

Celtic Coptic Anglicans?

A Modern Myth to Dodge the Authority of Rome *By Fr. Dwight Longenecker*

A few years back I visited the town of Glastonbury in England. It's a wonderful place, full of ancient mystery and genuine historical interest. Not only is it supposed to be the burial place of King Arthur, but ancient legend has it that during the silent years, Jesus Christ himself visited Glastonbury with his wealthy relative Joseph of Arimathea.

The town is now a New Age center for Britain. The main street is bursting with shops promoting goddess worship and alternative therapies. As I walked up the main street, I was pleased to see a Christian bookshop. I discovered that it was Eastern Orthodox. The fellow at the desk had the obligatory black robe, stovepipe hat, long beard and holy expression. I asked him what branch of Orthodoxy he belonged to.

He replied in a solemn English accent, "The Celtic Orthodox Church."

I'd never heard of such an outfit, but happy to acknowledge my ignorance of the complexities of Eastern Orthodoxy, I asked him where his patriarch was based.

He gazed on me with a lugubrious expression, stroked his beard and said, "Alas, we have not had a patriarch for thousands of years."

It was my first encounter with the eccentric world of Celtic Orthodoxy. The basic idea is that the church in Britain was founded by Coptic Christians from Egypt before the turn of the second century. This ancient Celtic Church existed in sublime isolation from the Roman Church for five hundred years before St. Augustine was sent by Pope St. Gregory the Great to evangelize the Anglo Saxons in 597 AD.

Coptic and Celtic

Lovers of arcane and bizarre theories need look no further than the lunatic fringe of British Christianity. On one website you can find support not only for the idea that Jesus also visited Scotland, but that he actually came from there in the first place.¹

We must stick to the point. The most mainstream Celtic Christianity theory supposes that Celtic Christianity was established as early as 37 AD by "wandering clergy" who followed the Roman trade routes through Gaul (present day France). Other Celtic-Coptic believers think the first evangelists came by boat to

Western Britain from Egypt. The most popular legend says the apostle Philip along with Lazarus and Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea took a boat to Marseilles. Mary Magdalene stayed in France and Joseph of Arimathea pushed on to establish Christianity in Britain. This pre-Nicene, monastic form of Christianity is supposed to have been spiritually and serenely unconcerned with troublesome things like hierarchy, dogma, and doctrine.

The most important aspects of "Celtic Orthodoxy" seem to be its British-ness, its antiquity, and its historic independence from Rome. As the website of the "Holy Celtic Church" claims, "Because of its autonomy and geographical isolation, the Celtic Church remained uniquely uncorrupted by Hellenistic Greek philosophy or Roman jurisprudence."

Kooks in the Mainstream

I thought the Celtic Orthodox Church was nothing more than one of those eccentric forms of Christianity that inhabit the twilight zones of Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism. A brief search reveals over seventy-five independent Anglican Churches, and innumerable Eastern Orthodox derivations. They all have their eparchs and archbishops, their patriarchs and bishops and archdeacons, their synods and their councils. They rarely have more than a handful of congregations. In their copes and mitres, kooky headgear and colorful names, they're crazy, fascinating, and amusing in their serious lunacy.

Then I discovered that an increasing number of mainstream Anglicans buy into the Celtic Christianity myth. I was surprised to hear my Anglican and Episcopal friends say, "Of course Anglicanism comes from the Celtic Church. It was established long before Rome interfered." They may not buy into the whole theory of Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea coming from Scotland, or the Coptic monks importing their religion to Wales and Cornwall, but the Celtic kooks have made inroads. Anglicans have a vague but certain feeling that their church has its roots in a spiritually sublime, ancient church that was always independent of Roman authority.

This suits Anglicans because they like to imagine that there are three ancient apostolic churches, Rome,



the Orthodox, and themselves. The Celtic-Coptic theory enables them to sustain this myth. It also helps them to defend their continued independence from Roman authority. The Anglican argument goes like this: “We are descendants of the first British Christians. They existed happily for six hundred years independent of Rome; and we are simply part of that same stream of ancient apostolic Christianity.”

Both liberal and conservative Anglicans like this kind of stuff. If you engage them in the authority question, you will probably come across these beliefs, and it’s necessary to know the facts.

Just the Facts, Ma’am

First of all, despite the cute idea, there is simply no evidence that Jesus and Joseph of Arimathea visited Britain. The whole story is *DaVinci Code* stuff. Neither is there any evidence that Coptic monks founded Celtic Christianity. The best the supporters of this theory can do is to notice similarities between Celtic manuscript illumination and Coptic manuscripts. The idea that Celtic Christianity sprang up on its own, independent of Rome, just doesn’t fit the facts.

However, we do have clear evidence that Christianity in Britain was, from the first, Roman Christianity. To pin it down we have to look at what happened in the Roman Empire the first few decades after the death of Christ.

Ten years after the crucifixion of Christ, the Emperor Claudius successfully invaded Britain. Over the next 350 years the Romans established a thriving colony in virtually the whole of Britain. With the Roman armies came Roman religions, and one of the religions was the new religion of Christianity. The first Christians in Britain, therefore, were Roman Christians.

Christian inscriptions found on crude Roman pottery in Britain dating from this period suggest that the first Christians were poor people, probably Roman soldiers or slaves. The documentary evidence comes from Tertullian and Origen, both writing in the second century. That they knew of the church in Britain shows that it was suffi-

ciently well-founded, large enough, and connected enough with the rest of the Church that Catholics in North Africa knew of it.

By the third and fourth century the evidence for Roman Christianity in Britain is overwhelming. The first British martyr, St. Alban, was killed for his faith in 304. There must have been a well established hierarchy because it is recorded that the bishops of London, York, and Lincoln attended the Council of Arles in 314. The British bishops were also present at the Council of Rimini in 359.

The archeological evidence for Roman Christianity at this time period is found everywhere in Britain. There are Chi-Rho

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monograms scratched in third century pottery, a ceramic plaque with the paternoster inscribed on it, and mosaic floors with Christian symbols. There are remains of Christian chapels, Romano-British Christian burial sites and a fantastic discovery in 1975 of a fourth-century silver chalice with Christian markings showing that Mass was not only celebrated in Roman Britain, but celebrated in sumptuous style.

Declaration of Independence?

Anglicans of all stripes cling to the myth of their independent Celtic Christian origins because it seems to ratify their continued independence from Rome. They imagine that the ancient British Church was independent, so they have a right to continue that tradition. Unfortunately, all the evidence shows that the first Christians in Britain were themselves Roman; as such they would have looked

homeward for their cultural allegiance, and therefore their religious allegiance also looked homeward and Rome-ward. But what happened after the Romans withdrew from Britain around the year 410? Did the British Church suddenly declare independence of Roman authority? Is this when the independent Celtic church was established?

On the contrary; after the departure of the Roman legions in the early four hundreds, the British Christians relied even more on their Roman Church contacts. This is the time of the Pelagian heresy, and in 429 a British deacon appealed to the Pope for help to combat the Pelagian heresy. Pope Celestine commissioned St. Germain of Auxerre to go on a mission to Britain. St. Germain was accompanied by St. Patrick. He stayed there and established seminaries, and re-visited Britain in 447 to consolidate his work. This is clearly an example, not only of Rome asserting authority in Britain, but also of the British Church asking for that authority.

The Mission of Patrick

Around 450 the Saxons started to invade a weakened Britain, and for the next 150 years (until the year 597) the pagan Saxons persecuted the Christian Britons. The persecuted Christian minority fled west to Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland, and south to Brittany in France. It was only during this 150 years that the Celtic Church existed in isolation from the authority structures of Rome.

Even then, the missionary endeavors to Ireland continued from Roman origins and not from Coptic Egypt. St. Patrick, the great apostle of Ireland, was born in Scotland of noble Roman parents. His mother was a relative of the great St. Martin of Tours. His origin and training didn’t come out of nowhere. It was all from the Catholic Church—always loyal to Rome. Patrick’s mission was actually commissioned by Pope Celestine. When he went to Ireland in 433 he didn’t discover an “ancient Celtic church”, but bloodthirsty Druids who needed converting.

It is true that Patrick’s Celtic church developed in relative isolation from Rome

for about 150 years, but in Britain it was soon to be reconciled. In 597 St. Augustine arrived in southeast England sent by Pope St. Gregory the Great. Eventually his missionaries encountered missionaries from Patrick's Irish church who had been evangelizing England from the North and West.

When they met there were some differences of discipline. At the synod of Whitby in 664 the matter was debated, and the Celtic contingent bowed to the authority of St. Peter in the person of the Pope.

Was the Anglican church founded on some pure, serene, and ancient apostolic church that existed in Britain for six hundred years before the arrival of St.

Augustine sent by Pope Gregory? There's no evidence for it. Instead, the British church was started by Romans, converted the locals, and remained linked to Rome even after the legions departed from Britain. After that the missionary efforts to the British Isles were of Roman origin.

Yes, for about 150 years the British Catholic Church, like the Catholic Church in China today, existed under persecution and in isolation from the seat of authority. But as soon as it had the opportunity to submit once again to Peter, the Celtic Church did so. The question for Anglicans and Episcopalians who see the Celtic Christians as their ancestors is: if the Celts

submitted to Rome the first chance they got . . . why don't you follow their example?

Dwight Longenecker and his family have recently moved back to his native USA from a long sojourn in Britain. He was recently ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Charleston under the pastoral provision for married former Anglican clergy and is now chaplain to St. Joseph's School in Greenville, South Carolina.

This article was first published in This Rock.

Reference

1 See <http://www.sacredconnection.ndo.co.uk/holyland/CelticHistory.htm>.