

From pagan to Christian in the 7th century Irish hagiography

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The New Catholic Encyclopedia defines conversion as ‘turning towards God and away from sin’. This definition embodies the two dimensions that can be given to the term. First it can mean the process of change from one religious, or non-religious, allegiance to another, as in the case of pagans being converted into Christianity. This is intrinsically linked to the second meaning, which is a conversion from one moral path to another.¹ Conversion can be seen as a continuous process starting at baptism and leading towards perfection and salvation. Therefore in this paper I will be considering a single process that includes both the dimension of a conversion from paganism to Christianity and the aspect of moral change towards perfection. The latter could also be labelled as Christianisation, referring to ‘the degree to which specifically Christian teachings and practices shaped the cultural milieu of medieval folk both high and low’ as it has been defined by John Van Engen.² Baptism alone does not automatically lead to the Christianisation of a society. In order to transform the customary culture and moral landscape with which the people are surrounded, further measures such as rituals and juridical structures are required to ensure the Christian profession and practice of the people.³

¹ See T. O’Loughlin: Muirchú’s theology of conversion in his *Vita Patricii*, p. 127–128. In *Celts and Christians. New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. M. Aherton, Cardiff 2002, p. 124–145 and Ian Wood: *The Missionary Life. Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400–1050*, Harlow 2001, p. 3.

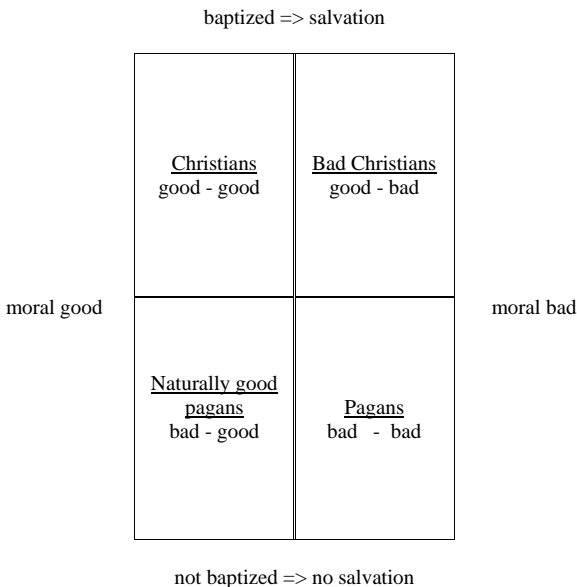
² J. Van Engen: The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem, p. 537. *The American Historical Review* 91, 1986.

³ See J. Van Engen: The Christian Middle Ages, p. 541–542.

Thomas O'Loughlin has interpreted Muichú's Life of St. Patrick as a work that reveals the author's theological ideas about conversion and answers the questions of how an individual and a nation become Christian.⁴ Following O'Loughlin's reasoning I will take the idea further and interpret Tírechán's work on saint Patrick as a text dealing with the foundation of an organized church in Ireland, while the earliest Lives of saints Brigit and Columba can be read as sources revealing what it means to live a good Christian life and thus what an ideal Christian society entails. When we read the earliest Irish saints' Lives as a body like this, we are presented with the salvation history of the Irish people as it was understood by four 7th century authors whose styles and aims differed somewhat, but who nevertheless shared the same cultural background and Christian learning.

Using these ideas as a basis I will consider in this paper the formation of an image of Ireland as a Christian society as it is presented in the earliest Irish hagiographical works. I will study how the seventh century authors imagined the religious history of their country and how they understood the process of Christianisation and therefore the theology of salvation. I will concentrate on the theological borders between the Christians and pagans on one hand, and the good and bad men on the other. These borders can be understood as a graph with four fields separated by two crossing axis, the horizontal one marking the level of moral goodness and the vertical one referring to baptism and thus to the process of salvation between the polar poles of heaven and hell (see graph below). Thus we can imagine the good Christians occupying the positive position in both axis, that is being good in the moral sense and good from the viewpoint of salvation history. The opposite position is occupied by the bad pagans whose moral standing and status in salvation history are negative. The remaining two positions are occupied by the bad Christians, who are Christians in name but not in their lifestyle, and the naturally good pagans, who are like Christians in their lifestyle but not in name. The bad Christians are technically qualified for heaven since they are baptised, but it is their immoral lifestyle that eventually disqualifies them. The naturally good pagans, on the contrary, are disqualified from heaven because they lack baptism although their lifestyle is morally good. The graph naturally simplifies things, but it can still be used as a useful tool that clearly demonstrates us the differences in focus between the four sources and the role of moral qualities beside baptism in the salvation history.

⁴ See O'Loughlin: Muirchú's theology of conversion.



I will begin by considering the transformation of the society and individuals from pagans into Christians, and then proceed to consider the further transformation of the society towards an ideal Christian society ruled by the Christian morals and the church. This way we can see how the borders between the pagan and the Christian on one hand and good and bad on the other overlap and meet in the imagined salvation history of the Irish nation as it is presented by the seventh century Irish hagiographers. The Irish authors are occupied with the Irish history when writing about their own saints, but their ideas of moral judgement and salvation can be projected also to other nations outside Ireland, and thus they can be interpreted as reflecting their theological understanding of salvation in general.

Muirchú portrays Patrick’s work in Ireland in the framework of the apostolic mission among the gentiles begun in the Bible. He does not only produce verbal echoes of Matthew 4.19 and Mark 1.17, where Christ commands the apostles to follow him so that he can make them into fishers of men, and of the great commission in Matthew 28.19, but he also echoes Patrick himself who refers to the same biblical maxims when writ-

ing about his own work in Ireland.⁵ Thus both Patrick and his biographer Muirchú share the same vision of seeing the conversion of the Irish as a continuation and fulfillment of the apostolic mission. The goal of this mission is to bring all the peoples to the knowledge of God and thus to bring salvation to all the nations.

When writing about his pre-Christian ancestors Muirchú represents them as a wild and cruel people who nevertheless were a great nation and who had a great empire, the equal of any biblical precedent. When referring to their conversion he employs two different but related approaches. The first is to relate the individual conversions of exemplary pagans, which then function as models for the second phase, the transformation of the whole Irish nation. Both approaches are employed in the story of Patrick's victory at Easter which functions as the climax of Muirchú's work and leads to beginning of the conversion of the whole of Ireland (Muirchú I 15–21). In this story king Lóegaire functions at the individual level as the symbol of the transformation of the whole nation.

Another profound transformation and a paradigm of conversion is provided by the exemplary pagan MacCuill (Muirchú I 23). He is an especially fierce and wicked pagan whose thoughts are evil, his deeds wicked, his spirit bitter, his temper inclined to anger, and so on. MacCuill plans to trick the saint in order to test whether his God really is powerful, but after witnessing a miracle wrought by the saint he believes and is baptised. However, MacCuill's transformation is not complete until he does penance for his former sins, which leads him finally to an island, later identified as the Isle of Man, where he becomes a bishop himself. MacCuill is thus transformed from an exemplary pagan into an exemplary Christian, that is a bishop, and by this transformation he demonstrates clearly the movement from one state presented in the graph to another.

⁵ Muirchú I 7...*dicens ei adesse tempus ut ueniret et aeuanguelico rete nationes feras et barbaras ad quas docendas misserat illum Deus ut piscaret...*, and I 22 *Sanctus autem Patricius secundum praeceptum Domini Iesu iens et docens omnes gentes baptizansque eas in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti...* Matt. 4.19 / Mark 1.17...*venite post me et faciam vos fieri piscatores hominum, and Matt. 28.19...euntes ergo docete omnes gentes baptizantes eos in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti...* Confessio 40 *Et iterum dicit per prophetas 'Ecce mitto piscatores et uenatores multos dicit Deus'... admonet et docet dicens 'Euntes ergo nunc docete omnes gentes baptizantes eas in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti...'*

Both MacCuill and king Lóegaire function in the narrative as exemplary wicked pagans who do not initially recognize the saint's power and conform to the new religion he brings. However, they are transformed into Christians by baptism and penance which can be seen as the twin keys to Christian life by which an individual can shed his previous life and choose a higher moral path. The paradigmatic representatives of the category of wicked pagans are, however, the pagan druids who actively oppose the saint and who do not conform but perish instead. They are the exemplary pagans who will never reach heaven although they were given the chance to hear the Gospel and to believe.

Tírechán's message, that Patrick is the founder of the Irish church, is the same as that of Muirchú but the means by which it is conveyed is different. His work can be seen as representing the next step in the process of Christianisation, since his interests are not only in the initial conversion but also in teaching the people and laying down the structures that are needed for the survival of the church in the society.

Tírechán takes care to portray the saint not only baptising people, but also teaching their sons and thus making them into ecclesiastics, and handing over the veil to their daughters in order to transform them into nuns. In this way Patrick is laying a foundation for a Christian society, and not only for a society of Christian laymen, but also for a nation of virgins and monks. Here Tírechán might be echoing Patrick himself for the saint relates in his *Confessio* how the Irish, who previously only had idols, have become a new people and the sons and daughters of kings are transformed into monks and virgins of Christ (*Conf.* 41).

Also Tírechán's Patrick brings the salvation both to the nation and to individuals. At the national level he relates how the unborn children of the Irish called the saint in a vision to come and save them (Tírechán III 15), while the individual salvation is represented for example by Énde son of Amolngid to whom the saint tells that, if he himself will not accompany Énde on his journey home, Énde would not reach his destination alive, nor would he have the everlasting life (Tírechán III 14).

The two remaining works I wish to consider here give us a different perspective on the process of Christianisation of the Irish society. They do not deal much with conversion as such, but instead they help us in understanding what the ideal Christian was like, both at the level of an individ-

ual and of a society. Thus they reveal what the goal was of the process started by conversion and continued with penance.

The underlying theme that runs through the whole *Life of Brigit* written by Cogitosus is charity. Cogitosus presents the saint as the embodiment of the virtue of generosity, which is based on the biblical image of helping Christ as he appears in the guise of the poor and suffering.⁶ Brigit is presented as an exemplary figure who demonstrates attributes, such as charity, chastity, compassion, and modesty, that are fundamentally suitable for all Christians to follow, although the saint's virtues always contain a thaumaturgical element as well. All of Brigit's virtues are based on the compassion she feels towards her fellow men and especially towards those who are suffering. This compassion can be seen as the base on which an ideal Christian society, where every man would feel compassion towards others, would be based. Thus the image of Brigit presented in the *Life* can be seen as an idealized figure of Christian virtue. Naturally all saints are exemplary figures to some extent, but in Brigit's case this aspect of her sainthood is more pronounced since her miraculous deeds are just embellishments to her virtuous deeds, for example when she miraculously produces the goods she donates to the needy. Furthermore, most of her miracles deal mainly with everyday objects, such as food and clothing, and commonplace chores, such as preparing food or herding sheep, that would be familiar to most people. It can be said that Brigit is generous to a saintly extent because her generosity is helped by her miracles, but even lay people could easily imitate the virtue of generosity itself.

The whole *Life* can be read as an illustration of an ideal Christian society where charity and other virtues reign, and wicked men are either punished or converted back to the Lord through repentance. This message is not only expressed by the individual characters in the narrative, but is also confirmed in the last chapter of the work where Cogitosus presents Kildare in his own time as an embodiment of an ideal that is as a church where 'a large congregation of people of varying status, rank and sex, and local origin... prays to the omnipotent Master differing in status, but one in spirit' (Cogitosus 32).

The last of the Irish seventh century hagiographers, Adomnán, presents us repeatedly with images of individuals, good and bad, who embody different characteristics that are seen either as beneficial or unfavourable in the

⁶ Cf. Matt. 25.40.

Christian life. By his examples he illustrates mainly the categories of good and bad Christians, and by narrating stories about these exemplary figures he presents his audience with a clear model for a Christian life. In his ideal society all members would first of all respect the church and especially the saint and his successors. Furthermore, his ideal Christian people would be charitable, just, believing, and merciful, in short they would live their lives according to the Christian principles and give the church its due honour.

Adomnán's account of the saint and the people he encounters is underlined by a clear Christian moral teaching on the consequences of good and bad deeds. He gives several examples of good deeds that are rewarded, such as being generous and respecting the saint's powers, while the wicked people, who scorn the saint and do violent deeds such as killing and plundering, meet horrible punishments. In this worldview based on Christian morals the violent and sudden deaths of the wicked function as a sign of their final punishment in hell, while the ideal death happens in peace at home, surrounded by family and friends. Thus the good men have time to prepare their soul for death which guarantees them a place in heaven. However, not all good people die in such a peaceful way, but some can meet a sudden and violent end just like the martyrs.

Adomnán's vision of the good Christian life is clearly that of a life orientated towards heaven. Saint Columba himself lives a heavenly life while still on earth and therefore he can witness heavenly apparitions such as angels and heavenly light without danger unlike other people. The monks of Columba strive to be like their saint and by being buried in the monastic grounds they expect to be resurrected with him when the Day of Judgement comes. Furthermore, lay people can win a place in heaven by their virtues, such as generosity and righteousness, as is evident in the cases where Columba sees the souls of lay men and women being carried above by angels.

In this paper thus far I have touched upon the subjects of the good and bad Christians and the bad pagans and now I will turn to the remaining category which is the naturally good pagans. In some cases they are pagans who can read the signs and recognize the holiness of the saint (Tírechán III 13, Muirchú I 11) and sometimes they are pagans who are able to learn about God from nature and inquire after him naturally, such as the pagan princess Monesan who is baptized by saint Patrick (Muirchú I 27). The important thing is that all the naturally good pagans in these sources come to be baptized when the saint encounters them. Thus in the salvation his-

tory the naturally good pagans can be seen as representing God's way of preparing the soil for the spread of the Gospel since they can lead the way for the other pagans to follow.

One of the two episodes featuring naturally good pagans in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* demonstrates the principle of the necessity of baptism. The story goes followingly: "Let us make haste," he said to those of the brethren who were with him, 'to meet the holy angles who have come from the heights of heaven to bear away the soul of a heathen man, who has spent his whole life in natural goodness and is now very old. But they must wait till we reach that place, so that we may bring timely baptism to him before he dies" (*Vita Columbae* III 14). From this we can conclude that the natural goodness of the old man is not enough, but baptism is needed in order to enable him to go to heaven.

This same message about the necessity of baptism is confirmed in three separate stories in *Tírechán's* work. In one story a sick pregnant woman is brought to the saint who baptises the unborn child using the waters of the womb as baptismal water. After that the woman dies and is buried near a church, and apparently the child goes with her (*Tírechán* III 44). In another episode *Tírechán* states this idea more explicitly, since there the saint awakens from a grave a huge man, who is baptized so he does not need to return to the painful place where he was before (*Tírechán* III 40). In the next episode the saint encounters a wrongly placed cross at the grave of a pagan. The charioteer of the saint pities the unbaptized pagan and suggests that maybe it would have been good to pour baptismal water over the grave. *Tírechán* comments on this saying that maybe God did not want this man to be saved, since the saint did not answer to his charioteers suggestion (*Tírechán* III 41).

It is clear from all these episodes that the authors took baptism to be a prerequisite for going to heaven, and here they are following biblical commandments, such as John 3.5: 'no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.' The necessity of baptising babies is also made clear in the Penitentials of Finnian (6th century) and Cummean (7th century) where strict penance is imposed on the parents whose child through neglect is not baptised and dies, and on the priest who instead of baptising only blesses a child (Finnian 47, Cummean X.19–20). These crimes are called as homicide and great crime, and they result in the loss of a soul, making clear why baptism was so necessary.

This has been nothing but a short detour to the imaginary salvation history of the Irish. I hope to have demonstrated how narrative texts, like hagiography, can be used to study theological ideas such as salvation. There are still number of topics, such as the role of penance in the Christian life, that I could have studied in more detail, but unfortunately the length of the paper does not allow this.

To return to the dichotomy between pagans and Christians that was the original topic of my paper I can conclude that baptism is the decisive break between the two. However, baptism is only the prerequisite for salvation, but it is not enough on its own. We get to the second decisive border, which is the one of moral judgement dividing those destined to heaven and hell. Besides dividing the pagans and the Christians this border brings along a further division between the nominally Christians who do not lead a Christian lifestyle and the pagans who live naturally like Christians. Neither of these groups can go to heaven unless transformed into good Christians; the first group by penance and the second by baptism. This leaves us with the majority of pagans who need both the baptism and the transformation of a lifestyle brought about by the saint in order to be saved.

When we return to the graph presented at the handout we can see how the four authors fit into it and how they map out the route to heaven. Muirchú and Tírechán are mainly occupied with the two categories of pagans, while Cogitosus demonstrates through the exemplary figure of Brigit what the good Christians are like. Adomnán's vision is the most inclusive of the three, since he gives his audience examples of both the good and bad Christians, while also touching briefly upon the pagans, both naturally good and bad.

By focusing on the theological understanding of the authors about the Christianisation of the Irish nation, albeit presented in a narrative form, we can see that conversion is a process started by baptism and leading towards the ideal Christian society and salvation. Thus conversion signifies at the same time both the conversion to Christianity and into a higher moral path. Both aspects are needed until Irish society is transformed from its former pagan state into an ideal Christian society based on Christian morals. This can be achieved only with the help of God and by following the example of saintly individuals who function as beacons leading others towards the heavenly path. In conclusion we can say that the authors considered in this paper understood the Christianisation of the Irish peo-

ple theologically as transforming a nation of pagans into one of Christians, that is into a society of the baptized, and hopefully in the future, as a result of penance, into one of saints.