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Pelagianism and the ‘Common Celtic Church’

A review of Michael W. Herren and Shirley Ann Brown, *Christ in Celtic Christianity: Britain and Ireland from the Fifth to the Tenth Century*¹

A handful of direct references to the existence of Pelagianism in the British church in the fifth century, another reference to Pelagianism in the Irish church in the seventh, and the use of Pelagius’ works (one work in particular, often cited under his own name by Irish writers) have all raised the suspicion that from the fifth century on there may have been a distinctive British and Irish theological tradition, one of whose characteristics was that it was shaped by Pelagianism.

The idea has been debated until recently in articles rather than in full-length monographs. Some authors have concluded that there was no commitment to Pelagian theology in Ireland, and no long-term serious dalliance with Pelagianism in Britain either, apart from whatever was going on in that short-lived episode in Britain when Germanus was sent (perhaps twice) to sort out an allegedly Pelagian church, or a Pelagian element in the British church.

J.F. Kelly, for example, having studied the use of Pelagius’ writings in Hiberno-Latin literature, and in continental writings with an Irish link, concluded:

Available evidence links the Irish somehow to every known use of Pelagius by name in the early Middle Ages and to considerable anonymous use as well. There are a number of ways to explain this phenomenon. One way, however, not to explain it is as a Pelagian party or movement in the Irish church. Most of the Irish use of Pelagius was selective and for explication of certain passages. Nowhere was Pelagius used to exclusion of orthodox Fathers, especially not to his adversaries Augustine and Jerome. His use simply does not reflect Pelagian attitudes.²

Kelly pointed out that all the known Irish uses of Pelagius’ writings are those taken from his *Expositiones XIII epistolarum Pauli*, which contain only one seriously ‘Pelagian’ comment, that on Romans 5:15, which is not used by the Irish writers except once where it is cited and highlighted as erroneous: ‘this is an answer to the lies of the heretics.’³ In other words, though the Irish were happy to use Pelagius’ commentary on the Pauline epistles, there is no evidence that they adopted Pelagian theology. Indeed the way they used Pelagius’ commentary suggests that they were both aware of, and determined to avoid, his views on grace and nature.

Other scholars have formed the view that the evidence of British and Irish sources points towards a non-Pelagian but pre-Augustinian orthodoxy on the questions of grace that lie at the heart of the Pelagian dispute.⁴ Prior to the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius in the

¹ The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2002, hereafter referred to as Herren and Brown.

² Joseph F. Kelly, ‘Pelagius, Pelagianism and the Early Christian Irish’, *Mediaevalia* 4, 1978, 99-124, at 115. It is important to bear in mind Kelly’s distinction between Pelagianism (a body of theological ideas which was articulated and defined to some extent by its opponents) and the teaching of Pelagius and his associates.

³ Kelly, ‘Pelagius’, 115, citing W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, Cambridge 1903 (repr. Dublin 1975 and 1987) vol. I, 509: *Frecre inso mentibus heriticorum* (sic).

⁴ See R.A. Markus, ‘Pelagianism: Britain and the Continent’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 37 (1986) 191-204; Clare Stancliffe, ‘The Miracle Stories in seventh-century Irish Saints’ Lives’, in J.

early fifth century there was a range of views on grace and nature, faith and works, infant baptism, the salvation of pagans, the effects of the Fall and so on. Until this dispute broke out there was no perception of there being a problem about such matters, but once the question had been asked in the sharp form raised by Pelagius and Augustine the undifferentiated spectrum of possibilities was sharply interrogated, conceptual tools were sharpened, and the need for a doctrinal judgement in the matter became apparent – at least in those areas where the churches had taken note of the dispute.

A third group of scholars has found that the ‘Celtic’ church or churches were indeed Pelagian. This position has not found a great deal of support in recent years, though M. Forthomme Nicholson argued strongly for it in her essay ‘Celtic Theology: Pelagius’ in 1989.⁵ She and the editor of the volume in which her essay appeared were both convinced that Pelagius had a profound influence on ‘Celtic theology’. Her case was rendered less convincing by the fact that she seemed to deny that Pelagius was a Pelagian. He is said to have written, ‘there is praise of man in good will and in good action: but moreover, there is praise of man and especially of God who afforded us the very possibility of will and action. God also furthers this possibility with his grace. Indeed whatever good man may will and in fact does accomplish comes totally from God alone’.⁶ This does sound fairly un-Pelagian, but in fact, the passage she is citing is found in Augustine’s *De gratia* I, vi, and it is the passage where Augustine cites a few passages of Pelagius’ work and claims that he actually means precisely the opposite of what he seems to be saying. When Pelagius asserts that God gives us grace, he means that God gives us the *possibility* of willing and acting (*possibilitatem dedit*), and gives us the law to instruct us and Jesus’s example to follow, and the threat of hell and the desire of heaven to spur us on. This is not at all what most people mean (nor what Augustine means) by ‘grace’ – that self-giving union of the Creator with the human creature, in which God’s presence and power in a human life is experienced as a constant enlightening, liberating and transforming reality of love, through which the person is ‘deified’, brought to share God’s own nature.⁷ Augustine is able to compare his soul resting in God to an infant on its mother’s breast, such is his sense of closeness to the God who is ‘closer to me than I am to myself’. For the Pelagian, the Christian is rather *emancipatus a Deo*, a free-standing autonomous adult citizen, subject to the law’s rewards and punishments.

M. Forthomme Nicholson also argued for a continuity between druidic belief and Irish Pelagian thought, stating that ‘for the Druids everything in nature was good, but it depended on the will of man for it to remain good’.⁸ How she knows that the druids held such a belief, or even that they had a concept of ‘nature’ (as opposed to what: culture? grace?) is not explained. More problematically, the supposedly Pelagian teaching about the goodness of nature is a central plank of *Augustinian* belief:

Fontaine and J.N. Hillgarth (eds), *The Seventh Century: Change and Continuity*, London 1992, 87-115, at 103.

⁵ In James P. Mackey (ed.), *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, Edinburgh 1989, 386-413.

⁶ M. Forthomme Nicholson, ‘Pelagius’, 397.

⁷ See for example Augustine’s *De gratia Novi Testamenti liber iv*: ‘He descended so that we might ascend, and remaining in his own nature he became a sharer in our nature, so that we, remaining in our nature, might be made sharers in his nature’ (*descendit ergo ille, ut nos ascenderemus, et manens in sua natura factus est particeps naturae nostrae, ut et nos manentes in natura nostra efficeremur participes naturae ipsius*) [Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts, Brepols 2002 (hereafter CLCLT); (also Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Paris (hereafter PL) 33.542)]. I will generally give references to modern editions as found on CLCLT accompanied by references to PL for those who don’t have access to that publication. For further illustration of this ‘deification by grace’, see also Augustine’s Sermon 166: ‘For God wants to make you god, not by nature, as if he had begotten you, but by his gift, and by adoption’ (*deus enim deum te vult facere; sed non natura, sicut est ille quem genuit, sed dono suo et adoptione*) [CLCLT, PL 38.909]. The foregoing are my own translations, as are all translations given in this article, unless otherwise stated.

⁸ M. Forthomme Nicholson, ‘Pelagius’, 401.

Whatever things exist, they are good. And that 'evil' whose origin I was seeking is not a substance. For if it were a substance, it would be good. ... Thus I saw and it became obvious to me that you made all things good, and there are no things which you did not make.'⁹

It is possible that Forthomme Nicholson meant *human* nature when she spoke of everything in nature being good in 'Celtic' thought, which would certainly be a more central question in the debate of Augustine and Pelagius, but this is what Augustine has to say about the goodness of human nature:

Therefore it is by nature (*naturaliter*) that men do those things which belong to the law. For if someone does not do it, it is by a vice that they don't do it. By that vice the law of God is erased out of their hearts; and therefore when the vice is healed, [the law] is written there and they do those things by nature which belong to the law. Not that by nature grace is denied, but rather by grace nature is restored.¹⁰

It will be worth remembering this Augustinian view of nature in the discussion that follows, especially when we turn to consider those who are good 'by nature' in early medieval Irish sources, or 'according to natural law' – pagans who are good not because they follow the law of Moses or the Gospel, but because they observe the law written on their hearts.

It is strange to have such a wide divergence of scholarly opinion on so fundamental an aspect of the history of the church in these islands, in particular of the Gaelic- and Welsh-speaking churches, as whether or not they were heretical.¹¹ One factor in this confusion is perhaps that until now no one has published an extended survey of all the many different kinds of evidence that need to be attended to if we are to make any progress in describing the Insular theology of grace in the early medieval period. There have been studies of individual writers, individual works, or genres (saints' lives, penitentials etc.), but no attempt to paint a picture of a whole regional church and its underlying theological account of its own salvation. Michael Herren and Shirley Ann Brown are therefore to be congratulated on facing this enormous challenge. One a Latinist, the other an art historian, they have combined their forces to pursue an enormous range of evidence, and to subject it all to a vigorous grilling to establish how it fits into their thesis. There is no better nor more concise way of describing this thesis than in the words used on the cover of their book:

The authors challenge the received opinion that Celtic Christians were in unity with Rome in all matters except the method of Easter reckoning and the shape of the clerical tonsure. On the contrary, according to the evidence presented here, the Pelagian heresy which rooted itself in Britain

⁹ Augustine, *Confessiones* VII, xii: *ergo quaecumque sunt, bona sunt, malumque illud, quod quaerebam unde esset, non est substantia, quia si substantia esset, bonum esset. ... itaque uidi et manifestum est mihi, quia omnia bona tu fecisti, et prorsus nullae substantiae sunt, quas tu non fecisti* [CLCLT (PL 32.743)].

¹⁰ Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, cap. xxvii: *proinde naturaliter homines quae legis sunt faciunt; qui enim hoc non faciunt, uitio suo non faciunt. quo uitio lex dei est deleta de cordibus ac per hoc, uitio sanato, cum illic scribitur, fiunt quae legis sunt naturaliter, non quod per naturam negata sit gratia, sed potius per gratiam reparata natura* [CLCLT (PL 44.229)].

¹¹ In this paper I will speak of doctrines associated with Pelagius and condemned by church authorities as 'heretical' or 'Pelagian', and I will speak of the contrary doctrines which are defended by church authorities as 'orthodox' or 'Catholic', and sometimes 'Augustinian' (though not all of Augustine's doctrines have entered into the orthodox solution to the problem). This is simply for ease of reference. As I have already indicated, the orthodox position prior to the dispute about Pelagianism was not well defined; no doubt both Augustine and Pelagius believed that they were truly interpreting the orthodox tradition that they had received. My terminology represents simply what happened subsequently, and the ecclesiastical resolution of the dispute.

in the early fifth century influenced the theology and practice of the Celtic monastic churches on both sides of the Irish Sea for several hundred years.

On the basis of this observation, the authors claim that we can identify a distinctive ecclesiastical tradition, one which merits being described as a ‘church’, and which is defined by its early adherence to, and later by its continuing to carry the vestiges of, its supposedly Pelagian belief:

The Pelagian movement defined the common Celtic Church, which we have envisioned as a set of commonalities of theology and of some features of practice in the British and Irish Churches down to the second quarter of the seventh century. Pelagianism may have dominated this Church for only a short time, but its ideology persisted, in some form, beyond the dissolution of the common Celtic Church in the early part of the seventh century. Its adherents taught the natural goodness of man, that a sinless life was possible not only for the Jewish patriarchs but for gentiles as well, that sin was not transmitted through the blood-line, that grace was not necessary for salvation, that God predestined no one, that all men could be saved if they believed, that salvation was achieved through perfect obedience to the law, and that obedience to the law was fostered by asceticism.’¹²

If this is true, the implications for our understanding of the history of the Insular church from the fifth to the early seventh century – its literature, its liturgy, its ecclesiastical organisation, its pastoral provision, and much more - is in need of drastic revision. The authors amass a great deal of evidence to offer a narrative that might be supposed to justify this picture of the ‘common Celtic Church’, some of which I will examine in the following pages. But let me begin with a slight lamentation. In a work of this sort, which relies on a careful sifting of large amounts of material to find the kind of evidence necessary to establish the case one way or another, which depends on careful theological analysis of imagery (both literary and artistic), is it really necessary to indulge in the kind of self-defensive posturing such as the following?

We recognise that some of the ideas proposed in this book – the Pelagian hypothesis and probably also the notion of a Common Celtic Church in the fifth and sixth centuries may be unpopular in some quarters. We did not write to satisfy current academic opinion. ... The pursuit of truth, certainly of historical truth, requires that one abandon the aim of pleasing.¹³

Surely their evidence and arguments can be allowed to speak for themselves. If Herren and Brown can make a persuasive case, they *will* satisfy academic opinion and may even please their readers. But the suspicion is raised that readers who are not convinced are regarded as mere fashion-victims, adherents of ‘current academic opinion’ who are not interested in the heroic quest for ‘historical truth’ on which Herren and Brown are engaged. Worse, there are implications of intellectual dishonesty among those who remain unconvinced by the Pelagian thesis and the common Celtic Church:

...there may still be scholars in the twenty-first century who cry out with Columbanus, *Nullus hereticus, nullus scismaticus* – certainly not in Britain or Ireland!¹⁴

Such preliminaries suggest, more than anything else, that the authors are not as confident as they sound in the persuasiveness of their argument. It is as if they anticipate that other scholars will remain unconvinced, but are resorting in advance to the defence that those who

¹² Herren & Brown, 278.

¹³ Herren and Brown, x-xi.

¹⁴ Herren and Brown, 12.

disagree with them do so on grounds not of 'historical truth' nor the quality of the evidence and argument, but for their own personal or credal reasons.

Leaving aside such preliminary reflections, we can turn to the evidence adduced for there having been a Pelagian 'common Celtic Church', the interpretation offered for this evidence, and the evidence for it having left its mark on subsequent church life after *ca* 650, when according to Herren and Brown *Romani* influence gradually took over the commanding heights of Christian culture.

Prosper and Constantius

The earliest evidence for there having been a Pelagian movement in Britain in the fifth century is the roughly contemporary record of Prosper. In his *Chronicle* he records:

'The Pelagian Agricola, son of the Pelagian bishop Severianus, corrupts the churches of Britain by putting forward his doctrines. But at the proposal of the deacon Palladius Pope Celestine sends bishop Germanus of Auxerre as his representative and having routed the heretics he brings back the Britons to the catholic faith.'¹⁵

This looks like strong evidence, at first sight, of an organised Pelagian movement in Britain, and Herren and Brown certainly make the most of this passage and the passages in Constantius' *Vita Germani* which expand on Germanus' *two* visits to Britain, the first in 429 AD, and a supposed second visit (which Prosper does not mention) some years later.¹⁶ But the use of a saint's life to substantiate such historical events is problematic at best. A hagiographer will often exaggerate the scale and intensity of the demonic opposition to God's truth which his saint will overcome with God's help – a help manifested in the performance of miracles in the rout of his enemies – and Constantius' Germanus does not disappoint in this respect. But whether Constantius can be regarded as reliable evidence for the presence of an organised movement of systematically and consciously Pelagian thinkers in the British church is doubtful. Why does the account of Constantius remain so very vague as to the places where this heresy was said to flourish, or who exactly was meant to be defending it? Not one Pelagian bishop, not one Pelagian supporter, is named in the show-down which has all the marks of being a mythic hagiographic set-piece. Herren and Brown do not make a serious attempt to answer R.A. Markus' suggestion that British theology in the fifth century was not Pelagian, but rather a pre-existing 'undifferentiated Christian tradition, perhaps containing a range of views similar to that found in Italy,' which had not yet been crystallised by the raising of sharp questions between Augustine and Pelagius.¹⁷ This view also has the merit of reading Prosper's evidence about Britain in the context of his other writings and his anti-Pelagian campaigning as a whole: he was suspicious of anyone not whole-heartedly subscribing to the most rigorous Augustinian predestinarian doctrine. Even though Prosper's Gaulish opponents had shown themselves to be determinedly anti-Pelagian by accepting the doctrines of grace and original sin, the fact that they resisted Augustine's notion of predestination was enough for him to characterise their beliefs as 'remnants of the Pelagian

¹⁵ T. Mommsen, 'Prosperi Tironis epitoma de chronicon' in *MGH, Auctores Antiquissimi*, ix, *Chronica Minora*, i, 384-499, at 472: *Agricola Pelagianus, Severiani episcopi Pelagiani filius, ecclesias Britannie dogmatis sui insinuatione corrumpit. Sed ad insinuationem Palladii diaconi papa Caelestinus Germanum Autisidorensem episcopum vice sua mittit et deturbatis hereticis Britannos ad catholicam fidem dirigit.*

¹⁶ Worries about Germanus' first mission, and the fact that Constantius says that it was undertaken not under Roman direction but instructed by a *synodus numerosa* of Gaulish bishops, are misplaced. Valentinian's law of 425 granting the bishop of Arles imperial authority to prosecute Pelagians would have formed a sufficient precedent for such an action. See Ralph W. Mathisen, *Ecclesiastical Factionalism and Religious Controversy in Fifth-Century Gaul*, Washington 1989, 101. There remains an apparent contradiction, however, between Prosper's account which ascribes the mission to the Pope and Constantius' account which ascribes it to a Gaulish synod.

¹⁷ R.A. Markus, 'Pelagianism', 199.

depravity'.¹⁸ Given the struggle which Prosper was waging on behalf of Augustine's teaching, and given that he tarred even strongly anti-Pelagian thinkers in Gaul with the Pelagian brush, we cannot assume that his account of events in Britain is straightforward evidence of actual Pelagianism there either.

If there had been a systematic and self-conscious adherence to Pelagian teaching in Britain which had such deep roots that it continued to flourish for 'several hundred years' as Herren and Brown propose, why does Constantius think that the heresy disappeared? Why does Prosper not mention it, whose *Chronicle* extends past the mid-point of the century and who was constantly on the look-out for the appearance or re-appearance of what he saw as Pelagianism, and would surely not have failed to mention it had he heard the faintest rumour of it? Why does Gildas not mention it, though he is happy enough to criticise almost every other aspect of his fellow-countrymen's lives, including their flirtations with Arianism?¹⁹ Why, above all, does Bede not mention Pelagianism as a present British trait? He celebrates the story of Germanus' triumph over Pelagianism as absolute and definitive, while the teachers of the heresy are exiled.²⁰ If there had been any suspicion of continuing British Pelagianism, he would surely have noted it. Instead when he discusses the Synod of Hatfield (679 AD), and lists the heresies that the thoroughly orthodox fathers condemned there, all are seen to be heresies concerning Christology – Arianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and so on.²¹ Nothing in what the synod fathers condemned could be described as a Pelagian heresy. In the same year, Bede reports, abbot John came from Rome to Britain to teach singing and reading, and to enquire about the beliefs of the English church so that he could report on them on his return to Rome. The one heresy that he is recorded as investigating is that of monothelitism (the view that Christ only had one will), and he found Britain free of such error.²² It never seems to have occurred to him, as far as we can tell from Bede, that Pelagianism might have been an issue. Had Bede had the faintest suspicion that Pelagianism was alive and well and living in Britain, one cannot imagine that he would have kept quiet about it; given the British church's rejection of fellowship with English Christians, even in Bede's time, he would surely have questioned the orthodoxy of their belief had there been any sign of Pelagianism among them.²³

Rhigyfarch

If Prosper and Constantius fail to offer a totally convincing case for a systematically Pelagian church in Britain, and if Bede and Gildas by virtue of their silence on the matter cast doubt on the likelihood of such a heresy being significantly present, what are we to make of the suggestion by Herren and Brown that the writing of Rhigyfarch in the late eleventh century is evidence that Pelagianism continued well beyond the expeditions of Germanus? According to Herren and Brown, Rhigyfarch 'wished to leave us in no doubt that Pelagianism as a sect

¹⁸ R.W. Mathisen, *Ecclesiastical Factionalism*, 129-34, shows the 'absurdity' of Prosper's charge of Pelagianism against the Gallic anti-Pelagians, but also shows how accusations of Pelagianism might serve as coded accusations of *political* unreliability, and a way of ensuring Italian support for his own campaign against Gallic writers, anti-Pelagian though they were, who resisted the doctrine of predestination.

¹⁹ Gildas, *De Excidio Britonum*, xii, 3, in Michael Winterbottom (ed.), *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and other works*, London and Chichester 1978, 93. Herren and Brown (52) note that for Gildas the Arian heresy paved the way for other virulent heresies, and suggest that Pelagianism was one of them. But though certain heterodox Christologies may have a certain resonance with Pelagianism, there is nothing intrinsically heterodox about Pelagian Christology. If Pelagianism really was an active force in the sixth century when Gildas was writing, as Herren and Brown claim, he would surely have mentioned it. But he gives no indication that he has ever heard of such a heresy.

²⁰ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, i, 17-21 (hereafter *HE*).

²¹ Bede, *HE* iv, 17.

²² Bede, *HE* iv, 18.

²³ Bede, *HE* ii, 20.

persisted well after Germanus' second visit to Britain'.²⁴ They cite Rhigyfarch's account of David's sixth-century contest with Pelagianism at the synod of Brefi and another a few years later at the Synod of Victory. I am not convinced that Rhigyfarch's goal here is to persuade doubtful readers that Pelagianism was a live issue in the sixth century. Far more likely, given that the citation is from his *Life of David*, is the suggestion of B.R. Rees that Rhigyfarch is promoting St David as a native British bishop who was quite capable of dealing with the Pelagian heresy (and by implication with any other problem that might arise) in the British church without any help from outsiders. Rhigyfarch's agenda in the late eleventh century is the defence of the autonomous jurisdiction of the Welsh episcopate in the face of encroachment from Canterbury, and the defence of a Welsh way of life that seemed to be disintegrating under Anglo-Norman pressure.²⁵ It is no surprise that he paints this picture of David, then. And as Rees has pointed out:

As one reads the narrative of the Synod of Brefi, one has a strong feeling of *déjà lu*, evoked by the many reminiscences in it of Constantius' account of Germanus' missions to Britain: the totally one-sided debate with the Pelagians in which no Pelagian either spoke or is even named, the vast multitude present, the accompanying miracles, the overwhelming success of the defender of orthodoxy, the second occasion needed to confirm the result of the first, and even the name given to it, recalling the 'Alleluia Victory'. Is it inconceivable that Rhigyfarch adapted Constantius' account to the greater glory of David, in order to demonstrate that a Celtic saint could be just as effective in uprooting heresy as any imported saint from Gaul, however prestigious?²⁶

A Gaulish red herring: Cassian and 'semi-Pelagianism'

Another thread that runs through the entire work of Herren and Brown is that of 'semi-Pelagianism'. This term first appeared in the seventeenth century as a term of opprobrium directed against fifth-century Gaulish writers who had refused Augustine's predestinarian thought. But the idea that Cassian is in any sense at all a Pelagian simply does not hold water. Prosper, as we have seen, was not above tarring these anti-predestinarians with the Pelagian brush, but they themselves were consciously, articulately and determinedly anti-Pelagian. What they rejected was both the *novitas* of Augustine's doctrine (the idea that what they saw as a brand new concept could be declared part of the deposit of faith) and the fact that it seemed to them to deprive the Christian of free will, but they insisted over and over again on the need for grace in order to do the will of God, and on the reality of original sin. The 'error' into which John Cassian fell was most clearly articulated in the thirteenth of his *Conferences*, where he is rather desperately trying to establish a relationship between grace and free will. As his most recent editor has remarked, 'Cassian was ... not a great speculative theologian. ... His perhaps laudable attempt in the famous thirteenth conference to offer a counterbalance to Augustine's relentless doctrine of grace has a disappointing quality to it, being notable from the theological point of view less for its profundity than for its mustering of scriptural proof texts.'²⁷ This is a rather polite understatement. Cassian had simply not grasped the subtlety of Augustine's thought in this matter, and he makes no systematic

²⁴ Herren and Brown, 86.

²⁵ See R.R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest. The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1100-1300*, Cambridge 1990, 27: Davies cites lines from a Latin poem by Rhigyfarch: 'Why have the blind fates not let us die? ... O [Wales] you are afflicted and dying,' noting that 'such passages are not merely flights of rhetoric; they register for us some of the psychological trauma of defeat at the hands of the Anglo-Normans. The Welsh and Irish were long used to wars and battles and defeats; but the victory of the Anglo-Normans was different. It brought with it a threat to, if not the imminent collapse of, a whole world of values, relationships and priorities, especially for the aristocratic and clerical élites. It disrupted the ordered pattern of nature and society; that is why Rhigyfarch saw it as life-threatening.'

²⁶ B.R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, Woodbridge 1988, 115

²⁷ Boniface Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, Mahwah NJ 1997, 23-4.

attempt of his own to explore the actual influence (if any) of grace upon the will. He gives some examples of instances where grace seems to have preceded faith, such as the conversions of Saul the persecutor and Matthew the tax-collector, both of whom were called to salvation while still mired in their sins. But as supposed counter-examples, where he says faith preceded grace, he gives the examples of Zacchaeus and the good thief on the cross: 'By their own desire they brought a certain force to bear on the heavenly kingdom and anticipated the particular signs of their calling.'²⁸ But Cassian shows nothing in these examples to suggest that 'their own desires' were not themselves marks of God's love, God's having chosen them, loved them, and given them the grace to express their faith. The stories of Zacchaeus and the good thief are perfectly intelligible within an Augustinian framework, and Cassian does not offer an alternative metaphysical framework.²⁹ But it is simply this issue of prevenient grace, the grace that precedes any merit of faith or works on the part of the recipient, which separates Augustine from Cassian. It does not make Cassian a 'semi-Pelagian'. Indeed, his was a position for which Augustine had some sympathy, having held it himself some years earlier, before the debate with Pelagius forced him to re-think it.³⁰ Augustine himself, while continuing to teach this prevenient grace, never regarded his Gaulish correspondents as semi-Pelagians. In his treatise *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, addressed to Prosper and Hilary in the late 420s, Augustine writes:

Those brothers of ours, for whom your pious love is solicitous, have arrived at the belief, together with the Church of Christ, that by the sin of the first man the human race is born *obnoxium* (liable, guilty, weakened, crippled), and that no one can be freed from this evil except by the justice of the second man. They have come to confess that men's wills are anticipated by God's grace, and they agree that no one can be sufficient in himself to begin or complete any good work. These things, therefore, which they have arrived at, if they hold fast to them, set them apart fully from the error of the Pelagians.³¹

These people whom Herren and Brown see as 'semi-Pelagians' Augustine regards not as heretics, but as 'our brothers' who have fully distanced themselves from the Pelagian error; he accepts their good faith, the seriousness of their engagement with his writing (even to the extent of their having accepted things that he once wrote which he no longer believes) and

²⁸ B. Ramsey, *Conferences*, 477. Compare this to the strange description of Cassian and the 'semi-Pelagians' as 'not so very different in the essentials, but ... a bit softer around the edges,' in Herren and Brown, 15.

²⁹ It must be said in Cassian's defence that his expertise was not that of a systematic theologian. He writes as a teacher of monks, concerned to encourage them and to help them on their moral and spiritual path. This is why he is at pains to stress the freedom of the will. But the problem of grace and free will had been raised in such a way that it required a systematic theological answer. Cassian's answer in the end is this (Ramsey, *Conferences*, 491): 'How God works all things in us on the one hand and how everything is ascribed to free will on the other cannot be fully grasped by human intelligence and reason.' It is simply not his concern to offer a way of understanding *how* God's grace can be the cause of free human acts. Columba Stewart (*John Cassian the Monk*, Oxford 1998, 23) writes of Cassian's *De incarnatione domini*, 'A great work of Christology this is not His grasp of the fine points of controversy was, to put it kindly, imprecise.' Much the same could be said about his approach to grace and free will in *Conference XIII*. I share Émile Amann's view of this *Conference*: 'Telle est cette fameuse conférence XIII, où la multiplicité des détails, la finesse même de certaines analyses psychologiques, n'arrivent pas à masquer l'incertitude de la pensée métaphysique.' (*Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, 14:1796-1850, at 1808).

³⁰ *De praedestinatione*, cap. vii.

³¹ *De praedestinatione*, cap. ii. *peruenerunt autem isti fratres nostri, pro quibus sollicita est pia caritas uestra, ut credant cum ecclesia christi, peccato primi hominis obnoxium nasci genus humanum, nec ab isto malo nisi per iustitiam secundi hominis aliquem liberari. peruenerunt etiam, ut praeueniri voluntates hominum dei gratia fateantur, atque ad nullum opus bonum uel incipiendum uel perficiendum sibi quemquam sufficere posse consentiant. retenta ergo ista in quae peruenerunt, plurimum eos a Pelagianorum errore discernunt* [CLCLT (PL 44.961)].

their receptiveness to his continued teaching. Where Herren and Brown say that in the fifth century ‘it was convenient to heap together Pelagians and semi-Pelagians as enemies of grace’,³² this does not do justice to the capacity of Augustine to see the difference. He does not think of these people as semi-Pelagians.

And it has to be said that even John Cassian, though his thirteenth *Conference* seems to promote the notion that the first movement of faith might (sometimes) be made by the unaided human will, seems to contradict this view at other points. Thus in the third *Conference* he writes:

‘For it is granted to you for Christ’s sake not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him’. Here too he (the apostle Paul) has declared that the beginning of our conversion and faith and the enduring of sufferings are all granted to us by the Lord.³³

Even in the thirteenth *Conference* [cap.7], Cassian seems still to hint at an Augustinian notion of grace preceding faith:

For God’s purpose, according to which he did not make the human being to perish but to live forever, abides unchanging. When his kindness sees shining in us the slightest glimmer of good will, *which he himself has in fact sparked from the hard flint of our heart*, he fosters it, stirs it up and strengthens it with his inspiration.³⁴

Here, although God’s grace seems to be given *in response* to a glimmer of our own, Cassian immediately adds that God himself has sparked that glimmer from the hard flint of our hearts. In other words, he seems to be entertaining even here the Augustinian position that God makes the first move.

Whatever the explanation of Cassian’s views on grace and predestination – for one and against the other – Herren and Brown place far too much emphasis on Cassian’s influence in Ireland as an indicator of Pelagian sympathies. After all, St Benedict’s *Rule* strongly recommends to his monks both the *Institutes* and the *Conferences* of John Cassian. His own rule was merely a starting-point on the road of monastic discipline (*initium conversationis*), while the works of Cassian were *instrumenta virtutum* for good-living monks, while ‘for us who are idle, bad-living and negligent it is a cause of shame.’³⁵ Gregory the Great was also steeped in the works of Cassian, and admired him.³⁶ Cassian’s works were held as *the* guide to advanced monastic spirituality all over medieval Europe, without any sense that his views on grace might lead the reader into ‘semi-Pelagianism’. St Dominic, founder of the Order of Preachers in the early thirteenth century, carried with him at all times a copy of the *Conferences* as well as the Gospel of Matthew and Paul’s Epistles. Thomas Aquinas cites him as an authority more than a dozen times in his discussion of morals in the *Summa Theologiae*.³⁷ Such consistent use of Cassian throughout the medieval west as a guide to monastic and moral life makes quite untenable the view of Herren and Brown that the use of Cassian in Ireland and Wales is somehow evidence of a Pelagian mindset.

³² Herren and Brown, 69.

³³ B. Ramsey, *Conferences*, 133 (editor’s translation).

³⁴ B. Ramsey, *Conferences*, 472 (editor’s translation, my italics).

³⁵ *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, cap. lxxiii: Luke Dysinger OSB (ed.) *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Trabuco Canyon, CA 1997, 169.

³⁶ R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World*, Cambridge 1997, 35, suggests that Cassian and Augustine were the two most significant influences on Gregory’s thought. Cassian’s account of a life which was both active and striving towards the contemplative was a particularly significant influence.

³⁷ B. Ramsey, *Conferences*, 7.

Grace and the work of the ascetic: a problem of theology

Associated with their thinking on the place of Cassian, since Cassian was an ascetic monk and a teacher of ascetics, Herren and Brown are given to suggesting that stress on monastic values and ascetic effort is also evidence of Pelagian thinking. Over and over again the authors stress the commitment of the Celtic church to asceticism, to effort, and to monastic life as the ideal form of Christianity. But nothing that they say about the 'common Celtic Church' and its idealisation of monastic life distinguishes it from orthodox attitudes to monastic life anywhere else in the west. So while they state that 'it is indisputable that among Celtic churchmen the monastic life was universally regarded as privileged',³⁸ suggesting perhaps a distinguishing feature of Celtic religion, even the authors cannot stop themselves pointing out a page later that 'private asceticism gave way to organised monasticism in most regions of the West ... The monastery stood as the paragon of Christianity in its fulness, a paradigm of sanctity and token of salvation visible to all the faithful.'³⁹ They are absolutely right about this: people became monks because they wanted to work out their salvation, and they thought that the monastery was the best place to do so. But if this is so of 'most regions of the West', why do Herren and Brown take it as evidence of distinctively Celtic Pelagianism when it is encountered in Ireland and Britain?

Given that monastic life was simply one form of the Christian life, albeit one seen by many as a more perfect form, we must surely expect to find several features of monastic life practised by non-monks simply because they were features of Christian life in general which were, inevitably, practised by monks too. In other words, the fact that non-monks are doing things which monks do cannot be taken on its own as evidence that they have been 'monasticised' as Herren and Brown imply. Asceticism in various forms is part of the life of ordinary believers: one only has to look at the seriousness of the Ramadan fast among Muslims – who have no specialist monastic movement – to realise that. The origins of fasting in Christian life are, likewise, not monastic.

Certainly the sixth-century Penitential of Uinniau cited by Herren and Brown requires celibacy of the clergy, but this is hardly an Insular peculiarity signifying, as the authors seem to suggest, an unusually 'monasticised society'.⁴⁰ Pressure had been growing on the clergy in many parts of the continental Church, seeking to impose celibacy on them, since at least the Council of Elvira (early fourth century), and writers such as Pope Damasus (c. 380), Pope Siricius (c. 385), Jerome and Ambrose had carried on the tradition of saying that priests should be continent.⁴¹ If orthodox authorities from the fourth century on were increasingly commending (and even commanding) clerical celibacy, the fact that Uinniau sought to 'monasticise' the Irish clergy in the sixth century is hardly evidence of anything Pelagian going on.

Similarly, as evidence for 'monasticisation' of the laity in Ireland, Herren and Brown cite the practice of fasting for three forty-day periods (the 'three Lents') during the year and abstaining from sexual relations, recommended again by Uinniau's Penitential.⁴² But quite how this can be used to distinguish the 'common Celtic Church' from the church anywhere else escapes me. Here is Augustine in a sermon preached at the beginning of Lent:

Now let us fast, humbling our souls, as the day approaches on which the Master of humility humbled himself, made obedient even unto death on a cross. Let us imitate his cross, nailing down our lusts with the nails of

³⁸ Herren and Brown, 13.

³⁹ Herren and Brown, 14.

⁴⁰ Herren and Brown, 29-30.

⁴¹ For a recent useful (and brief) discussion of this process and its relationship to the changing social and cultic status of the cleric, and the limited effect of such recommendations, see Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Celibate Clergy: the Need for Historical Debate', *New Blackfriars* 85 (2004) 583-97.

⁴² Herren and Brown, 14, 30

abstinence. Let us punish our body, and subject it to our service; and lest we fall into unlawful things through our uncontrolled flesh, in order to subdue it, let us deny it even lawful things for a while. Drunkenness and inebriation are always to be avoided, but on these days (of Lent) even permitted meals are to be avoided. Adultery and fornication are always to be abhorred and fled from, but on these days we should refrain even from marital relations.⁴³

Likewise a century later, Caesarius of Arles (d.542 AD), another profoundly anti-Pelagian thinker, required of the laity during Lent that they refrain from marital relations during Lent (as well as during other times of the year for a few days before receiving Communion), and fast for the whole period; they should get up early for prayers (*vigilias*) and try to come also to prayers at Terce, Sext and None. In addition to this they must give alms, make peace with their enemies, wash the feet of pilgrims and feed the poor.⁴⁴ Herren and Brown paint a picture of the ‘monasticisation’ of the Irish laity which bears strong similarities to the process going on in North Africa and on the Continent, and it is not a process of monasticisation at all. It is part of the discipline of holiness envisaged by pastors for the whole church which quite naturally bears some resemblance to the discipline of holiness envisaged by monastic writers for monks.⁴⁵

Furthermore, even if the laity in Ireland *were* more ‘monasticised’, or even if ascetic values were more heavily stressed here than elsewhere, there is no intrinsic connection between asceticism and a Pelagian view of grace. Certainly, all Pelagians must have a certain ascetic instinct, but it doesn’t follow that all ascetics are committed to a Pelagian understanding of grace and original sin. Indeed, as Cassian himself stated, the true ascetic was utterly dependent on God’s grace for his or her spiritual progress. The struggle for spiritual advancement in Cassian’s writing is not that of a Pelagian, freely and calmly making up his mind and doing perfectly all that the law required. It is a process in which Cassian says God’s grace is always necessary for both the willing and the completion of the monk’s ascetical works. This is something that Herren and Brown seem not quite to have grasped: the orthodox resolution of the dispute does not propose grace as an alternative to works, something which does away with effort and struggle, but something which enlivens and strengthens the ascetic in his or her struggle with temptation, fear, demonic distraction and so on. Herren and Brown often write as if a monk’s reliance on grace meant that effort and struggle were no longer necessary – an impression that they share with some of Prosper’s opponents in Gaul.⁴⁶ They write as if an act inspired by God’s grace was thereby somehow

⁴³ *Sermon 207.2 ieiunemus etiam humiliantes animas nostras, appropinquante die quo magister humilitatis humiliavit semetipsum, factus subditus usque ad mortem crucis. imitemur eius crucem, abstinentiae clavis edomitas concupiscentias configentes. castigemus corpus nostrum, et seruituti subiiciamus: et ne per indomitam carnem ad illicita prolabamur, in ea domanda aliquantum et licita subtrahamus. crapula et ebrietas etiam per dies caeteros deuitanda: per hos autem dies etiam concessa prandia deuitanda. adulteria et fornicationes semper exsecranda atque fugienda: his autem diebus et a conjugibus temperandum est* [CLCLT (PL 38.1043)].

⁴⁴ D.G. Morin (ed.) *Sancti Caesarii Arelatensis Sermones*, Turnhout 1953, vol. I, 10, 196, 290, 356; vol. 2, 806-7.

⁴⁵ Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, New York 1986, contains useful discussion of the development of Lenten observances in the early centuries of the Church, especially in Part Three.

⁴⁶ They are not alone in this misapprehension among modern scholars. Marilyn Dunn, for example, writes of Cassian following Evagrius of Pontus by creating a ‘third way in which it was clear that both grace and effort played a role in the transformation of the individual.’ (M. Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: from the Desert Fathers to the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford 2002, 73.) This is not a ‘third way’; it is the teaching of Augustine that both effort and grace play a role, but not as alternative origins of willing and acting: rather those efforts of ours which are brought about by God’s grace are more truly *our own* efforts than those which are not graced, and in them, by God’s grace, we are restored to our nature, and raised beyond that to God himself.

removed from the realm of nature.⁴⁷ On the basis of this supposition, they imagine that whenever they point out how much effort is required by a particular monastic writer, they are offering evidence of Pelagian rigourism. But they are not. Effort and struggle are perfectly assimilable to the Catholic account of grace, as orthodox ascetics, monastic founders and reformers have demonstrated for centuries.

Righteous gentiles

Herren and Brown cite stories in early medieval Irish saint's lives which suggest to them a Pelagian notion of the salvation of good pagans. Underlying this connection between the good pagan and Pelagian theology is the Pelagian notion that even under natural law, before the law of Moses or the law of Christ were given, men and women had a perfectly intact free will and also the guidance of their conscience, and if they followed their conscience they could be saved. Since there was no original sin to damage or distort their will, they could find salvation by simple obedience to that law of nature which they possessed inwardly. At first sight, therefore, the examples cited might look like a convincing argument for an underlying Pelagian view of salvation. But on closer inspection this becomes less clear.

The image of pre-Christian Gaels being found righteous, and being saved, was raised in an article forty years ago, which examined the story of *Beowulf* in the light of Christian thinking about pagan ancestors.⁴⁸ Donahue held that these stories of righteous pagans reflected thinking about natural law which was attributable not to Pelagianism, but rather to a pre-Pelagian and pre-Augustinian view brought to Britain probably from Gaul. This thinking has its roots in Romans 1:19-32, which though not exactly optimistic about the prospects of salvation for most pagans does offer a mechanism whereby some might be saved. The author of *Beowulf*, like the authors of certain Irish saints' tales, has built on this tradition.

Such a motif may very well reflect a pre-Augustinian tradition,⁴⁹ but it is not greatly at odds even with the position of Augustine himself. In *De Civitate Dei* he argues that gentiles have been saved, on the understanding that they have come to some kind of knowledge of God:

I have no doubt that it was an act of heavenly providence that from this one man (Job) we should know that there could also be those among other nations who lived according to God's way and who were pleasing to Him, and who belonged to the spiritual Jerusalem. But we must believe that this was granted to no one, except those who had received a revelation of the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, whose future coming in the flesh was foretold to the saints of antiquity, just as his having come is announced to us, so that the self-same faith may, through him, lead

⁴⁷ See for example Herren and Brown, 96, where the virgin Monesan is discussed. The fact that she maintained her virginitly against family coercion is explained both by her receiving the assistance of the Holy Spirit (grace) and by her following the example of Abraham. Herren and Brown declare that this reveals 'a vacillation between a grace-based and a nature-based explanation for sanctity'. But no such vacillation is suggested by Muirchú's account: grace and nature are not *alternative* explanations. Rather what she does by the goodness of nature (imitating Abraham) she is inspired to do and enabled to do by the grace of God. As Augustine said, 'Grace is not denied by nature; rather nature is repaired by grace.' *De spiritu et littera*, cap. xxvii, *non quod per naturam negata sit gratia, sed potius per gratiam reparata natura* [CLCLT (PL 44.229)].

⁴⁸ C. Donahue, 'Beowulf and Christian Tradition', *Traditio* 21, 1965, 55-116. See also his later article, 'Beowulf and Christian Tradition: a reconsideration from a Celtic Stance', *Traditio* 21 (1965) 55-116.

⁴⁹ Think for example of Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV, xiii, 1: 'The law of nature, by which natural man is justified, which, even before the giving of the Law, was kept by those who were justified by faith and pleased God, this law the Lord did not annul but extended and fulfilled, as is shown by his own words (Matt v.21 et seq.)',

to God all those in the City of God, God's house, God's temple, who are predestined.⁵⁰

This knowledge of God was not necessarily explicit about the details of Christian faith, since Augustine also says:

This mystery of eternal life was announced by angels to those who were fit for it, from the very beginning of the human race, *by certain signs and symbols appropriate to the times*. Later the Hebrew people was gathered and united into a kind of nation which would perform this symbolising activity. There, what was to take place from the coming of Christ up to the present day was predicted, by some knowingly and by others unknowingly.⁵¹

The fundamental point here is that pagans can be righteous, and if they are righteous it is because they have received revelation and grace from God.⁵² In other words the difference between Pelagius and Augustine here is *not* that one believes in righteous pagans and one doesn't. The difference is that while they both believe that there have been (a few) righteous pagans, Pelagius thinks they managed on their own because they were strong, while Augustine thinks that they managed it by the grace of God, by the Spirit being poured into their hearts, although they were weak.

It is a great uncleanness of an unclean soul to reckon that it can cleanse itself all on its own. But of those who have not worshipped idols, nor bound themselves by any Chaldaean or magical rites, one should not say anything rashly, lest perhaps it is hidden from us that the Saviour, without whom no one can be saved, has somehow revealed himself to them.⁵³

Elsewhere, Augustine enjoys a vision of the City of God which is all-embracing, though without being very specific about who is in it, but which makes it clear again that there are people included in God's kingdom who must have had some kind of anonymous pre-Mosaic and pre-Christian 'faith' in Christ:

⁵⁰ *De ciuitate Dei* xviii, 47: *diuinitus autem prouisum fuisse non dubito, ut ex hoc uno sciremus etiam per alias gentes esse potuisse, qui secundum deum uixerunt ei que placuerunt, pertinentes ad spiritalem hierusalem. quod nemini concessum fuisse credendum est, nisi cui diuinitus reuelatus est unus mediator dei et hominum, homo christus iesus, qui uenturus in carne sic antiquis sanctis praenuntiabatur, quem ad modum nobis uenisse nuntiatus est, ut una eadem que per ipsum fides omnes in dei ciuitatem, dei domum, dei templum praedestinos perducatur ad deum* [CLCLT (PL 41.610)].

⁵¹ *De ciuitate Dei* vii, 32: *hoc mysterium uitae aeternae iam inde ab exordio generis humani per quaedam signa et sacramenta temporibus congrua, quibus oportuit, per angelos praedicatum est. deinde populus hebraeus in unam quamdam rempublicam, quae hoc sacramentum ageret, congregatus est, ubi per quosdam scientes, per quosdam nescientes id, quod ex aduentu christi usque nunc et deinceps agitur, praenuntiaretur esse venturum* [CLCLT (PL 41.221)].

⁵² Being righteous is not the same thing as being sinless for Augustine, and note that the righteous people in the stories cited by Herren and Brown are not described as sinless. However, though Augustine denies that anyone other than Christ was actually sinless, if others insist that there have been sinless people he replies (*De natura et gratia*, 68): 'where and when they become perfect in complete righteousness, I don't much care: however wherever and whenever they become perfect, I insist that they cannot be perfected without the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord' (*ubi et quando plenissima iustitia perficiantur non nimis curo, ubicumque autem et quandocumque perfecti fuerint, non nisi gratia dei per iesum christum dominum nostrum perfici posse confirmo*) [CETEDOC (PL 44.288)].

⁵³ This sermon by Augustine is a recently discovered one. See F. Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons au Peuple d'Afrique*, Paris 1996, 394: *Immundae quippe animae ea ipsa magna immunditia est per seipsam se putare posse purgare. Sed de illis qui nulla idola coluerunt neque aliquibus chaldaicis aut magicis sacris sese obstrinxerint, temere aliquid dicendum non est, ne forte nos lateat quod eis aliquo modo saluator ille reuelatus sit, sine quo saluari nemo potest.*

The body belonging to this Head (i.e. to Christ) is the Church. Not the Church which is in this particular place, but that which is both in this place and across the whole earth; not that which is at this time, but that which *from Abel up to those who are still to be born* to the end of the age, and who believe in Christ, all the crowd of saints belonging to the one city, which city is the Body of Christ, whose head is Christ himself.⁵⁴

Having established that both Pelagius and Augustine have theologies which can accommodate the salvation of good pagans, let us look at the sources which Herren and Brown offer as suggestive of a Pelagian view of salvation.

Muirchú, in his *Life of Patrick*, mentions a man called Díchu who was ‘good by nature, although a pagan’.⁵⁵ Herren and Brown assert that this man kept the law of nature ‘apparently without any assistance of divine grace’,⁵⁶ but in the account of Díchu’s goodness there is no denial of grace. On the contrary, though Díchu originally intended to kill Patrick and his companions, ‘when he saw Saint Patrick’s face, the Lord changed his thoughts to good, and Patrick preached to him and there he believed Patrick.’⁵⁷ In other words, though his gentile goodness is not explicitly attributed to grace, his decision not to kill Patrick *is*: it is the Lord who changes Díchu’s thoughts. This in itself is a highly un-pelagian feature of the narrative, and if God can change his thoughts about killing Patrick we cannot rule out that the author might have imagined God having graced his thoughts more generally, which led to him being a just man.

Muirchú’s other story of a righteous gentile concerns a woman called Monesan. In the midst of pagan Britain, she was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ long before she had heard the Gospel of Christ. She expresses her implicit faith by refusing marriage and asking her mother and her nurse questions about who made the sun – in other words, reflecting on the monotheistic pre-Mosaic law written already on her heart. Her refusal of marriage is explicitly said to be because she was enlightened by the shining counsel of the Holy Spirit (*luculentissimo Spiritus Sancti <consilio>*).⁵⁸ This repeated reference to the Holy Spirit, and her ‘natural’ monotheistic quest, show a perfectly orthodox sense of the role of grace and nature in her conversion. Incidentally, given that Muirchú’s Monesan is clearly saved under the influence of divine grace (the Holy Spirit), it is strange that Herren and Brown should assume that Muirchú’s Díchu is good *without* God’s grace, even though grace is not explicitly mentioned as underlying his goodness.

Herren and Brown also mention two passages in Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* (hereafter *VC*) as evidence of a Pelagian notion of salvation of good pagans.⁵⁹ The first is in *VC* i, 33, where Columba predicts the arrival of a certain pagan old man ‘who has preserved natural goodness throughout his whole life’. The man arrives, is baptised and dies on the spot.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps. xc: *corpus huius capit is ecclesia est, non quae hoc loco est, sed et quae hoc loco et per totum orbem terrarum; nec illa quae hoc tempore, sed ab ipso abel usque ad eos qui nascituri sunt usque in finem et credituri in christum, totus populus sanctorum ad unam ciuitatem pertinentium; quae ciuitas corpus est christi, cui caput est christus* [CLCLT (PL 37 1159)].

⁵⁵ L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin 1979, 78: *porcinarius cuiusdam uiri natura boni licet gentilis*.

⁵⁶ Herren and Brown, 95.

⁵⁷ L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, 78: *sed uidens faciem sancti Patricii conuertit Dominus ad bonum cogitationes eius, et praedicauit Patricius fidem illi et ibi credit Patricio...*

⁵⁸ L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, 100-102.

⁵⁹ Herren and Brown, 95.

⁶⁰ A.O. Anderson and M.O. Anderson, *Adomnán’s Life of Columba*, Oxford 1991, 62

The reading of this story as indicative of a Pelagian view of salvation has been questioned by Tomás O’Sullivan, however.⁶¹ A subtle literary reading of the text reveals a quite different underlying message. First of all, Artbranán is baptised before he dies. If this were a Pelagian story, there would be no need for his baptism; his virtues as a righteous pagan would be sufficient to save him. Secondly, O’Sullivan shows that features of the narrative are suggestive of a more orthodox reading. The image of a man striking the ground with his staff and bringing forth a stream of water is a commonplace in hagiography, but it draws on the image of Moses in the desert, raising his rod in his hand over the Red Sea to part the waters (Exodus 14:16ff), and again striking a rock with his staff to bring forth a stream of life-giving water for God’s thirsty and murmuring people (Exodus 17:5-6), passage that lent themselves to interpretation as a pre-figuring of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist.⁶² Compare this aspect of the tale to the one at VC ii, 10, where Columba blessed a rock in a waterless land, and immediately water cascaded out of it, and Columba baptised an infant with it. Infant baptism, of course, may be another indicator of a non-Pelagian outlook.

O’Sullivan also asks *how* Artbranán kept virtue throughout his life: was it by his own strength alone, or did he do it with divine assistance? The passage in VC makes no explicit comment on this question, but it notes that he is carried in a boat, that he is carried from the ship to stand in front of Columba, that he is feeble, and that he needs an interpreter. It is a convincing picture of a man without power, dependent on things outwith his control. The only action he performs without help is believing - *credens*. It is all rather reminiscent of Augustine’s interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan, where the Church is the inn, and the helpless wounded traveller (the Christian) is carried there by the merciful Samaritan (Christ) when he has no power of his own.⁶³ O’Sullivan’s literary analysis is strongly suggestive of an implicit theology of grace here, in the story of Artbranán. I would add to this that Artbranán is described as *Geonae primarius cohortis*, the leader of the cohort of Geon. The phrase applied to him here may be intended by Adomnán to echo the description of Cornelius in Acts 10: *centurio cohortis quae dicitur Italica*. Cornelius is described as righteous by the author of Acts, ‘religious, fearing God with all his household, giving many alms to the people and always praying to God.’ All this even though he is a gentile, a pagan. Yet God pours out his Holy Spirit on this man, and by the grace of that Spirit he is finally brought to baptism. There are clear parallels between Artbranán and Cornelius in their pagan state, their natural righteousness and their each being the leader of a *cohors*. It seems likely that Adomnán is modelling his account of the baptism of Artbranán on that of Cornelius, and by implication that he imagines the Holy Spirit has brought Artbranán to Skye to be baptised.⁶⁴

The second story in VC cited by Herren and Brown is the tale of Emchath, a man ‘preserving natural goodness through his whole life, into extreme old age’, who is now dying.⁶⁵ Again, though there is no explicit statement that it is by grace that he has achieved such virtue, neither is there any denial of it. Grace is involved in the story in another way, however: the fact that the Holy Spirit reveals to Columba this man’s approaching death. More importantly, from a Pelagian point of view, if this man had maintained natural goodness throughout his life, why does he now need to be baptised? The Pelagian account of salvation would make

⁶¹ Conference paper, Iona 2004 and forthcoming ‘The anti-Pelagian motif of the naturally good pagan in Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae*’, in R. Aist et al. (eds), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Law-Maker, Peace-Maker*, Dublin.

⁶² 1 Cor. 10:4.

⁶³ *De natura et gratia*, cap. lii [PL 44.76].

⁶⁴ Note that the gift of the Holy Spirit is said to bring Cornelius to baptism, though it is not explicitly stated that the same gracious gift was what made him righteous before that. Nevertheless, the absence of such a statement should not be read as a denial of such grace. If grace is required for the seeking of baptism, why would it not also be for the other good acts Cornelius does?

⁶⁵ VC iii, 14; Anderson and Anderson, *Life of Columba*, 200: *ut ipsum naturale bonum per totam uitam usque ad extremam senectutem conseruantem...*

such a rite redundant, and it would see no need for the urgency with which God sends Columba to perform the rite.

There are plenty of other clues in Adomnán's work which allow us to infer his view of the role of grace in salvation. In the second preface of the *Vita Columbae*, the saint is reckoned to have preserved his integrity of body and purity soul because God granted it (*Deo donante*).⁶⁶ The miracles of Columba are repeatedly said to be performed by the grace or gift of God or by the power of the Holy Spirit. Fintén is 'predestined' by God not to be a mere monk, but to be an abbot of monks and a leader of souls.⁶⁷ Columba is 'predestined by God to be a leader of nations into life'.⁶⁸ Finally, Columba is described as 'an unstained virgin, free from every blemish' (in a way that would perhaps suggest to Herren and Brown an instance of *impeccantia*), but Adomnán states that this is by the gift of Our Lord Jesus Christ (not by Columba's own unaided effort).⁶⁹

The seventh-century hagiographical stories adduced by Herren and Brown as evidence of a Pelagian notion of the salvation of the good pagan are either capable of orthodox interpretation or require it. I am not suggesting here that Augustine would have *liked* these stories, or that he would have imagined that such pagans who found such salvation would be very numerous. But the stories manifest an understanding of grace and nature which is perfectly compatible with an orthodox view of pagans who are good because they are saved by God's grace, a view which Augustine expounds tentatively in the passages we looked at above.

We might also take note that in later accounts of 'good pagans' in Ireland, where people are saved before the coming of Christianity, a similarly orthodox view is often implicit. When Conchobar mac Nessa dies he appears to be justified by faith in Christ at the moment of Christ's death, far away in Jerusalem:

It was then that Conchobar believed. And he was one of the two men that had believed in God in Ireland before the coming of the Faith, Morann being the other man.⁷⁰

Morann, mentioned as a believer alongside Conchobar here, is the legendary judge to whom the text *Audacht Morainn* was attributed. The author of *Aided Chonchobuir* envisages not only the warrior-king Conchobar but also the judge-lawyer Morann as saved by faith, presumably by 'signs and symbols appropriate to the times' as Augustine would have it. Note that *Audacht Morainn*, whether or not it was composed by a Christian cleric (*circa* 700 A.D.), refers to the Creator (*dúilem*). This fact alone would suggest to its Christian readers that the author (whom they supposed to be Morann) was a pre-Christian monotheist.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *VC secunda praefatio*, Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life*, 6. This grace is also granted to Saint Fintén, *VC i*, 2. Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life*, 18.

⁶⁷ *VC i*, 2, Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life*, 22.

⁶⁸ *VC iii*, 3, Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life*, 186.

⁶⁹ *VC iii*, 23, Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life*, 232: *uirgo immaculatus, ab omni intiger labe, ipso domino nostro Iesu Christo dignante...*

⁷⁰ Kuno Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, Dublin 1906 (reprinted Dublin 1993) 9-11 (tr. Meyer). This is the A-version of the text. The B-version states that 'Conchobar believes in Christ' (Meyer, *Death-Tales*, 14), while the C-version states that 'Conchobar believed in Christ' and 'Conchobar was the first pagan who went to Heaven in Ireland, for the blood that sprang out of his head (in his onslaught in imaginary defence of Christ) was a baptism to him' (Meyer, *Death-Tales*, 17).

⁷¹ F. Kelly (ed.), *Audacht Morainn*, Dublin 1976, 10-11: 'Tell him, let him estimate the creations of the creator who made them as they were made' (*Apair fris, ad-mestar dúili dúilemon tod[a]-rósat amal to-rrósata*). Kelly doubts that the work was composed by a cleric (F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin 1988, 236), but McCone argues that it is 'a product of learned ecclesiastical sophistry implying clerical authorship' (K. McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, Maynooth 1990, 141).

Morann and Conchobar, as heaven-bound pre-Christian Irishmen, are joined in legend by a third, Cormac mac Airt, a king and judge over Ireland who believed in the one God and refused to worship stones or trees, but would worship only the one who made them.⁷²

Medieval Irish legal theory points towards several other pre-Christian teachers who were righteous according to the law of nature. Connla, for example, is remembered in a Middle-Irish poem as ‘that same just Connla who, with the strength of the mighty Holy Spirit, contended with the barren druids and overcame them.’⁷³ In the pseudo-historical prologue of the *Senchas Már*, arguably contemporary with the main text and dateable to the eighth century, the pagan poet Dubthach maccu Lugair is blessed by Patrick and speaks a true judgement, since ‘the grace of the Holy Spirit came upon his utterance’ and guided him throughout his judgement.⁷⁴ Again, the good pagan motif occurs in contexts and with explanations that make it perfectly orthodox. The peculiar characteristic of Pelagianism is not that good pagans can be saved, but rather that good pagans can be saved without the grace of Christ. The Irish passages we have examined are not Pelagian, since they nowhere deny the need of grace: several positively affirm it, and others certainly suggest it.

In addition to reading these texts as suggestive that monotheistic faith and God’s grace lay behind the medieval view of the salvation of righteous pagans, we should also note Kim McCone’s important discussion of the Irish literature about the supposed synthesis of Christian faith and pre-Christian Irish law. McCone sees the *recht aicnid*, the ‘law of nature’ by which pagans might be saved, as parallel to the *ius naturale* of Roman law, remodelled by Isidore (also drawing on Saint Paul – Romans 2:14-15) in distinction to divine law or civil law, as the justice which is held by all men ‘by the impulse of nature’ (*instinctu naturae*). Far from being evidence of adherence to peculiarly Insular and Pelagian-inspired beliefs, this pattern of integration of natural law and the law of Christ shows an inventive but orthodox way of incorporating pre-Christian Irishmen into the same scheme of salvation as that in which various Old Testament figures also found salvation: pre-Christian Irish law and poetry are analogues of Old Testament law and prophets. Just as importantly, it provides a means of presenting Christianity as the natural fulfilment of the expectation of the pagan Irish past, thus legitimating the Church’s wish to re-shape social and political life in Ireland through transforming the legal basis of that life.⁷⁵

Morann also appears in ‘Cormac’s Adventure in the Land of Promise’, edited and translated by W. Stokes in Stokes and Windisch (eds), *Irische Texte 3(1)*, Leipzig 1891, 189 and 207, calling on men to worship ‘God over the beautiful world’, clearly implying monotheistic belief in the Creator.

⁷² For Cormac believed in the one God, ‘for he said he would not adore rocks, nor trees, but would adore the one that made them and who was lord behind every creature, i.e. the one mighty Lord God who shaped the creatures, it is in him he would believe’ (*ar ro ráidseom na aidérad clocha ná crunnu acht no adéra intí dosroni 7 ropo chomsid ar cúl na uli dúla .i. in t-óen Dia nertchomsid ro crutaig na dúli is dó no chreitfed*), R.I. Best and O. Bergin (eds) *Lebor na hUidre: the Book of the Dun Cow*, Dublin 1929, ll. 4016-8.

⁷³ Peter Smith, ‘Aimirgein Glúngel Tuir Tend: a Middle-Irish Poem on the Authors and Laws of Ireland’, *Peritia* 8 (1994) 120-50: *Is é in Connla céma cóir co nnirt Spirit Naím nertmóir ro-lá conflícht ros conaig risna druídib díthoraid*, tr. Smith.

⁷⁴ Kim McCone, ‘Dubthach maccu Lugair and a Matter of Life and Death in the Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*’, *Peritia* 5 (1986) 1-35, at 5ff. Dubthach appears considerably earlier, in Muirchú’s seventh-century account of Patrick’s appearance at Tara on Easter Day, as the only one in the assembled company who rose to welcome Patrick, ‘and on that day he was the first to believe in God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.’ (Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, 92: *creditique primus in illa die Deo et repputatam est ei ad iustitiam.*)

⁷⁵ Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*, Maynooth 1990, chapter four.

Legalism - Pelagian and orthodox

Herren and Brown explore aspects of Pelagian belief related to the teaching that a Christian must obey each and every one of God's commandments. Inevitably, as they rightly say, a Pelagian tradition will therefore be one with a strongly legalistic reading of scriptures.⁷⁶ In this section of their book (106ff) they raise important questions about aspects of Irish Christianity, about the unusual literalness with which Irish and Scottish writers insist on some Biblical injunctions. They have certainly hit on something peculiarly Gaelic here, I am sure. I cannot think of anywhere outside Ireland, for example, the bodies of the dead were shunned by priests for fear of incurring the pollution mentioned by Leviticus 21.

But two things are to be noted. First of all, even if all Pelagians must be biblical legalists, it does not follow that all biblical legalists are Pelagians. If Irish writers feared pollution by corpses, or were concerned about eating *morticinia*, or feared pollution in the toilet, it does not follow that they had peculiar notions about grace. After all, there are plenty of biblical laws which perfectly orthodox Christians have to insist on: usury was prohibited everywhere for centuries, the whole church insisted in the payment of tithes, witches were burned or hanged in countless places. Though these aspects of the Mosaic law are not regarded as binding by mainstream churches these days, the modern Christian concern over what to do about homosexual relationships shows that the Mosaic law is still selectively binding on Christian consciences. Are Christians who cannot accept gay marriages really manifesting a Pelagian instinct? Are they not more likely to say in a perfectly orthodox way, 'If you are tempted to get into bed with a person of the same sex, don't do it, but pray for God's grace to resist the temptation.' A tradition which lays more than usual stress on obedience to certain biblical laws need not be doing so for reasons of Pelagianism, and continuing (if selective) obedience to the law of Moses is a universal feature of orthodox Christianity.

Secondly, much of the evidence offered by Herren and Brown for a distinctively Irish legalism or 'Judaising tendencies' seems to me, in any case, not to be evidence of any such thing. To take one example, the story of Columba's death is meant to suggest that Iona ('at least', and therefore, we are probably meant to understand, other Irish churches too) continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath in Columba's time. Here is the passage they cite:

This day (says Columba) is called in the sacred books 'Sabbath', which is interpreted 'rest'. And truly this day is for me a Sabbath, because it is my last day of this present laborious life. In it after my toilsome labours I kept⁷⁷ Sabbath; and at midnight of this following venerated Lord's day, in the language of the Scriptures I shall go the way of the fathers. For now my Lord Jesus Christ deigns to invite me.⁷⁸

This is the only example that the authors offer of the supposed Saturday-sabbath observance of any Celtic church or monastery.⁷⁹ Two things are worth noting in this respect: first, that

⁷⁶ I am using the word 'legalist' here without any of its common weight of pejorative meaning. For the purpose of this argument I am using it to mean 'taking literally the commands and prohibitions of the law, especially the Old Testament law, as binding on Christian conscience'.

⁷⁷ Note that though Herren and Brown are using Anderson and Anderson's translation (1991 edition, p. 221), they have silently adjusted their 'keep' to 'kept', translating *sabatizo*. 'Keep' is correct, or even better perhaps 'I am keeping'.

⁷⁸ Herren and Brown, 109, citing Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnán's Life*, 221 (editors' translation).

⁷⁹ Herren and Brown are not the first writers to suggest such a Saturday-sabbatarian interpretation of the passage. This view can be traced back at least as far as W.F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban*, Edinburgh 1887, vol. 2, 349-50, interpreting this same passage in VC. Note that Muirchú may also echo some form of Saturday observance in his account of the baptism of Monesan: while she was languishing in pagan Britain, her parents heard that Patrick was visited by the eternal God every seventh day (*audito Patricio uiro ab aeterno Deo uisitato septimo semper die*), and so they took her to Ireland (Bieler (ed.) *The Patrician Texts*, 98). This is not necessarily evidence of a *sabbatarian* observance of Saturday, however, in the sense that people were following the Jewish law

observance of the Sabbath on Saturday would not in itself be a strong indicator of Pelagian belief. As we have seen, observance of the Mosaic Law, or select parts of it, is a continuing part of mainstream Christianity, and not only a feature of Pelagianism. Secondly, in the early centuries of the Church some form of Saturday observance was not at all uncommon. This might include fasting, gathering for prayers, reading the Gospel (as on a Sunday) at divine office, or other forms of observance.⁸⁰ In short some sort of Christian observance *on* the Sabbath was not the same thing as Mosaic observance *of* the Sabbath. What was usually firmly ruled out was the Jewish form of Saturday observance in which the blanket of prohibited activities (against which Jesus is said to have protested – see, for example, Matthew 12:1-14, Mark 2:27-8 etc.) was continued by some Christians. As late as 603, Gregory the Great was writing to the citizens of Rome warning them against men of a perverse spirit who were disseminating bad teaching there, contrary to the holy faith, forbidding any kind of work to be performed on Saturday (*ut die sabbato aliquid operari prohiberent*). He called them ‘preachers of the Antichrist’, and Judaizers, but there is nothing to suggest that he suspected them of Pelagianism.⁸¹

In any case, and more to the point, I would suggest that the quoted passage from *Vita Columbae* has nothing to do with any such legalist observance. Columba is not, on his death-bed, abstaining from work because it is Saturday. Far less is he boasting about how he *kept* the Sabbath during his life. He is reflecting on the meaning of his own death in the context of God’s creative activity. On six days God worked, and on the seventh day, the Sabbath, God rested. The Sabbath rest has become the sign of God’s own eternal peace into which Christians hoped to enter at the last. So Columba is speaking of the appropriateness of his own death taking place on a Saturday or Sabbath. This has nothing to do with the rhythm of Iona’s working week, and everything to do with the theological meaning ascribed to the cycles of time by the likes of Augustine, who preached some time before 420 AD about how the Old Testament is a figurative promise, while the New Testament teaches us how to understand that promise spiritually:

If the Jews were commanded to keep one day out of the seven as the Sabbath, that symbolises (for Christians) a spiritual rest, one which has no evening. Each day in Genesis (in the account of creation) it says “and it was evening;” but on the seventh day “it was evening” is not said. The

and refraining from all work and much else. See footnote 80 below for non-sabbatarian observance of Saturdays. Note also that Muirchú has a strong sense of Sunday being the day on which rest is actually required, as witnessed by his story of the pagans of Druimm Bó who were told by Patrick not to work on Sunday (Bieler, *The Patrician Texts*, 106) and by his observation that ‘it was Patrick’s custom not to walk out from the evening of the Lord’s night (Saturday evening) until Monday morning’ (Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 114).

⁸⁰ Augustine gives a picture of great variety, not to say confusion, concerning how Saturday was kept – with or without fasting, with or without celebration of the Eucharist – and urges that as long as a local practice is not contrary to doctrine, one should simply observe the customs of the local church where you happen to find yourself, *Epistola* liv, 2-3 [PL 33.200-201]. The fourth-century Council of Laodicea had already identified Saturday’s *liturgical* observance as like that of Sunday’s (canon 16), while absolutely forbidding the observance of Jewish sabbath practice of cessation of work (canon 29). John Cassian followed Eastern practice in celebrating special liturgies and teaching relief from fasting on Saturdays (though he noted that the church in Rome fasted on Saturdays), while also expressly ruling out the practices of the ‘Jewish superstition’ (*Institutes* iii, ix-x, in Boniface Ramsey, *John Cassian: the Institutes*, New York 2000, 66-7). In other words, Christian observance of Saturday (which is perfectly orthodox) is not the same thing as a sabbatarian observance of Saturday.

⁸¹ D. Norberg (ed.) *Registrum Epistolarum*, Turnhout 1982, XIII.1 It clearly took several centuries for the church to make up its mind about what exactly was to be done on Saturdays and Sundays. This may be partly attributable to scriptural authority, or lack of it: St Paul in at least three places suggests that he doesn’t think it matters very much whether Christians keep the Sabbath or not, as long as they are patient with each other (see Colossians 2:16, Galatians 4:9-10; Romans 14:5). The Council of Friuli in 791 or 796 also complained (canon 13) that some peasants were still avoiding work on Saturdays.

seventh day which has no evening means, for us, eternal rest where there is no sun-set.⁸²

For Augustine, the Sabbath rest of Saturday is not a legal obligation for Christians but a prophetic sign in Hebrew scripture of the reality of Christian hope of liberation and, ultimately, that we would indeed enter God's rest (in spite of the threat made in Psalm 94:11 *Ut iuravi in ira mea, si introibunt in requiem meam*, which for Augustine applied only to the reprobate). And this is clearly the kind of rest that Adomnán's Columba has in mind, too. On the day of the Lord's rest he is ceasing from his labours, laying down his burden, and on the day of the Lord's resurrection (Sunday) he will enter into that new creation which Sunday represented, Augustine's 'eighth' day of the week:

This seventh day will be our sabbath, whose end will not be an evening but the Lord's Day, like an eternal eighth day which is consecrated to the resurrection of Christ, prefiguring the eternal rest not only of the spirit but of the body also. There we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise.⁸³

Given the patristic evidence for understanding the Sabbath in this way, we cannot accept the passage cited from *Vita Columbae* as evidence of some peculiar Saturday sabbatarianism practised on Iona.

Herren and Brown also make much of the 'sabbatising' of Sunday, that is, the process by which the rules that had governed the Jewish sabbath were gradually transferred to Sunday. This is also meant to represent a peculiarity of the common Celtic Church and its fixation with observing details of Old Testament law, though in this case by transferring the observance to Sunday under pressure from the *Romani*.⁸⁴ But how does the insistence on a sabbatarian Sunday in Ireland differ in principle from exactly the same process which was happening on the continent in the sixth century – during the period of the 'common Celtic Church'? Noting how the *Céli Dé* kept Sunday as though it had been the Jewish Sabbath (no work done, no preparation of food, no journeys undertaken and so on), we are supposed to marvel at how different the Irish were from the less legalistic continental churches. But sixth century preachers in Gaul were forbidding all kinds of labour. One council noted that people were persuaded that they ought not to travel by horse, by ox or by cart, nor to prepare any food or clean their homes; but the council thought such observance excessive and more Jewish than Christian, and decided simply to forbid rural work in order to make it easier for people to go to church.⁸⁵ The fact that the council had to discourage stricter observance of

⁸² *Sermo iv: si iussi sunt iudaei unum diem sabbatum obseruare de septem diebus, significat spiritalem quietem, quae non habet uesperam. namque et in ipsis septem diebus, in genesi in omnibus diebus dictum est: factum est uespera; in septimo die non dicitur, factum est uespera. septimo die qui uesperam non habet significatur nobis requies sempiterna, ubi nullus est occasus* [CLCLT (PL 38.37)] *Occasus* is a term often used of downfall, ruin, destruction, as well as of literal sunset.

⁸³ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* xx, cap 30: *haec tamen septima erit sabbatum nostrum, cuius finis non erit uespera, sed dominicus dies uelut octauus aeternus, qui christi resurrectione sacratus est, aeternam non solum spiritus, uerum etiam coropris requiem praefigurans. ibi uacabimus, et uidebimus, uidebimus et amabimus, amabimus et laudabimus* [CLCLT (PL 41.804)].

⁸⁴ Herren and Brown, 110.

⁸⁵ C. de Clercq, *Concilia Galliae, A.511-A.696*, Turnhout 1963, vol. 2, 125. Herren and Brown (p. 285) note suggestively that 'the sabbatising of Sunday in the Gaulish Church beginning ca 585 coincides closely with Columbanus' arrival on the continent'; but this Council, attempting to restrain the sabbatarian rigour of some, was held in the year 538, long before the arrival of Columbanus (or any other Irish monk that we know of) on the continent, and even before the birth of Gregory of Tours (ca 540, who also promoted a somewhat sabbatised Sunday. Herren and Brown's misunderstanding of the Insular churches' observance of Saturday and Sunday leads them to doubt (p. 285-6) Columbanus' authorship of the hymn *Precamur patrem*, an authorship for which Michael Lapidge has made a strong

Sunday is a sign that such movements were afoot on the continent as well as later among the *Céli Dé* in Ireland. Such gratuitous impositions of additional burdens are not unusual in any part of the Christian tradition, and have little correlation with ideas about grace. One only has to go to the parts of Scotland where the strictest of ultra-Augustinian Calvinist theology is still in vogue today to find sabbatarian forms of Sunday observance that bear a marked resemblance to those of the *Céli Dé*.⁸⁶ Legalism and Pelagianism are not inseparable bedfellows.

Columbanus

Among other Irish writers that Herren and Brown seek to recruit into the Pelagian-inspired 'common Celtic Church' is Columbanus. Some of their argument stretches the evidence far beyond what can realistically be said. Columbanus, we are told, makes a bold formulation of western Dyophysitism (the orthodox teaching that Christ was fully human and fully divine). So far so good, but Herren and Brown suggest that by espousing the orthodox Catholic position Columbanus was giving 'full scope to Christ's human nature', and therefore by implication lending his support to an Irish ethos in which the imitation of the *human* Christ, a supposedly Pelagian topos, played a significant role.⁸⁷ Effectively, we are asked to believe, because Columbanus was orthodox on Christology he must have been heterodox on matters of grace and salvation. Put like that it sounds ridiculous, but that seems to be the shape of the argument offered by the authors.

Herren and Brown, here and elsewhere, suggest that the very notion of the imitation of Christ is a Pelagian one. It is no such thing, of course. It is a theme which has been reflected on and developed by orthodox Christians throughout the history of the Church. Those who have recommended the imitation of Christ from St Paul ('be imitators of me, as I am of Christ'⁸⁸) onwards, include Augustine – here, for example, writing on the feast of St Lawrence the martyr:

He loved Christ in his life, he imitated him in his death. Therefore, brothers, if we truly love, let us imitate. For we can not render to him any better fruit of our love than by imitating his example; for 'Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow in his steps'.⁸⁹

It should be noted at this point, also, that Herren and Brown associate not only the imitation of Christ, but in particular the imitation of Christ in his passion and suffering, with a Pelagian outlook.⁹⁰ The above citation from Augustine is sufficient to show that there is nothing intrinsically Pelagian about the motif. In any case, far from the cited passage by Columbanus stressing Christ's human nature at the expense of his divine nature, the monk insists that though he was born in the flesh 'he never left heaven, remaining in the Trinity'. His position is fully orthodox: the sufferings of Christ are *both* the sufferings of man *and* the sufferings of God (as man), just as Mary is both the mother of the man and the mother or 'bearer' of God

argument in his study 'Precamur Patrem: an Easter Hymn by Columbanus?', in Michael Lapdige (ed), *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin Writings*, Woodbridge 1997, 255-63).

⁸⁶ It is not uncommon for visitors to be instructed by their Bed & Breakfast hosts not to hang out washing on Sunday, significantly called *Latha na Sabaid*, 'the Sabbath Day' in those areas; the older appellation is *Di-Domhnaich*, 'the Lord's Day' (c.f. Latin *dies dominica*), more commonly used in areas of Catholic influence.

⁸⁷ Herren and Brown, 54.

⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:1.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *Sermones* 305.1: *amauit christum in uita sua, imitatus est eum in morte sua. et nos ergo, fratres, si ueraciter amamus, imitemur. non enim meliorem reddere poterimus dilectionis fructum, quam imitationis exemplum; christus enim pro nobis passus est, relinquens nobis exemplum, ut sequamur uestigia eius* [CLCLT (PL 38.1395-6)]. See also the Lenten sermon mentioned above, footnote 43, for the imitation of the suffering Christ. We should recognise, however, that for the later Augustine the feature of Christ that is best for the Christian to imitate is his humility.

⁹⁰ Herren and Brown, 257-60, for example.

(as man) - *theotokos*. This is how the *communicatio idiomatum* works. Herren and Brown get it nearly right when they say, ‘the *imitatio Christi* is truly possible because humanity, not divinity, is the model.’ In fact it is Christ who is the model, who is both human and divine, but it is certainly true that it is the human *behaviour* of Christ that is offered to us by proponents of the *imitatio Christi* as the kind of thing we should be doing.⁹¹

To return to Columbanus, Herren and Brown suggest further Pelagian features in his writing where he states that ‘we conserve our good nature by doing God’s will’. The authors add that ‘the words “blessing of nature” (*beneficium naturae*) in the same passage can be construed as innately Pelagian, since Pelagians regarded our good human nature as a facet of grace ... It is clear that Columbanus was in tune with the Pelagians by thinking of human nature as good, even virtuous ... (and) men corrupt their own originally good natures.’⁹² Once again, there is nothing Pelagian (i.e. heterodox) in the themes Herren and Brown identify here. For Augustine, too, human nature was good, and if we willed what was good and did it we would certainly be behaving according to the good natures that God had created. I will cite that passage from *De spiritu et littera* again:

Therefore it is by nature (naturally, *naturaliter*) that men do those things which belong to the law. For if someone does not do it, it is by a vice that they don’t do it. By that vice the law of God is erased out of their hearts; and therefore when the vice is healed, [the law] is written there and they do those things by nature which belong to the law. Not that by nature grace is denied, but rather by grace nature is restored.⁹³

Likewise Augustine says in *De civitate Dei*:

... without doubt, wherever there is the evil of wickedness, it is preceded by a nature which is not evil. For evil is so contrary to nature that it can do nothing but harm nature.⁹⁴

Clearly, then, there is nothing *intrinsically* Pelagian about Columbanus’ description of the good person as someone who restores the original blessing of his nature by good works. What is in question, and what will tell us whether Columbanus’ view is heretical or orthodox, is whether or not he thinks we can attain this truly natural, truly human state on our own,

⁹¹ Here and elsewhere, Herren and Brown show that they have a not altogether happy understanding of orthodox Christology. For example, when they discuss the harrowing of hell they state (p. 178), rather oddly, that ‘he retains something of his humanity even in the underworld’. But orthodox Christology declares precisely this: that Christ, fully human and divine, died, descended into hell, rose and ascended into heaven. There is now a man on the throne of God – yes, he ‘retains his humanity in the underworld’, and he retains it in heaven too. Again Herren and Brown seem to be arguing that the Irish had an orthodox Christology (in which Christ was ‘human, all too human’), and that this is evidence for, and an explanation of, their heretical soteriology. In fact, the motif of the harrowing of hell *depends* on Christ being fully human and fully divine: Adam and his seed are rescued from hell, where they are rightly incarcerated, because the devil has mistakenly bitten off more than he can chew: death has taken an innocent man, thinking that all men were sinners and therefore all were legitimate prey. But here is an innocent man, and death/the devil has taken him. The gates of hell are broken precisely by this tortured innocent powerless man, by his death. See also Herren and Brown, 253, where they state that ‘his human nature was dead on the cross, but his divine nature was eternally alive’, as if Christ’s human nature was a subject or substance, capable of being dead or alive. The orthodox position is that *He* (not his nature) was dead, as man; and the same ‘*He*’ was alive, as God.

⁹² Herren and Brown, 89.

⁹³ Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, cap. xxvii: *proinde naturaliter homines quae legis sunt faciunt; qui enim hoc non faciunt, uitio suo non faciunt. quo vitio lex dei est deleta de cordibus ac per hoc uitio sanato, cum illic scribitur, fiunt quae legis sunt naturaliter, on quod per naturam negata sit gratia, sed potius per gratiam repaata natura* [CLCLT (PL 44.229)].

⁹⁴ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* xi, 17: *quia sine dubio ubi esset uitium malitiae, natura non itata praecessit, uitium autem ita contra naturam est, ut non possit nisi nocere naturae* [CLCLT (PL 41.331)].

unaided by Christ. The simplest way to answer this question is to cite the prayer which is included among his surviving works:

Lord God, destroy and root out whatever the Enemy plants in me, that with my sins destroyed you may plant understanding and good work in my mouth and heart; that in deed and truth I may serve only you, and that I may understand how to fulfil Christ's commands and seek you. Grant memory, grant charity, grant chastity, grant faith, grant everything which you know to be useful to my soul. Lord, work good in me, and grant me what you know I need. Amen.⁹⁵

This prayer goes to the very heart of our question: the nature that needs to be restored, the good will and good deeds that pertain to that nature, and which pertain to his salvation, are in the gift of God. In passing, we should note in respect of this radically un-Pelagian prayer that Patrick Sims-Williams has proposed that it is an early example of what may be a characteristically Irish type: 'such lists of virtues introduced by *dona* or *da* are common in later prayer books, but may have been spread by the Irish in particular.'⁹⁶ If this is true, then Columbanus' orthodox prayer for grace is part of a devotional practice which is characteristically Irish, which is hardly suggestive of a strong Pelagian current in Irish belief.

As the above prayer demonstrated, Columbanus is no Pelagian. Other passages in his writings make this abundantly clear:

Therefore, to will and to run in the midst of so many dangers, though it be yours, yet it is not yours [*licet tuum, non est tuum*, i.e. though it is your duty, it is not within your power] for human strength is not sufficient to attain what it wills, unless God's mercy also create the will.⁹⁷

Precamur Patrem

The hymn *Precamur Patrem* in the *Antiphonary of Bangor* is identified as a 'mixed case' – i.e. containing both Pelagian and anti-Pelagian themes.⁹⁸ It contains references to miracles, which Herren and Brown use as an indicator of an anti-Pelagian, or at least non-Pelagian,

⁹⁵ G.S.M. Walker (ed.), *Sancti Columbani Opera*, Dublin 1957, 214: *Domine Deus, destrue quicquid in me plantat adversarius et eradica, ut destructis iniquitatibus in ore et corde meo intellectum et opus bonum inseras; ut opere et veritate deserviam tibi soli, et intellegam implere mandata Christi, et requirere te ipsum. Da memoriam, da caritatem, da castitatem, da fidem, da omne quod scis ad utilitatem animae meae pertinere. Domine, fac in me bonum et praesta mihi quod scis oportere. Amen.* The language of *eradica* and *inseras* here reflects the imagery of Columbanus' *Instructio* II, which sees the soul as a farmer's field (Walker, ed. *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 68). Michael Lapidge has given other good reasons for regarding this as an authentic prayer of Columbanus: 'The *Oratio S. Columbani*', in M. Lapidge [ed.] *Columbanus*, 271-3; but lest there should be any doubt about this attribution, note the similarity of this other, clearly authentic passage from *Instructio* XII: 'Lord, grant me, I pray you in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, my God, that love which knows no fall, that my lamp may know itself enflamed and know no quenching, may burn for me, may enlighten others. Deign, Christ, to light our lamps, Saviour most sweet to us ... May it be yours, I pray, most loving Saviour, to show yourself to us who knock, that as we perceive you so may we love; may we love you alone, desire you alone, meditate on you alone by day and by night, think on you always; and deign to inspire us with your love, as it is fitting that you are to be loved and enjoyed as our God; that your love may possess our inward parts, and your love should possess us entirely, your charity fill all our senses...' (Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 114).

⁹⁶ P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600-800*, Cambridge 1990, 324-5. He cites two prayers from the *Bobbio Missal* as further examples of this formula of prayer with an Irish character.

⁹⁷ Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*, 34 (*Epistula* IV). See also his *Epistula* II, 9: *Praestet hoc nobis sua gratia, ut omnes mundum horreamus et illum solum amemus illumque cum patre et spiritu sancto desideremus* (p. 22);

⁹⁸ The text of its 42 verses can be found in F.E. Warren, *The Antiphonary of Bangor*, London 1895, part II, 5-7.

theology. But its ‘Pelagian’ aspect consists in the fact that it does not contain a reference to the resurrection of Christ.⁹⁹ For Herren and Brown it is noteworthy that the small body of texts that survive from the period of the ‘common Celtic Church’ tend to avoid mention of Christ’s miracles and of his resurrection. The sample is too small, and the genre of the texts too skewed, for this kind of observation to be very much use to us. But what of the *Precamur Patrem*, which Herren and Brown suggests has a Pelagian strand because it does not mention the resurrection? First of all, note that it mentions several miracles, most of which prefigure the resurrection in some way – not surprisingly since it is a Sunday hymn, and concerns events that happened on Sunday: the creation of light and order on the first day of creation (verses iv and v); the liberation of Israel from Egypt through the red sea (x); water changed into wine (‘the flavour of nectar’, xxi); the lame can leap, the dumb speak, while the deaf, blind and lepers are healed, and thousands are fed with bread (xxii-xxv); the dead rise from their tombs (xxxii). But here is the verse where one might expect the resurrection to be mentioned, and where Herren and Brown suggest that it is omitted:

*Exaltans caput
universi corporis
in Trinitate
locavit ecclesiam.*

Herren and Brown translate it thus: ‘Raising his head, he located the church of his whole body in the Trinity.’¹⁰⁰ That is certainly one way of reading it, but one might suggest a more natural reading: ‘Raising the head of the entire body, he located the church in the Trinity’. In either case, however, Christ himself is the head. He is the head of the body which *is* the church. By raising himself, the *caput (universi corporis)*, he has located both the head and the body which belongs to it in the life of the Trinity, in heaven. This verse about the head and the body is surely about the resurrection of Christ,¹⁰¹ and about the belief that what happens to him (the head) happens to us (the body) also.

Hymnum dicat

Herren and Brown refer to another item in the *Antiphonary of Bangor*, the hymn attributed to St Hilary which begins *Hymnum dicat turba fratrum*.¹⁰² The authors discuss the twenty-eighth stanza: *Seque a mortuis paterna suscitatum dextera tertia die redisse nuntiat apostolis* (‘He announces to the apostles that on the third day he returned from the dead, raised by the Father’s right hand’). Ignoring the fact that this is a clear reference to the resurrection of Christ (which the authors told us on page 139 was a mark of a non-Pelagian theology), and seeking no explanation of this passage in the fact that its likely reference to the fulfilment of prophecy in Psalm 118: 16-17,¹⁰³ they ask, ‘did Christ raise himself, or was he raised by the Father?’ and suggest that ‘this formulation of the resurrection is compatible with Pelagius’ own exegesis of the event given in his commentary on Romans.’¹⁰⁴ The argument here is that Pelagian theology has a ‘low’ Christology, stressing the human example of Christ as a model for us to follow, rather than his being a source of grace and life in a more immediate sense, and trying to avoid portraying Christ as a wonder-worker. To say that the right hand of the Father raised him would perhaps help to keep the saving and miraculous power of Christ in the background, and allow the Pelagian to lay the stress on his obedience. Certainly such a reading of verse 28 of *Hymnum dicat* is easier to square with Pelagian thinking, but that doesn’t make the hymn Pelagian. And note that Christ himself is described in this very hymn

⁹⁹ Herren and Brown, 139.

¹⁰⁰ Herren and Brown, 287.

¹⁰¹ Compare this to, for example, Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, CIX,20: *propterea exaltauit caput; id est, quia humilatus est, et factus est subditus usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis; propterea eum deus exaltauit a mortuis, et donauit ei nomen quod est super omne nomen ... quia dominus iesus christus in gloria est dei patris* [CLCLT (PL 37.1462)].

¹⁰² Warren, *The Antiphonary*, part II, 3-5.

¹⁰³ *Dextera Domini fecit uirtutem, Dextera Domini exaltauit me; Dextera Domini fecit uirtutem. Non moriar, sed uiuam...*

¹⁰⁴ Herren and Brown, 138.

(verse 3) as ‘Right hand of the Father’, *Dextra* (sic) *Patris, mons, et agnus, sponsus idem vel columba, flamma, pastor, janua*. This suggests to me that the power which raises Jesus from the dead is seen as both that of the Father and that of the Son – consubstantial as they are, how could it be any other way? This is in complete harmony with such reflections as those of Augustine (again!) in a sermon on the Trinity, and how the works of the Father and the Son are inseparable (*opera Patris et Filii inseparabilia*):

The Father performs the resurrection of the Son (“Therefore he has exalted him and has given him the name which is above every name”, Philippians 2:9). Therefore the Father raised the Son, lifting him up and enlivening him from the dead. But does the Son not raise himself? He clearly does. Speaking figuratively of the temple of his body he said, “Destroy this temple, and on the third day I will raise it up” (John 2:19).

The ambiguity of *dextera Patris* in this hymn, where it seems to refer both to the Father and to the Son, may be seen therefore to reflect the same orthodox Trinitarian theology as we find in Augustine’s sermon. There is nothing Pelagian about it.

Altus Prosator

Herren and Brown discuss the Hiberno-Latin hymn *Altus Prosator*, and having searched it for Pelagian themes they suggest one line that might do the trick. The eighth stanza describes how God has made the fallen angels invisible, so that they should not corrupt humanity:

Driven out from the midst, he (the devil) was thrust down by the Lord;
the space of air is choked by a wild mass
of his treacherous attendants, invisible
lest, tainted by their wicked examples and their crimes
-- no fences or walls ever concealing them –
folk should sin openly, before the eyes of all.¹⁰⁵

It is the line ‘tainted by their wicked examples’ (or ‘steeped’ in them as Herren and Brown have it) that suggests a Pelagian view to the authors. This is because, from the Pelagian point of view, human beings are mired in sin not because Adam’s sin has been transmitted to his descendants, but because they imitate his bad example.¹⁰⁶ Imitation of Adam is therefore a significant theme in the Pelagian explanation of evil, as Herren and Brown quite rightly state. But what is described in this verse of *Altus Prosator* is not the imitation of Adam, nor of any other human being, but the imitation of the devil. Pelagians spoke of sinners imitating Adam as a way of avoiding the doctrine of original sin, but as imitation of Adam is not the issue here there is no sign of an underlying Pelagian mind-set. After all, Augustine himself states that imitation of the devil is part of the explanation of evil in the world:

It is much more reasonable to say that Adam is an imitator of the devil,
whom he had as his instigator to sin.¹⁰⁷

The *Altus Prosator* is certainly the kind of poem that a Pelagian might approve of in many other ways – it has not a mention of grace, places a great stress on judgement and reward and punishment, and ends with the rather self-congratulatory: ‘we shall surely fly off to meet him straight away, according to the eternal merits of our rewards...’.¹⁰⁸ But the fact that it contains nothing offensive to a Pelagian does not make it a Pelagian poem.

¹⁰⁵ T.O. Clancy and G. Márkus, *Iona: the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, Edinburgh 1995, 47.

¹⁰⁶ Or, presumably, the bad examples of other people who are ultimately imitating Adam’s example.

¹⁰⁷ *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, I, xii.15: *multo enim rationabilius adam dicitur imitator diaboli, quem suasorem peccati habuit* [CLCLT (PL 44.118)]. See also *Opus Imperfectum Contra Julianum* II, xlix-1 [PL 45.1163-4], where Augustine argues that the sin of imitation entered the world via the devil, while the sin of transmission (transmitted sin) entered through Adam.

¹⁰⁸ Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 53.

Amra Choluim Chille

Herren and Brown note that the *Amra*, written about the time of Columba's death in 597 AD, refers to his reading matter, including the books of Solomon and the works of Cassian. From this they infer 'the continuing popularity of the sapiential books ... from Pelagius to Cassian to Columba.'¹⁰⁹ We can leave Cassian aside here since, as we have seen, his work was considered central to all western monastic discipline from Benedict on. The reading of the sapiential books of the bible may reveal a certain moralising tendency, but that is all.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, the un-Pelagian indicators in the poem are significant. This line suggests a completely orthodox view of grace:

By the grace of God (*rath Dé*) Colum rose to exalted companionship.¹¹¹

Furthermore the structure of the poem is suggestive of a more orthodox view than Herren and Brown might suppose. Though the bulk of it is a praise-poem for the dead saint, it begins with a prayer to God for protection 'from the fiery wall, from the long trench of tears.' By this the poet presumably means damnation, and a prayer for protection from damnation is hardly a Pelagian topos. After all, the way a true Pelagian keeps himself from damnation is by obeying the law. He keeps *himself* from damnation, and doesn't ask God to intervene for him.

Great God, protect me
from the fiery wall,
the long trench of tears.
Just God, truly near,
who hears my wailing
from cloudy heaven.¹¹²

Likewise a Pelagian does not need a God who is 'truly near'. This spiritual proximity also suggests a view of God as a supportive presence, whose grace protects and nurtures the suppliant. A Pelagian has Christ's commandments, the law, and some good examples.

The ending of the *Amra Choluim Chille* also shows strong signs of an non-Pelagian view:

This is the elegy of the king who rules me.
He will protect us in Sion.
He will urge me past torments.
May it be easily dark defects go from me.
He will come to me without delay,
the descendant of Cathair's offspring, Coirpre, with dignity.
Vast the variations of the poem, vast the splendid sun of heaven,
I have not time.¹¹³

The idea that God would urge you past torments or remove your dark defects from you was alien to Pelagian thought – You don't need God's help. You have free will. Do it yourself! Here the saint, Colum Cille, is the instrument of God's grace, and through his prayers the poet hopes to find salvation, and to be cleansed of his dark defects. There is no sign in the *Amra* of the autonomous emancipated individual imagined by the Pelagian, responsible for his own sins and his own virtues, entirely responsible for his own eternal destiny.

Apgtír Chrábaid: the Alphabet of Devotion

¹⁰⁹ Herren and Brown, 117.

¹¹⁰ In a poem like this, one must also ask to what extent the praises of the poet truly reflect the practices of his honorand.

¹¹¹ Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 107, tr. Thomas Owen Clancy.

¹¹² Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 105, tr. Thomas Owen Clancy.

¹¹³ Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 115, tr. Thomas Owen Clancy.

This is the title of a short work about monastic life and observance, attributed to Colmán mac Béognae, founder of Lann Elo in Co. Offaly. He seems to have spent time on Iona before founding his own monastery, and died in 611. Herren and Brown identify passages in the text which they see as evidence of Pelagian thought in the writer. The first passage they cite is the following:

Anyone, therefore, who shall fear God and who shall love Him and who shall fulfil His will and His commandment, shall have honour in the presence of men in this world and shall be blessed along with God in the next world.¹¹⁴

The aspect of the passage that Herren and Brown focus on is the fact that ‘salvation is available to everyone’. But this is not an intrinsically Pelagian notion. A perfectly orthodox account of salvation would also say this, but would add that this salvation is a gift of grace. Grace in this scenario does not remove human choice and freedom, but makes both the willing and the performing possible. The movement from fearing God to loving him in this passage is also one that Augustine likes very much. It appears strongly in the *Apgitir* in the following passage:

The Lord of Heaven and earth is to be invoked and prayed to by every person to arouse fear of Him and love of Him in his heart, for a person tends to be in a state of indifference until the fear of God comes into his heart. For he who will not have fear of God, will not have love of God. ... For fear underlies love. Love underlies holy work. Holy work underlies eternal life in Heaven.¹¹⁵

Compare this to Augustine’s writing about fear and love, where he notes that ‘Perfect love casts out fear’, and goes on:

Therefore let fear begin the process, for ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’. Fear prepares a place for love. When love begins to dwell there, however, the fear which prepared a place for it is pushed out. As one grows, the other decreases. The more love moves in, the more fear is pushed out. More love, less fear; more fear, less love. But if there were no fear, there would be no way for charity to enter. When something is being sown, we see that the thread is led through by the needle. First the needle enters, but unless it comes out the thread cannot follow it. So at first fear occupies the mind, but fear does not remain there; it only enters in order to lead in love.¹¹⁶

Such reduction of fear by love would not be high on the agenda in the Pelagian view of faith, where one would be constantly in need of the threat of punishment and the promise of reward.

The *Apgitir Chrábaid* contains other indicators of the theological outlook of its author which Herren and Brown have overlooked, in particular a sentence which can mean nothing other

¹¹⁴ Herren and Brown, 100; the original is in V. Hull, ‘Apgitir Chrábaid: the Alphabet of Piety’, *Celtica* 8 (1968), 44-77, at 61

¹¹⁵ Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 200, tr. Thomas Owen Clancy.

¹¹⁶ *In Iohannis epistolam ad Parthos Tractatus*, Tract. IX, 4: *sed perfecta, inquit, caritas foras mittit timorem. ergo incipiat timor, quia initium sapientiae timor domini. timor quasi locum praeparat caritati. cum autem coeperit caritas habitare, pellitur timor qui ei praeparavit locum. quantum enim illa crescit ille decrescit, et quantum illa fit interior timor pellitur foras, major caritas, minor timor, minor caritas, major timor, si autem nullus timor, non est qua intret caritas. sicut uidemus per saetam introduci linum, quando aliquid suitur. saeta prius intrat, sed nisi exeat, non succedit linum. sic timor primo occupat mentem, non autem ibi remanet timor quia ideo intrauit, ut introduceret caritatem* [CLCLT (PL 35.2047-8)].

than that original sin, which destroys truth in a person, is inherited from Adam rather than learned (as Pelagians would have it) by bad example:

When is his justice pure? When his heart is in its proper state. It is then that truth is there *as if he had not been born of a human*.¹¹⁷

Whatever else can be said about the author of *Apgitir Chrábaid*, he clearly believed in the transmission of Adam's sin.

Herren and Brown rightly point out that there are passages in *Apgitir Chrábaid* which are capable of interpretation as meaning that grace is given according to merit rather than freely. So we read:

Who is nearest to God? The one who contemplates him.

Whom does Christ assist? The one who does good.

In whom does the Holy Spirit dwell? In the one who is pure without sin.

It is then that a person is a vessel of the Holy Spirit, when the virtues have come in place of the vices.¹¹⁸

Though this can be read to mean that grace requires the recipient's virtue before it is given, it need not be read in this way. It is capable of a perfectly orthodox reading, in which the one who contemplates God is able to do so *because* God is near to him; the one who does good is able to do so *because* Christ assists him; the one who is pure without sin is able to achieve this state *because* the Holy Spirit dwells in him. In any case, the passages would be perfectly orthodox even if they are read as Herren and Brown read them, if it were understood that the human goodness which *results* in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and so on was itself the gift of God. This would simply be an instance of what Augustine calls 'God crowning his own gifts to us'.

Loricae

The *lorica* is rightly said by Herren and Brown to be a typically Insular form of personal prayer.¹¹⁹ They also add that the profound sense of danger, the heightened awareness of sin and hell that the *loricae* manifest are typical of the Irish Church and the English Church – one is tempted to ask: unlike which churches? What the authors do not observe in their discussion of this hell-fearing form of prayer is that it very often an expression of a profoundly Augustinian notion of grace. The very *Litany of Jesus* cited by Herren and Brown is mostly a prayer for protection against one's own sins – that is to say, a prayer for grace to help a fallen nature to fulfil God's commands:

... preserve and protect me from demons and all their promptings, against all the elements of the world, against lusts, against transgressions, against sins, against crimes of the world, against the dangers of this life and the torments of the next ...¹²⁰

Even if the Irish suffered from an 'obsession with hell,'¹²¹ and even if this obsession distinguished them from their continental brethren (which I doubt), the fact that the *loricae* which manifest this obsession are also asking for grace precisely in order to avoid sin and hell mean that the obsession itself cannot be evidence for a Pelagian mindset.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 203, tr. Thomas Owen Clancy. The original text found in reads V. Hull, 'Apgitir Chrábaid', 68: *is and is ffrinne i ssuidiu amail ní roichned ó duini*.

¹¹⁸ Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 207, tr. Thomas Owen Clancy.

¹¹⁹ Herren and Brown, 152.

¹²⁰ Cited Herren and Brown, 152, from C. Plummer, *Irish Litanies*, London 1925 (repr. Woodbridge 1992), 35.

¹²¹ Herren and Brown, 153.

¹²² For other prayers of this sort, see for example 'Patrick's Hymn with its prayer for God's strength to protect the praying person 'against snares of devils, against temptations of vices, against inclinations of nature' (W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, vol. II, 356); the *Lorica* now shown to be the work of Laidcen (d.661), which begins with prayers for the protection of God and the angels

Collectanea pseudo-Bedae

Among the fragments of evidence collected to create an impression of ‘interest’ in Pelagius, the eighth-century *Collectanea* appears,¹²³ though the passage concerning Pelagius which lists him as one of the ‘luminaries’ of the Church is only partially cited. Here is the full text of the entry on Pelagius, with the part omitted by Herren and Brown in brackets:

Pelagius is a talking point among the faithful, and to me likewise it is a grievous matter. [The imputations of his sayings have been made known in nearly the whole world and all the churches shun them like the forest wolf: covering black poison with the colour of gold, he has mixed the sweet spring of primal honey with the bitterness of malice.]¹²⁴

Clearly, whatever the meaning of this text, its author cannot be a Pelagian. He recognises that Pelagius is still being read and is a talking point (*sermo est*), but we know this already from the fact that his *Expositiones* are being reproduced in Ireland and Britain at this time. For this reason alone, presumably, the author of *Collectanea* includes Pelagius in his list of ‘luminaries’, but there is no doubt in his mind that Pelagian views (which, as we have seen, were *not* accepted by the Irish writers who copied his mostly orthodox *Expositiones*) are ‘poison’ and ‘bitterness’. So the *Collectanea* can best be understood as evidence that Pelagius is being read, but that Pelagianism is shunned ‘by all the churches’.¹²⁵

Images of Christ

Herren and Brown ask, ‘Given the fact that Christianity existed in Celtic Britain from Roman times and in Ireland from the fifth century or just before, how does one explain the apparent lack, from the fifth century until the middle of the seventh, of contemporary religious artifacts upon which deliberate artistic attention and care had been consciously devoted.’¹²⁶ This is basically a question about how the richly embellished Christian artefacts of Roman Britain (silver spoons with *Chi Rho* symbols on them, mosaics depicting Christ or the cross, *Chi Rho* wall-painting, baptismal tanks etc.) have no equivalent in the period of the ‘common Celtic Church’. But the most obvious answer, and one which Herren and Brown do not consider at any length, is that such artefacts (often associated with Roman villas) disappear from the archaeological record in Britain at the same time as the villas themselves disappear, and for the same reasons. These artefacts are the product of Romano-British life and its constant artistic contacts with the continent, and with the dissolution of much of that life in the fifth century the artistic tradition is also broken.¹²⁷

from death, the vanities of the world, from (spiritual) enemies, and that ‘every evil should perish from me’ (J.H. Bernard and R. Atkinson, *Irish Liber Hymnorum*, London 1898, vol. II, 206-7); the prayers of an Irish nun in MS: BM Harl. MS. 7653, which pray ‘Sabaoth, be with me early, and hasten to me when I rise, and rule all my deeds, and my words and my thoughts. Guard my feet lest they go idly wandering around the houses, but stand rather in prayer to God; guard my hands lest they be often stretched out to receive gifts,’ and so on (published as an appendix in Warren, *The Antiphonary of Bangor*, 83-97).

¹²³ Herren and Brown, 98.

¹²⁴ M. Bayless and M. Lapidge, *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae*, Dublin 1998, 171 (editors’ translation).

¹²⁵ It is worth noting that the next ‘luminary’ in the list, after Pelagius, is the condemned monk Jovinian, who ‘induced many to drink a sweet potion mixed with venom’, while the third in the list is Origen who ‘thought up higher and greater things’ but ‘when he could not make any progress, he plunged down in a huge fall, and his fall was matched by that of his teaching’ (Bayless and Lapidge, *Collectanea* 169).

¹²⁶ Herren and Brown, 187.

¹²⁷ Elsewhere the authors are prepared to admit that features of early Irish art may reflect not some theological perspective, but rather ‘the tenacity of an indigenous aesthetic’ (Herren and Brown, 259), and they recognise that Britain was isolated from the continent until the early seventh century (189).

There are other factors which may be complementary explanations for the absence of such objects in the record. We might consider the possibility that in this period post-Roman secular rulers who were amassing wealth were not yet transforming part of that wealth into patronage of ecclesiastical art.¹²⁸ We should also bear in mind the astonishing level of destruction of such objects: what happened to all the books, chalices, patens and so on that the fifth- and sixth-century Insular church must have possessed? We need to explain not the fact that no ornate or luxurious items of this sort have survived, but rather that almost no such items of *any* description have survived from this period, ornate or plain, image-bearing or abstract. Whatever religious art was made and used has been destroyed.

Instead of such explanations, Herren and Brown suggest that the lack of such ornate objects in the surviving record is due to a Pelagian insistence on the primacy of poverty in the imitation of Christ. The evidence offered for this is the observation of some English authors of the beauty and richness of ecclesiastical furnishings, contrasted with Tírechán's reticence – the fact that he doesn't say whether or not Patrick's bells, chalices, patens, altar stones and books were ornate is taken as evidence that they must therefore have been 'austere', though this is simply a supposition.¹²⁹

The supposed lack of such art in the 'common Celtic Church' is also said to be connected with suspicion of imagery *per se*, for theological reasons, as an instance of severe adherence to the law of Moses and its prohibition of graven images.¹³⁰

But even if we accept the supposition that there was a principled objection to the earlier forms of Christian art in the fifth- and sixth-century Insular church, as Herren and Brown would have us believe, rather than simply a decline in that continental artistic villa-based tradition, the two explanations based on a desire for austerity and obedience to the law of Moses are not in themselves evidence of a Pelagian belief.

First of all with regard to the explanation based on a stress on austerity, certainly, as Herren and Brown point out, the critique of luxurious living is a strong theme in Pelagian writing. They rightly cite the Pelagian tract *De divitiis* as an illustration of this attitude, quoting Rees' translation, and showing how for Pelagians the imitation of Christ must start with imitation of his poverty:

In what manner are we to imitate Christ? In poverty, if I am not mistaken, not in riches; in humility, not in pride; not in worldly glory; by despising money, not by coveting it.¹³¹

But this kind of rhetoric is not an indicator of Pelagianism. It is an indicator of the kind of ascetic motivation that underlay all monastic life. The *Life of Antony*, an inspiration to the monastic movement for centuries, tells how the saint was first drawn to his ascetic life by hearing the word of the Gospel in church: *If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor.*¹³²

¹²⁸ On the making 'clean' of wealth transferred from secular patrons to spiritual ones (monastic founders), see Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, Cambridge 1995, 62ff. One might also wonder whether artistic patronage might have become less of a priority for such rulers due to economic difficulties in the wake of Pictish and Anglo-Saxon attacks in Britain.

¹²⁹ Herren and Brown, 190.

¹³⁰ Herren and Brown, 190-1.

¹³¹ Herren and Brown, 189-90, citing B.R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers*, Woodbridge 1991, 187.

¹³² *Vita Antonii* cap. ii. For more on the role of voluntary poverty in early monasticism see B. Ramsey, 'Christian Attitudes to Poverty and Wealth', in I. Hazlett (ed.), *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to A.D. 600*, London 1991, 256-65.

The critique of wealth as an oppression of the poor is also made, for example, by Jerome:
Their parchment is tinted with purple colouring, the gold shines in their letters, their books are dressed up with jewels, and in front of their doors a naked Christ is dying.¹³³

Such rhetoric, once it is understood as belonging to an orthodox (and in Jerome's case strongly anti-Pelagian) tradition, can no longer be viewed as an indicator of Pelagian belief.¹³⁴

As to the suggestion that fifth- and sixth-century Insular Christians rejected imagery because it went against the Mosaic prohibition of graven images, once again we must recall that literal biblical legalism is not in itself an indicator of Pelagianism (as we noted above with regard to modern crises about homosexuality).¹³⁵ For instances of a radical rejection of religious imagery coupled with a commitment to hard-line Augustinian theology, we need look no further afield than the Scottish Calvinist tradition and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century iconoclasm that left us bereft of much medieval art.¹³⁶

Herren and Brown have not shown, therefore, that there ever was a principled rejection of fine Christian arts on grounds of austerity or Mosaic law in the Celtic world; but even if they had demonstrated it, that would not be a demonstration of Pelagian thinking.

The authors also cite John Cassian's tenth *Conference* on prayer, in which he discusses images, as if this were evidence of the supposed Pelagian rejection of images in churches (like Ireland) which were influenced by Cassian's ideas.¹³⁷ The *Conference* is actually about the Egyptian anthropomorphite heresy, not about graven images. The anthropomorphites believed that God actually had some kind of human form. They are not claiming that it was lawful to make an image of God, but stating that since man was made in the image of God, God must also be rather like a man in some ways, and therefore one could *imagine* him in human form during one's prayer. Cassian, however, is not only arguing that God does not have a human form; he is also talking about progress in the spiritual imagination, how the

¹³³ Jerome, *Epistola 22: inficitur membrana colore purpureo, aurum liquescit* (I suspect an original *lucescit* here, for which see below), *gemis codices uestiuntur, et nudus ante fores earum christus emoritur*. This passage was the source of §232 in the *Collectanea Pseudo-Bedae* (probably by an Irish author), M. Bayless and M. Lapidge, *Collectanea*, 149. It may be that this text has preserved Jerome's original *lucescit*, where the modern edition as *liquescit*. It makes more sense to think of gold letters as 'shining' rather than 'flowing' or 'dissolving'.

¹³⁴ One need hardly add that the rise of Cistercians, Franciscans and Dominicans in the following centuries are also abundant evidence that there is no necessary connection between the embrace of austere poverty and a Pelagian view of salvation.

¹³⁵ Also note that the iconoclastic movement later promoted by emperors in the east was not motivated by a Pelagian ethos, but was associated with monophysitism which insisted that Christ had only one, divine nature, and with the Manichean thinking of Paulicians who held that all matter was evil. Portrayal of a human Christ was thought by the iconoclasts to mire him too deeply in the orthodox teaching of his two natures, human and divine. For indications of Augustine's misgivings about the use of religious images, see Edwyn Bevan, *Holy Images: an Inquiry into Idolatry and Image-Worship in Ancient Paganism and in Christianity*, London 1940, 119-22. As late as 599 A.D., Bishop Serenus of Marseilles was breaking up pictures in his churches. Gregory the Great had to rebuke him (*Registrum IX*, 209), and in a letter of the following year he explained the importance of images for encouraging the unlettered and the heathen in the ways of holiness, sorrow for sin. Interestingly, in the case of Serenus, his opposition to images does not appear to stem from the purity, legalism and rigour of his faith (as one might expect if his iconoclasm bore any relation to a Pelagian instinct). Gregory felt it necessary to warn him against socialising with wicked men, stressing that whoever does not correct such evils is giving permission to perpetrate them: *Registrum XI*, 10.

¹³⁶ See David McRoberts, 'Material Destruction Caused by the Scottish Reformation' in D. McRoberts (ed.), *Essays on the Scottish Reformation 1513-1625*, Glasgow 1962.

¹³⁷ Herren and Brown, 190.

meditative and prayerful person rises toward God by entertaining ever less material intrusions into the mind, first ‘withdrawing from the contemplation of earthly and material things’ so as to be able to see Jesus by one’s inward gaze, either as ‘still humble and in the flesh, or as glorified and coming in the glory of his majesty’; and then a further step allows them ‘to see his Godhead with purest eyes the glory of his face and the image of his brightness’.¹³⁸ This is not about the use of graven images, nor about how the Mosaic law is binding on Christians. It is about the kind of spiritual progress that monks expect to make in the ‘desert’ of their withdrawal, and the role of the ascetic and purified imagination by which they contemplate God in prayer.¹³⁹

Everything looks like a nail

Herren and Brown have shed a great deal of light on many features of the early churches of Ireland and Britain. Their profound scholarship is manifest in countless ways, from observations about the cult of the cross and its artistic representations to the punitive character of miracles in Irish saints’ *Lives*;¹⁴⁰ from interpretation of artistic imagery in manuscripts and on stones to reflections on the organisation of pastoral care based around monastic order. There are passages to which one will return again and again.

The authors have laboriously gone over a wide range of Insular literature and the visual arts, sifting it carefully for signs of the Pelagian or semi-Pelagian belief which they claim is characteristic of the ‘common Celtic Church’. One could continue to unpick their selection and analysis of one example after another, *ad nauseam* – the reader may think that state has already been reached. Space does not allow discussion of all the texts and images they offer as symptomatic of a Pelagian church, but the above detailed discussion of a few of their supposedly Pelagian indicators is necessary because the picture they offer of such a church is largely formed by the accumulation of exactly these kinds of fragmentary evidence. But as we have seen, a lot of the signs of Pelagian thinking turn out to be nothing of the sort. Many ‘Pelagian’ features are apparent throughout western Christianity. Others are capable of interpretation as Pelagian indicators, but are capable of other interpretations too. Many features of Pelagianism are simply exaggerated aspects of orthodoxy. Perhaps more accurately, Pelagianism can be seen as a denial. The pre-Pelagian and pre-Augustinian orthodoxy of the church can be seen as comprising two voices. The first of these is the voice which urges conversion *from* worldly values, to faith, purity, virtue, asceticism. Here conversion and baptism mark a radical break with the old self, and this voice will continue to be present in both Pelagianism and orthodox Catholic belief. The second voice, however, is a more subtle one, which speaks of a church which embraces sinners; a church which is the ‘inn’ to which sinners are carried by Christ (the Good Samaritan in Augustine’s reading of the story) to recover under the healing power of his grace; a church where salvation is not restricted to the morally perfect but is offered to the humble Christian who continues to live in the world and continues to be held back by the allure of the world, and yet prays for forgiveness and for strength to persevere. It is no accident that Pelagius was a lawyer with no responsibility for anyone else apart from a handful of upper-class ascetics in their villas, to

¹³⁸ B. Ramsey, *Conferences*, 374-5.

¹³⁹ That is not to say, of course, that Cassian would have approved of graven images. I have no idea whether he did nor not. If he did, like Gregory the Great nearly two centuries later, he would probably only have allowed their usefulness for beginners, for illiterates and pagans, who might first be drawn to Christ by such images.

¹⁴⁰ The authors’ reflections (165f-9) on the punitive character of some miracle stories could benefit from consideration that miracles are not *only* about demonstrating the Christ-like power of the saint in relation to (or in imitation of?) the Jesus of the Gospels. They are also anticipations of Christ’s punitive power as the Judge of the world. That is why punitive miracles are so often associated with the dreadful sins performed by the person being punished; they often involve not only the temporal harming or slaying of the person being punished, but also their damnation. They are ‘Christ-like’ not by imitation of the gentle Christ apparent in most of the Gospel stories, but by imitation of the Christ of Matthew 25:45-6.

whom he offered guidance, while Augustine was the bishop of a north African town full of off-duty sailors, dodgy shop-keepers, married couples who were not immune to the attractions of other people's husbands and wives, people who were less than generous in their almsgiving, and folk still shamefully attracted by the exotic revelries celebrated at New Year – people he compassionately described as often 'weeping and groaning' while they sin.¹⁴¹ It is the second voice, what we might call the patient and pastoral voice, that Pelagius denies. For him there is nothing *except* the individual moral rigour of the first voice. But to show that Irish and British Christians displayed such moral rigorism in the fifth and sixth centuries is not to show that they denied the second voice. Such evidence as Herren and Brown have offered does not substantiate their claim.

In the above arguments, I have often cited passages by Augustine where he says things that seem to me similar to passages cited by Herren and Brown as evidence of Pelagianism. The strategy here is obvious: any *topos* which is found in the works of an Insular author which is also found in Augustine (or for that matter such anti-Pelagian writers as Jerome, Caesarius of Arles or Gregory the Great) simply cannot be read as a straight-forward indication of a Pelagian mind-set. I am quite emphatically *not* suggesting that Insular writers are Augustinian in all matters. I am quite prepared to accept that much of the pre-Pelagian/pre-Augustinian instinct of the Church survived in many ways, offering a continuing spectrum of attitudes, practices of prayer and preaching, monastic discipline, a stress on ascetic exhortation and so on. But the strategy of citing Augustinian parallels of supposedly Pelagian *topoi* seems to me a legitimate way of showing that though such *topoi* may sometimes be compatible with Pelagian belief, they are not evidence of actual Pelagian belief.

Herren and Brown have undertaken a huge work, and offer interesting and enriching insights into countless features of Insular Christianity. But the work as a whole is rendered much less useful by their insistence on forcing all kinds of evidence into the mould of their Pelagian hypothesis. 'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.' Even thoroughly orthodox utterances, in their methodology, can be made to show the existence of a Pelagian church. Snippets of evidence are forced to fit into the hypothesised Pelagian framework, but the forcing is often evident.

What must be realised is that most heresies appeal strongly to the outlook of ordinary men and women. We fear and resent the weakness and vulnerability of the flesh, and deep inside most believers a Manichean of some sort is trying to get out. We cannot imagine how the eternal, which is beautiful and pure, could allow itself to be compromised by uniting itself with the polluting, pain-ridden, corrupt world of humanity, so we become either Monophysites or Arians, instinctively shying away from all that is implied by the union of two natures in Christ. We are afraid of the risks of love, and are attracted to the simplicity of a moral-legalistic picture of our lives and meanings, and so we prefer to deal with a predictable Pelagian God who is lawgiver, judge and executioner (the God described by Edmund Hill, recent editor and translator of Augustine's works, as a 'supernatural thug'), rather than risk being seized and overwhelmed by love, or grace.

The fact that such half-acknowledged and unquestioned attitudes are lurking at the periphery of most people's imaginations must account for a great deal of the variation in different local or temporary traditions in the Church, where one theme or another is stressed or brought to the fore, sometimes seeming to verge on the heretical. But such local variations do not make people, or whole communities, heretics – Arians, Monophysites, Manicheans or Pelagians. To

¹⁴¹ *De natura et gratia*, cap xxix (33): 'Many sins are committed through pride, but not everything done wrongly is done proudly; some are surely done by the ignorant, some by the weak, and for the most part by those who weep and groan,' (*multa enim peccata per superbiam committuntur, sed neque omnia superbe fiunt quae perperam fiunt - certe a nescientibus, certe ab infirmis, certe plerumque a flentibus et gementibus* [CLCLT (PL 44.263)]).

describe a whole church or group of churches as heretical requires a much more sustained and consistent body of evidence than Herren and Brown have mustered vis à vis the Irish and British churches. Their use of the sources is selective (why choose *Altus Prosator* rather than its twin sister *Adiutor Laborantium*?¹⁴² Why use the *lorica* to demonstrate a supposedly Pelagian fear of hell rather than the practice of praying for grace to do God's will?), and their interpretation of such sources is often forced.

As a result, by insisting on everything being evidence of Pelagianism rather than exploring Celtic Christian literature on its own terms, Herren and Brown have missed many opportunities to enrich our understanding of the belief and culture of early Christian communities in these islands. No doubt others will examine particular aspects of their evidence as time goes on, but we do need far more objective, nuanced and in-depth examination of the rich evidence that survives to build up a clearer picture of the beliefs and cultures of the Insular churches.¹⁴³

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¹⁴² For text, translation and discussion of its significance in respect of Pelagianism, and its relationship to *Altus Prosator*, see Clancy and Márkus, *Iona*, 69-82. For its possible authorship, see G. Márkus, *Altus Prosator: a poem by Adomnán?* forthcoming in R. Aist et al. (eds), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Law-Maker, Peace-Maker*.

¹⁴³ I am very grateful to Dr Thomas O'Loughlin, Prof. Robert Markus and Prof. Thomas Owen Clancy for comments they made on earlier versions of this article, helping me to clarify my thinking on several points. Any surviving errors and oddities in the published version are my own responsibility, however, not theirs.