

What is a Culdee?

The Twelve Apostles and the Culdees

In this article, I argue that the Israelite-Christians, observant of the laws of Moses, and keepers of God's Sabbath, stand behind the origins of Christianity in Britain, Ireland, and Germany. The history of the Culdee Church, a very large and important chapter of British history, has been effectively suppressed. This is the result of many centuries of Catholic disinformation, also uncritically accepted by the Protestants. There's no doubt that the role of the Culdees in British history, and in the history of Christianity in Britain, as well as on the Continent, was preeminent.

by Yuri Kuchinsky

It seems like, at least in the beginning, the Twelve Apostles were not entirely missionaries. Alfred Loisy argued that the institution of the Twelve was primarily an administrative body, based in Jerusalem, that governed the affairs of the followers of Yeshua the Messiah in the years after the crucifixion. For a long time, they would have been headed by James, the brother of the Messiah.

During the first Judean War, that ended with the defeat of the Judeans in 70 CE and the destruction of Jerusalem, the apostles fled from the city, probably to Jordan and to Syria. But they came back when things settled down, and, until 135, and the second disastrous Judean War, the Jerusalem Church was still headed by Israelite-Christian overseers, following the earliest tradition of the Messiah. The twelve apostles were all Israelites, of course, and they combined the observance of the laws of Moses with their faith in Yeshua as the Redeemer and the firstborn Son of God.

The Church father Epiphanius informs us that "the bishops of the circumcision" were driven from Jerusalem after Hadrian defeated the Judeans for the second time in 135 AD. Soon, the Romans built a new, massive temple of Jupiter in the redesigned city.

And thus, Gentile-Christians took over the Jerusalem Church after that rather late date. This, of course, was the time of considerable official anti-semitism in the Roman Empire. It was then that Emperor Hadrian banned circumcision, and imposed punitive taxes on all Jews.

Ironically, during the first part of early Christian history, the Christians wanted to be seen as Jews so they could claim the special monotheistic privileges granted to the Jews by the Romans. However, this privilege was not granted to them by the Romans and, later on, they seemed to make great public efforts to dissociate themselves from the Jews. Perhaps this, too, was not granted to them by the Romans?

And so, after the second Judean War, the Jerusalem apostles went into exile for good. They spread themselves around the Mediterranean, but especially around the Eastern Mediterranean, it seems, where the Churches for many centuries to come preserved many primitive Israelite-Christian elements. Very importantly, the Church of Rome was already Gentile-Christian controlled, but the influence of

Rome was slow to spread as, still, in the second and later centuries, most Christians around the ancient world naturally esteemed the tradition of the Church of Jerusalem well above the Roman Church.

And, also apparently some time in the first century, the Israelite-Christian apostolic tradition arrived in Britain in the person of Joseph of Arimathea -- and we have the traditions and the Culdees to prove it.

Many early historians confirm this. Gregory of Tours, in his History of the Franks, written shortly before A.D. 600; Haleca, Archbishop of Saragossa; and the Chronicon of Pseudo Dexter; all agree that Joseph of Arimathea was the first to preach the Gospel of Christianity in Britain. Hugh Paulinus de Cressy says,

“Now the most eminent of the primitive disciples, and who contributed most to this heavenly building, was St. Joseph of Arimathea, and eleven of his companions along with him, among whom is reckoned his son of the same name. These, toward the latter end of Nero’s reign, and before St. Peter and St. Paul were consummated by horrendous martyrdom, are by the testimony of ancient records said to have entered the British island, as a place for refuge, the benevolence of the British Princes, and the freedom from Roman tyranny, more opportune and better prepared for entertaining the Gospel of peace than almost any country under the Romans”.

The Culdees

A lot of nonsense is written about the Culdees, and the Celtic Church more generally. Primarily, it is the result of great many centuries of the Catholic efforts to make the Culdees into good Catholics. But, also, there seems to be something of a conspiracy of silence about them, at the same time. Witness the fact that Encyclopaedia Britannica doesn't even have an entry about them, and that many recent histories of Britain mention them only in passing, if at all. And yet, there's no doubt that their role in British history, and in the history of Christianity in Britain, as well as on the Continent, was pre-eminent.

Scholars have disputed for a long time the origin of the word "Culdee". Usually it is translated from Gaelic as a "devotee of God", or something similar. But perhaps it is also possible to connect "Culdee" with another English word, "Chaldee" (based on the Greek "khaldaios"), which means something like a "holy-man".

Protestants are somewhat friendlier to the Culdees than the Catholics, and so they should be, of course, since the Culdees seem to be a very important source of the Protestant Revolution of the 16th century. In fact, among the 19th century Protestants, there was a bit of a love-affair with the Culdees for a while. A lot of important studies appeared then from the pens of various Protestant historians, indeed acknowledging the role of Culdees in fomenting anti-Roman sentiment in late medieval times, and in foreshadowing numerous ecclesiastical ideas that Luther and friends later embraced.

But, certainly, the Protestants are not all the same. It is curious to read now some of these 19th century Protestant historians. Presbyterians make the Culdees Presbyterian, Baptists make them into Baptists -- just like the Catholics tended to make, and still try to make them into Catholics. It was a free-for-all!

But nowadays, the Culdees are mostly forgotten, it seems. The only ones who still care about them, and write about them are some of today's non-mainstream mildly Judaizing congregations, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, and some other Baptists.

Many people in Britain know about the sacred island of Iona, and about Columba, but few seem to be aware that Iona was a Culdee island, and that Columba, as well as his contemporary Columban, were Culdees.

So who were the Culdees, really? They were an ancient religious order of northern Europe that, for many centuries, preserved a form of Christianity more primitive than that of the Church of Rome. It is clear that the Culdees were much closer to the Eastern Christianity than the Catholic Church, and that they preserved many unusual customs that can be described as "Judaizing". For example, clearly they were Sabbath-observers, abstaining from work on the Seventh Day of the week. And here are some other such traditions they seemed to follow --

- (a) abstaining from the unclean meats;
- (b) unusual form of Easter observance;
- (c) marriage acceptable (as opposed to Catholic celibacy);

And there are even reports of some medieval groups on the Continent, similar to the Culdee, that practiced circumcision. Obviously these customs indicate that Culdee Christianity was a form of Israelite-Christianity, and that it was very ancient. None of these customs could have derived from Rome, that was dominated by Gentile-Christians from early in the second century, as noted above.

The question of Culdee Easter observance is rather complex, to be sure. And yet, it is reasonably clear that they were quartodecimans, i.e. they always celebrated Easter on the full moon of 14th of Nisan -- coinciding with the Passover observances of the Jews. Interestingly, this is supported by Encyclopedia Britannica, in a passage referring to the church in Britain, that doesn't even mention the Culdees. (The Western calendar and calendar reforms -- britannica.com),

"...the church in Britain, which had few links with European churches at this time, retained the Quartodeciman position..."

Whatever the case may be, clearly there were significant differences between the Culdees and the Catholics in this area, and the notorious "Easter Controversy" at the Synod of Whitby was seen as rather troublesome by both parties.

As far as the Culdee acceptance of clerical marriage, implying a more tolerant view of human sexuality, this puts them firmly into opposition to Rome. Culdees fully accepted marriage for priests, overseers, and even for monks. This puts them very close to the Jewish tradition, where marriage is recommended to all rabbis. (It is true that the Catholics at that time, until circa 1000 CE actually, still tolerated some married priests, but they firmly rejected marriage for bishops, and for monks, and this was a source of numerous bitter disputes between the Catholics and the Culdees at the time, starting with the 7th century, when the Catholics tried to bring the Culdee Church under their control.)

All evidence points to Columba, who founded the Iona centre of worship in 563, being a Culdee. Little is known for sure about Patrick, it seems, but it is only reasonable that he also was a Culdee.

Columba, of course, is usually given credit as the first evangelizer of Scotland. It is not as well known that Columban, a slightly younger contemporary of Columba, together with other Irish and Scottish Culdees, played a leading role in founding monasteries, and spreading Christianity on the Continent, such as in France and Germany. Later Catholic revisionists had tried to deny or diminish their big role in this area.

Culdees and the Protestant Revolt

So what is really the connection between the Culdees and the later Protestants? Did the Culdees help to influence the Protestant Reformation in any significant way? To me, this seems self-evidently so, and many Protestant historians fully accept this. The line of influence here goes from the Culdees to the Lollards, to Wicklif, to Huss, and then on to Luther.

Culdee influence certainly lived on in Britain, and especially in Scotland, well past the 10th century. In fact, even the Catholic historians accept that some Culdee customs and traditions survived until the beginning of the 14th century, when the reformers such as Lolardus in France, and Wicklif in England, came upon the scene.

It is remarkable how many of the disputes between the Culdees and the Catholics, well documented from the 7th century onwards, foreshadow later Catholic/Protestant disputes:

- (1) I've already mentioned the very important question of clerical marriage.
- (2) The question of the role of the bishop of Rome vis-a-vis other bishops was perhaps the biggest in Culdee/Catholic disputes.

In a letter from Columban to Pope Boniface (AD 590), Columban does not write as a subordinate, but as a fellow bishop, in no way inferior to the Roman Pope. In his letter, Columban encourages Boniface to "cleanse his holy See" from error. While he does agree to honour the See of Rome, Columban reserves the highest place of honour for the See of Jerusalem, since it is known scripturally as the place of the Lord's resurrection.

In these disputes, Culdees often appealed to ancient records that proved, according to them, that the bishop of Rome should not pretend to command other Christian bishops. This is certainly similar to the Protestant appeals to Scripture above any human authority. Culdees represented the grassroots, "the people's church". They did not place great value on any big and formal Church hierarchy.

Culdee Education

Culdees were strongly into learning, and the study of the Scripture.

According to tradition, Columba spent much of his time in reading and writing, and he placed great value in exact copying of ancient texts. Also, unlike the Catholics of the time, the Culdees believed that the Scriptures should be translated into the vernacular languages of the people. Another similarity to the Protestants, and a clear influence on Wicklif, the first prominent translator of biblical texts into English.

The Culdees even preserved the knowledge of biblical languages. For example, Adamnan, a biographer of Columba, was very knowledgeable of not only Latin, but also of Greek and Hebrew.

There's a complicated question of the connection between the Culdees and the Waldenses, another important group of early non-orthodox Christians in northern Europe, but some such connection there seems to be. Generally, the Waldenses are seen as a subset of the Cathari, which is a more generic name for many similar faith traditions of medieval Europe, such as the Leonists, Albigenses, Patrini, Petrobrusians, and others. All these are widely seen as prefiguring the Protestant Reformation in many respects. (After all, the word "Cathari", itself, seems to translate into English as "Puritans".)

Typically, the historians attribute the origins of these "heretical movements" to late Middle Eastern influences spreading in Europe in the wake of the Crusades. Perhaps this is because our mainstream historians, even the best of them, are generally ignorant about the Culdees.

Culdee Eastern Origins

Here's some more information about the evident connection of the Celtic Church with the Middle East.

- (a) The illustrations in the Book of the Kells have numerous unique and very close parallels to the art of Assyrian and Southern Egyptian origins.
- (b) The construction of Iona, and of other Culdee monasteries was clearly Eastern-influenced, with little or no Roman influence in the use of mortared stone or architectural design. These monastic communities of the Culdees consisted of groups of detached huts or beehive cells that were not centred around one big cathedral, as was the Roman custom, which suggests a Syrian origin.
- (c) Because a lot of Culdees were married, there usually was a female monastery nearby the male one, where the spouses of the Culdees lived with their children. Often, both monasteries were headed by a female Abbess.
- (d) Another clear link of the Culdees with the Jerusalem apostles is the well known Culdee custom to send out missionaries in groups of 12. For example, Columban originally set out for France and Germany accompanied by 12 associates.
- (e) Some scholars argue that the ancient Celtic Litany of Oengus reveals the influence of the East Syrian Church (Nestorians) on Celtic monastic life. Also, the Stowe Missal often contrasts all other Eucharistic Liturgies that developed separately in the west. It has been linked with the Didache, a very ancient Israelite-Christian document.
- (f) The earliest records of music sung by the Celtic Christians, dating from the 3rd century, suggest that it was of a Hebraic plain song type, such as used especially for the Psalms.

Conclusions

It is remarkable to me to what extent all memory of the Culdees is suppressed in the mainstream histories of the British Isles -- because this is a very rich and remarkable history indeed. As to the historians of Christianity, the suppression here seems to be even more thorough. But this is easily explainable, since the Culdees seemed to preserve a form of Israelite-Christianity that became rather "heretical" from the second century onwards.

The simple truth of the matter is that all early Christianity, for at least its first century or so, was Israelite-Christianity. But this will be of course denied by mainstream Christian historians, who will cite late interpolated passages in Paul and in Mark as their proofs. But there's no real proof that Mark in its entirety dates from the first century. And neither is there proof that the epistles of Paul are all early and uninterpolated.

It is quite clear that the Israelite-Christians, observant of the laws of Moses, and keepers of God's Sabbath, stand behind the origins of Christianity in Britain, Ireland, and Germany. Their influence persevered for great many centuries, and it still survives today, especially in British Christianity. Witness the unique interest of many British Protestants in keeping Sunday as the LORD's Day, free from work. While this unusual custom only dates from perhaps the 17th century, the Culdee Sabbath-keeping seems to be the main influence here. The idea was simply moved on to Sunday.

During the Reformation, Britain was a hotbed of many heresies. There was a myriad of divergent groups, many of them, such as the Seventh Day Baptists, apparently directly dependent on the Culdees. Driven by religious persecution, these dissenters came to America, and they played a very important role on the other side of the ocean as well.