The 'feminist Celtic Church' is thus another figment of contemporary counter-cultural imagination.[5]

It seems to be that historical evidence indicates, although the laws may have been somewhat more favorable to women, they were not treated significantly differently in Ireland or in the Irish church than they were in other areas of Europe. Women were not legally independent in Irish patriarchal society and they often required the authorization of a superior (usually male) to conduct transactions. There is no compelling evidence

[3] Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Women: Women in Celtic Society and Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 18.

[4] Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 19

[5] Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Handsel Press Ltd., 2000), 119

that there was a unified, coordinated entity identified and identifiable as a distinct, coherent ecclesiastical entity called the Celtic Church.[6]

In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, with its centralized, hierarchical structure, there were a variety of "Celtic Churches" in Ireland, Northern England, Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, Brittany, and the Isle of Man – predominately areas not conquered by Rome. This looser structure left these churches vulnerable when the two approaches to Christianity came into contact. Ireland was never either part of the Roman Empire or situated on a well-traveled trade route. Such isolation means that what happened in Ireland cannot be readily extrapolated to other areas of "Celtic Christianity" in the British Isles. There is relatively little documentation available to the historian; in particular, there are few texts from the pre-Christian period and no documentation left from Roman armies passing through Ireland. What sources and materials do exist are "extremely patchy over time: material of one sort may be relatively abundant in one period but scarce or absent in another … (thus) the evidence is discontinuous."[7] Where texts do exist, the dates are often disputed over a range of up to two hundred years. The variety of genres in those texts is also an issue. For example, "… laws are by nature normative and prescriptive, and there is often an absence of evidence concerning their application."[8] From such patchy evidence, historians conclude that, by the fifth century, there were both male and female vowed religious in Ireland where they could and did marry. Additionally, it is likely that the monasteries of the fifth and sixth century were comprised of small communities of residential huts rather than grand structures.

At least some of the differences between the Roman Church and the Celtic Church are attributed to their different Gospel traditions. Laura McKinnish Bridges states it in the following way: "… the Gospel of John occupied an elevated position in the Celtic Christian tradition."[9] She

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[6] Edward C. Sellner, "Brigit of Kildare – A Study in the Liminality of Women's Spiritual Power." *Cross Currents* 39 no. 4 (Winter 1989-90), 404

[7] Christina Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church: Ireland 450-1150.* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002),16.

[8] Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church,* 17

[9] Laura McKinnish Bridges, "The Fourth Gospel and Celtic Christianity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 35 no. 1 (Spring 2008): 47.

postulates that, just as the Johannine communities of the early church lived on the "… periphery of imperial and religious power"[10], the Celts lived "… in remotest places, in insular locations, on the margins of the continent, away from Roman centers of wealth, faith and political power … the ancient Celts shaped a unique form of Christianity … No elaborate hierarchical structures with complex ecclesiastical titles. No centralized religious organizations. Religious structures were built of thatched roofs and impermanent materials. Few permanent dwellings remain."[11] Newell presents the contrast as between the Celts who followed the "Beloved Disciple" whereas the Roman tradition relied on St. Peter as the "most blessed Prince of Apostles,"[12] and grounded it in the synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Newell quotes the ninth century Celtic theologian John Scotus Eruigena, as saying that the Gospel of John "represents the way of contemplation" while Peter's way is "faithful action."[13]

Without the strong, central authority of the Roman Catholic Church, the more loosely aligned Celtic Christian churches were vulnerable when the two came into contact. As will be discussed later in this article, such a clash occurred in 664 C.E. at the Synod held at Whitby Abbey. Following this Synod, the Celtic tradition slowly gave way before the Roman Catholic tradition, retreating to Ireland and more remote parts of Britain. The scholar Ian Bradley sees the current interest in Celtic Christianity as just the latest embodiment of its recurrent appeal when he writes:

> The appeal seems to extend across the theological and denominational spectrum, and well beyond the company of Christian believers. … it is tempting to suggest that Celtic Christianity is less an actual phenomenon defined in historical and geographical terms than an artificial construct created out of wishful thinking, romantic nostalgia, and the projection of all kinds of dreams about what should and might be. … Ours is not the first generation to cast longing glances back at the beliefs and practices of the native Christian communities of the British

[10] McKinnish Bridges, "The Fourth Gospel and Celtic Christianity," 45

[11] McKinnish Bridges, "The Fourth Gospel and Celtic Christianity," 46

[12] J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality.* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997; reissued in 2008), 94

[13] Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*. 95

Isles in the period between the fifth and seventh centuries. They have had a recurrent appeal over the last 1,300 years.[14]

In summary, I conclude that the evidence does not support the existence of a separate ecclesiastical entity identified and identifiable as the Celtic Christian Church. Instead there were a variety of "Celtic churches" that shared many aspects of cultural and religious life but at no time organized as a unified, coordinated entity that would be readily identifiable as a distinct, coherent ecclesiastical entity. [15]

The Witness of St. Brigit

I now turn to St. Brigit, one of the "Blessed Trinity" of saints alongside Saints Patrick and Columba who were central to the story of the establishment of Christianity in Ireland. While we have direct information about St. Patrick and St. Columba from their own writings, this is not the case for St. Brigit. By the end of the eighth century, Ireland had many local saints whose claims to sainthood were based on founding one or more monasteries. Hagiographers were charged with promoting the claims of those monasteries to ensure their prestige and financial success. St. Brigit is claimed to have founded the monastery at Kildare although there is no direct evidence supporting this assertion. The three oldest *vitae* of St. Brigit, the *Vita Prima, Vita Secunda,* and the *Bethu Brigte,* were written about 150 years after her death and provide few details into the life of the real, historical woman (if there were such a person). Modern scholars hold a variety of views as to "the extent to which pre-Christian material was woven into early Celtic Christian literature … (this) lies at the heart of the debate between nativists and anti-nativists in the field of Celtic studies."[16]

The key elements of Brigit's life story as related in popular and scholarly sources are, however, readily available.[17] Very little is known

[14] Ian Bradley, *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), vii.

[15] Sellner, "Brigit of Kildare – A Study in the Liminality of Women's Spiritual Power."

[16] Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 8

[17] This summary is based on descriptions of Brigit's life in Ian Bradley's *Celtic Christianity*, Peter Berresford Ellis' *Celtic Women*, Michael Mitton's *Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today* (Abingdon, UK: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2010), Alice Curtayne's *St. Brigid of Ireland* (New York, NY: Sheed & Ward, 1954),

about the real, historical woman who became Saint Brigit. Additionally, the saint shares her name with an Irish goddess of healing, smithy, fertility and poetry. The goddess' festival day, one of the four most important festivals of pagan Celts, was "the feast of Imbolg, or parturition, when ewes came into lamb, on 1 February. Significantly, the saint Brigit took this festival over for her feastday and much of the goddess' symbolism has been subsumed into that of the Christian saint."[18] Even so, she remains undoubtedly the most famous woman associated with the "Celtic church." In brief, her father was either a druid or the King of Leinster; her mother was one of his bondswomen or a slave. Brigit is thought to have studied with bishops of the Irish church, becoming a nun and then, by some accounts, an ordained bishop. Additionally, she was claimed to have founded the double monastery (members were both male and female vowed religious) at Kildare in about 500 CE. Born around 455 CE, Brigit died at about age seventy. Given the lack of verifiable documentation on her work and life and the prevalence of claims about her, scholars are wary of placing too much reliance on the three extant *Vitae*.

In his discussion of Brigit, Ian Bradley notes that the *Vita Prima* "closely identifies Brigit with the cause of the kings of Leinster, the province in which Kildare was situated,"[19] bringing them victory in at least one important battle and thereby enabling Brigit to become the patron of Leinster, a title she held until the eleventh century. But again, these were undocumented claims, which suggests that Brigit's hagiographers were trying to create a "superhero" by portraying her in a manner "more akin to that of her male counterparts than to other female saints." By the ninth century Brigit was well established as "military protector, archetype of moral purity, Christianized goddess and bringer of fertility."[20] It seems likely

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D.D.C Pochin Mould's *Saint Brigid* (Dublin, Ireland: Clonmore and Reynolds, Ltd., 1964) and Hugh De Blacam's *The Saints of Ireland: The Life-Stories of S.S. Brigid and Columcille* (Milwaukee, WI: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1942).

[18] Ellis, *Celtic Women*, 27. For more information on the overlap of the pagan goddess and the Christian saint, see Eileen Harrington's Masters Thesis, "Brigit: Goddes and Saint Examining Cogitosus' *Life of Brigit*" and Judith Bishop's Ph.D. Dissertation, "Sanctity as Mirror of Society: Culture, Gender and Religion in the Three Oldest *Vitae* of Brigit of Ireland" Bishop states "there is no hard evidence that a goddess Brigit was ever worshipped in pre-Christian Ireland." (p. 169)

[19] Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 10

[20] Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 11

that, if she existed at all, the person who became St. Brigit was different from the saint depicted by her hagiographers!

The lives of the saints "consistently claim churches and monasteries were founded by peripatetic missionary leaders; they are also consistent in saying that these leaders tended to found numerous places rather than just one (place). … one finds both women founding autonomously and men founding places for them."[21] Women who established female monasteries do so in the same manner as their male counterparts do: they travel, convert pagans, befriend bishops, acquire land and followers, and establish churches. Cristina Harrington describes the founding of Kildare, supposedly by Brigit, as follows:

> The monastery was founded out of public demand … with people of both sexes pledging their vows to Brigit. Thus a seventh-century churchman imagined that in the century preceding him a holy woman, a consecrated nun, could have developed a national following and built herself a large monastery for followers of both sexes. He relates this without explaining to his readers how a nun could have acquired the land or the temporal authority to do so.[22]

Harrington observes that it would be interesting to conduct an archaeological dig under Kildare to determine if there was a pre-Christian religious site at that location, possibly one sacred to Brigit. She refers to the period of the fifth through seventh centuries (400 – 600 CE) as the "conversion period" during which the Irish church was established, concluding that, for the Irish hagiographers, consecrated women were

> … able to participate in the apostolic work of spreading Christianity and of founding churches and monasteries. …Textual evidence suggests that the earliest churches sometimes developed into cult centres and

[21] Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church,* 54

[22] Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church,* 55 According to Peter Berresfor Ellis, Cogitosus' *Vita Brigitii* is comprised of miracle stories intended to convey Brigit's sanctity, deep faith and charitable disposition.

> cemeteries after the death of the leader, whether male or female.[23]

Thus, while women may not have had as broad an authority or equal status as men, their hagiographers could put them in roles where their impact equaled their male counterparts. St. Brigit, founder of Kildare, was as well known and loved as St. Patrick, who founded Armagh, and St. Columba, the founder of Iona. St. Brigit's abbey in Kildare serves as an incubator for Ellis' protagonist, Sister Fidelma, and permits the author to illuminate the history of seventh century Ireland and of the Christian church in Britain and Ireland in an engaging manner. As a vowed religious woman formed in Brigit's abbey, Sister Fidelma gains religious authority, thus she can easily move throughout Christian Europe and her story provides a lens through which to elucidate the cultural history of the period and important events such as the Synod of Whitby.

Abbess Hilda and the Synod of Whitby

St. Hilda, Abbess of Whitby, shares some characteristics with Ellis' leading lady, Sister Fidelma[24]. Most of what we know about St. Hilda and the Synod comes from Bede's *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.[25] Abbess Hilda is one of the few women for whom there is solid historical evidence. We know she was a princess, the daughter of the nephew of King Edwin of Northumbria and cousin to King Oswy who convened the Synod, that she was brought up in King Edwin's court and baptized with Edwin's family in 627 CE Twenty years later, Aidan (later St. Aidan), the renowned Irish missionary and Bishop of Lindesfarne, called Hilda to establish a monastic community of women, and later to become abbess of the religious community at Hartlepool, About 650 CE, Hilda

[23] Harrington, *Women in a Celtic Church,* 68

[24] In the first book of the series, *Absolution by Murder*, Sister Fidelma attends the Synod of Whitby.

[25] This section draws on Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, especially Book IV. Chapter XXIII. https://www.ccel.org/ccel/bede/history.v.iv.xxiii.html (accessed on 31 August 2019) and also on Book III. Chapters XXIII – XVII.

> … undertook either to build or to set in order a monastery in the place called Streanaeshalch, and this work which was laid upon her she industriously performed; for she put this monastery under the same rule of monastic life as the former (Hartlepool); and taught there the strict observance of justice, piety, chastity, and other virtues, and particularly of peace and charity, so that, after the example of the primitive Church, no one there was rich, and none poor, for they had all things common, and none had any private property, Her prudence was so great, that not only meaner men in their need, but sometimes even kings and princes, sought and received her counsel; she obliged those who were under her direction to give so much time to reading of the Holy Scriptures, and to exercise themselves so much in works of justice, that many might readily be found there fit for the priesthood and the service of the altar. Indeed we have seen five from that monastery who afterwards became bishops, and all of them men of singular merit and sanctity, whose names were Bosa, Aetla, Oftfor, John and Wilfrid.[26]

Thus, in all the communities she led, Hilda followed the practices of the Celtic tradition used in the monastic communities such as Iona "which contained both sexes. … What archaeological evidence we have indicates … the members lived in small houses, usually with two to three to a house. Men and women lived separately but worshiped together."[27]

The Synod of Whitby is viewed as a turning point and is sometimes portrayed as "a kind of Armageddon between an overbearing, bureaucratic 'Roman Church' on the one hand and a small, self-effacing 'Celtic Church' on the other."[28] Donald Meek observes,

> There was no killing at Whitby, and Irish monks continued to be very active in Anglo-Saxon England long after 664. Again, the encounter is sometimes seen as a "culture clash." In reality, it

[26] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* Book IV, Chapter XXIII

[27] Susan Abernethy, **"**Hilda of Whitby – A Ray of Light in the "Dark Ages" (published 26 September 2014) http://etc.ancient.eu/education/hilda-of-whitby-susan-abernethy/ (accessed 3 September 2019).

[28] Donald E. Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Handsel Press Ltd., 2000), 138

> does not fit any of these interpretations. It was part of an ongoing attempt to bring uniformity to the diverse practices of Christendom.[29]

The conference was convened to

> … come up with a conclusive answer of which strain of Christianity to maintain. This meeting wasn't really a synod in the religious sense as much as it was a … political council convened by a king, attended by nobles and advisers, where the king would come to a decision and pass judgement. [30]

A major issue was setting a standard date for Easter as the Roman and Celtic churches celebrated it on different days. This caused domestic tension between the king of Northumbria, a cousin of Abbess Hilda who grew up in the Celtic tradition, and the queen, who came from the Roman tradition. A secondary issue was the difference in tonsure for the Irish monks (long hair down the back with the front of the head shaved bare) and the Roman monks (a circlet of hair around the shaven head). It seems that this famous council was driven as much by human issues, domestic tranquility and outward appearances of the vowed religious, as by theological ones, such as the dates for Lent and Easter. At its conclusion, the king chose to harmonize church practices in accordance to the Roman tradition; a legend has it that he feared St. Peter's rejection at the pearly gates if he chose the Celtic tradition.

What was Abbess Hilda's role in the Synod? Called by King Oswy of Northumbria – Hilda's cousin – it was a means to cementing Oswy's political prominence in Britain where both Roman and Celtic traditions were practiced. Oswy would not have wanted to alienate either side. As Ray Simpson writes, "It is a tribute to Hilda's status as a spiritual mother to people from both traditions, and to her organizational ability, that Oswy

[29] Meek, *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, 138

[30] Susan Abernethy, "Hilda of Whitby – A Ray of Light in the "Dark Ages" in *Ancient History et cetera* http://etc.ancient.eu/education/hilda-of-whitby-susan-abernethy/, posted by James Weiner, Communications Director at Ancient History Encyclopedia on 26 September 2014. (accessed on 30 March 2018).

asked her to undertake this task."[31] Simpson continues by noting that "Bede records that Hilda and her followers were supporters of the "Irish side of the argument"[32] and observes that this would have taken courage as she "owed her position to the royals who wanted to go over to Rome."[33] After the Synod, Hilda accepted the Roman tradition and continued to lead the Abbey at Whitby until the end of her life. As she had done when she was baptized a Christian, she knew that, as a member of the royal family, she played a vital and visible role in staying to guide the Abbey of Whitby into the Roman tradition.

Although we have no transcript of the Synod and cannot precisely identify Abbess Hilda's role in the Synod, it's clear that her status as a successful founder and leader of monastic communities, her noble lineage and her role in mentoring religious leaders created an environment where this clash of religious traditions, doctrines and practices could be resolved peacefully. Hilda demonstrated the power of an influential leader: her moral authority, based in her lifetime of demonstrated religious leadership, provided the setting for the peace conference we call the Synod of Whitby. But this outcome does not suggest the disappearance of the Celtic tradition or any interest in it. Ian Bradley observes "The outcome of the Whitby debate may also have promoted a new interest in the early Celtic experience of the other side. … Just as outsiders and exiles tend to give more honour to prophets than their own kinfolk do, so victors are apt to romanticize what they once sought to destroy."[34] For Bradley, this romantic view was to give rise to recurrent interest in "Celtic Christianity" over the past thirteen hundred years.

Concluding Reflections

The historical evidence supports women being active in the early church in the British Isles. Their roles appear to have been similar to those in other areas of the Western Christian church; these were governed in large part

[31] Ray Simpson, *Hilda of Whitby: A Spirituality for Now*. (Abingdon, U.K. The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2014), 79

[32] Simpson, *Hilda of Whitby*, 81

[33] Simpson, *Hilda of Whitby*, 83

[34] Bradley, *Celtic Christianity*, 5

by the local custom and culture. In my quest to find out if the fictional Sister Fidelma *could* have really existed, I encountered two women leaders: a legendary woman in St. Brigit and a real woman leader in St. Hilda. Like the Abbess Hilda, Sister Fidelma is a princess and a vowed religious woman although it is Fidelma's status as a lawyer and advocate that is most central to her detection efforts. By having Sister Fidelma take her vows at Kildare, Ellis links her to an established figure and she gains authority from that association. Both of these legendary women of the Celtic Christian tradition informed Ellis' Sister Fidelma. I reluctantly conclude that, although it is possible that someone such as Sister Fidelma lived in seventh century Ireland, it is unlikely. Nevertheless, I hope she did.

Joy T. Barnitz, M.Div., Ph.D., is passionate about highlighting women in leadership. A recognized lay leader in three Christian denominations and interfaith settings, she incorporates the arts, sciences, and the labyrinth in her work. Joy finds that her life experience at the laboratory bench, in the board room, and at the bedside provide her with a unique perspective in both interfaith work and biotech consulting practice. She shares her life with her husband of over 40 years and (currently) one cat.

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