

# THE GREAT GOD OF LIFE







THOMAS MERTON tells the story of the Zen master who asked a postulant presenting himself at the monastery gate, “Why do you seek such a thing [i.e. the truth about Zen Buddhism] here? Why do you wander about neglecting your own precious treasure at home?” (*Thomas Merton on Zen*, Introduction by Irmgard Schloegl, 1976, p. 54). It is a parable that we would do well to take to heart, for it suggests the relevance of our interest in these treasures of the Celtic tradition. Why do we wander about neglecting our own precious treasure at home [in the United Kingdom]? Recent years have seen the enormous growth in exploration of other religious traditions, particularly those of the East; yet have we not failed to recognize

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the wealth of a tradition much nearer to us, a tradition “at home” in our own native islands? Why do we not seek our “precious treasure” very literally “at home”? Every form of spiritual exercise or new therapy derived from the East, or even from the West, is seized on with excitement, but the possibility of finding God in our everyday lives, in the prosaic and the mundane, has not caught the popular imagination with any excitement.

These Celtic prayers and poems (the two are inseparable since to ask God for his blessing is already to have acknowledged his gift), the legacy of the simple farming and fishing people in the Hebrides, are shot through with an awareness of God’s presence that can speak to men and women of today. Their sense of God’s immediacy in daily living is precisely what so many people are urgently searching for today, as they struggle to acquire techniques of “mindfulness” or to practice the contemplative approach in daily living. The self-conscious approach of our contemporaries would, of course, have been totally alien to a

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people who found it entirely natural to see God in every moment and at every level of their ordinary life. They walked with God, with Mary and the saints, addressing them tenderly and familiarly, and involving them in whatever they were doing. The material things of daily life almost inevitably became a way to God for a people who always speak of soul and body with equal respect and for whom the borderline of secular and sacred seems irrelevant. Their prayers were songs, and as they crooned or intoned them, they seem close to the continuous prayer the Orthodox describe as a murmur in the heart.

It is always easy to pursue parallels between religious traditions, and it would not be difficult to find much in common not only with Orthodoxy but also with the Hebrew attitude to man or with Eastern teaching on “awareness.” But it is a more creative exercise to let these poems speak for themselves. They come from a people with their own particular genius, and it will be sufficient if they explain themselves to us as

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a gift of grace, if they can touch our hearts and enrich our vision. It is not my intention here to enter into any academic, historical or theological discussion of the Celtic tradition which these poems reflect. Anyone who wishes to pursue the subject further may enjoy the anthology which I published with A.M. Allchin, *Daily Readings for Prayers & Praises in the Celtic Tradition*, Templegate Publishers, Springfield, Illinois, and also selections from the *Carmina Gadelica* which I edited in *Celtic Vision*, St. Bede's Publications, Petersham, Mass. For an overall discussion of Celtic Christianity see *Every Earthly Blessing, Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition*, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan and *The Celtic Way of Prayer, the Recovery of the Religious Imagination*, Doubleday, New York, 1997.

The poems we will be considering, the *Carmina Gadelica*,<sup>1</sup> come from the outer Hebrides, the rocky, remote and far-flung islands off the northwest coast of Scotland which were the home of a hardy pastoral and sea-going people.

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They were collected by an amazing scholar, Alexander Carmichael, who for the last forty years of the nineteenth century lived amongst these people, collecting and transcribing what had belonged hitherto to an entirely oral tradition. Like many of the greatest translators, Carmichael himself was a poet. His English renderings from the Gaelic are not only faithful, but “their grandeur and power show him as one of the translators through whom a masterpiece can be reborn in a new language” (Adam Bittleston, *The Sun Dances, Prayers and Blessings from the Gaelic*, 1960, xi). Since many of those to whom he listened were already well-advanced in years, much of the material in the *Carmina Gadelica* would now be almost certainly two hundred years old, though Carmichael would claim that much went back to the seventeenth century, and also contained even older elements.

The pattern of life in the outer Hebrides up to the present century when evictions, emigration and education changed everything drastically,

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was simple. Here were crofting and fishing communities in which men and women worked hard by day and in the evenings gathered together to talk and to sing. Poetry was central to their life, poetry carried on from generation to generation by word of mouth. Carmichael said of these people: "Mirth and music, song and dance, tale and poem pervaded their lives as electricity pervades the air." (*Carmina Gadelica*, I, xxxiii.) He found simple old men and women in lowly homes addressing "the great God of life, the Father of all living" in words which were at once homely and eloquent, presenting to him their needs and desires, fully and familiarly, and yet also with awe and deference.

There was little in their poetry of what is popularly assumed to characterize something Celtic, something typically misty or mystical, or vaguely pantheistic. Rather these Gaelic people found it quite natural to bring into their prayers and poems the vigour, honesty and incisive humour of their daily lives. What also in particular

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makes these poems unique is that, unlike the much better known bardic poetry, “these poems are private; they reveal what is not usually revealed to strangers and outsiders.” (G.R.D. McLean, *Poems of the Western Highlanders*, SPCK 1961, xxvii.) Carmichael tells of an episode in which one old man, having allowed him to take down a “going to sleep” rune, traveled twenty-six miles the following morning to see him again and to exact a pledge that his “little prayer” should never be allowed to appear in print. “I should not like cold eyes to read it in a book.” (*Op. cit.*, IV, xxxi.) Carmichael therefore destroyed it (and it is lost to us, as is so much of this rich treasury—stamped out, destroyed, dispersed).

Although certain of these songs or prayers—and it is significant that it is impossible to draw any distinction between the two—were designed for communal gatherings and rituals, most were meant to be sung privately, intoned softly or crooned secretly. Catherine Macphee, a cottar, after giving Carmichael a night-shielding poem,

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described how the women sang these verses at the time of going to sleep; then she added: “the people of that day were full of hymns and prayers, full of music and songs, full of joy and innocent merriment. By the Book itself, you would not ask but to be hearing them, however long the night, however wild the weather, however miry the road, however dark the night going homeward.” (*Op. cit.*, III, 350-1.)

Perceiving a world in which the divisions of sacred and secular seemed irrelevant, these Gaelic people found God lovingly concerned with all aspects of their lives and felt themselves walking not only in his presence but close to the saints and angels too. Almost as a matter of course they assumed that they were surrounded by a multitude of spiritual beings, near throughout the day and nearer still in the hours of sleep. The involvement of the saints, and above all, the involvement of Mary and Michael, Columba and Brigit, was taken for granted and forms a constant subject of great numbers of poems.

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The holy apostles' guarding,  
The gentle martyrs' guarding,  
The nine angels' guarding,  
    Be cherishing, be aiding me.

The quiet Brigit's guarding,  
The gentle Mary's guarding,  
The warrior Michael's guarding,  
    Be shielding, be aiding me.

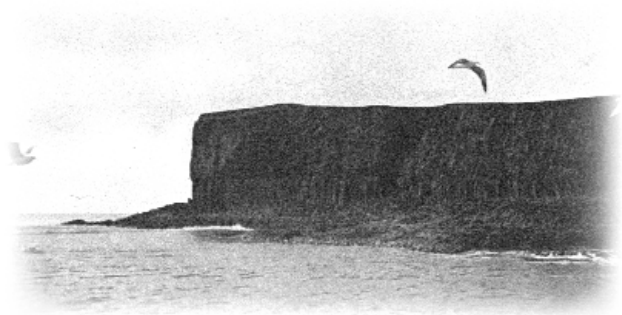
The God of the elements guarding,  
The loving Christ's guarding,  
The Holy Spirit's guarding,  
    Be cherishing, be aiding me.

(III, 106-7)

1. *Carmina Gadelica, Hymns and Incantations with Illustrative Notes of Words, Rites and Customs Dying and Obsolete*: Orally collected in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland by Alexander Carmichael, see acknowledgment. References given in this study are to volume and page number.



# COMMON CREATION







AN AMAZINGLY POWERFUL VISION of the universe is expressed in these poems. The sense of a common creation is experienced so strongly that sun and moon, animals and crops are also felt to have the need to receive a blessing. The encompassing of the Trinity and the saints is not confined to man alone. The unity of God and his saints, the whole created order, man, beasts and growing things is continually assumed. An old man in Arasaig would take off his head covering and bow when he saw the sun each day, thanking the great God of life for the glory of the sun and for the goodness of its light to the children of man and to the animals of the world. When the sun set in the western ocean the old man would

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again take off his head covering and would bow his head and say:

I am in hope, in its proper time  
That the great and gracious God  
Will not put out for me the light of grace  
Even as thou dost leave me this night.

(III, 308-9)

At the sight of the new moon another old man told Carmichael, “A person ought to make reverence to it and make the cross of Christ over the tablet of his heart, and to say the rune in the eye of the God of glory who sees all.”

He who created thee  
Created me likewise;  
He who gave thee weight and light  
Gave to me life and death.

(III, 304-5)

*Common Creation*

It is interesting to see expressed the feeling of *common* creation. However this is very far removed from any sort of easy-going, romantic pantheism. At the heart of this sense of unity lies the recognition that everything good comes from God and is to be given freedom to be itself, to enjoy and be enjoyed, and that we are enslaved if we care for anything in ways that exclude the Giver (A. Bittleston, *op. cit.*, p. xv). The song of a woman on Harris who cured herself of leprosy by using aright the healing plants and fish demonstrates this frame of mind:

It were as easy for Jesu  
To renew the withered tree  
As to wither the new  
Were it His will to do so.  
    Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!  
    Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.

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There is no plant in the ground,  
But it is full of His virtue,  
There is no form in the strand  
But it is full of His blessing.

Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.

There is no life in the sea,  
There is no creature in the river,  
There is naught in the firmament  
But proclaims His goodness.

Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.

There is no bird on the wing,  
There is no star in the sky,  
There is nothing beneath the sun  
But proclaims His goodness.

Jesu! Jesu! Jesu!

Jesu! meet it were to praise Him.

(I, 38-41)

*Common Creation*

Children learning the first prayer of the day from their mothers were unconsciously made to feel their worship of God took place in the midst of the whole worship of the natural world. “My mother would be asking us to sing our morning song to God down in the back-house, as Mary’s lark was singing it up in the clouds, and as Christ’s mavis was singing it yonder in the tree, giving glory to God of the creatures for the repose of the night, for the light of the day, and for the joy of life” (III, 25). The dressing prayer she was taught as a child set the keynote for the rest of the day, which is seen as a total act of worship both in activity and in word:

I am giving Thee worship with my whole life,  
I am giving Thee assent with my whole power,  
I am giving Thee praise with my whole tongue,  
I am giving Thee honour with my whole  
utterance.

(III, 44-5)

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Amongst the many morning prayers comes this one, typical in its lifting up all things to God at the start of the day, an act of affirmation since they have come to man through the love and bounty of God:

Each thing I have received, from Thee it came,  
Each thing for which I hope, from Thy love it will  
    come,  
Each thing I enjoy, it is of Thy bounty,  
Each thing I ask comes of Thy disposing.

(III, 58-9)

This is nowhere better expressed than in the long morning prayer from an old woman, Mary Gillies, which starts with a great credo:

I believe, O God of all gods,  
That Thou art the eternal Father of life,