

Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2017. 352pp. £25.00. ISBN 978-1-843-837-13-8

A silent partner in a business venture is one who provides necessary capital, but remains removed from the management and operations of the enterprise. In the book *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century*, Pelagius plays the role of silent partner for the developing Celtic Church of the early Middle Ages. He provides the theological “capital” needed for the Christian thinking of the Insular world.

As stated early in the text, “The thesis of this book is that Celtic Christianity and its Christological images were formed in the matrix of the controversy surrounding Pelagius and his divergent views on grace and redemption”(p. x). This work seeks to challenge traditional scholarship relating to Christianity in the Celtic regions and the scope and impact of Pelagian thought. Co-authors Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown argue that there was a “common Celtic Church,” at least in the fifth to the seventh century, and dispute the oft-repeated idea that the distinctions between Christianity in the Insular world and that of Rome were primarily concerning practical matters. Instead, they seek to show that Pelagian thought was the influence shaping Celtic Christianity, and they argue this through the extant theological texts and the artwork of the time period stated in the subtitle.

The title identifies that the lens through which the authors will make their case is Christological. How did this common Celtic Church view Christ? To set the stage, they begin with an overview of the Christological issues of the early Church, in essence describing where the Roman Church would be entering the fifth century and contrasting that with the Pelagian thinking rebutted by the former. This juxtaposition is focused on matters

pertaining to the interpretation of Scripture and the use, or lack thereof, of iconography.

Pelagius's ideas emphasize the role of Scripture as the sole source of authority in the believer's life. This emphasis also highlights the place of the law in the believer's practices. Through that Christological lens, the implication the authors draw is that the Celtic understanding of Christ focused on four images, particularly Christ the Perfect Monk and Christ the Judge (cf. Chapter V). The one who follows the law and the one who, as the lawgiver, can also be the arbiter of justice reflects this Pelagian "capital" found in the common Celtic Church. As the centuries advance, and the *Romani* influence takes firmer hold, these images wane in favour of those more reflective of the Roman Church of the eighth century onwards.

The connection between the law and imagery itself is also key, as a strictly Pelagian doctrine would not allow for physical images of the Divine, as this is explicitly stated in the Decalogue. In the later chapters of the book, the argument pivots from doctrinal explanations and interpretations to the practical expressions of that "capital." If there is a common Celtic Church of the early Middle Ages that is heavily, if not solely, shaped by Pelagian thought, then one might expect this to be evident in the artwork (or lack thereof) for the same community of the same time period. In point of fact, there is a dearth of imagery in the Insular world during this era depicting a physical manifestation of Christ. The question, of course, is why? The argument states that the earliest existent artistic examples, whose dates are difficult to pin down, focus on the imagery of the cross in the place of Christ and utilize this to express their artistic endeavours. Compare these earlier pieces to those of the eighth century and forward, after the *Romani* influence takes root, and we see far more physical depictions of Christ in the latter. Once again, the question is, why?

The authors contend that before the theological influence of the *Romani*, the common Celtic Church is primarily shaped by Pelagius' thought. This shows itself in how they view and depict Christ. Once the late seventh to eighth century comes along, this "capital" is no longer the prevailing theological currency. This conclusion challenges modern scholarship's ideas of Christianity in the Insular world in the early Middle Ages, especially as they argue for a common Celtic Church, and use a Christological lens to show their case.

The work is heavily researched (unpacking important primary figures such as the ever-elusive Patrick and the seminal works of John Cassian) and it discusses key thinkers who hold to opposing views. These authors take up and seek to answer those who make inferences or leave unresolved questions. For example, drawing from scholarship regarding the Irish Penitentials and the analysis done on artwork found in Medieval manuscripts (such as the Book of Kells) or the famous high crosses, Herren and Brown make connections to their premise of a Pelagian theological influence in the attempt to answer the "why" question.

Undoubtedly, the exhaustive research and extensive citations and bibliography alone make this work a welcome companion for anyone with an interest in early Medieval Christianity in the Insular world. That the authors take this wealth of information and present it in an engaging and readable manner is a wonderful bonus! The strengths of this piece fall along the theological issues. How did Pelagius' thought compare/contrast with his contemporaries and how might his ideas have taken deeper root in that region than often recognized in modern scholarship? To focus this type of inquiry through a Christological lens is a masterful and appropriate accomplishment.

At times, however, the work does belabour this Christological emphasis, or stretch the material under consideration to fit this scope. For example, there are moments when, in attempting to address the heart of

the book's thesis, discussing a topic such as why did the artwork change from the sixth to the ninth century, the conclusion comes across as a question. Could it be due to Pelagius' thought and a lingering influence that was finally snuffed out by the *Romani*? This uncertainty may simply reflect the challenges of working with this material; it may also expose an attempt to draw connections where strong ones do not exist.

Christ in Celtic Christianity is an engaging, thoroughly researched work that recognizes the spectrum of opinions surrounding Christianity in the early Medieval Celtic world. While some of its claims are stronger than others, perhaps due to the availability of evidence one way or the other, it provides insightful considerations that further this field of study. Michael W. Herren is Professor Emeritus at York University and has a lifetime of scholarship in the Early and Medieval Church. Shirley Ann Brown is Professor Emerita at York University and a specialist in Medieval Art and Architecture.

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