

Còmhradh: Argyll Faith and Culture Conversation

Glencruitten House, Oban, 22-23 April 2016

Argyll's Spiritual Landscape

Summary of Discussions

Introduction: Kenneth Ross

Faith and Culture Conversation. Relationship between faith and “the way we live now”. It is a conversation provoked among people who deeply value Christian faith but notice that there is a disconnect between the heritage of faith and the way we live now, such that many people can live quite happily in our cultural context with little or no reference to faith, at least not in its institutional expression.

This might call for many things but one thing for which it calls is conversation, to talk together about the moment in which we find ourselves with the aim of getting to understand it better. The simple goal is conversation. Source of frustration to some! Planning, programme, action? Today – SMART goals as soon as possible. Deepening conversation, deepening understanding. Need for talking at depth. Emmaus Road. Even in times of perplexity it is good to talk. Out of heart to heart talking much can result. Inspired at the beginning by Emerson's saying that he would walk 100 miles through a snowstorm for one good conversation.

We may not have walked 100 miles but we have made our way up the hill to Glencruitten. We come here because it has been a good venue for this particular conversation - a place of Christian hospitality that is rather free of institutional constraints. It offers that bit of distance from church life that allows us to reflect on it without being inhibited by it. We have found value in keep in this a freelance initiative, not part of any particular church or organization.

Degree of structure and an element of preparation but not heavily pre-scripted. The idea is to open up conversation and let it flow. Very grateful to those who will facilitate sessions and all the thought that lies behind their input but the goal is always to get us all talking.

Looking for points of connection and points of tension. Bring a particular aspect into focus each time. We have talked about national and global issues but we have always aimed to situate ourselves in our Argyll context, the deep history of Argyll and its contemporary life.

We are making a new departure this time by taking a book – and an author! – as the springboard for the conversation. But when Ian Bradley published his book *Argyll: The Making of a Spiritual Landscape* we thought this was so relevant to our conversation that we could not miss the opportunity to bring it into the discussion. Ian has not only assembled a portrayal of the spiritual landscape of Argyll but has ventured an interpretation of it that gives much food for thought.

Some of us have read the book and we are here because we have been inspired by it and would like to reflect further on it. Others may have just heard about it and would like to know more. For all of us we hope that this weekend can be an opportunity to deepen our understanding of what Argyll is all about and what it might mean for the future of faith.

Framed by worship. Talk of God in the presence of God.

Friday – Opening Worship – Marilyn Shedden

It was on a day trip to Colonsay that I first came so close to Islay and Jura, as the Finlaggen slipped through the narrowest part of the Sound.

Out on deck it was breathtakingly beautiful and I noticed a man looking wistfully towards the distant islands

I started chatting to him as we each commented on the beauty surrounding us.

He was Australian, but his people were from Colonsay and he was making his first visit to the place of his beginnings.

He was clutching something in his hand as if he never wanted to let it go.

It must be very precious I thought and so I asked him about it.

In his hand was a note of the place names and family names that held the secrets of his story.

It was just a piece of paper, or was it?

It was indeed very precious.

He had come on a very important once in a lifetime journey – a pilgrimage home in fact.

He would visit his beginnings just once in this lifetime and then return home to Australia.

Would he find what he was searching for, I wondered.

I wished him well as we left the boat.

We are going to hear Ian's story today, and maybe also have an opportunity to listen to each other's stories.

We each have a story to tell and often we want to find out more about our own stories, about our beginnings.

There is something that draws us to our past.

There is something that also draws us to our collective past.

Even those of us here today who may have no family ties with Argyll, feel that we have a spiritual connection with this place we now call home.

We are a pilgrim people and are on a spiritual journey.

This weekend we will have a guide to help us find our way.

We will have someone who knows the spiritual landscape and he will take us on a journey.

We will travel together through place and time, hear the secrets of the stones, listen to the words of the ghosts of the past, and find our own place in this wonderful tapestry.

As we met again on the homeward ferry journey, I asked the Australian if he had found what he was looking for.

Tears welled in his eyes as he told me had found his past and his beginning.

I can still see him holding fast to that wee bit of paper with the names of those he sought and loved in his hand.

I wonder what God would answer if we asked of him, 'What do you have in your hand, God?'

I think he would answer – 'It is your name I have written on the palm of my hand.....that is what I hold so dear'.

Loving God, of past and present and future, we give you thanks for our own spiritual landscape, for the places that have touched our souls, for the moments that have taken our breath away, for the times when we can just catch a glimpse of eternity.

Give us ears that will strain to hear the words asleep in wood and stone, give us sight that gives way to insight, and show us the road on earth that leads the way to heaven.

Walk with us on our journey, stand beside us in our wonder, give us stillness in our soul and awaken us to all the new possibilities you have in store for us.

For we ask these things knowing you have each of our names written on the palm of your hand. Amen

Friday Night – Sharing our Stories

Everyone brought an object or told a story expressing something in Argyll's spiritual

landscape that has been inspirational for them. Participants shared their experience in a personal and sometimes emotional way, making for a very rich beginning to the conversation.

Friday – evening prayers – Marilyn Shedden

The night is for stillness.
Let us be still in the presence of God.

It is night after a long day.
What has been done
has been done;
what has not been done,
has not been done;
let it be.

The night is dark.
Let our fears
of the darkness of the world
and of our own lives rest in you.

The night is quiet.
Let the quietness
of your peace enfold us,
all dear to us,
and all who have no peace.

The night heralds the dawn.
Let us look expectantly
to a new day
new joys
new possibilities.
In your name we pray. Amen

Saturday morning worship –Marilyn Shedden

Meditation prayer.

Loving and eternal God, this is the day that you have made and we will rejoice and be glad in it.

We come to you in the newness of this morning with the promise of a new day ahead.
We come to you in the stillness of our worship time to ask your blessing upon us.
We come to you, Lord of the universe, yet keeper of our days.
God, our Father, by whose mercy and might the world turns safely into darkness and returns again into light, we thank you for the light of your love for each one of us.

We thank you, God for the enchanting – for things that take us out of everyday experiences – however briefly, and tantalise us with glimpses of mystery and eternity. We thank you for the things we cannot explain.

We thank you for the extraordinary – for shooting stars and Northern Lights, for impossible coincidences and for ordinary wonders.

We thank you for the wisdom that science can teach us, and the mysteries it cannot. We thank you for the things we find easy to believe, and we ask for patience in those things that defy belief in the logic of our minds.

Lord amidst the busyness of life, let us stop and take in the silence.

Speak to us in the blowing of the wind, in the rustling of the grass, in the sound of the sea, and in the beating of our heart.

Speak to us in the mystery of prayer and let us find you in the care of each other.

And now good Lord, who walked with fishermen and farmers and sat in village kitchens, walk and talk with us now that we may live in peace with the earth and with the whole family of God.....for we ask it in the name of the one who calls us by name, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Ian Bradley – Argyll's Spiritual Landscape

I want to begin with my mid-Argyll born and raised mother. Along with her siblings she embodied and epitomised a theological and religious outlook which mixed open-minded liberalism and romantic mysticism with a high moral seriousness and simplicity in a way that I have not found in any other strain of Christian thought or practice, neither during my youthful engagement with various hues of Anglicanism and English Nonconformity, nor in my later encounters with many different varieties of Scottish Christianity. A question which has long fascinated me – and which this book sets out to answer – is why the Christianity of Argyll is so different from that found in neighbouring regions. It is altogether gentler and less judgemental than the Christianity of the Western Isles and Northern Highlands and altogether simpler and more mystical than that found in Central and Eastern Scotland. I am not the only person to feel this difference. In his fascinating contribution to *The Argyll Book*, published in 2006, Donald Meek, the distinguished Gaelic scholar who himself hails from Tiree, notes that 'the Protestant clergy in Argyll were less tied to doctrinal straitjackets than their colleagues in other parts of the Highlands' and that 'the evangelicals of the northern Highlands tended to regard Argyll as a rather "moderate" region.' He goes on to comment on the

country's 'liberal and liberating atmosphere' and to say that 'the openness of Argyll was created not only by its religious complexion but by its geographical position'.¹

My experiences of undertaking locum ministry over the Christmas period in the Outer Hebrides and on the Argyll island of Jura underline the contrast between the Christianity of these two regions. In the Western Isles, only a handful of the large weekly congregation in the parish church where I provided cover for three months, were members and ever took communion. This was because church membership is open only to those who abstain utterly from drinking, dancing and singing secular songs. I found this out to my cost when I was visited one morning in the manse by an elder who told me that by all rights I should be on the next ferry back to the mainland. My crime had been to attend a pre-Christmas ceilidh in the public hall and to compound the offence by publicly singing Andy Stewart's 'A Scottish Soldier'. There was some reluctance to have either a Christmas Eve or Christmas Day service in the church, both being regarded as Popish if not pagan intrusions. The atmosphere on Jura, where I have taken many services over the last ten years, could not be more different. At the Christmas Eve Watchnight service over which I presided in the parish church a bottle of port was passed round the congregation which was made up of people from many different denominations and backgrounds. There were candles galore, a tree decked with fairylights, a crib at the door and a baby doll lying in a manger in front of the Communion table.

The difference of outlook and approach between the Christianity of Argyll and that of the Western Islands and north west Highlands goes back a long time. Reminiscing about his grandfather's ministry in Morvern between 1770 for and 1824, Norman MacLeod wrote 'One characteristic of the manse life was its constant cheerfulness. One cottager could play the bagpipes, another the violin, and a dance in the evening by his children was his delight. If strangers were present, so much the better. He had not an atom of that proud fanaticism which connects virtue with suffering.' By contrast, MacLeod commented that the minister in a parish in the Western Isles once told him that 'on religious grounds' he had broken the only fiddle in the island. MacLeod went on to note: 'His notion of religion, we fear, is not rare among his brethren in the far west and north'. At around the same time as the Morvern minister was encouraging music making in his parish, a minister on Skye set fire to a pile of

bagpipes and fiddles as big as a house on the shores of Loch Eishart with the remark 'Better is the little fire that warms in the day of peace than the great fire that consumes on the day of wrath'. Criticising such killjoy attitudes Norman MacLeod asked 'What next? Are the singing birds to be shot by the kirk sessions?'.²

It would be quite wrong to characterise Argyll's Christianity as frivolous, easy-going or casual. It has always had a deeply serious side. There is a strong and unmistakable evangelical strain which goes back to the austere asceticism of Columba, sleeping on the bare earth of his cell at Torr an Aba on Iona with a stone for his pillow, and the solitary hermits who built their beehive cells on the Gavellochs. The theological temper of Argyll has never been narrowly judgmental, however. Rather it has been notably liberal. There can be few places where heretics are venerated as much as saints – yet such is the treatment accorded to Alexander Robinson, thrown out of the Church of Scotland in 1897 for over-emphasizing the humanity of Christ, in Kilmun Church where he was minister and is commemorated by a stained glass window identifying him with St John and with the text 'God is Love'. Another Argyll-born minister arraigned for heresy for preaching the doctrine of universal love rather than limited atonement, John McLeod Campbell, is similarly celebrated in a window depicting a procession of saints going up the steps of light (pages xx and xxx). It is significant that the Church of Scotland congregations on the islands of Barra and South Uist, very different in theological and liturgical outlook from the more northerly of the Western Isles, have recently successfully petitioned to leave the Presbytery of Uist and join the Presbytery of Argyll with which they feel much more affinity.

Perhaps Argyll's distinctive spiritual atmosphere is the result of a blending of the best of the surrounding traditions – the evangelical simplicity of the northern Highlands and Outer Hebrides without its harsher side and tendency towards judgmentalism and the enlightened moderatism of Eastern and Lowland Scotland without its over-rational suspicion of the romantic and mystical. There are other respects in which Argyll brings different traditions together – sometimes they stand in juxtaposition like the Highland and the Lowland churches in Campbeltown and the English and Gaelic speaking division of Inverary Parish Church. There is more than in any other region of Scotland an intermingling of the pagan and primal with the Christian and of the Protestant with the Catholic. The former is graphically illustrated by the two

figures carved high on the south wall of Muckairn Parish Church in Taynuilt, one a grinning ecclesiastic and the other a 'Sheela-na-gig' mother goddess and female fertility symbol; while the latter finds unintentional confirmation in the series of roundels from the High Kirk of Dundee now propped up against an outside wall where John Knox finds himself next to a very Catholic looking angel.

Argyll is a very Presbyterian place. As we will see, there are several reasons for this, not least the dominance of the Campbells. Episcopalianism has never had a strong hold apart for a time in Appin and Ardnamurchan, while the historic heartland of West Highland Catholicism is centred just across the border into the old county of Inverness-shire in Moidart and Arisaig. The majority of the parishes in the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles, which today comprises only 1.6% of the total Catholic population of Scotland, are still to be found in Lochaber and in the Southern Hebrides. Argyll's Presbyterianism has had a distinctive character, markedly more mystical, more liturgical and more liberal than that found in other areas, especially of the Highlands. Several factors may account for this - the lingering influence of Columba and the other Irish missionaries and saints; the fact that unlike so many clan chieftains and lairds the Dukes of the Argyll remained loyal to the Kirk and did not forsake it for Episcopalianism; the region's loyalty to the Established 'Auld Kirk' with the consequence that the influence of the Free Church has been less keenly felt than further north. Maybe, too, climatic and geographical factors have played a part, from the soft mild rain that makes Argyll so green to its location as a liminal borderland and a place on the edge.

Donald Meek rightly says that Argyll has a unique geographical position as 'a threshold area of the Highlands'. He points out that 'people from Argyll travelled backwards and forwards to the Lowlands with relative ease. As a consequence, the fashions of the Lowland south entered Argyll more quickly than they did other parts of the Highlands'. He cites as an example the ready reception of Protestantism in the region soon after the Scottish Reformation. As well as experiencing these Lowland and Anglicising influences, Argyll also remained a Gaelic stronghold, not least in respect of its clergy, as Meek acknowledges:

The proportion of ministers who were natives of the region and contributed constructively to the development of Gaelic literature *per se* is

probably higher in Argyll than in any other district of the Highlands. The county had a liberal and liberating atmosphere in which writers could pursue their callings. This continuing feeling of liberation may partly explain why Gaelic writers from other parts of the Highland still find it a congenial place.³

The Gaelic influence on Argyll's spiritual landscape goes much deeper than language. More than any other region of Scotland, Argyll has exhibited those features which are associated with Celtic religion in its primal as well as its Christian forms. It is the land of second sight - the ability to see events at a distance either in time or space - and of the evil eye, called *air a chronachadh* in southern Argyll and *air a chronachen* in northern Argyll.⁴ Its geographical position as 'a land that lies westward', to quote from George Campbell Hay's poem '*Tir Thàirngaire*', looking towards the setting sun and with its islands in the western sea has given it particular associations in Celtic understanding with the Otherworld, variously described in Gaelic as *Tír na mBeo* (the Land of the Living), *Mag Mell* (Delightful Plain), and *Tír na nÓg* (the Land of the Young). This is a land without sickness, old age or death where happiness lasts forever. It is also to the west that people have traditionally gone to die and there is much in Argyll's landscape of ghosts and ruins that speaks of death.

The spiritual landscape of Argyll combines pre-Christian and Christian features. Pagan folklore and superstition have been as important to its formation as Catholicism and Calvinism. It is a landscape populated by fairies and banshees, glastaigs, brownies and hags, water horses and kelpies as much as by saints, priests and preachers. These primal presences remain and they have not always been repudiated or rejected by Christian ministers, who have often, in fact, been among the most assiduous in collecting folklore and preserving ancient traditions. They have been adapted and appropriated into new belief systems in a constant process of re-imagining and re-incorporation. Stones from megalithic burial sites were incorporated into medieval chapels and later into Reformed kirks. Recent research has shown that early Christian churches were often built deliberately near to the shrines and sacred places of pre-Christian belief systems. It may or may not be true that Columba constructed his monastery on Iona on the site of a Druidic college but if he did, he was acting in conformity with a trend found throughout Argyll's religious history of looking back to

past traditions and taking over, re-using and adapting their monuments and artefacts rather than either destroying or preserving them untouched.

This process of constant borrowings and re-workings comes out of a mindset very different from our modern approach towards ancient buildings and structures which is either to knock them down to make way for completely new replacements or else to conserve and preserve them as museum pieces. What happened throughout thousands of years in Argyll was rather a constant process of reinterpreting and re-creating the sacred landscape, informed by a strong sense of provisionality. At Ardhcattan on the northern shore of Loch Etive five successive parish churches were built in a little over 500 years, each new building re-using stones from the previous one – the original thirteenth century chapel was re-built substantially in fifteenth century, followed by the Priory Church in the seventeenth century, a new parish church in 1730 and then another, still in use today, in 1836. When the inhabitants of Taynuilt heard of Nelson's great victory at Trafalgar in 1805, they dragged a megalithic standing stone from the field where it had stood for thousands of years and re-erected it near the church as the first monument to the great naval battle anywhere in the British Isles. In the words of Neil Ascherson, 'Argyll is a palimpsest. Its surface is like a vellum manuscript repeatedly scraped down to allow new words to be written over the previous text'.⁵

Argyll exhibits in particularly dramatic form the characteristics of what for better or worse has come to be known as Celtic spirituality. Its spiritual landscape is imagined and imaginal. By this I do not mean that it has been constructed on the base of false and fictitious myths, although there have been plenty of those. Romantic fantasy has certainly played a part in the creation of its landscape. The county has more than its fair share of quixotic follies such as McCaig's Tower above Oban and of buildings which are not what their names suggest, like Glenbarr Abbey, rightly described by Frank Warner as 'a splendid scenographic elaboration of the Gothic conceit' and 'an abbey only by romantic assumption'.⁶ In describing it as imaginal, what I have in mind is rather the extent to which Argyll's spiritual landscape has a dimension beyond the physical and material. It is informed and enriched by imagination, a landscape not just of mountains, lochs and stones but of supernatural presences and intimations of another world.

The Irish mystical theologian, Noel Dermot O'Donoghue, who taught for many years at Edinburgh University, distinguished four regions of what he called 'imaginal reality' in the Celtic tradition: the world of fairies; the world of elemental presences; the world of the living dead and the world of angels.⁷ All four have been prominent features of Argyll's spiritual landscape. There is certainly no shortage of places said to be the haunts of the *sithich*, or fairies. They include the Fairies Hill near Kintraw, the Fairy Islands in Loch Sween, with their ancient oak trees covered in lichens and mosses which still today have an atmosphere which is enchanted as much as enchanting, and the 'fairy well' of *Tobar an t-Sithein* near Baile à Chlamhain on Islay where until relatively recently people reported seeing fairies dancing. Dun Bhuirg on Mull and Dunnuilg near Loch Craignish are among the hills said to be the dwelling places of fairies who occasionally come down to help mortals, especially women with their weaving. A story set on the shores of Loch Awe tells of fairies from Kilchrenan taking a child to nearby Nant Wood. Her father reclaimed her by drawing a furrow round the fairy hillock with his plough. Another man whose wife and children were stolen by fairies discovered that they were imprisoned inside Beinn Iadain in Morvern. He found a way into the fairy mountain through a back door and rescued them by tying three knots in the black silk handkerchief which his wife had worn on her wedding day. There are also numerous stories of people being transported great distances across Argyll by a flying host (*sluagh* in Gaelic) of fairies.

Argyll is especially rich in *glastaigs*, mortal women put under enchantment and given a fairy nature. Haunting both pastures and households, and appearing in the guise of thin little creatures with long yellow hair and dressed in green, they often guided herds of sheep or cattle or undertook housework when people were asleep but they could also be disruptive and act like poltergeists if upset or disturbed. They have left their mark on the landscape, as in the hollow in the ground near Balnahard on Colonsay where libations of new milk were said to have been poured as offerings to the *glastaig* who had charge of the local sheep and cattle. Their male equivalents, brownies, were not so common and rarely harmful. Belief in banshees, the fairy women who began to wail if someone was about to die and who were seen as omens of death and messengers from the underworld, is attested in such place names as *Toll na Caointich*, 'the pool of the banshee', near Port Wemyss on Islay. Argyll also has its demons as well as its fairies. The devil makes regular appearances in its folklore, manifesting himself to a shepherd

in Benderloch in the form of a large bundle of ferns rolling down the hillside and, in a story which is located both at Kilneuair Kirkyard and Saddell Abbey, leaving a handprint in the stone after appearing to a tailor stitching a pair of trousers while seated on a tomb.

Elemental presences abound in Argyll, hardly surprisingly when the region is subjected to some of the wildest, windiest and wettest weather in the British Isles. Natural and climatic forces were personified in the form of Cailleachan, fearsome ancient women sometimes known as storm hags, who were seen as having a direct influence on both landscape and weather. The Cailleach Bheir, who lived in a cave in the rocks on Ben Cruachan, was believed to control the flow of the spring near its summit by covering it over with a stone every evening. One evening she was distracted from this nightly task because her herd of goats had wandered off on to Rannoch moor and she had to round them up. As a result, the waters cascaded down the mountain to form Loch Awe. She was punished by being turned into a granite boulder, *Creag na Caillich Bheir* (the Old Wife's Rock), which can still be seen on the side of Loch Etive. Another cailleach, called Bhéarra, was believed to usher in winter weather by washing her great plaid in the whirlpool of *Coire Bhreacain* (Coryvreckan) north of Jura. This process took three days, during which the roar of the coming tempest was heard twenty miles away. When she finished, her plaid was pure white and snow covered the land.

The dead are a very obvious continuing presence in Argyll. No other region of the British Isles has a greater concentration of burial sites, elaborately carved grave slabs, mausoleums and monuments, many of them prominently displaying the stark injunction '*memento mori*' (remember death). If the Kilmartin Valley and the Street of the Dead on Iona are the most dramatic examples of ritual landscapes of the dead, there are many other equally powerful physical reminders of human mortality. Among the most sombre is the monument to the Gaelic poet Duncan Ban Macintyre which stands on a hillside south of Dalmally. A harsh granite block surmounted by a circular henge, it broods over the dark waters of Loch Awe with its heavily wooded island graveyard of Inishail. Another island graveyard, Eilean Fhianain, or the Green Island, in Loch Shiel, which for long formed the boundary between Argyll and Inverness, is the oldest place of burial in Western Europe still in use today. More than 60,000 bodies are said to be interred there. Modern burials invariably involve the digging up and displacement of

the bones of those previously laid to rest. Perhaps it is their ghosts who ring the ancient bell lying on the altar of St Finnan's Chapel which is sometimes heard by those fishing on the loch when there is not a living soul on the island.

Angels, too, have left their mark on the topography of Argyll, most famously on *Cnoc nan Aingeall*, the Hill of the Angels which stands in the middle of the island of Iona. This is where, according to his biographer Adomnán, Columba was seen by a fellow monk conversing with angels who had flown down from heaven in white robes as he stopped to pray on his way down to the macahir on the west coast of the island. Known also in Gaelic as *Sithean Mòr*, or the large fairy mound, it is one of many places in Argyll with both Christian and pre-Christian associations. There was an unusually strong devotion in Argyll to the Archangel Michael who was frequently invoked in incantations and charms and depicted on gravestones.

The intermingling of folklore and Christian faith persisted not just through the Middle Ages but well beyond the Reformation. As late as 1650 parishioners of Craignish were rebuked by the Kirk Session for 'going sungates around the Kirk' before entering for divine service. Although there were some other similar complaints from church authorities, overall there is a striking lack of censure or even concern about the survival of pre-Christian beliefs and practices on the part of Argyll's Presbyterian ministers. Indeed, several seem to have found no incompatibility in embracing manifestations of primal beliefs such as second sight and the existence of elemental presences like the Cailleachan – alongside their Christian faith. John Frazer, minister of Coll and Tiree in the early eighteenth century, compiled a collection of examples of the phenomenon of second sight and wrestled with the question as to whether it was inherited or came as a direct gift from God. In 1791 Charles Stewart, minister of Strachur and Stralachlan, suggested that two mudslides in the hills north of Loch Eck which has destroyed dwelling places were caused by a water spout produced by the Cailleach Bheir. Some of the most comprehensive collections of Scottish folklore and superstitions were made by Argyll ministers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notably John Gregorson Campbell of Tiree and Kenneth MacLeod of Gigha. Bordering on the syncretistic, their attitude to the material which they found and preserved for posterity was different both from the unease generally although not universally displayed the

more conservative and Calvinistic ministers of the Western Isles and Northern Highlands and the sceptical rationalism which tended to prevail in the Lowlands.

Argyll is a region where the next world can seem very close. Its westward orientation, with the connotations that brings of proximity to the Otherworld, its location on the fringe and at the edge, the strange almost ethereal quality of its light brought about by the interplay of mist, rain, sun and cloud on its lochs and mountains, and the intermingling of so many spiritual influences combine to make it, in the (borrowed) words that George MacLeod famously applied to Iona, 'a thin place'. At the south end of Jura Geata Àth nam Marbh – the Gate of the Ford of the Dead – supposedly provides a passage between this world and the afterlife. The imagined and imaginal spiritual landscape of Argyll has given many of its inhabitants and visitors glimpses and intimations of another world. For Celtic dreamers it is the world of eternal youth, of Tìra no Og, fairies, second sight and supernatural presences. For Christians it is glimpses of Heaven. George Matheson experienced such intimations as he listened from his Innellan Manse to the 'Symphony of Nature' on the Clyde and reflected, 'Heaven somehow begins here, and immortality'. For T Ratcliffe Barnett, the Free Church minister who made so many pilgrimages through Argyll, they came as he stood on a summer's day at Crinan harbour looking out to the islands in the open sea and to the great flats of Mòine Mhór 'steeped in the shimmering light of the west':

You may think you have come to a cul-de-sac of the world. But, before long, you will be quite sure that where the world ends heaven only begins... When the sun goes down in all its glory, the outgait to the west from Loch Crinan is like the forecourt of heaven.⁴

For me, but then I am a Campbell with generations of mid-Argyll Campbell tenant farmer ancestors, Argyll's distinctive mixture of evangelical simplicity and liberal mysticism owes much to the Campbell clan and to successive Earls and Dukes of Argyll. In the sixteenth century they enthusiastically embraced the doctrines of the Protestant reformers and played a crucial role in establishing the Protestant kirk throughout and beyond Argyll. In the seventeenth century they were associated with the Covenanting movement and the defence of Protestantism against absolute monarchy. In the eighteenth century they championed enlightenment values and were assiduous and

generous patrons of leading philosophers and liberal theologians and ministers. The 8th Duke of Argyll, that extraordinary polymath, who dominated Argyll throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, exemplified in his writings, his politics and his theology intellectual, liberal, mystical Presbyterianism. The bachelor tenth Duke, Niall, unusual in being an ardent Episcopalian, was steeped in the legends and folklore of Argyll and unusually open to supernatural experience, claiming to see the Galley of Lorne, crewed by the spirits of his ancestors, passing over Loch Fyne on its aerial journey to Loch Awe and regularly going down to the River Aray to blow his horn and summon the 'wee people'.

Argyll is the only local authority which I know of to have a Christian symbol – and nothing but that symbol – as its official corporate logo. The distinctive image of the ringed Celtic cross which now appears on road signs, ferries, schools and public buildings, also appears in many forms across the region: in its earliest incarnation going back more than a thousand years in the form of the incised cross stones found in ancient burial grounds like Cladh a' Bhile near Ellary and the great high standing crosses on Islay and Iona; then in the later medieval crosses like those now erected in the middle of Inverary and Campbeltown; and more recently in thousands of gravestones, like that for my own mother, father and brother in Carsaig Bay. At one level, it is a starkly simple Christian symbol, bold in its evangelical message and uncompromisingly proclaiming Christ's death as the ultimate salvific act. Yet in its Celtic form it also introduces an element of mystery with the unending scrolls and spirals of the knotwork and an added liturgical dimension with the elaborately carved depictions of Biblical scenes and characters.

There is one particular cross which for me epitomises Argyll's spiritual landscape. Maclean's Cross, dating from the fifteenth century, stands half way along the road between the ferry jetty and the Abbey which is traversed by nearly all the quarter of a million visitors who come to Iona each year. Those who pause as they pass by it probably register the classic Celtic interleaved foliated designs which cover the side that faces the road. Most probably miss the stark portrayal of the Crucified Christ on the other face. A good many almost certainly also miss the building which forms its background, the simple parish church built to the standard design of William Telford in 1828. The image of the Kirk bisected by the Cross, which can also be seen at Lochaline in

Morvern where a fourteenth or fifteenth century disc-headed cross is silhouetted against a background of another relatively simple church built in 1898, sums up the diverse and apparently discordant strands which have together fashioned Argyll's spiritual landscape: Celtic and Calvinist, Catholic and Reformed. This particularly dramatic visual juxtaposition encapsulates what are perhaps its two dominant features – evangelical simplicity and liberal mysticism.

Response: Liz Gibson

I enjoyed the book, particularly the people based stories, rather than the buildings aspect which I had feared would predominate but which do have their place as part of the rich tapestry of Argyll's spiritual heritage. Wonderful buildings – supposed to glorify God, but is that really what they do? Or do they glorify those who funded them? Or remind us of the divisions and splits? Transfiguration – Peter wanted to build shelters. It was not appropriate. Of course we're not in an identical situation but we do concentrate too much on what shelters us for worship. Young and old need homes and there is a real shortage of suitable housing. Encouraging that the problems we face are not new – they go back centuries. Monks leaving Iona, buildings being destroyed.

Victoria Campbell 3rd daughter of Duke of Argyll – most influence, most inspiring. Not just a “do-gooder” but making a real and good difference.

“Fraternal” meetings in Oban – whole spectrum of Christian traditions, including RC and Free Church clergy. Rules good but best when flexible.

Involvement in RC funerals which wouldn't have happened a couple of decades ago.

Funerals in village halls (usually when church not big enough), at gravesides, from homes.

Scottish Episcopal, “English Church” “County” – family tradition of supporting CofS in local village although being more Episcopal. Main thing – Christian

Gaelic – I was asked to include a Gaelic blessing at a funeral for a lady who had only spoken Gaelic for the first few years of her life. Lots of positive comments at door, but nobody knew whether it was said right because they didn't have the Gaelic themselves, but did appreciate it being included. People appreciate buildings but don't feel the need for the religious aspect. Should “religious” people concentrate on what is more important in life of faith.

p. 5 borrowings and reworkings of buildings – houses, pubs, museums,

I like idea of using original stones to make completely new building. At bicentenary in Glenorchy it was 200 years of that particular building and there was some reflection on the upset and furore it might have caused pre-1811 when the decision was made to knock down and rebuild. There would certainly be upset and furore if that were to be suggested now, although the thousands spent on the building haven't made it look how it was supposed to.

Someone complaining to me about people chatting and laughing in the cloisters at Iona Abbey, and me explaining that that would be the place of the common life. Whether or not I was right, the point is people live and work there – it's not monks keeping silence.

I confess that as parish minister of Glenorchy & Innishael, I never went to Inishail. (Different spellings are common). But there were also living people who I didn't visit and if I were to feel guilty about either it would be the living. With graveyards it's good to know they are there and one can spend time there, but knowledge is often enough. You don't have to actually go often. I wouldn't go into the graveyard at Kilninver without visiting the graves of my father and paternal grandparents, but I don't go often. My maternal grandparents are buried in a small private graveyard on the hillside in Kilmelford. I went there for the first time in many years just a couple of months ago. The sense of history is there and it doesn't matter to me if the graves are well kept, wild can be good, although in cemeteries where burials still take place it can give people a sense of someone caring. And some people like to visit weekly or even daily. If that's what keeps them going then it's a good thing.

Built heritage will be around in some form long after us. It has been here long before us. I would be glad to be part of an era which puts them to better use for people, whether for community use or as houses, as well as for worship, which can take place anywhere and everywhere.

Response: Archie MacPhail

The thesis is that Argyll has a different spirituality from that of the rest of Scotland, especially when compared to the allegedly austere northern Highlands and Outer Hebrides. That thesis resonates with many people, but it must overcome the objection that we are judging on the basis of stereotypes.

My experience of ten year's ministry in the north-west led me to see that area's tradition as more complex than its world-renouncing image suggests. Historical examples come to mind.

John MacDonald, who became a leading nineteenth century evangelical preacher, was sent to research how far Ossianic Odes remained in the memory of Highland communities. It is said that music is forbidden, yet the influential evangelical poet John

Morison (the 'Harris Bard') is recorded as saying, 'I have nothing against music, only what goes along with it'. In the twentieth century Murdoch Campbell was a quintessential Lewis minister yet his regard for the intellect did nothing to diminish his devotional spirit or the mysticism that pervades his books.

That is not to say the image is wrong. The stereotype can be found, though that may be because it is conspicuous rather than normative, and reflects a later stage of the tradition. Nor can we say that the spirituality of the north and west is the same as that of Argyll. There are differences.

Geography and language have been major influences. The Scottish church always had difficulty penetrating the mountainous areas or providing enough Gaelic-speaking ministers. Consequently the north-west tended to have a spiritual life of its own, unlike Argyll which was influenced by the Lowlands.

Timescale is also important. Although Christianity arrived early in both Argyll and the north its influence was greater in Argyll. Also, the evangelical movement influenced Argyll half a century before it took hold in the western isles.

As time goes on such a movement's influence changes. The first generation to wake up to the gospel is impacted in a deeply personal way but over time the movement can become institutionalised. The first generation develops certain forms for valid reasons, but later generations equate those forms with the essence of that spirituality. Thus it becomes externalised and legalistic. When gospel power is absent substance and style become confused and eventually they lose their force.

That may explain how a warm evangelicalism has come to be seen as harsh and the spirituality of Argyll as mellow. The process is more advanced in Argyll than in the north and west, and Argyll's spirituality may have changed even further.

It raises a number of questions. Since the evangelical movement majored on God as Redeemer may it be the case that spirituality in Argyll has reverted to emphasising God as Creator? And if so, is there a possibility that our deep awareness of nature may blur the distinction between Creator and creation?

Visit to the Glencruitten Cathedral of the Trees

Nicola Moll led a visit to the Glencruitten Cathedral of the Trees, created after the First World War by Alexander Mackay using the old Cathedral in St Andrews as a model. Nicola introduced the group to the efforts being made to restore and maintain the cathedral and surrounding woodlands (using methods sensitive to the local biodiversity) in order to create a living sacred space open to all.

Argyll Spirituality – The Future – Shared Thoughts

Concerns

- Individualism – loss of community and orality
- Globalization – plethora of influences
- Lack of shared language - private

Hopes

- Resurgence of Gaelic
- Music – Fèis
- Art
- Return to rituals and symbols
- Return to the elements – connecting to land
- Pilgrimage – affirming local culture, not institutions
- Ethical values of youth – affordable housing, land reform
- Changing ethnicity e.g. Polish
- Return to Christian communities
- Recovery of the mystical
- Need for authenticity

Saturday closing worship – Marilyn Shedden

Donald John's workshop must be in one of the most picturesque places on the planet.

He looks out on Luskentyre bay on the wonderful Hebridean island of Harris.

The sand at his doorstep is white and is covered in the most beautifully formed tiny multi-coloured shells.

The sea is beyond description as only God could invent the kaleidoscope of green and turquoise, navy and ultramarine, blue and silver, that is the sea at Luskentyre.

Donald John is a weaver – a weaver of cloth and of dreams.

He is one of the last remaining weavers of the lovely Harris Tweed and he is proud of what he does.

His loom clicks along with the rhythm of the tide and a pattern emerges.

The threads look nothing as single strands, but when Donald John weaves them together it is a glorious sight indeed!
His cloths seem to almost reflect the colours of the sea in all her changing moods and patterns.
Donald John's talent is renowned, and tourists come, not only to buy his work, but to see him create it.
They come by ferry across the Sound of Harris from the noise and pace of the cities to this romantic island, and they are charmed by the beauty and the incredible, almost tangible - peace.
Many have never seen anything quite so beautiful in their lives, and their enchantment creates a desire to return again and again.
The dream has been woven and when they get back to the city and the noise and the crowds, in their dream they can be back on a Hebridean island walking on a deserted beach of pure white sand.
They can look at their piece of fabric woven there by Donald John and they can reclaim again a wee bit of that peace for their tired souls.
They can lift their eyes to the hills of their imagination and find strength.
Donald John is a weaver of cloth and of dreams.
God too is a weaver of dreams.
'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' and so began his dream for the world.
'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'.....
Donald John invests much of himself in his creation - so too God puts himself into his creation - including each one of us.
God loves us and weaves for us the threads that make up our lives.
I love the image of God as seamstress - in Psalm 139 we hear of God forming us in the stillness and darkness of our mother's womb - fashioning us and shaping us in that nest of our beginning, to become who we will be and then waiting as God calls us into the fullness of life.
He takes all the threads, just as Donald John does, even the dark ones, and completes the picture of our lives.
And God promised to be the thread that would hold everything together.
The threads of our lives have brought us all here today.
God the weaver has created his tapestry in us.
We have heard much about the past and its influence on us and importance for us.
We are part of a great tapestry that God is weaving.
We are part of God's wonderful dream for humankind.
We are a work in progress.
Let us weave the dream.