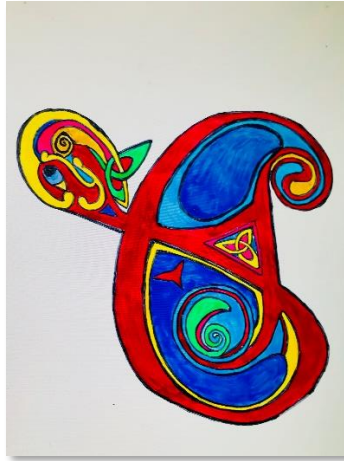


# Celtic Illumination: A Window into The Celtic Soul

By Christina Archbold



*The Illuminated Initials C.A.*

This creative project was inspired by a trip to Lindisfarne, also known as Holy Island in Northumberland<sup>1</sup>. It was here that Eadfrith created the Lindisfarne Gospels, 'one of the world's greatest masterpieces of manuscript painting', around 698 CE<sup>2</sup> (Backhouse, 2014 p.7). The Gospels were created in honour of St. Columba who having died in 687 CE, was formally declared a Saint when it was found his body had not decayed on its exhumation in 698 CE.<sup>3</sup> After a walk around the Lindisfarne Priory ruins (which date from 1093 on the site of the earlier monastery), the project to 'do some Celtic artwork' was hatched in a café on the island and I went home clutching a copy of 'The Celtic Design Book' (Meehan 2007).

Much like a Celtic knot, there are many strands that weave their way through this project and through this essay. My interest was in sacred geometry and how this may have informed the illumination of Celtic sacred texts, but I also discovered a deeper personal resonance. Although born

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<sup>1</sup> Lindisfarne is a spit of land that lies about a mile and half off the coast and is cut off from the mainland twice a day by the sea. A monastery was founded here by Aidan in 635 CE who arrived from the Irish monastery on Iona at the request of King Oswald of Northumberland.

<sup>2</sup> This date is disputed by Brown, who believes they date from around 710-721 (Brown 2003)

<sup>3</sup> It was common practice to exhume the bones of holy men in order to create relics. Apparently, his body was still undecayed in 1104 when it was returned from Durham to the new Priory cathedral on Lindisfarne. (Backhouse, 1981 p.87)

in England, my own background is ‘Celt’<sup>4</sup> and perhaps because of this I have always been drawn to what I thought to be ‘Celtic Christianity’. I believed that somehow this was a purer and more soulful version of Christianity that had been mercilessly stamped out by the Roman Catholic church at the Council of Whitby in 664CE. Having received a traditional Catholic convent school education, the notion of a ‘better’ form of Christianity waiting to be rediscovered had haunted me for decades.

Apparently, I am not alone in this:

There is a longing to restore something that seems to have been “lost” in modern life combined with the hope that in the past people “got it right.” Therefore, for some, the Celtic Church becomes the embodiment of the dreams of these groups—whether it is the hope that this tradition gave women equality, was able to access special layers of spirituality, or continued and preserved pagan traditions. But these ideas reflect modern hopes, not the reality of the early medieval Church in the Celtic lands or the concerns of those living during that time. Essentially, popular Celtic spirituality in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries tells us much more about the spiritual desires of people today than those in the early medieval world (Corning 2006, p.3)

It became clear to me as the project progressed that I was indeed looking to ‘access special layers of spirituality’ through connecting with Christian Celtic art. This was at first unconscious but became apparent as I delved deeper into the context for the Lindisfarne Gospels, looking for an answer to the question ‘What was it like to be a monk producing this kind of art?’ I was specifically interested in the mode of being such work requires. The journey also took me into exploring the historical and political context of the Gospels which inevitably led to researching the differences between the Celtic and Roman Churches. But perhaps most importantly, I also wanted a breakthrough experience. Perhaps there was something talismanic about those spirals and knots? Or perhaps in there was something in the ‘doing’ of it that would produce an altered state of consciousness, something that would be ‘soul-making’ (Hillman, 1975). This became what was at stake for me.

The final strand was confronting my artistic inabilities. Having once come 27<sup>th</sup> out of a class of 30 in the end-of-year art exam at that same convent school (the only year they actually ranked art work), I’d been left with a lifelong ambivalence about ‘doing art’. As a consequence, undertaking art work for this project provided an additional personal challenge.

## **Methodology**

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<sup>4</sup> My father’s family originates from the Scottish borders, and my mother was born and raised on a small 50-acre island in Lough Ree in Ireland, called Innishturk (Island of the White Boar) and went to school on the island next door, Innismore, which has monastic ruins the foundation of which is attributed to a fifth century monk, St. Lioban (or Liberius).

In working on this project and essay I have been informed by the work of Rosemary Anderson on Intuitive Enquiry (Anderson & Braud, 2011) and in particular the type of enquiry arising from what she describes as 'empathic identification', that is seeking to 'inhabit the lived world of another person or object of study...By loving and through living thoroughly the experience studied, the researcher looks around from inside the experience and witnesses the essential qualities of the other come to life'. (Anderson & Braud 2011, pp.24 & 25). This deeply informed my experience of doing the artwork and exploring the mode of being of the monks. Anderson also comments on the intuitive style of researchers tending to 'settle along the "fault line" or wounds in the personality of the researcher' (ibid. p.25) and that the topics her students 'choose to explore in research are those aspects of their personalities that seek healing either within themselves or within the culture at large, or both' (ibid. p.26). This is evident in my preoccupation with finding a 'better' form of the religion I grew up with.

Anderson makes the point that the 'researcher's *own being*' is essential to what can be known. 'Knowledge is a function of being. When there is a change in the being of the knower, there is a corresponding change in the nature and amount of knowing' (Anderson & Braud 2011, p.80 quoting Huxley 1970, vii,ix). Part of the enquiry was to see if the mode of being of the monks could in some way inform the present.

### **Context – A Very Brief History of the Celtic Church**

Chadwick calls this period the 'Age of Saints'. The definition of 'saint' (*sanctus*) in this context denotes a man in Orders which in turn carries the meaning of 'educated' and 'literate', rather than someone of special virtue deserving veneration. These '*sancti*' inaugurated an 'attitude of enlightenment...when the fact comes to be widely accepted that the mind can effect more than military strength...the substitution of the pen for the sword.' (Chadwick, 1960 p.4). The essential difference between the Celtic and Roman Churches was one of organisation and both operated throughout the British Isles. The Roman church had an episcopal hierarchy, whereas the Celtic Church was mainly monastic comprising independent foundations. Whilst there was no difference in doctrine, the Celtic Church had adopted the eremitical monastic<sup>5</sup> system originating with the Desert Fathers in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to a large extent had become identified with it. Whilst this brought an extreme asceticism, it also encouraged intellectual life through the spread of books and book production.

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<sup>5</sup> Eremitic monasticism, or solitary monasticism, is characterized by a complete withdrawal from society as opposed to cenobitic monasticism where the religious live in community regulated by a religious Rule.

'The clash between the two Churches was bound to come.' (Chadwick, 1960, p.119). The most divisive issue between the two Churches was the dating of Easter<sup>6</sup>. The problem was an important one, for the discrepancies could result in some Christians still fasting in Lent whilst others had already celebrated Easter. (Corning, 2006 p.13).

In the end the issues were decided (if not resolved) at the Synod of Whitby in 664CE which decided for the Roman church. Slowly the Celtic monasteries across Britain and Ireland fell into line and there was never any question of a 'resistance' movement.

### **Celtic Motifs and Symbols**

Christian Celtic art has three basic components: spirals, keys and knots. The monks were able to create an overarching system of ornamentation that took inspiration and 'married patterns from Lombardic wrought iron knotwork, Greek meander keywork, Saxon animal zoomorphics and native spiral compass work.' (Tetlow, 2014 p.24). This demonstrates that they were in contact with the rest of Europe and beyond with their trumpet patterns and triskeles being found as far apart as South Shields in Tyne and Wear and Dura-Europos in Syria (Laing, 1997 p.8). The fact they were also willing to embrace an eclectic mix of motifs and styles to enhance their stylistic vocabulary bears witness to their openness to new influences. Motifs from earlier pagan sources are also evident. Lydney Park in Gloucestershire was a shrine to the Celtic god Nodens, dating from the late fourth century. Laing describes it as a 'pattern book' where the mosaics provided examples of all the main motifs (knots, step patterns and animals). (Laing, 1997 p.10).

### **Sacred Geometry and Form**

The early Church Fathers were no strangers to Pythagorean concepts of number and geometry and adapted the meanings of number to suit their own spiritual requirements. It is not unreasonable to assume that the monks in producing books of the Word of God would work to scripturally-based guidelines, particularly those related to building and construction. The theme of building and foundation is used as an allegory for spiritual development and 'the idea of spiritual foundations and

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<sup>6</sup> The date for Easter is the Sunday after the full moon after the vernal equinox. The ancient church first set the Spring Equinox at 25<sup>th</sup> March 'These dates [were fixed] due to their symbolic meaning. Before the vernal equinox there are more hours of dark than light. Then on the night when darkness and light are in balance, the Messiah was conceived. The Incarnation was also seen as the beginning of a new creation where Christ, the new Adam, would heal the world. On the longest night of the year, the winter solstice, Christ the Saviour, the Light of the World was born. Placing Easter in relation to March 25 would complete the cycle' (Corning, 2006 p.5). When the date was changed to 21<sup>st</sup> March in keeping with astronomical data, Easter tables were produced to try and preserve the symbolism. These tables differed in their dates for Easter since there was no agreement on the lunar days it was permissible to use in with ranges from 14-20, 15-21 to 16-22.

spiritual building materials is expanded upon by the Church Fathers and is linked by them to sacred numerology, and therefore to sacred geometry.' (Hitchins, 1996 p.127).

I had been uncertain as to whether the monks would be familiar with the precepts of sacred geometry but Stevick (1987) demonstrates that they used the 'two true measures of geometry' the proportions of  $\sqrt{2}:1$  and the golden mean  $\phi : 1$  to layout their carpet pages which as 'formal features are certainly not determined by unaided intuition'. (1987, p.9).

Another fascinating feature is the size of the work. According to Bain, 'The extreme minuteness of the art...and the impossibility of the ordinary eyes perceiving much of its contents, shows that the artists did not display their skill for human eyes and human applause'. Their primary concern was working to glorify God. The tools needed to be able to work at such a fine scale and be able to 'draw lines with the exactness beyond the skill of moderns may never be known.' Citing an example from the 'Book of Armagh' he quotes Professor J.O Woodward: 'In the space of about a quarter of an inch...I counted with a magnifying glass no less than one hundred and fifty-eight interlacements of a slender ribbon pattern'. (Bain, 1951 p.21). Working at this level is inconceivable today without some form of magnification begging the question as to whether the monks had access to optical technology that has since been lost.

Hull remarks on the way in which the artist changes the scale 'Although the primary pattern...is based on a well-defined grid, with the finer scale design of individual panels following finer grids, the details of the patterns in the finer grids may display a range of variations. This undoubtedly helps to make the overall work intriguing to the point of being mystical and elevates it above the ordered and routine conformity of conventional patterns.' (Hull, 2003, p. 140).

In discussing the structure and the grids used to underpin the work, Swenson makes the point that once 'the grammar was mastered...the artist...wilfully varied motifs within the guidelines of the system...each layer of the structure has a logic and symmetry peculiar to it and generally not shared by another.' (Swenson, 1978 p.12). She goes on:

'Yet, gradually this intellectual, unemotional framework is threatened, its reasonableness brought into question by ornament inconsistent with the rational symmetry...in each page the situation is always the same. Within a clearly predetermined design environment governed by set rules of order, ornament exists which is brought into being by that order yet motivated by an independent will' (ibid. p.17).

It strikes me that this a perfect metaphor for the relationship between the Celtic and Roman Churches. The Celtic Church remained orthodox, yet within the 'set rules of order' they expressed their independent will and approach to spirituality. Their attitude to their external world was thus exquisitely expressed in their art. There is also a resonance here with McGilchrist's (2012) divided

brain theory. Perhaps Hull's remark about the work being almost 'mystical' could be attributed to the way in which the different brain hemisphere's work and that these images invoke both hemispheres equally. The symmetry of the geometry (which is processed by the left hemisphere conceptually focusing on single elements) being confounded by the profusion of asymmetrical features which call for the bigger picture 'holistic' processing of the right hemisphere. To the modern mind, dominated as it is by the left hemisphere, the effect of this can be perplexing. I certainly experienced cognitive disturbances when I was drawing spirals using the fairly complex geometry needed to construct these with just a compass and straight-edge. Whilst these disturbances were not mystical in anyway, there was certainly a sense of something unusual happening.

## **The Praxis**

### **Framing The Project**

The word 'Illumination' resonates deeply with me and captured my imagination so I decided that the artwork should be done in a way that enabled it to be illuminated like stain glass windows. This involved a lot of experimentation with materials and eventually I settled on using glass paint on clear plastic A3 sheets. With no background in art it was a process of trial and error to make it work. I also decided to focus on producing one piece that would be my (very simple) version of a 'carpet page'. In preparation I also decided to do a series of pieces to practice each of the elements for my composition which would also provide the opportunity to explore that particular motif through its geometry and any allied symbolism.

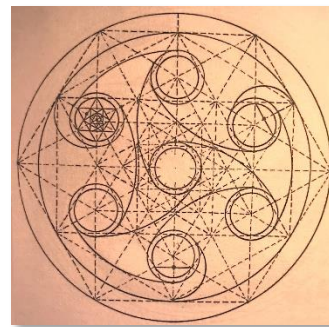
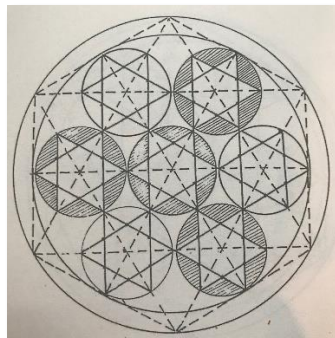
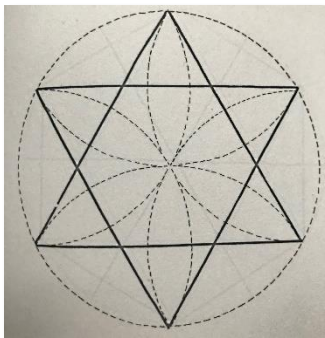
### **The Elements**

What follows is the series of pieces I drew to practice the elements I wanted to introduce into my final piece.

### **The Spiral**



The spiral is found at all levels throughout the cosmos, from galactic arms to molecular bonds. It is one of the first symbols created by human artists appearing on very early artefacts such as stones in Newgrange in Ireland dating from 3200 BCE which feature 'snake-like coils that represent the nineteen-year Metonic cycle' (Quinn, 2006 p. 133). It is a physical expression of the archetypal circle in motion and is synonymous with the flow patterns seen in the curls of waves, ripples and whirlpools. This example shows what is called the 'C' curve and comprises seven centres joined within a circle. The underpinning geometry is constructed as follows:

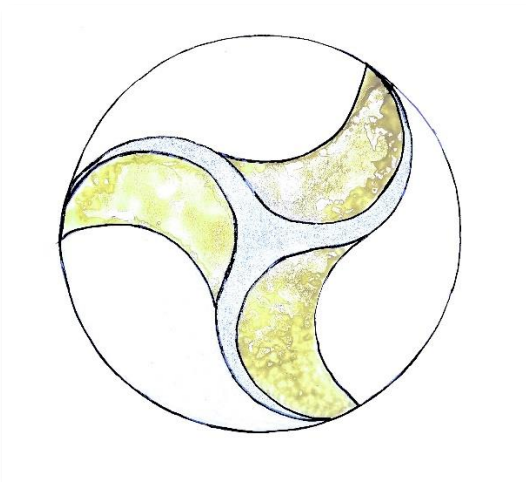


There is also something 'holographic' about this form. 'Based on the close-packing properties of circles, these spiral forms repeat at different scales; they are self-similar (spirals within spirals), like quarks in atomic nuclei, a window into the advanced fractal thinking of the Celts' (Tetlow, 2014, p.26).



*Drawing from Meehan, 2007 pg.72*

## Triskeles



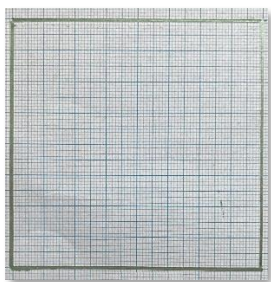


These are 'Triskeles', a triple-armed spiral using the 'S' curve which is an important archaic symbol representing motion. The three arms make it appear as if it's moving outwards from the centre signifying action, cycles and progression. Three is a very significant number and depending on the era and culture can represent a range of tripliciities e.g. The Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost; the triple aspect of the Goddess: Virgin, Mother, Crone; or Life, Death and Rebirth or the three Celtic worlds of Spirit, Present and Celestial.

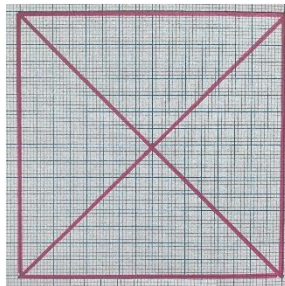
This too has a holographic quality as Meehan says, 'the whole is reflected in the part in the geometry of the circle, hexagon and star, the same geometry as generates the triple spiral roundel...with this in view it follows that the whole triple spiral design may be reflected in each of the triples contained within it.' (Meehan, 2007 p.71-72). In executing these pieces, I found myself struggling with drawing the freehand curves. As discussed above, I had a distinct awareness that I was repatterning something in my brain. This seemed to be borne out by the fact that for the next few days my attention was drawn to Celtic-like patterns everywhere I went.

### Celtic Knots

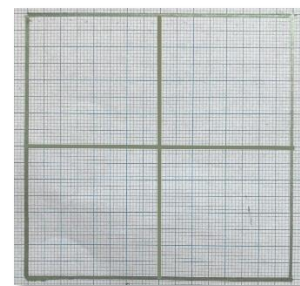
Celtic artists 'sought not to imitate nature but rather to imitate her in her mode of operation'. (Tetlow, 2013 p.366). They wanted to capture the flow of nature as ongoing movement, that is as alive, not as a frozen snapshot in time. The Celtic knot with its interweaving of strands, continuously draws the eye along itself and creates that feeling of flow. Knots are constructed by the use of three overlaid grids.



The Square or 1x1  
*Primary Grid*



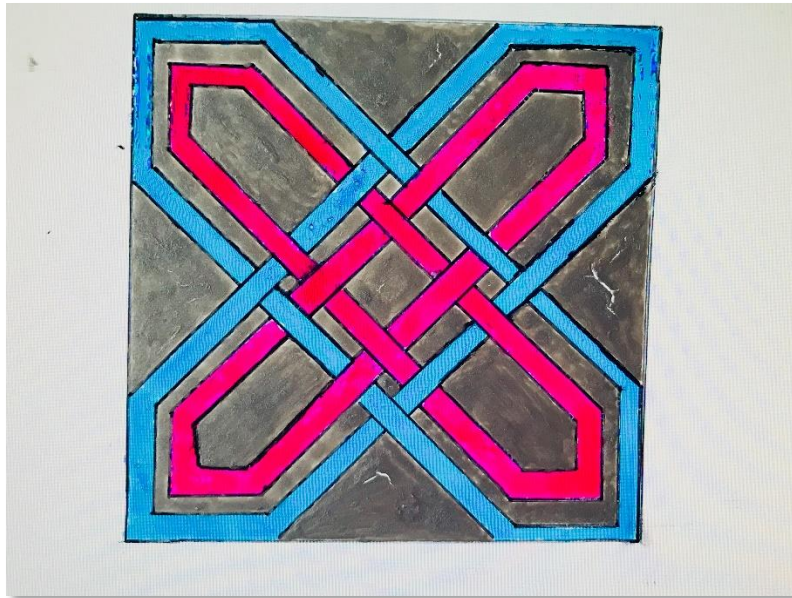
The Centre or 1x1  
*Secondary Grid*  
The centre point is found by joining the diagonals



The Midpoints or 1x1  
*Tertiary Grid*  
The mid-points are found by drawing through the centre

According to Meehan 'the way in which the primary square, and its centre, secondary provide the coordinates for the division of the sides of the square (tertiary) may have been seen by early monks

as a symbol of tri-unity – three in one.’ (2007, p.178). The geometry of the square symbolised the manifestation of the manifold universe and it was an important spiritual practice for them to contemplate how the Two, the infinite and the finite could be engendered by the One.



More complex knots are created by placing ‘breaks’ in the grid – lines that interrupt the flow and cause the line to double back on itself as in the pattern above.

### **Zoomorphology**

Celtic art is also teeming with life, highly stylised animal forms. According to Celtic belief there were seven created life forms: plant, insect, fish, reptile, bird, mammal and man.



The Final Result - The Tree of Life



The Tree of Life is a pre-Christian Celtic symbol deriving from the Druids. According to Bain, “The Tree of Life” makes an appearance in the Book of Kells growing out of a pot. He states that after the Synod of Whitby in 664CE ‘Following the victorious Church of Augustine, the Romanesque vine and other plant forms replaced the Celtic “Tree of Life” and rapidly produced decadent forms of Celtic Art’. Bain (1951, p.121). It’s not hard to guess which side of the debate Bain was on and given that most of the great illuminated gospels were produced after Whitby, the comment should be taken with a pinch of salt.

This piece took over 100 hours of work. Beyond starting with the idea of the Tree I allowed it to evolve organically and was surprised to find the heart shape in the branches – this was not done deliberately. I also had wanted to fill in the background with more detail, but the amount of time it would have taken was prohibitive, so I settled on a modern solution of just using paint. In working symbolically with the image, I have decided to use the fourfold hermeneutic described in Voss (2009, pp.11-12). In being the creator of the image, the challenge is not to think it has already ‘spoken’ - to use the metaphor of Angelo (2005). As Voss says, ‘True imagination...is the mode in which the soul reveals its nature through the language of symbol and metaphor.’ (2009, p.4). So, what is my soul communicating?

On the literal level the picture depicts a leafless brown tree that has interwoven branches reaching up and interwoven roots reaching into the ground and encircling a blue and green triskele spiral. The centre of the image is a heart shape, formed by the tree branches, coloured in pink by the background. Also, in the branches two intertwined birds sit facing each other, beaks touching as if kissing, one with a pink tail flowing into the heart. Above them is a symbol of the moon in blue and sun in yellow. Interwoven in the branches is a plant, perhaps ivy or a vine with a scattering of green leaves attached to it. In the lower branches of the tree, two snakes are interlaced in the branches, but not touching each other. One is striped blue and green and the other is striped red and green. The red and green snake is also wound around the trunk, it’s head up as if to confront the figure who is riding a horse towards the tree. The figure is a man wearing a red and green cloak that mirrors the colours of the snake and he is holding a stick, something like a croquet mallet. He has blond hair and a blond beard and is wearing red knee length breeches, green hose and a yellow boot. The horse is brown with a blond face and a greeny brown mane and appears to be rearing up perhaps frightened by the sight of the snake. On the other side of the tree there is a wild boar facing the tree, a little behind it, maybe this is what the horse is frightened of too. Beneath the ground and globe interlaced in the roots, is a pair of interlaced dogs, they seem to be sleeping, looking down. The background comprises a sky made of faint gold swirl patterns and beneath ground with slightly denser and

darker swirl patterns shot through with pink. Down each side of the image there is a strip of knotwork with a yellow ribbon interwoven on a blue background.

Allegorically, there are clear allusions to the Tree in the Garden of Eden and also to the Serpent. The mounted figure could perhaps be seen as a 'Soldier of Christ' which is most certainly how the monks of the Celtic Church saw themselves. 'A striding boar on coins embodies the striving for (royal) power, as does the stealing or hunting of boar described in Celtic literature. Boars that kill snakes possibly represent cults in competition with one another' (Heinz, 1999 p.63). The boar could represent the Roman Church and could be intending to kill the snakes wound round the Tree, seeing them as the embodiment of Satan as described in the book of Genesis. The heart of the matter is the tree as shown by the shape of the branches which could represent the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The snakes appear interested in the soldier and one is the same colour as his cloak. Perhaps this represents that true knowledge, that of gnosis and the union of opposites denied by the organised Roman church is available to him. Both sides are facing each other and could be preparing for battle. The fate of the world is in their hands as shown by the roots of the tree encompassing the blue green globe which represents the Earth. The dogs are reminiscent of Cerberus, the 'Hound of Hades' that guarded the Underworld, and as yet they are sleeping, awaiting the outcome of the battle. That this is a battle for the imagination and the imaginal is shown by the Sun and Moon both in the sky at the same time.

The tropological (and perhaps anagogic) level, this image expresses what is at stake for me in this enquiry and goes beyond an interpretation of the image into life events. During the presentation day of this project there was chance remark by one of the audience before I presented. A mild criticism of Christianity and organised religion - a generally 'fashionable' view which was met with general agreement. It was one which I myself have expressed on many occasions. But this time I felt hurt by it. Not offended or upset but hurt. In that moment I realised how much I have come to identify with the Celtic monks and to admire their incredible devotion. This image has become my small homage to them and their amazing and unadulterated love of God. When I look at the image with these eyes all I see is the heart and in seeking out a purer type of faith, I have been presented with it almost without realising. In what now seems an obvious thing to say, it doesn't come from church organisation, or dogma or ritual. It genuinely is in a way of being (as expressed by Anderson, (Anderson and Braud, 2011). The Celtic Church and the Roman Church had fundamentally different ways of being in the world. On the surface the Celtic way can be describes as 'contemplative' and 'ascetic' but this doesn't encompass the pure happiness that rings out through their art. Chadwick describes this as 'the personal expression of spiritual happiness' which speaks 'with an urgency and beauty against which there is no appeal'. Chadwick (1960, p. 161). So, personally, out of respect for

the monks, I've released my grudge against Catholicism knowing that my spiritual wellbeing is in my own hands, just as it was for the monks, who played by the rules but were also free. I suppose, in some strange way I was 'inspired' by doing the art work in the old sense of the word - receiving 'the breath of God'. It was very unexpected.



*Tree of Life in a Pot (in honour of George Bain)*

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