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ARTICLE

An Assessment of Contemporary British New Monasticism Framed by the Missional Spirituality of the Celtic *Peregrini*

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Abstract

From the sixth century, Celtic *peregrini* (wandering scholars) emerged from Britain and Ireland to establish monastic centres for mission and evangelism. British New Monastic expression would no doubt benefit from increased adoption of their distinctive monastic practices.

These practices include the Celtic understanding of the sacramental universe – all creation steeped in the presence of God – all pointing towards the ultimate glory of his kingdom. In risky living they undertook both physical and inner spiritual journeys. They emerged from monastic schools and long periods of seasonal formation. They embraced rhythms of ebb and flow, searching for silence and solitude, to first breathe in the Holy Spirit, before enthusiastically embarking on evangelism. They drew boundaries – encircling the sacred core, whilst keeping out distractions. They developed frameworks of daily prayer and Scripture reading, based on the Psalmody, intentionally building scaffolding – *Rules of Life* and vows, constantly refocussing themselves on their ultimate goal of prayer without ceasing.

Keywords: Celtic, Spirituality, *Peregrini,* Monasticism, Mission

1 Introduction

Ray Simpson, in a short but significant book, defined five modern waves of New Monastic innovation and experiment: an initial wave in the 1930s and 1940s following the horror of the World Wars; a second wave, in response to "the moral permissiveness and material prosperity" of the swinging 1960s and 1970s; the third and fourth waves in the 1990s; and a fresh wave in the 2000s (Simpson 2009a: 11–40). Within these episodes, four New Monastic expressions were formed in Britain which claim at least partial missional roots in the spirituality of the Celtic saints and *peregrini,*

namely: the *Iona Community*, the *Community of Aidan and Hilda,* the *Northumbria Community* and the *24-7 Prayer* movement. Yet what was the spirituality of the original Celtic saints and *peregrini* and how authentic are these modern missional claims to be Celtic?

2 Spirituality of the Celtic *Peregrini*

The 1980–90s resurgence and euphoria around Celtic spirituality has led to a number of authors questioning the authenticity of Celtic Christianity (see Hughes 1981, Simms-Williams 1998). Yet this research and the work of others (see Bradley 2018) has identified a distinctive grouping of spiritual attributes which typify the early Celtic Christians. Their spirituality was essentially monastic, rooted in the experiments in solitude and silence of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. They focused on the contemplative – grounded in the Gospel of St John and the Beatitudes; they prioritised the "heart" over the intellect; to the Celt the universe was sacramental – creation infused with the presence of God; and they emphasized the faith of the individual rather than institutionalized corporate worship – all aspects which appear to be resonating with an increasing audience today. These changes of emphasis, although not defining a distinct religious grouping, were the product of two hundred years of geographic isolation on the fringe of the former Roman Empire.

As the Roman cohorts retreated from Britain and warring pagan tribes filled the vacuum in the early fifth century, some Latin scholars and teachers fled to northern fringes of the empire, taking with them precious manuscripts of St Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible (the *Vulgate*), John Cassian's *Conferences* and *Institutes,* Athanasius's *Life of St Antony* and Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St Martin of Tours*. These monastic teachings struck a chord with the rural Celtic societies with their *túaths* and clan-based structures, much more so than the town-focused, authoritarian diocesan "bishop-priest" system of the Roman Church (Finney 1996: 28). In geographic isolation from Rome between the early sixth and eighth centuries, large Celtic monastic schools developed, from which the Celtic *peregrini* emerged, leaving their homes and native lands, seeking their "places of resurrection", setting up new monastic centres in the heart of essentially pagan lands, from which to conduct mission and evangelism. Most prominent were St Columba, of Irish aristocracy, who founded a Celtic monastic centre on Iona in 563, and St Columbanus who undertook his *peregrinatio* journey across Europe from *c.*590, establishing Celtic monastic schools at Luxeuil in France, and later Bobbio in northern Italy. In Great Britain it was largely the monks of Iona – and from 635, those of St Aidan from Lindisfarne – who initiated the evangelism of most of northern and central Britain, even as St Augustine of the Roman Church arrived in Kent in 597 (Finney 1996: 21–33).

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But what was the spirituality of the Celtic *peregrini,* and what can we learn from them about mission and evangelism for today? Before it's possible to address this question, it's important to acknowledge that the study of Celtic Christianity is problematic – there are a number of issues to consider. First, the spirituality of the Celtic Christians was diverse, linked to strong inspirational leaders, rather than a centralized co-ordinated tradition. Secondly, few original manuscripts have survived – not only was there a scarcity of original material, but many documents were destroyed during the Viking raids, and no doubt by the Roman Church following their "victory" at the Synod of Whitby in 664. Thirdly, many of the manuscripts written about the Celtic saints were in the form of *Vitae* or *Lives of the Saints* – a genre that was not necessarily historically accurate (Gougaud 1992: 52–6). This hagiographic literature was largely written in the high medieval period, between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries, more than four to six hundred years after the individual saints lived (Sellner 2006: 23). Most of these documents were compiled by eager clerics with the agenda of promoting their chosen patron saints to give authority to their diocese, to justify prominence and to attract lucrative pilgrims. Fourthly, in a more recent phenomenon, the spirituality of the Celtic saints has often been romanticized and even highjacked by contemporary agendas: those of the New Age movement, by elements promoting mindfulness and well-being, and the eco-bandwagon (Bradley 2018: 3–26).

In order to uncover authentic aspects of Celtic spirituality it is necessary to "look through" these distortions, by focusing on the original texts (see Bradley 2018: 25–39) and attempting to minimize the medieval hagiographic and later embellishments. Thus, this study has focused on three Celtic saints: St Columbanus for whom there are a number of documents written in his own hand, as well as a *Life* penned by the Bobbio monk Jonas, one or two years after his death (Munro 1993); St Columba whose poems and a *Rule* survived, but most of what we know about him comes from the *Life of St Columba* by Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona (Sharpe 1995), using material compiled shortly after Columba's death; St Aidan whose only source is the Venerable Bede in his classic *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, published in 731 (McClure and Collins 1994).

This study also seeks to see beyond the counter-cultural aspects of the Celtic Christianity itself: the over-emphasis on martyrdom, their sometimes harsh asceticism and their penchant for penance. Although these aspects undoubtedly helped shape Celtic spirituality, they were largely a product of their times.

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The more helpful spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini* fall into two broad groups: those which were more distinctively Celtic, and practices held in common with other monastic movements.

2.1 Spiritual Attributes of the Celtic *Peregrini*

2.1.1 Sacramental Universe and the Presence of God

Distinctive to the Celtic *peregrini* was an intense sense of God's omnipresence. For the Celts, humankind lives in a sacramental universe. According to Arthur Allchin, the Celts believed, "The world is the place of God's presence … without Him there is no world" (Allchin 1997: 11). The Celtic *peregrini* saw God as incarnate in the world: God ever-present amongst them: God sustaining and caring for his creation (Bradley 2018: 90–4). As Bishop Tírechán put it, in his *Collectanea,* in *c.*690:

> *God is above the heavens; and He is in the heavens; and He is beneath the heavens … He inspires all things, He gives life to all things, He stands above all things, and He stands beneath all things. (Bieler 1979: 122–67)*

The Celts saw creation as a sacrament, "a mechanism of imparting the divine grace of God" (O'Loughlin 2000: 46–7). The beauty and order of creation to the Celt was an invitation to "a pilgrimage of discovering the love that God has implanted in creation, and which beckons us beyond it", each flower and each creature being "the music of many tiny whispering instruments woven into the harmony of a divine orchestra", each element with its part to play, all treasured and all valued (O'Loughlin 2000: 152–3).

Although we are sometimes aware of the presence of God in our contemporary world, the main difference was the intensity of belief shown by the Celtic *peregrini*. Perhaps in recapturing some of this intensity today, a renewed sense of the presence of God will bring increased accountability towards our neighbour, and a greater sense of ownership of our fragile planet?

2.1.2 Risky Living – Peregrinatio

The Celtic *peregrini* took this invitation of pilgrimage to discover God's love, very seriously. More than pilgrimage, they left their homes, totally abandoning their kith and kin, with no intention of returning, seeking their "places of resurrection" – their eternal resting places (Lehane 2005: 111). Following God's call, they pushed off in their coracles into the unknown. On the eve of his epic – perhaps allegorical – voyage from Ireland into the Atlantic Ocean as a Celtic *peregrinus,* St Brendan the Navigator questioned:

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Shall I abandon, O King of Mysteries, the soft comforts of home?
Shall I turn my back on my native land, and my face towards the sea?
Shall I put myself wholly at the mercy of God, without silver, without a horse, without fame and honour?
Shall I throw myself wholly on the King of Kings, without sword and shield, without food and drink, without bed to lie on?
Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land, placing myself under Christ's yoke?
Shall I pour out my heart to Him, confessing my manifold sins and begging forgiveness, tears streaming down my cheeks?
Shall I leave the prints of my knees on the sandy beach, a record of my final prayer in my native land?
Shall I then suffer every kind of wound that the sea can inflict?
Shall I take my tiny coracle across the wide, sparkling ocean?
O King of the Glorious Heaven, shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?
O Christ, will you help me on the wild waves?
(Navigatio Sancti Brendani, trans. van de Weyer 1990: 57–8)

The Celts believed that this call to risky living entailed both a physical and an internal journey. The inner spiritual path also requiring us to leave the familiar and comfortable behind as they followed God's call:

The path I walk, Christ walks it. May the land in which I am be without sorrow. May the Trinity protect me wherever I stay, Father, Son and Holy Spirit … May every path before me be smooth, man, woman and child welcome me. A truly good journey! Well does the fair Lord show us a course, a path. (Attributed to St Columba, translation in Davies and Bowie 1995: 37–8)

2.1.3 Seasonal Formation

One of the most remarkable features of Celtic Christianity, often understated, was the seismic cultural shift in the early sixth century, from the entirely oral Celtic tradition to a culture that embraced the written word and classical learning (Graham 2020: 15–29). Focusing on Ireland, "Not only was Latin brought to a land that had never been occupied by the Romans, but also Greek and Classic scholarship" (Meyer, 1913, p1). According to John Healy:

The monastic schools of Ireland had their roots in the life and works of John Cassian who set-up the first monastic schools in Europe [at Lérins and Marseille] between the years 415 and 420. (Healy 1912: 190)

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Perhaps the most successful Celtic monastic school of the period was located at Clonard on the banks of the Boyne, on the busy boundary road between Leinster and Meath. It was here that St Finnian of Clonard, nicknamed the "tutor of the saints of Erin", trained the "twelve apostles of Ireland" including St Columba and St Brendan: "Before three thousand scholars he, their humble master, meekly stood; his mind a mighty stream that poured for all, its fertilising flood" (Healy 1912: 204). It was at these great monastic schools that the Celtic *peregrini* undertook their spiritual seasonal formation before dispersing on their missional journeys of evangelism (Hale 1976: 177).

2.1.4 Ebb and Flow

Following the example of Jesus (Mk. 1.12-13; Mk. 6.46), the Celtic *peregrini* retreated regularly during their ministry, mirroring the metronomic rhythm of the seasons, and the ebb and flow of the tides – to find silence and solitude – a quiet place to pray. As St Columba taught, they linked "sacrament with service, altar with hearth, and worship with work" (Simpson 2004: 82). St Columbanus frequently retired to a secluded cave in the densely forested Vosges Mountains (Munro 1993: 30; Lack 2000: 64–7). St Aidan, and later St Cuthbert, retreated to the remote Farne Islands, south of Lindisfarne (McClure and Collins 1994: 135), seeking solitude to be alone and refreshed by God, "before launching back to preach, or to organise". Escape for silence and solitude were regular parts of the Celtic *peregrini*'s spiritual diet, to enable them to repeatedly breathe in God's Holy Spirit of power through prayer and contemplation, before breathing out God's love in evangelism, hospitality and service (Freeman and Greig 2007: 97–8).

2.1.5 Boundaries – Vallum

Celtic monastic centres were traditionally surrounded by a ditch or *vallum*, designed practically, to keep wild animals out and domestic animals in, but spiritually, to delineate the boundaries of a sacred space (Dunn 2003: 177). The Columban tradition saw the *vallum* as enclosing "places of spiritual experience – glimpses of paradise on earth" (Walker 1957: 144–7). Places where the values of the Kingdom of Heaven were daily reinforced; places of sanctuary for those fleeing from violence and aggression; places of earthly community but with "radically other-worldly values" (Bradley 2000: 18–19). As Philip Sheldrake put it, the *vallum* surrounded the Celtic monastery where "the privileges of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, received from God but lost in the Fall, were reclaimed" (Sheldrake 1995: 39).

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2.2 Common Monastic Spiritual Practices

2.2.1 Frameworks – Daily Rhythms of Prayer and Scripture

To constantly remind themselves of their heavenly orientation and of the ways of God, maintaining a daily framework of regular prayer and Scriptural reading was vitally important (Stokes 2007 (1877): 123). A life of simplicity and self-control (McClure and Collins 1994: 116–18), with balance and rhythm in life and worship, were central – "leaving room for both awe and intimacy, silence and celebration, relevance and transcendence, order and spontaneity" (Bradley 2000: 152). Mirroring the Desert tradition before them, the majority of monastics, including the Celts, used Psalmody as the bedrock of their daily devotion (Bradley 2000: 138). Alongside daily worship, the Celtic *peregrini* learnt the Psalms as well as the Gospels by heart (McClure and Collins 1994: 117), with constant recital of the "three fifties" (Bradley 2021: 74), as they journeyed in their persistent endeavour to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5.17). Worship and prayer were balanced with the discipline of hard manual labour and sacred reading. Long before the printing press, the Celts developed *scriptoria*, becoming renowned for their knowledge of Latin and the creation of the great illuminated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells* and priceless renditions of the Vulgate Bible (James 1996: 70; Herbert 1996).

2.2.2 Scaffolding – Shared Values, Vows and Rules of Life

The Celtic *peregrini* were bound by shared values, life-long vows and *Rules of Life* – important scaffolding of monastic cohesion and unity (Bradley 2000: 54). For the first ten to twenty years of their lives, the Celtic saints lived in static cenobitic settings, studying under obedience in a balanced rhythm of sustainable prayer, observing their *Rule* and obeying their abbot. But some, following their call to *peregrinatio*, ventured forth into the unknown, seeking to maintain this same rhythm and scaffolding of vow and *Rule*, as they sought to walk more deeply with God. Despite their journeying, they were continually drawn back to their interior space of prayer and sanctuary.

3 New Monastic Expressions

In Great Britain today, ordinary people are seeking more holistic expressions of culture and spirituality outside established Church structures, is well documented (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The prevailing "Institutional Church" has largely been side-lined – viewed as "a bureaucratic, outdated culture" (Simpson 2004: 37–41). In the typical pithy summary of Dr George MacLeod, "the trouble with the Church these days is that no one any longer thinks it's worth persecuting" (Shanks 1999: 31). Yet interest in spirituality is on the increase, with contemporary spiritual searchers

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looking for anchors outside today's Church and moving towards new expressions of spirituality. The great Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer predicted such interest in a letter to his brother Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer in 1935:

> *The restoration of the Church will surely come from a sort of new monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7) in the following of Christ. I believe it is now time to call people to this. (Kelly and Burton-Nelson 1995: 424)*

As Scottish, Celtic academic Ian Bradley comments:

> *How do we begin to keep in time with the deep pulsations of Eternity and establish "Colonies of Heaven" in a society that is profoundly earthborn, materialistic and secular? One way is by establishing communities which embrace many of the disciplines of monasticism…a spirituality found in the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monasteries. (Bradley 2000: 44–5)*

A number of these new monastic-oriented experiments claiming to be Celtic have emerged, but how true are they to the spirituality of the early Celts?

3.1 The Iona Community

The small rocky island of Iona in the Scottish Hebrides – described by George MacLeod as a "thin place" – is the spiritual home of the Iona Community (Ferguson 1998). From the first Christian community established on Iona by the Irish *peregrinus* St Columba in 563, the island has been a spiritual magnet (Marshall 2014: 27). Yet according to Norman Shanks, the Iona Community was not explicitly initiated to reflect "the patterns and priorities of the Celtic Church" (Shanks 1999: 150). The Iona Cathedral Trust, set up by George Campbell, Eighth Duke of Argyll, in 1899, had a choice to make in 1935. Against a fully-funded offer to restore the Iona Abbey ruins and establish a Celtic College – from a group of Highland emigrants of the American Iona Society – the Trust chose the initially unfunded, local option proposed by Glasgow Church of Scotland Presbyterian Minister Dr George MacLeod (Marshall 2014: 135–43). MacLeod's vision was to restore the Abbey ruins as "a retreat centre for worship, meditation, study, and instruction", by conducting a social experiment of combining equal numbers of unemployed working-class tradesmen with young largely middle-class Church of Scotland ministers and ordinands (Marshall 2014: 140). MacLeod's proposal won the day because of his distinguished Scottish military and aristocratic lineage, and because the experiment was essentially a repeat of what MacLeod had already achieved a few years earlier in a similar social endeavour at Fingleton Mill, near Glasgow (Ferguson 1998: 50–2). Thus, the Iona Community,

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founded by MacLeod, commenced rebuilding activities in 1938 and largely completed the Abbey restoration by 1967 (Shanks 1999: 44; Morton 1977; Muir 2011). MacLeod, an ex-World War I war-hero turned pacifist, ran an autocratic, quasi-military all male group on Iona, but had remarkable success in returning more experienced and empathetic Church of Scotland ministers to rejuvenate the slums of Glasgow and the Church in Scotland more broadly. With the Abbey restored and his elevation to the peerage in 1967, the Very Revd Lord MacLeod of Fuinary stepped down from his leadership role of the Community (Ferguson 1998: 100). Some saw MacLeod as a latter-day reincarnation of St Columba; each was am aristocratic individual with connections to royalty; each had commanding charisma and was hugely autocratic; both personalities combined stubborn pride with deep humility and an almost child-like simplicity and enthusiasm; and both were hugely successful in their undertakings (Bradley 2000: 45–6). Unlike the Celtic *peregrinus* in St Columba, MacLeod's motives were almost entirely aimed at social justice and the advancement of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland (Shanks 1999: 154–77). Some critics, perhaps rather unfairly, referred to MacLeod's achievement as "I own a community", instead of as founder of the Community (Ferguson 1998: 63).

Under the new leadership of Ian Reid, the Iona Community rapidly became ecumenical and more diverse (Marshall 2014: 162). The first female Community member, Dr Nancy Brash, was accepted in 1969, and the first Roman Catholic in 1976 (Ferguson 1998: 112, 117). With the Community's main centre in Glasgow and a further youth camp at Camas on the Isle of Mull, the key spiritual focus remains Iona Abbey, with a small transient core of devotees, committing to a true Celtic-style rhythm of daily scriptural reading and prayer (Shanks 1999: 66–70). As the Community expanded and the majority of adherents dispersed, the need for statements of common values and shared beliefs became acute (Galloway 2010: 19–21). Rather than follow the format of their Celtic forebears, a new five-principled Community Rule of Life was developed. To the vows of a regular practice of devotion and meetings, were added accountability for time and money, and later, social and political advocacy, environmental justice and peace (Galloway 2010: 18–19; Marshall 2014: 162–3).

The Community's focus on the incarnation and the presence of God in the world is captured in MacLeod's view of the birth of Jesus Christ as "an inherent explosion [of God] into matter, setting up a chain reaction of igniting love". The importance of the incarnation to the Community is reflected in the dramatic statue positioned at the centre of the Iona Abbey cloister, the *Descent of the Spirit* by Jacob Lipchitz, compatible with Celtic belief – Christ born with energy and mystery (Shanks 1999: 2–3).

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Rather than fully embodying Celtic Christianity, the present-day Iona Community, with its distinctly inclusive and liberal theology (Bradley 2000: 51), is regarded more as a social justice movement, in keeping with its slogan: "spirituality is where prayer and politics meet" (Shanks 1999: 154; Ferguson 1998: 183). The typical Iona Community member has a strong sense of advocacy and justice, with "a placard in every corner" in readiness to join demonstrations for world peace, social justice, and to demand action on climate change (Shanks 1999: 156).

3.2 The Community of Aidan and Hilda

The Community of Aidan and Hilda began as an attempt at a holistic renewal of the religious life of the Church, combining God-given strands of Christianity to heal the land and renew the earth. As New Monastics they aimed "to stay close to the divine inner compass while navigating the flux of modern life" based on the monastic principles of simplicity, purity and obedience, elaborated in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5). The movement is charismatic, with its emphasis on spirituality and mission, focusing on how the characteristically Celtic themes of monastic discipline and Soul Friendship can be applied to enrich the life and mission of the contemporary Church (Bradley 2000: 51–2). The focus is ecumenical, and like the Celtic *peregrini*, they espouse a regular rhythm of prayer and study: a simple lifestyle, concern for creation-care, mission and justice, and seeking "to weave together the separate strands of Christianity to bring healing to fragmented people, communities and lands". The Community seeks to "research the first Celtic mission", combining the depth of the ancient monastic traditions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers and the Celts with today's culture (Simpson 2009a: 25). The aim is to restore the memory and experience of this past, with a view to resourcing its members and churches with new "Celtic" worship materials, and to conduct study programmes and retreats. The target of their worship is "to bridge the gap between formal church liturgies and creationist practices inspired by nature … to rediscover our Christian roots" in a worship-style that reflects the "rhythm of creation" and the "flow of human life" (Simpson 2004: 30–3). From its launch by six individuals, including Ray Simpson, Russ Parker and Michael Mitton in 1994, a small Community group has followed a regular rhythm of morning and evening prayer at retreat centres on Lindisfarne (Simpson 2014: 45-8). The Community's Rule – the "Way of Life" – contains "Three Life-giving Principles" and "Ten Elements of the Way" – the Waymarks – all broadly compatible with the spiritual principles of the Celtic *peregrini* (Simpson 2014: 19–27; Simpson 2009b). The ten Waymarks are based on the broad monastic principles of poverty, chastity and obedience, to which they add lifelong learning, particularly focused on the Celtic traditions; following a spiritual journey with a Soul Friend; a rhythm of prayer, work and rest; spiritual protection; simplicity of lifestyle; creation care; healing ministry; openness to God's spirit; unity and community; and mission (Bradley 2000: 51). The

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importance of a Soul Friend to the Community has a strong biblical endorsement (Ecclesiasticus 6.14-17; Prov. 18.24), inherited from the Desert tradition (Ramfos 2000: 215–17), is a prominent Celtic theme (McClure and Collins 1994: 211; Duke 1932: 130) and is one of the more popular practices in the current revival of enthusiasm for Celtic Christianity (Bradley 2000: 108–10; Simpson 1999; Sellner 2002).

3.3 The Northumbria Community

The Northumbria Community's spirituality is predominantly contemplative, focusing on the inner life, silently listening for God's call to action – and is therefore the closest modern expression of authentic Celtic Christianity. The Community emerged from an exploration of a new inner monasticism of the heart, drawing on ancient monastic forms. Its roots lie in the history and heritage of Celtic Northumbria, the saints and scholars of Ireland and the wisdom tradition of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, all played out in the context of daily life. The Community does not call itself "Celtic", mainly because, in their view, the word "Celtic" has become "so misunderstood, misrepresented and misused by popularism", as Trevor Miller, a former leader of the Northumbria Community put it – the Community is not a "trendy fad", nor does it sign up to the "Disneyland Celtic spirituality" that "romanticises the Saints with ridiculous nostalgia" (Miller, n.d.). Following the Celtic *peregrini* as they wandered and wondered for the love of Christ, the Community originated with a call to "risky living" (Miller 2004: 15), a commitment "to be willing to walk in the paradox of life's uncertainties," not knowing where this journey may lead. The specific call was to live three questions: "How then shall we live?" (Ezek. 33.10b), "Who is it that we seek?" (Jn 18.7), and "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137.4; Miller 2003: 3–4). Praying through these three questions led to the development of the Northumbria Community's Rule of Life, focusing on *availability* and *vulnerability,* providing "an external spiritual scaffolding for an interior journey, both as 'sign posts' and as 'banister railings,' both marker and guideline on our way to God" (Miller 2004: 6–7). The Rule emphasizes being *available* to God, to each other and to mission, whilst remaining *vulnerable* to being taught; accountable; to asking the hard questions; making relationships the priority; and living in "a church without walls" (Lings 2006: 21). The concepts of *availability*, being available to follow God's call, and *vulnerability* to risky exposure, were very much components of the Celtic *peregrini's* call in their search for God. Following the natural rhythm of the ebb and flood tides on the island of Lindisfarne, the Community are happy both "when the tide is in and when the tide is out" (Miller, n.d.), either "at home in the cell" on the inner journey of seeking God in the heart, or "abroad in the coracle" in their availability to others by serving God through mission and evangelism. The Community is best known for its prayer book, now a double tome of daily devotion and worship liturgy, based mainly on the Celtic tradition (Northumbria Community 2015a&b).

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3.4 24-7 Prayer and Boiler Rooms

Regarding the more recent "24-7 Prayer", "Boiler Room" and Order of the Mustard Seed movements, although claiming to be "inspired by the ancient Celtic Christian communities that combined prayer and mission" and in "looking to the Celtic Saints for ideas and a framework for doing mission and ministry in our time" (Freeman and Greig 2007: 16–18; Greig and Roberts 2015; Greig 2004; Anderson 2020), they are essentially monastic and not overtly Celtic. They certainly include the monastic principles of a framework of daily prayer and scriptural reading and have developed their own scaffolding of shared values and vows. They also embrace the ebb and flow of ministry, ensuring focused times of prayer interspersed with the upward and outward practices of creativity, hospitality, learning, mission and justice.

4 Conclusions

The enormous challenge for the dispersed expressions of the modern New Monastics is how to maintain and enhance spiritual discipline amongst the many distractions of today's world. Over history, most forms of monasticism have evolved from solitary eremitic and semi-eremitic forms, towards communities of enclosed cenobitic monks and nuns – for good reason. If the dispersed New Monastic experiments are to be sustainable, they would do well not only to embrace the more usual monastic practices, but also to adopt some of the distinctive spiritual tools of the Celtic *peregrini*.

Set against the defined spiritual attributes of the Celtic *peregrini*, the four most "Celtic-like" movements – the Iona Community, the Community of Aidan and Hilda, the Northumbria Community and 24-7 Prayer – show variable take-up. All four have sensibly minimized the "dated" attributes of Celtic spirituality (martyrdom, asceticism and penance) and emphasized the more positive aspects.

Although all four communities recognize the importance of the presence of God in their devotion and worship, it is the contemplative Northumbria Community which is more closely aligned to the Celtic monastic way. The concern for creation-care in both the Community of Aidan and Hilda and the Iona Community has its roots in the Celtic view of creation as a forebear of the glory of God to come. However, all New Monastic forms would benefit from the increased intensity of the Celtic expression, their emphasis on God's daily blessings in ordinary life, as well as their strong belief in the sacramental universe. The recognition of God within all aspects of creation today will no doubt bring much needed enhanced accountability for the global environment.

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The risky living of the Celtic *peregrini* is best captured by the Northumbria Community's Rule of Availability and Vulnerability, implying a readiness to spring forth into travel and action in response to God's call. The move to mission and lifelong adventure and discovery in God has been adopted by the Iona Community, as evidenced by their commitment to go overseas to address the poverty gap in the developing world; for example, the inequality of wealth and lifestyle between Africa and the West, with their concern and mission in Malawi (then Nyasaland) in the 1950s and 1960s (Ferguson 1998: 83–6). As followers of the Son of Man we, like the Celtic saints, should hold a strengthening compassion for our neighbour, as we journey as "strangers" through this world (Lk. 9.58).

The seasonal formation of regular, extended periods of spiritual formation and learning are implied by most New Monastic forms, often expressed in the need for continual lifelong learning and openness to listen for God's call.

The need for ebb and flow, balancing silence and solitude with activity, is promoted particularly by the Northumbria Community and the 24-7 Prayer movement. Yet, finding time for silence and solitude is becoming increasingly difficult in our impatient, digital world. We should follow the example of Jesus in His constant search for quiet places to be with his Father (Mt. 6.6), to recharge our spiritual batteries. The tendency in New Monasticism towards minimizing boundaries provides a challenge for maintaining regular spiritual discipline in an increasingly contrarian world.

Following more general monastic practices, the importance of regular, personal and corporate frameworks of daily prayer and scriptural reading are enthusiastically emphasized by all, with most publishing extensive liturgies both in the use of words and (particularly from the Iona Community) in song, poetry and creativity.

Although the scaffolding of shared beliefs, vows and Rules of Life are still considered important today, for the dispersed New Monastic expressions, the trend is towards loosening these formalities, with less demanding Rules and a drift away from lifelong commitments, towards annual reassurances and accountability. And yet, God sees our motives and blesses our intentions, suggesting that deep inner commitment is necessary. The importance of Soul Friendship – the Celtic practice of *Aram Cara* (O'Donohue 1997: 35) – as emphasized by the Community of Aidan and Hilda, is closely aligned with the increasing popular practice of Spiritual Direction, or Spiritual Accompaniment – another effective way of encouraging spiritual discipline.

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For the contemporary expressions of New Monasticism to regain the genuine intensity of the Celtic saints and *peregrini*, perhaps increased focus is needed on the original spiritual attributes of our forebears, the Celtic Christians.

About the Author

The author presents these findings from a dissertation submitted to complete an MA in *Christian Spirituality* at Sarum College, Salisbury – accredited by the University of Winchester. The thesis was entitled: "Critically Assess the Impact of the Spirituality of the Celtic *Peregrini* on Expressions of Contemporary Christian Practice" and was submitted in December 2022, by Peter Ruxton. Contact: peter.ruxton@gmail.com

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