Pagans and Proselytizers: Evidence of the Persistence of Celtic Pagan Eschatological Beliefs in Medieval Irish Christian Literature

In the many and varied forms that it has taken throughout history, Christianity has become a truly global phenomenon, extending its shroud to encompass every corner of our wide world. In the vernacular of Western Christianity, the term "inculturation" refers to the process through which the Christian religion is presented and adapted to non-Christian cultures with the intent of attracting converts from the target group's existing belief system. Inculturation also includes the reciprocal influences that those cultures exert on the unique development of Christianity within a particular group as part of the broader aim of attempted Christianization.[1] Evidence of the interaction between Christianity and the Celtic pagan religion in Ireland, as revealed in medieval written sources, indicated the occurrence of inculturation as various missionaries to Ireland endeavoured to establish Christianity in a complex culture with entrenched lifeways and an existing religious tradition. Ideas concerning the fate of the soul after it had departed from the physical world and notions of the terrestrial realm meeting with a catastrophic end before experiencing a rejuvenation were fundamental preoccupations of both Christian and Celtic pagan belief.[2] The branch of theology that offered those all-important explanations of death, the afterlife, and the ultimate fate of humanity was known as eschatology.[3] The focus of this present work was trained on eschatology because of its central position in western religions, a doctrinal commonality that allowed for reliable comparison. A careful assessment of this component of both Irish Celtic paganism and the Christianity that developed in medieval Ireland revealed that a dynamic interaction occurred between insular paganism and continental Christianity, evidence of which

[1] Oliver Davies and Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 12, 15; James C. Russell, *The Germanizaion of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4, 11-13, 15-18; Paul M. Collins, introduction to *Christian Inculturation in India*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 5-10.
[2] Bernard McGinn, foreword to *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology*, eds. John Carey, Emma Nic Cárthaigh and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2014), 12.
[3] Işıl Altun, "Eschatology or ends of history," *International Journal of Turcologia* 2, no. 4 (2007): 83.

was preserved in medieval religious texts, demonstrating the lasting impact of paganism on Christianity in Ireland.

To assess the religious landscape of early medieval Ireland for evidence of inculturation and the survival of pagan ideas in later Irish Christian beliefs and practices, historians are largely dependent on the existence of surviving textual sources. Some of the extant resources that provide vital insights into the enigmatic nature of Irish Christian eschatology in the Middle Ages are poems, tales of intrepid journeys known as voyage literature, and compilations of devotional works that religious scholars created between the late-seventh century and the end of the twelfth century. Many of these individual works were first written some years before they were compiled into the surviving collections, indicating that the dates ascribed to some of these texts may be based on the age of the collection itself rather than the literary offerings contained within. These important written sources that exhibit the nature of medieval Irish notions of death and the hereafter showed that continental Christianity had undergone inculturation after its arrival on the shores of the Emerald Isle in the fifth century. This process yielded a uniquely Irish version of Christian eschatology that built on or retained many aspects of Celtic pagan conceptions of the afterlife and the end of days, a synthesis of religions and cultures that was preserved in ink and vellum. Herein it is demonstrated that vestiges of paganism abound in this foundational aspect of Christianity and thus it is asserted that Celtic paganism had a profound and lasting impact on the development of Christian belief and practice in Ireland, yielding a unique, if not Celtic, version of Christianity.

The pre-Christian mythology of Celtic Ireland held that five different groups of beings had successively occupied Ireland, each one of them contributing in some way to the formation of the country's natural landscape and culture.[4] In the eleventh century, religious scholars compiled a

[4] Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1961), 96-97, 103-105.

collection of narratives known as the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, "The Book of the Taking of Ireland," that evinced how aspects of pre-Christian belief had been combined with the cosmology of Christianity to reconcile the newer faith with the predominant paganism to facilitate its gradual acceptance.[5] The syncretic approach that informed the writing of the narratives within the *Lebor Gabála* dated from the seventh and eighth centuries and attempted to situate Irish history within the timeline of Biblical history, connecting different invasions of Ireland with pivotal events in the Bible.[6] The text claimed that either the first woman to settle Ireland, Cessair, was the granddaughter of Noah,[7] or that the Gaels were descended from Noah's son Japheth, constructing a genealogical connection between the Irish and certain figures of great import in the incoming religion.[8] To complete this fusion of native Irish belief and Christianity, religious scholars concocted the existence of a sixth people who were known as the Mílesians, or the Sons of Míl, who the authors alleged had made their way to the island and became the ancestors of the Gaels.[9]

In the Christian account, the Mílesians fought against the fifth group that had come to Ireland, which was comprised of druids or divine wizards known collectively as the Tuatha Dé Danann who had arrived either on boats or on clouds from the cities of four intangible northern islands.[10] The Mílesians themselves supposedly came to Ireland from the continent by way of Egypt, Crete, Sicily, and finally Spain, where one of their number built a great tower whence his son spied Ireland and set out to investigate.[11] Upon the son's arrival, the Tuatha Dé Danann killed him out of suspicion, provoking the other Mílesians to invade Ireland. They engaged in battle with

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[5] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 95.
[6] McGinn, foreword to *The End and Beyond*, 23.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 95.
[9] Séamus Mac Mathúna, "Sacred Landscape and Water Mythology in Early Ireland and Ancient India," in *Sacred Topology of Early Ireland and Ancient India: Religious Paradigm Shift*, eds. Maxim Fomin, Séamus Mac Mathúna, and Victoria Vertogradova (Washington: Institute for the Study of Man, 2010), 6.
[10] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 107, 109.
[11] Unless otherwise noted, the entirety of this account of the Mílesians is paraphrased from Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 96-97.

the Tuath Dé and eventually triumphed over them, but three kings of Ireland's fifth people pronounced that the Mílesians should leave the island in peace for three days. They obliged, withdrawing to their ships and waiting just off the coast. When they attempted to invade the island once more, the druids and poets of the Tuath Dé chanted spells against them and conjured a magic wind that blew them far out to sea. In response, the poet and judge of the Mílesians, Amairgein, recited a poem that calmed the wind, allowing the group to land and triumph over the Tuatha Dé Danann once again. Amairgein was then called on to divide the land of Ireland between the two groups and he cleverly assigned the terrestrial realm to the Mílesians, relegating the Tuatha Dé Danann to the subterranean world to which they retreated.[12] The *Lebor Gabála Érenn* showed how the origin stories from the mythology of pagan Irish religion and the cosmology of the Judeo-Christian tradition were syncretized, while also revealing how elements of pagan Irish eschatology were fused with Christian eschatological belief.

One of the Mílesians who engaged in the battle against the Tuath Dé was Donn, who had been tasked with climbing the mast of the ship to hurl spells back at the supernatural beings, which eventually brought about his death from an illness that an incantation had cast onto the ship. Before he died, Donn requested that his body be taken to an island off the coast of Ireland, lest the sickness that gripped him continue to plague future descendants of the Sons of Míl, and his remains were subsequently entombed on an isle just off the strand of Munster to the southwest of the Irish mainland.[13] After his body was inhumed, the island upon which Donn was buried became a waystation for the departed souls of sinful humans and he was thenceforth regarded as a guardian of the otherworld. The souls of the unrepentant coalesced around the island, which became known as Tech Duinn, or "Donn's House," to pay their blessings to the god of the dead before passing

[12] Séamus Mac Mathúna, "Sacred Landscape and Water Mythology," 6.
[13] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 97.

through to an infernal otherworld, while the souls of the repentant gazed upon it from a distance but were not compelled to travel there.[14] The figure of Donn as related in the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* shared many striking similarities with an older, truly pagan Irish Celtic mythological figure known as Manannán Mac Lir, a potential connection that some scholars have already acknowledged.[15] Since the material compiled in the *Lebor Gabála* demonstrated an attempt to syncretize familiar pre-Christian Irish mythology to Christian cosmology to facilitate the conversion of the pagans, it was possible that Christian authors drew inspiration from Manannán to construct Donn's role as gatekeeper of the otherworld since he was a Mílesian and as such had no innate connection to native Irish belief.

After the defeat of the Tuatha Dé Danann at the hands of the Mílesians, the former became chthonic beings and were thenceforth said to dwell within or under caves, springs, wells, and lakes throughout Ireland, while some were thought to reside on islands located off the coast or across the sea.[16] Manannán Mac Lir was the guardian of the pagan Celtic otherworld, but also a sea god,[17] evincing the close connection between bodies of water and the afterlife in pre-Christian Irish eschatology. The Celts had an intimate spiritual relationship with bodies of water like rivers, lakes, and the sea, which they believed to be the sources of paradise whence all life and wisdom stemmed.[18] The Celts conceived of their political and religious centres, including the island Eamhain Ablach or Emain Ablach, upon which Manannán resided across the sea,[19] as duplicates of the otherworld abodes of the gods.[20] Manannán's island, in the same fashion as Tech Duinn, acted as a liminal space between the physical realm and the afterlife, displaying the connection

[14] Ibid., 97.
[15] Séamus Mac Mathúna, "Sacred Landscape and Water Mythology," 39-40.
[16] Ibid., 6.
[17] H. Wagner, "The Archaic 'Dind Ríg' Poem and Related Problems," *Ériu* 28, no. 1 (1977): 13.
[18] Wagner, "Archaic Poem and Related Problems," 13.
[19] Séamus Mac Mathuna, "Sacred Landscape and Water Mythology," 6.
[20] Wagner, "Archaic Poem and Related Problems," 13.

between the figures of Manannán and Donn. On top of their shared function of guiding souls to the otherworld, it was also significant that Emain Ablach was referred to as Manannán's "house" in the eighth-century voyage narrative *Immram Brain*, the same terminology that was used in the *Lebor Gabála* to refer to the island that Donn came to inhabit.[21] Emain Ablach, the name of Manannán's island home, was translated into English as Emain "of the Apples,"[22] and this association between the symbol of the apple and an island connected with the pre-Christian otherworld revealed a potential pagan influence in a later Irish Christian depiction of the catastrophic events that would signal the end of days.[23] In the Irish monk Blathmac's devotional poems, to be discussed in greater detail below, he described the events that would accompany the end times, declaring that "the world will be a level expanse so that a single apple might roll across it."[24] The inclusion of the apple in Blathmac's depiction of the destruction of the physical world suggested a possible vestige of pagan imagery, indicating a lingering Celtic pre-Christian influence within later Christian writings. The sea god's island of apples was also of the magical variety, springing forth into tangible existence once every seven years,[25] which drew a striking parallel with the seven-year-long journey that Saint Brendan and his monks undertook in the voyage narrative known as the *Voyage of Saint Brendan* to find the island paradise known as the Promised Land of the Saints.

Strong connections between islands and the otherworld were particularly prominent in a genre of Irish Christian literature known as the voyage narrative, in which islands continued to act

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[21] Ibid.
[22] James MacKillop, "Emain Ablach," in *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), http://www.oxfordreference.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780198609674.001.0001/acref-9780198609674-e-1849#.
[23] I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Jane Samson for alerting me to this potential connection in our HIST 428 seminar.
[24] Blathmac, "The Poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan," in *The Poems of Blathmac, Son of Cú Brettan: Together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and a Poem on the Virgin Mary*, ed. James Carney (Dublin: Published for the Irish Texts Society by the Educational Co. of Ireland, 1964), 81.
[25] Wagner, "Archaic Poem and Related Problems," 13.

as a liminal space, a sort of holy rest-stop for humans and divine beings awaiting the end of days.[26] The quest to find a distant land of plenty located on an island somewhere across the sea provided the central theme in the mid-eighth to early-ninth century *Voyage of Saint Brendan*. In this tale, journeying monks travelled to many islands throughout the sea in search of the Promised Land, an island that was revealed to them after seven years of continuous seeking.[27] This specific duration evoked a connection with Emain Ablach, the island of pagan belief that showed itself once every seven years. Another voyage narrative, *Immram Brain*, or the *Voyage of Bran*, was written between the late-seventh and early-eighth centuries and included a description of a timeless island, a vestige of the pagan conception of a land of eternal youth as a part of the "Happy Otherworld."[28] Pagan Celtic belief also held that Manannán Mac Lir presided over a land of plenty called Mag Mell that existed on an island somewhere off the coast of Ireland,[29] and it was this pagan land of plenty that was conflated with the biblical Promised Land in *Immram Brain*.[30] In addition to pagan understandings of the insular location of the otherworld,[31] the sea was also an important symbol in Christianity. It represented a crucial space for Christendom, the outermost reaches of the known world to which salvation needed to extend in order to trigger the events leading up to the end of days, evincing a shared sense of significance that would have facilitated inculturation.[32]

In addition to the emphasis placed on the significance of islands in the Celtic pagan religion, birds also occupied an important role as omens in pre-Christian Irish belief. Some evidence suggested that early poets garbed themselves in feathered robes, a cultural significance

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[26] Benjamin Hudson, "Time is Short: The Eschatology of the Early Gaelic Church," in *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Caroline Bynum Walker and Paul Freedman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 105.
[27] Davies and O'Loughlin, *Celtic Spirituality*, 165.
[28] Hudson, "Time is Short," 105.
[29] Wagner, "Archaic Poem and Related Problems," 13.
[30] Proinsias Mac Cana, "The Sinless Otherworld of Immram Brain," *Ériu* 27 (1976): 98
[31] Mac Cana, "Sinless Otherworld," 97-98.
[32] Katja Ritari, *Pilgrimage to Heaven: Eschatology and Monastic Spirituality in Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2016), 93.

that was carried over into early Christian narratives.[33] Evidence of the prominence attached to the symbol of the bird was also found in the syncretized mythology of the Tuath Dé, for the goddess Morrígan was said to transmute herself into the form of a bird.[34] In the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, the abbot and his band of monks encountered an island drenched in lush foliage with a monumental tree towering over a spring, holding countless white birds in its bows.[35] God revealed to Saint Brendan that the birds were the souls of people who had been complacent with Lucifer's transgressions and so were forced to exist without substance, aside from Sundays and feast days when they were allowed to assume the form of white birds.[36] The inclusion of birds in this work was representative of a broader theme in Celtic eschatological literature in which birds embodied the souls of the departed.[37] This interaction between the living monks and the bird-souls also reinforced the idea of islands acting as liminal spaces where the living and the dead mingled, as expressed in relation to Manannán and Donn in the various forms of medieval Irish literature.

The practice of storytelling occupied a place of prominence in Irish tradition as the foremost method by which elements of Irish culture were embodied and shared, enabling the stories that comprised the origin and spirit of the Irish and their way of life to be committed to memory and thereby strengthened.[38] Through song and verse, aspects of pagan cosmology and ideas concerning death and the afterlife were preserved in oral tradition.[39] This distinctly, though not uniquely, Irish method of preserving aspects of culture in verse was continued and set down on paper in the writings of early Irish Christian thinkers, not least of whom was the monk

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[33] Davies and O'Loughlin, *Celtic Spirituality*, 13-14.
[34] James Bonwick, *Irish Druids and Old Irish Religions*, (London: Griffith, Farran & Co., 1894; reprint New York: Dorset Press, 1986), 123.
[35] Davies and O'Loughlin, *Celtic Spirituality*, 164-165.
[36] Hudson, "Time is Short," 108.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Patrick B. Kavanaugh, *Stories from the Bog: On Madness, Philosophy, and Psychoanalysis* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 2.
[39] Kavanaugh, *Stories from the Bog*, 3-4.

Blathmac, son of Cú Brettan. As a member of one of Ireland's monastic orders, the instruction that Blathmac received was conducted in the Irish language and verse was employed as a tool to assist with memorization.[40] Active in the latter half of the eighth century,[41] this emphasis on verse in monastic learning contributed to Blathmac's choice to convey his devotional ardour through poetry instead of prose. Though two of Blathmac's extant poems contained 149 and 109 stanzas, respectively, taking into account the likelihood of lost and damaged leaves, it was thought that the originals had been intentionally organized into 150 stanzas to reflect the 150 psalms in the Western Christian tradition.[42] The fact that a lost third poem was speculated to have existed alongside Blathmac's two extant works reflected the importance of the trinity in Irish Christianity, while also recalling the pagan Irish fascination with triads and the number three.[43] This example of the use of verse from pre-Christian Irish oral tradition and possible pagan cultural influences to convey the content of Christian belief found in Blathmac's worshipful poetry evinced the inculturation of pagan Irish custom to Christian tradition, as well as the continued influence of the former on the articulation and perpetuation of Christian teachings in Ireland.[44] Aside from the pre-Christian parallels that the form of Blathmac's writings exhibited, the content of his poems revealed additional pagan influences on the eschatology that underpinned Christian teachings in Ireland.

In Irish pagan cosmology there was a tripartite division of the physical realm into sky, land, and sea. Evidence of this belief survived in a number of writings, including a legend entitled *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, "The Cattle Raid of Cooley," found in the late-twelfth century *Book of Leinster*, in

[40] James Carney, introduction to *The Poems of Blathmac, Son of Cú Brettan: Together with the Irish Gospel of Thomas and a Poem on the Virgin Mary*, ed. James Carney (Dublin: Published for the Irish Texts Society by the Educational Co. of Ireland, 1964), xv.
[41] Carney, introduction to *The Poems of Blathmac*, xiv.
[42] Ibid., xiii.
[43] Davies and O'Loughlin, *Celtic Spirituality*, 15.
[44] Ibid., 14.

addition to the eighth-century poems of Blathmac.[45] In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the characters equated the imperiling of human life or the severe transgression of breaking a sworn oath with a disruption of the three-part cosmologic division, which reflected an integral component of pagan Irish eschatological belief.[46] These references demonstrated that chaos within society was directly connected to the maintenance of the natural order of the earth's three component parts and that the end of the physical world would result from a grievous human disruption of that order. When such a devastating disturbance occurred, the Irish Celts believed that the sky would come crashing down upon them or that the sea would surge over the shoreline, drowning all life on earth.[47] A specific grouping of stanzas in Blathmac's second poetic offering that detailed how the end of the world would unfold was filled with similarities to the eschatology of Celtic Irish paganism. The monk bemoaned a coming cataclysm that would "utterly crush the great elements" and declared that "Earth and sky will be ablaze; the smile will be wiped from the face of the seas."[48] He made a further reference to the plummeting of the stars from "heaven," recalling the pagan eschatological belief that the sky would collapse at the advent of the world's end.[49] His poem contained explicit references to the tripartite division of the mundane world that comprised pre-Christian cosmology and the destruction of those three parts that heralded the end of the world in the eschatological framework of pagan Irish belief. Blathmac's use of the Old Irish word *nem*, meaning sky, to refer first to the blazing sky of the apocalypse and then to heaven in the next stanza provided further evidence of the blending of pagan and Christian eschatology, this time manifested in the Irish lexicon.

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[45] Liam Mac Mathúna, "The Irish Cosmos Revisited: Further Lexical Perspectives," in *Celtic Cosmology: Perspectives from Ireland and Scotland*, eds. Jacqueline Borsje, Ann Dooley, Séamus Mac Mathúna, and Gregory Toner (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2014), 12-14, 16.
[46] Liam Mac Mathúna, "The Irish Cosmos Revisited," 12-14.
[47] Bernard McGinn, foreword to *The End and Beyond*, 19.
[48] Blathmac, "The Poems of Blathmac," 81.
[49] Ibid.

Certain later Christian scholars in the Middle Ages, including Blathmac, exhibited pagan lexical influences in their writings, which served to reinforce the argument that an amalgamation of pagan and Christian beliefs and practices had occurred in Ireland over the course of the early Middle Ages. *Talam*, *muir*, and *nem*, the Old Irish words for "land," "sea," and "sky," respectively, shared their original meanings with later Christian concepts in Blathmac's poems, evincing a blending of pagan Irish meaning with more recent Christian concepts.[50] *Nem* was used to refer to the eternal abode of the righteous dead and the home of the Christian God in addition to its original meaning of "sky," and this application of existing Irish words to less familiar Christian themes showed one way in which the process of inculturation was occurring.[51] The poet's further lexical maneuvering attempted to reconcile the tripartite cosmic division with the binary of heaven and earth, evidence of earlier and continued efforts to inculturate pagan and Christian religious traditions.[52] Another of these fusion words appeared early in Blathmac's first poem when the author was extolling the virtues of Christ, exalting his wisdom in comparison to that of a *druí*, or "druid."[53] That this particular term was still employed in the work of an Irish Christian monk three hundred years after the introduction of Christianity to Ireland indicated a considerable degree of sustained interaction between elements of paganism and the Christian faith, namely in the continued existence and relevance of the druids in Irish society.[54] Further references to the druids and evidence substantiating the survival of a pagan conception of the end of the world were also detected in a slightly earlier Irish Christian work composed in the late-seventh century.

The Irish bishop Tírechán, in his late-seventh century *Collectanea*, contained in the ninth century *Book of Armagh*, described an exchange between Saint Patrick and the pagan king

[50] Liam Mac Mathúna, "The Irish Cosmos Revisited," 17.
[51] Ibid., 18-20.
[52] Ibid., 19-20.
[53] Blathmac, "The Poems of Blathmac," 5.
[54] Liam Mac Mathuna, "The Irish Cosmos Revisited," 17.

Loegaire in which the latter made reference to the Day of Judgement using the druidic term *erdathe*.[55] Tírechán's recount of this incident and the existence of such a singular word to describe a prefigured calamity that would bring about the end of days indicated the existence of a pagan eschatological conception of the destruction of the physical realm.[56] Additional textual evidence contained in the same work suggested that the pagan Celts engaged in burial rites that saw their deceased warriors and kings armed in their graves so that they could continue to defend their territory until the world's expected end.[57] Such terminology and burial practice further showed that the pre-Christian Celts possessed their own idea of the impending annihilation of humanity and that it evidently exerted enough of an influence in their society to ensure its survival in later Irish Christian textual sources and from pagan times to a period when Christianity was in the ascendant. Another excerpt from the *Collectanea* related the story of a prophet who entombed himself at the bottom of a spring so as to protect his body from some anticipated fiery calamity.[58] The themes of burial and bodies of water appeared to have a close relation in pagan mythology, much like the association between water and the otherworld, for when the sea god and guardian of the otherworld, Manannán Mac Lir, was buried in Ireland, a lake sprang forth and flooded the area, and was subsequently named for him.[59] In Irish Celtic mythology there was great reverence given to water, the various sacred places that were associated with water, and the role that bodies of water played in shaping the topography of Ireland with each successive wave of incoming groups in the cosmologic accounts.[60] The special place of water in Celtic myth seemed to be reflected in this episode in Tírechán's account of the prophet who had buried himself beneath the floor of the

[55] John Carey, "Saint Patrick, the Druids, and the End of the World," *History of Religions* 36, no. 1 (1996): 42-43.
[56] Carey, "Saint Patrick and the End of the World," 43-44.
[57] Ibid., 43.
[58] Ibid., 44.
[59] Séamus Mac Mathúna, "Sacred Landscape and Water Mythology," 35-36.
[60] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 104.

spring, though it was unclear whether the prophet or the spring came first. The close pagan identification with water was also incorporated into the work that Saint Patrick did in Ireland on behalf of those whom he had converted. The saint obtained a concession from God so that a flood would drown Ireland seven years preceding the end of the world, sparing the Irish from a brutal end amidst fire and fury. Patrick appealed to existing pagan anxieties concerning the dramatic ending of the known world as a conversion strategy employed as part of the process of inculturation, offering the pagans a more peaceful end beneath the waves of a great flood instead of an agonizing death amidst a great inferno.[61] This appeal validated the idea that the Celts had possessed their own apocalyptic eschatology independent from Christianity before it had washed up on Irish shores,[62] while also demonstrating that Christian missionaries like Patrick could martial pre-existing beliefs to assist in their proselytizing and were willing to adjust parts of their own religion to accommodate native beliefs.

In each society and culture that came into contact with Christianity as it circumnavigated the globe, proselytizing and missionizing its way onto every continent, the indigenous religious traditions of the host group flavoured the formulation of the Christian belief system. As part of the process of Christianization, the method through which Christianity was introduced to a new audience and the nature of the prevailing religious beliefs and practices of that community impacted how Christianity was adopted and adapted in each new context.[63] Of vital importance to any discussion of Christianity in the Middle Ages is the acknowledgment that the Christian religion itself was still evolving. A generous amount of fluidity typically characterized medieval Christian dogmas, for they were still in the process of being definitively set down, which further helped

[61] Carey, "Saint Patrick and the End of the World," 48.
[62] Ibid., 45.
[63] Ritari, *Pilgrimage to Heaven*, 3.

native religious traditions to persist in local variants of Christian doctrine.[64] As Alwyn and Brinley Rees noted in their treatment of the *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, the adaptation of Christianity to local religious concepts was occurring in all the places that the Christian faith had touched during the Middle Ages, not only in Ireland with its Celtic paganism.[65] Medieval Irish Christianity possessed unique aspects due to this localization, the fluidity of Christian doctrine, and the influence of persistent indigenous religious traditions.

Traces of pre-Christian Celtic eschatological belief survived in medieval Irish Christian literature that discussed ideas pertaining to death, the afterlife, and the Last Judgement. This examination of a selection of extant religious texts dealt with a single, albeit focal, facet of religion during the early to high Middle Ages in Ireland to demonstrate that early Irish Christianity incorporated elements of pagan belief into the Christian religious tradition, evidence of which was manifested in the writings of medieval Irish Christian authors. Incoming Christianity did not simply force Celtic paganism from the cultural and social fabric of medieval Ireland. The Irish pagan religious tradition was vibrant and comprehensive, and possessed complex notions of the soul's fate upon departing from the body, as evinced in conceptions of the otherworld from Irish mythology and voyage literature. The pre-Christian Celts also nurtured a conception of the world's end independent of that which Christianity introduced to Ireland and that predated the coming of the Christian religion. Taking the evidence of inculturation of pagan eschatology to Christian eschatology found in these works as indicative of the general relationship between Christianity and Celtic paganism, it is evident that the strength of pre-Christian religion in Ireland forced the initial bearers of Christianity and its later adherents to incorporate pagan elements of belief into their religious doctrine. The relative flexibility of the Christian religious system at this point in

[64] Ibid.
[65] Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, 95-96.

time also allowed its emissaries to incorporate some aspects of the pre-existing religion of the subject group into its overarching framework to gradually acclimatize the members of that group to the incoming faith, a compromise intended to expedite and ease the conversion process. Evidence of the existence and continued influence of Irish Celtic paganism survived in the texts that Irish Christian writers authored in the medieval period and many of these texts continue to provide a vital resource from which invaluable information about the pagan religion and society of Ireland prior to the coming of Christianity can be ascertained.

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