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Philipp W. Rosemann

The Holy Well
as a Window
onto Irish Life
– Pre-Christian,
Christian and
Post-Christian
(Part 2)

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The Holy Well as a Window onto Irish Life – Pre-Christian, Christian and Post-Christian (Part 2)*

Philipp W. Rosemann

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HOLY WELLS

After these historical distinctions, it may be permitted to offer some more general theological reflections which abstract from historical differences, attempting to paint a larger picture of the theological interest and significance of holy wells.

(1) The Catholic faith is characterized by a logic of hierarchical mediation – unlike Protestantism, in which the relationship between the individual soul and its Maker is lived in a much more immediate way. This explains a difference that used to be important historically: whereas Catholic lay people used to be discouraged from reading Scripture (because of its inherent difficulty and, thus, the need for guidance from appropriately schooled clergymen), the Reformation embraced the principle of ‘Scripture alone’ (*sola Scriptura*), contributing significantly to the dissemination of Bibles in the vernacular languages. Again, depending on the Protestant denomination, the number of sacraments – material vehicles for the communication of grace – is greatly reduced as post-Reformation churches emphasize the encounter with the Lord through his word.

It is within the typically Catholic logic of mediation that holy wells find their place. At holy wells, the faithful are able to worship the Lord through the mediation of local saints, who lived their lives on the same land as the faithful, leaving a mark of their saintly activities in the landscape itself – in the form of a well that they called up, or a rock that they moved. Blessing oneself with water from this well, or taking a little of it home, ultimately connects the worshipper with God himself, but in a very mediated (and at the same time immediate) fashion. The latter paradox indicates that God cannot be identified with the well water, nor is the well water

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Philipp W. Rosemann is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Maynooth University.

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itself divine; yet through the action of his saint, the Lord is in a very real sense present to the water from the holy well.

(2) A second dimension of the theological significance of holy wells relates to the way in which time is lived in the patterns, that is to say, the rituals and festivities celebrating the consecration of a well by its patron saint. Most of these patterns are held in July or August, which on the one hand appears suitable because the warm summer weather lends itself to pilgrimages, while on the other hand this timing of the patterns indicates that they represent Christianized versions of *Lúnasa*, a Gaelic harvest festival named after the god Lugh.¹ But this is not the main point here. Rather, the patterns exemplify a way of being in time that is sacred or liturgical as opposed to merely chronological.² Most of us, even those of us who consider ourselves practising Catholics, mainly live in chronological time, that is to say, time measured by technological means which is artificially divided into equal units: seconds, minutes, and hours. Such chronological time is perfectly homogeneous, in that the minute marked by 11:35 is not different from the minute identified as 23:35. In terms of natural time, 11:35 belongs to the morning hours, whereas 23:35 already falls into the night; chronological time ignores this crucial difference. We find it 'unnatural' to have to get up at 6:00 a.m. in the morning during the winter because it is still dark outside, but our schedule for the day, which is dictated by chronological time, does not care about our biological clock. Biological time derives its meaning from the cycle of life; chronological time 'is money', as the saying goes: it is – especially nowadays – an economic measurement of productivity.

Liturgical time is the deepest of the three, fullest of meaning. Liturgical time is structured by the recurrent remembrance of central events in salvation history, at the level both of the universal Church (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter ...) and of the local Church (the feasts of St Patrick, St Brigid, St Finian; the pattern day of St Brigid's Well in Mullingar; etc.). This time is not homogeneous: the significance of, say, Lent is radically different from the meaning of Easter or Christmas while the long stretch of 'ordinary time' between Easter and Advent is devoid of any major events in the salvation history of the universal Church. Locally, on the other hand, a pattern day in July or August can be one of the major feast days in the life of a parish. Liturgical time invites us to pattern our lives on the examples provided by the people of

1 See Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1980), p. 43.

2 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin briefly raises this point in his article, 'Revisiting the Holy Well', *Éire-Ireland* 40:1&2 (2005), 11–41 (p. 25). Ó Giolláin's piece offers the best overview of recent scholarly debates on the subject of holy wells.

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Israel, Jesus and his apostles, the saints of the universal Church, and – last but not least – the local saints who brought the faith to our own communities. Like natural time, liturgical time is cyclical, preventing our lives from dissipating into shapelessness; chronological time, by contrast, proceeds in a straight line that extends beyond the horizon, petering out in an unknown future. Chronological time is therefore incapable of anchoring meaning.

(3) As already remarked above, the ritual activities that occurred at holy wells – pattern days in particular – were not always welcomed by the ‘official’ Church. One of the main reasons for this critical attitude had to do with the fact that pattern days typically combined elements of deep piety with worldly excesses. In 1825, Thomas Crofton Croker, famous for his influential collection of *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, shared the following impressions from a visit to the pattern at Gougane Barra, Co. Cork:

The door or opening to the front of the well was so narrow as scarcely to admit two persons at the same time. Within, the well was crowded to excess, probably seven or eight persons, some with their arms, some with their legs thrust down into the water, exhibiting the most disgusting sores and shocking infirmities. When those within came out, their places were as instantly filled by others. Some there were who [*sic*]³ had waited two or three hours before they could obtain access to this ‘healing fount.’ [...] Were this all, I could have beheld the assembly with feelings of devotion mixed with regret at their infatuation and delusion; but drunken men and the most depraved women mingled with those whose ideas of piety brought them to this spot; and a confused uproar of prayers and oaths, of sanctity and blasphemy sounded in the same instant on the ear.⁴

Maria Spilsburg Taylor, an artist contemporary with Crofton Croker, captured the atmosphere of the pattern day at Glendalough in two paintings, one of which is now held in the collections of the National Gallery of Ireland while the other is on display at the National Folklore Collection (University College Dublin).⁵ One may be surprised that in both paintings, the religious significance

3 Probably a misprint for ‘some were there who’.

4 T. Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland, Illustrative of the Scenery, Architectural Remains, and the Manners and Superstitions of the Peasantry* (London: John Murray, 1824), pp. 279–80.

5 The painting in the National Gallery can be viewed at <http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/8759/patrons-day-at-the-seven-churches-glendalough>; the version in the National Folklore Collection is accessible via this link: <http://www.duchas.ie/en/cbceg/12192>.

of the pattern day appears to be overshadowed by merry-making, with plenty of food, games, and performances.

The combination of piety and excess might seem strange and contradictory, as even we in our own day usually consider church-going to be serious business. In reality, however, religious devotion and worldly festivals form two sides of the same coin. In Christian ritual, the people of God come together in worship, praise, and occasionally religious ecstasy, in order to overcome the separation of the community through narrow egoisms and to form one body of Christ. In the festivals that occurred on pattern days, the people experienced themselves as a ‘biological collectivity’⁶ where drinking and fun of all sorts suspended social norms and divisions, dissolving them in laughter. The ritual and the festive sides of the pattern, then, accomplish a twofold liberation from the constraints of the narrow self: from ‘above’ (through spiritual union with God and neighbour) and from ‘below’ (through physical union with a ‘body’ of people).

One can compare the two faces of the patterns with the relationship between carnival and Lent as it is lived in countries like Germany and Brazil. While Lent offers the opportunity to join Christ symbolically in the desert in the struggle against temptation, carnival is a celebration of transgression – an overthrowing of the social order (including the order of the Church) where authority and hierarchy are suspended.⁷

(4) Mortification is another phenomenon associated with patterns that may be difficult to understand in our own time. A recent commentary piece in the *Irish Independent* on the topic of euthanasia declared with great confidence, ‘Contrary to traditional teachings, there is no dignity in suffering’; the writer then went on to express ‘scorn towards those who say there is’.⁸ The pilgrims who still come each year to St Patrick’s Purgatory on Lough Derg think otherwise, as do those who perform barefoot the rounds at wells such as St Gobnait’s in Dunquin, Co. Kerry.⁹ In the past, visitors of holy wells frequently reported the sight of pilgrims circumambulating the wells on their knees, suffering terrible lacerations in the process.¹⁰ In such rituals, the pilgrim symbolically joins Christ on the Cross, for penance and in the hope

6 Ó Giolláin, *Revisiting*, p. 28.

7 The literature on the relationship between devotion and excess is extensive; I discuss some aspects of the phenomenon in my recent book, *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018), pp. 186-97.

8 Ian O’Doherty, ‘Euthanasia will be the next big cultural battleground – and it’s time we faced that uncomfortable reality’, *Irish Independent* (December 3, 2019), 27.

9 Ó Giolláin briefly describes the latter in ‘Revisiting’, pp. 17-18.

10 See Ó Giolláin, ‘Revisiting’, pp. 19-20.

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of redemption. In this way, suffering is able to be integrated into the cosmic order and ultimately overcome, rather than staring at us in mere meaningless facticity. The latter is what shocks us today, in an age which has forgotten the value of many religious practices.

HOLY WELLS IN POST-CHRISTIAN IRELAND

To speak of ‘post-Christian’ Ireland is in some ways misleading and overly pessimistic: the question mark in the title of Vincent Twomey’s book, *The End of Irish Catholicism?*, remains very much alive.¹¹ Many in the Church are working assiduously to ensure that the Christian faith has a future in this country.

The continued existence of holy wells and their use for devotional purposes are one of the many signs that Christian practices are far from dead in Ireland. Louise Nugent has chronicled how the ancient practices associated with holy wells continue to inform contemporary life. Thus, for example, she has found that St Dominic’s Well at Esker, Co. Galway, remains an active pilgrimage site. Each year, on January 5th and 6th, Mass is said in the nearby Redemptorist monastery, which is followed by a procession to the well. There, a priest blesses the water, which farmers then fill into bottles to bless their buildings, machinery, and land. Throughout the year, the water is used to cure animals as well. Pilgrims believe that the blessed water from St Dominic’s Well has helped to cure diseases, and they share stories about such healings.¹²

While some wells continue to attract the faithful, others fall into disuse or are destroyed. An interesting third category consists of wells that become quasi-museums. This tends to happen in towns and villages which get tidied up and renovated in an effort to attract visitors, often to replace or at least supplement more traditional sources of income. Ironically, such an effort to save a well can actually destroy it. As the Brennemens have described this kind of scenario, ‘In such cases the wells are taken out of the sphere of the sacred and placed into that of the secular.’¹³ God ‘dies’, as Nietzsche would put it, his transcendent mystery becoming inaccessible as sites of prayer and pilgrimage undergo commodification for the global tourism industry.¹⁴ One is reminded of the sad fate of many

11 See D. Vincent Twomey, SVD., *The End of Irish Catholicism?* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003).

12 See Louise Nugent, ‘Preserving an ancient practice: Farmer’s pilgrimage to blessing of the waters at St Dominic’s holy well at Esker’, *Connacht Tribune* (January 16, 2015), 38. Also see Louise Nugent and Richard Scriven, *Wells, Graves, and Statues: Exploring the Heritage and Culture of Pilgrimage in Medieval and Modern Cork City* (Scotts Valley, Calif.: CreateSpace, 2015).

13 Brenneman & Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle*, p. 109.

14 See Ó Giolláin, ‘Revisiting’, p. 34.

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famous churches and cathedrals, where signs have to remind visiting tourists not to walk around scantily dressed and to keep the noise down.

Finally, the Maynooth geographer Ronan Foley has considered holy wells as a stage in the evolution of what he terms ‘therapeutic landscapes’. His book on the subject includes chapters on holy wells, spa towns, Turkish baths, sea resorts, and modern spas.¹⁵ His argument is that the sites where water is sought for healing mind and body are subject to historic variation. At a certain point in Irish history, holy wells were the only places where those in search of healing could hope for a cure of their spiritual and physical ailments. Later, holy wells were complemented, and for some people superseded, by spa towns (like Johnstown, Co. Kilkenny, with Ballyspellan Spa), where waters with medicinal qualities became available for the first time outside of a religious context. Arriving in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Foley argues that the paradigmatic site where healing waters are encountered is currently the spa resort – a large hotel, often in a scenic setting, complete with gourmet restaurant, gym, swimming pool, and of course spa. Notably, in these spas one can observe a return of the religious – or, shall we say, pseudo-religious – dimension of healing waters. Foley describes a contemporary hotel in Cork City where visitors of the spa must undergo a consultation with a doctor trained in Ayurvedic medicine. This doctor, having identified the visitor’s *dosha*, prescribes the correct combination of ‘massages, herbal medicines, stretches and oils’.¹⁶ The spa thus becomes a place where the patient is able to reconnect with his or her spiritual side as healing is promised for both body and soul. Whether religious practices that are half-understood and superficially transplanted from one side of the globe to the other can provide genuine healing is an open question. Closer to the truth may be a perspective which regards such spas as commercial sites that offer guests respite from their busy working lives, promising relaxation as part of successful lives of income-generation and consumption.

A WORD IN CONCLUSION

Perhaps most fascinating about the story of holy wells in Ireland is that the major phases which we have distinguished – pre-Christian, Christian, and post-Christian – actually coexist in contemporary society. The Christian holy well continues to attract visitors – not

¹⁵ See Ronan Foley, *Healing Waters: Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁶ Foley, *Healing Waters*, p. 155.

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just tourists, but pilgrims seeking healing of body and soul. One is permitted to think that, on occasion, the rituals performed by such pilgrims will be reminiscent of pagan, magical practices, as when a particular number of roundings is considered indispensable for the success of a rite. At the same time, in certain circles in modern-day Ireland – possibly more affluent and urban – pilgrimages to holy wells have been superseded by secular ‘pilgrimages’ to exclusive spas.

All this is part of the complex fabric of contemporary Irish society as it attempts to find its way in the twenty-first century.

Changing Times. Our modern culture, with its increasing emphasis on individualisation and material and consumerist goals, has come to be seen by many as a world of greater uncertainty, disconnectedness and social fragmentation. We are undoubtedly still the same human race, but we simply cannot adapt as quickly as the technology we produce. As many of the advancements that have emerged since the advent of our technological era have brought about major societal changes at breakneck speed, many of us have been left without the tools or resilience to handle these rapid shifts. With the integration of smartphones and laptops into our daily lives we have become increasingly vulnerable to major threats to sustainable mental health such as online gambling, addictive gaming, excessive exposure to violent imagery, porn and fake news, online bullying, invasion of privacy, and the sedentary lifestyles that come from hours spent staring at a screen. We cannot deny the fact that it is our young people in particular who are bearing the brunt of these pressures.

– JOAN FREEMAN, in *Modern Culture and Well-Being*, ed. Catherine Conlon (Dublin: Veritas) p. 42.