African Conversion and the 'Irish Question'

Bernard Martin [*]

About a hundred years ago, the 'Irish question' in politics centred mostly on Home Rule; it occupied a good deal of Mr Gladstone's attention, and was much discussed. That Irish question wasn't answered then, and isn't fully answered now. There was a 'Balkan question' in those days, too; it isn't answered, either. But the Irish question I have in mind is this: what happened when Celtic paganism encountered Christianity? Or, to put it another way, what was the cause of the conversion, and how did it take place? If one agrees with Robert Bellah (he'll be mentioned again later) that religions attempt 'to relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence', then the questions are large ones. And in the case of the conversion of the Irish to Christianity which traditionally began in the fifth century, the factors involved — religious beliefs, practices, symbolic systems, personalities, economic and social concomitants — all these are indistinct in the night of time, though perhaps not quite indistinguishable. I don't find myself answering my Irish question here, though I hope to say something about sub-issues in it. To get anywhere near an answer, I think some general questions about religious conversion need to be considered; and since it has been suggested that the theories of Robin Horton about conversion to Christianity and to Islam in West Africa might function as a kind of reference-point in this collection of papers, I'll refer later on to Horton and to discussions that his work has stimulated.

1

The conversion of the Irish to Christianity will have been a long and complex process: an encounter between two religious systems, each of which expressed and implied ramifying patterns of culture and social order. The older system was a form of Celtic paganism (to use a slightly old-fashioned term), which had replaced whatever religion the pre-Celtic inhabitants of Ireland had. The newer system was the Christianity that was

[*] Bernard Martin was formerly Professor of English at the University of New South Wales, and is now an Honorary Associate in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. He inaugurated formal classes in medieval Irish literature in the original language at the University of Sydney in 1960.

brought to Ireland, or at least consolidated there, in the fifth century. Not enough is known about the forms of either religion to allow a good description of their encounter.

Liam de Paor puts the matter like this: 'When we try to deal with the fifth century in Ireland the difficulties are very great. No actual manuscript of any kind written in Ireland in that century survives. There is virtually not a single Irish artefact in a museum or a single monument in the field of which an archaeologist could say with full confidence that it was made in the fifth century.'[1] We do nevertheless have later copies of St Patrick's fifth-century *Confessio* and *Epistola* which are accepted as authentic. They represent 'a lone voice from the silence of the fifth century in Britain and Ireland',[2] and give a few fitful glimpses of early moments in the establishment and definition of Christianity in Ireland. St Patrick tells us, for example, how he had baptised 'many thousands of people' and had ordained many clergy for a population coming newly to the faith.[3] His preaching had been especially effective with the more marginal members of pagan Irish society: young people defying parental authority, women of both aristocratic and servile rank, widows, and the *continentes* or naturally austere.[4] The saint was fortified in his work by a strong sense of communion with God, which was manifested in visions seen and voices heard; and we may surmise that Patrick's presence was memorably charismatic. He speaks also of hostility and real danger in the bringing of Christianity to unvisited places at 'the ends of the earth'.[5]

According to the chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine, however, there were 'believers in Christ' in Ireland, presumably before St Patrick began his mission there, and Pope Celestine had sent Palladius to them to be their first bishop.[6] These believers had presumably learned of the new faith in or from Roman Britain, and being perhaps scattered or ill-organised, they stood in need of a bishop's authority to regulate their religious lives and to

---

[1] Liam de Paor, *Saint Patrick's World: The Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age*, Dublin, 1993, p. 5. De Paor conveniently translates many of the documents relating to St Patrick, and also two of the later *Lives* of the saint. The Latin texts of St Patrick's letters are given in Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi*, Dublin, 1993. There is a whole sub-literature on the 'Patrician question'; for a modern biography which takes account of controversies, see R. P. C. Hanson, *Saint Patrick: His Origins and Career*, Oxford, 1968.

[2] de Paor, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

[3] *Confessio*, chs 14 and 38, trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 98 and 103.

[4] *Ibid.*, chs 41-2, p. 104.

[5] *Ibid.*, chs 28-30 and 37-8, pp. 101-2 and 103.

[6] *Epitoma Chronicon*, in *Chronica Minora*, ed. T. Mommsen, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Auctores Antiquissimi*, IX, Berlin, 1892, p. 472; trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

maintain their orthodoxy: for in the person of Pelagius the British Isles had already produced one heresiarch, and the dangers of backsliding into paganism would always be present — certainly St Patrick shows abhorrence of pagan practices in his *Confessio*.[7] In any case, about a century and a half after Patrick's time, St Columbanus could claim that the Irish church had preserved evangelic and apostolic doctrine intact.[8]

Yet even orthodoxy has inflections and nuances; and in the matter of practice, the Irish ways of calculating Easter and of consecrating bishops came to look slightly strange to churchmen more directly in touch with Rome; debate about them took place at the Council of Whitby in 663.[9] As for church organisation as it developed within Irish Christianity, Chadwick marks a certain contrast. To judge by Saint Patrick's two extant letters, the Christianity which he brought to Ireland in the fifth century was that of the westerly provinces of the Roman empire, with their towns and roads and episcopal sees; yet when documents begin to become more numerous in the sixth and seventh centuries, they show us a Christian Church in Ireland which was organised less around bishoprics than around monasteries. In a sense this is not surprising, since there were no real towns in Ireland until Scandinavian invaders began to found them in the ninth century; yet apart from that demographic circumstance, Chadwick saw the Irish monastic movement as showing strong influences from the austere monasticism of Syria and Egypt.[10] If she was right, one is almost tempted to speak of 'modalities' of Christianity having existed in Ireland during what I think will have been a longish conversion period, or at least Christianity there will not have been 'monolithic' in every respect. Under correction, I don't think there is much evidence about how the monastic life and the pastoral care of fresh converts were combined together and managed in the first century or so of the conversion period, or about what overall direction of them there was. However that may be, the documentation of fifth-century

---

[7] Chs 18-19, pp. 99-100. The sucking of nipples was not a pagan rite of 'initiation', as de Paor says at his p. 99, n. 10. Rather, it was a formal gesture of friendship or allegiance, which the unbending saint refused to make to pagans even at some risk to himself. See M. A. O'Brien, 'Miscellanea Hibernica, 13', *Études Celtiques*, 3, 1938, pp. 372-3. One may surmise that Irish Christianity in the fifth century was in what Humphrey Fisher calls a 'quarantine' phase, 'quarantines' being imposed by both Christians and pagans on each other. See below, n. 63 and discussion.

[8] *Sancti Columbani Opera*, ed. and trans. G. S. M. Walker, Dublin, 1957, pp. 38-9. See also N. K. Chadwick, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, London, 1961, pp. 14-15.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 65-9.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 61-118.

affairs is defective and unlikely to be enlarged, though experts in church history may make more coherent and illuminating patterns from it.

I say little more just now about the Christian side of the encounter between the two religious systems, but turn towards the 'traditional' religion with which it had to interact. A difficulty in trying to describe Celtic paganism as it was in Ireland, or elsewhere, is that we don't really know enough about it, either. There are three main bodies of materials from which we can get some idea of it, each of them having its defects: from archaeological remains, from Greek and Roman written sources, and from indigenous Celtic literature written down in the Middle Ages. Even when we put all three together, it's still hard to make a very coherent whole.[11]

To begin at archaeology. In Ireland and in the British Isles, and also in Continental Europe, images of deities are not wanting, though the pre-Roman ones are virtually never accompanied by inscriptions. The standard accounts of them seem to agree that the images afford only a glimpse of the Celtic religion of which they were part — its beliefs, its cosmologies, its rituals, its ethical theories and practices, its formal organisation.[12] To illustrate the point, I take just two objects, one Irish and the other Continental. The Irish object is an anthropomorphic stone figure, formerly at Tanderagee, Co. Armagh, and now kept at Armagh Cathedral. Armagh and its environs are an ancient religious centre.[13] The stone figure appears to be horned, and to wear a cap or helmet; similar headgear is attested in Gaulish archaeological remains. The representation of the mouth suggests a snarl or scream; the figure is neither eirenic nor aesthetically pleasing. It may have been first discovered in a bog, but the exact context is not

---

[11] I do not attempt to discuss here either the recently discovered inscriptions in Continental Celtic dialects, or folk tradition. For a classic study of an aspect of folk tradition, see Máire Macneill, *The Festival of Lughnasa: A Study of the Survival of the Celtic Festival of the Beginning of the Harvest*, London, 1962.

[12] Paul-Marie Duval, *Les Dieux de la Gaule*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1976, p. 2; also Duval, *Travaux sur la Gaule, 1946-86*, Rome, 1989, vol. I, p. 287. Anne Ross has written: 'The evidence for native cults [in Britain] is ... very much of an archaeological nature, but its interpretation is another matter. The material evidence is suggestive of certain patterns of belief, but an understanding of these apparent patterns cannot be based on archaeology alone ...' (*Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition*, London and New York, 1967, p. 2).

[13] See *ibid.*, p. 146 and pl. 46; J. V. S. Megaw, *Art of the European Iron Age: A Study of the Elusive Image*, Bath, 1970, illus. 285, and notes; Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art: From its Beginnings to the Book of Kells*, London, 1990, pp. 226-7. For the Iron Age round building near Armagh, see Christopher J. Lynn, 'Navan Fort', in Sabatino Moscati *et al.* (eds), *The Celts*, New York, 1991, pp. 610-11, and Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland: The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, London, 1994, pp. 74-9 and 232.

scientifically known. Its absolute date 'is a matter of conjecture'.[14] And so we have the figure itself, the archaeologists' expert comparisons and estimates, and our own impressions of what this enigmatic object may have meant.

The second well-known object which I mention is the Gundestrup Cauldron, which was found in a peat bog in Denmark.[15] A number of deities are represented on it, including a god with a wheel who may be Taranis; similar images have been found in Gaul.[16] On one of the cauldron's inner panels a large human figure holds a small human figure upside-down over a vat, but whether the scene represents ritual drowning, ritual resuscitation, or something else again can't be determined; drownings and resuscitations both occur in medieval Irish stories. Much of the iconography of the Gundestrup Cauldron is Celtic; yet lions, elephants and a boy on a dolphin can also be seen on it, and the craftsmanship recalls certain metal objects found in Dacia and Thrace. Over the last two or three decades, many new archaeological discoveries have been made in territories associated with the Celts, and one never knows what may turn up next; but at present how 'Celtic' the Gundestrup cauldron is, and what its religious significance may have been, are both uncertain.

The second body of information about Celtic religion lies in ancient written sources. A number of Greco-Roman historians and geographers have left ethnographic accounts of the Continental Gauls as they saw them about two thousand years ago, with rather less said in them about the Britons and practically nothing about the Irish. The writers include Julius Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and others.[17] Much of what these men wrote seems to derive from Posidonius, a polymath who had travelled in southern Gaul a generation or so before Caesar's campaigns; his work survives only in other writers' citations. All these Greco-Roman writers,

---

[14] Megaw and Megaw, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

[15] See Ross, *op. cit.*, Index, *s.v.* Gundestrup; Megaw, *op. cit.*, Index, *s.v.* Gundestrup; Megaw and Megaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-7. Two incidents in medieval Celtic fiction involving cauldrons are conveniently translated in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales*, rev. C. W. Dunn, Dublin, 1969, p. 42, and in Jeffrey Gantz (trans.), *The Mabinogion*, Harmondsworth, 1976, p. 79.

[16] Duval, *Les Dieux*, pp. 72-3; see also Lucan, *The Civil War* (Pharsalia), ed. and trans. J. D. Duff, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1928, I.444-6.

[17] Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, ed. and trans. H. J. Edwards, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1963; Diodorus of Sicily, ed. and trans. C. H. Oldfather *et al.*, 10 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1950-67; *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. and trans. H. L. Jones, 8 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1917-89. The most relevant texts are printed and translated with a valuable introduction in J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60C, 1960, pp. 189-275.

including Posidonius, perceived the Gauls as barbarians and remembered that they were old enemies; besides that, the writers were naturally influenced by the philosophical, political and literary circles that they lived in and wrote for. They probably misunderstood some things the Gauls did, and misrepresented others. According to Tierney, much in Posidonius was written from an explicitly Stoic point of view, while Pliny's remarks about the druids and their plant-lore are philosophically sceptical and dismissive. After Gaul and Britain were safely pacified, Roman authors had no pressing reason to write about them, though in the second century Ptolemy had some information about Ireland and gives names and locations for some of its peoples.[18] One or two things do, however, seem to emerge from the Greco-Roman sources fairly clearly. On the one hand, the Celts seem to have believed the cosmos to be a kind of regular process that could in part be understood. For example, Divitiacus, a Gaulish druid and political leader, told Cicero that he knew how to foretell some future events by interpreting signs. On the other hand, the accounts of the sacrifices conducted by the druids suggest that they thought of the cosmos as also being ruled by beings something like people to be propitiated. If the Gaulish sacrifice of human beings for purposes of divination is to be believed, the druids sometimes operated with both these ideas.[19]

The remaining chief source of information about Celtic paganism is the indigenous Celtic literature of the British Isles; it is quite abundant, especially in Ireland. A difficulty in using this literature as evidence for Celtic paganism is this: as we now have it, it is late in date. The oldest extant Irish books containing secular literary material come from the twelfth century — some six hundred years after the time of St Patrick's mission. Now it's true that the most ambitious Irish heroic saga, the *Táin Bó Cúalnge* (let it be the example here), may have existed in irrecoverable oral forms for a long time before it was written down, and that the written forms of it that we actually have barely mention Christianity at all. It's also true that the *Táin* narrative accepts sign-reading druids and poets as normal persons of social consequence, and it even brings in certain figures who belong to old Pan-Celtic religion, the chief of them being the deity Lug.[20]

---

18 For Ptolemy's map of the British Isles, see *De Vita Agricolae*, ed. R. M. Ogilvie and Sir Ian Richmond, Oxford, 1967, pp. 38-9. For Pliny on the druids, see his *Natural History*, ed. and trans H. Rackham *et al.*, 10 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1938-62, XVI.24, XXIV.103-4, XXIX.52 and XXX.13.

19 Cicero, *De Divinatione*, ed. and trans. W. A. Falconer, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1923, I.xli.90; Caesar, *Gallic War*, VI.16.

20 Lug makes an appearance in the Book of Leinster version of the *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, ed. and trans. Cecile O'Rahilly, Dublin, 1970, ll. 2134-55, trans. p. 198; for another version

Lug and one or two others play only minor parts in the *Táin*, but their presence there at all is a trait which contrasts with the narrative mode of *Beowulf*, even though the Old English poem has its own element of the marvellous and is actually older, as a text, than any version of the *Táin*. The *Chanson de Roland* is about as old as the earliest *Táin* version, and is militantly Christian. In any case, the twelfth-century *Táin* versions, with their druids, Lug and Morrígan, were written out on valuable vellum at ecclesiastical centres. Much the same is true of other medieval Irish texts which I must pass over. One of the complex interactions between the pre-Christian 'traditional' order and the new Christian order, then, seems to have resulted in the preservation of certain 'traditional' elements by the Church itself; otherwise, no written record of them would have survived. Yet I doubt that those fragments of old pagan mythology that got into Irish monastic manuscripts amount to reliable, detailed data about Celtic paganism in Ireland. In reading old texts, it's often hard to tell where serious belief ended and where literary convention began; and it's certainly hard to think that texts in which pagan scraps appear were composed by old believers for old believers. Much attenuation of the pagan must have taken place. I prefer to think of the 'pagan survivals' in medieval Irish and Welsh literature as parts of a cultural heritage which the Church, functioning as a cultural institution, neither endorsed nor suppressed, but tolerated. Irish litterati may have been like their contemporaries elsewhere who copied out Ovid or the *Edda*, or like Christian poets who, a thousand years after Constantine converted, went on referring to the Greco-Roman pantheon as if it still functioned. An Irish endnote to the Book of Leinster *Táin Bó Cúalnge* in fact calls for a conventional blessing on those who copied it out correctly, while the writer of the accompanying Latin endnote (probably the same man) announces that for his part he gives 'no credence to the various incidents related in [the story]. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments; ... while still others are

---

of the incident, see Thomas Kinsella (trans.), *The Táin*, Oxford, 1970, pp. 142-4. The appearance of Morrígan is associated with the same *Táin* episode: O'Rahilly, ll. 1986-2010; Kinsella, pp. 132-7. Lug, romanised as Mercurius, is well attested in Roman Gaul: see Duval, *Les Dieux*, pp. 67-70; and further Jan de Vries, *Keltische Religion*, Stuttgart, 1961, pp. 40-5 and 50-5. The recently discovered Tablet of Chamalières invokes the Gaulish Lugus in Roman writing: see *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe and Early Ireland and Wales*, ed. John T. Koch and John Carey, Malden, Mass., 1995, pp. 1-3. De Vries treats Morrígan as one of the Irish 'war-goddesses', pp. 235-8. The case for the antiquity of the Irish heroic tradition made by Kenneth Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, Cambridge, 1964, now looks exaggerated.

intended for the delectation of foolish men.' Nevertheless, the endnotes were added after the copying of the old story had been completed.[21]

My general conclusion is that even when you put archaeology together with the relevant ancient and medieval literature, any detailed notion of belief, rite, religious organisation and praxis in pre-Christian Ireland remains elusive. All the more difficult, therefore, to estimate what happened in the fifth or sixth centuries when Celtic pagans listened to unfamiliar Christian preaching, or to estimate in what ways the change from the old religion to the new affected how people felt, thought and lived.

Even though it will be quite inadequate, I don't see how I can avoid saying something about the theories of Georges Dumézil, for they bear on the understanding of pre-Christian religion in the Celtic realms, and hence on its encounter with Christianity. Dumézil proposed and offered to document what he called a tripartite Indo-European 'ideology', or religious philosophy. The ideology was prehistoric — elaborated and fixed before the Indo-European peoples dispersed from their original homelands and migrated to the places where we find them in historical times.[22] This 'ideology', according to Dumézil, combined a set of three 'functions'. They were these: sacred sovereignty; force (especially military force), and a less well-defined 'third function' of fertility, numerousness, nourishment, wealth and the like. Or perhaps, to label the functions more crudely: order, the application of power, productivity. These abstract Indo-European 'functions' were embodied in and performed by three hierarchised social groups: priests, warriors and free farmers. There seems to have been no formal place in the system for the alien or the unfree. Even though the Indo-Europeans migrated long distances to their historical homelands in India, Italy, Ireland and so on, and even though they encountered many other peoples in their wanderings, they preserved their tripartite ideology as a kind of 'deep structure' to their thought ('deep structure' is not one of Dumézil's own terms). Celts and Scandinavians preserved the ideology until well into the present era, and it is also said to be one of the

---

[21] O'Rahilly, *op. cit.*, p. 272. By 'deception of demons' the copyist may have meant passages in the *Táin* such as those mentioning the pagan deities (above, n. 20). By 'poetic figments' he may have meant florid passages such as those describing CúChulainn's warrior frenzy, as in O'Rahilly, ll. 2230-2300, trans. pp.199-202 — a passage which is also connected in n. 20, above.

[22] A convenient introduction to Dumézil is C. Scott Littleton, *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil*, 3rd edn, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1983. Dumézil summarised his basic ideas in *L'Idéologie tripartie des Indo-Européens*, Bruxelles, 1958. I have not yet seen the last, posthumous version of his *Mythe et Épopée*, Paris, 1995.

foundations of the Indian caste system. It was true, Dumézil indicated, that 'surface structures' were often modified in the course of time; but the deep structure persisted. Sometimes it would manifest itself in explicitly religious documents, sometimes in historicised myths, sometimes in epic narrative.

I give one example of this persistence. Apparently the Indo-Europeans did not clearly recognise any single Supreme Being who, having created the cosmos, continued to govern it. Their two chief 'sovereign' deities were Mitra and Varuna (to use the Indic names). These two complemented each other by exercising separate modes of sacred and sovereign power, and were further complemented by minor sovereign deities. One of these was Aryaman. Aryaman is mentioned in Vedic texts as being associated with restoration to health (*assainissement*) and with marriages. Now in medieval Irish pseudo-historical texts, the figure of one Eremon occasionally appears. In one story told about him, he heals warriors of mortal wounds by means of milk, and so helps defeat an evil enemy. In another story, Eremon arranges significant marriages. These Irish stories, as we have them, are no older than the twelfth-century Book of Leinster; yet Dumézil compares them with texts composed in India up to two thousand years earlier; he points to analogies between the Celtic and the Indic which, he argues, derive from a distant common origin.[23] From long perspectives and extensive comparative materials of this general kind, Dumézil obtained many striking results. His results and methods may help us detect and explain traces of ancient Indo-European ideology and mythology in medieval Irish literature and solve many puzzles in it; they may seem to offer better insights into old Celtic religion than mute stone figures can do, or biased Roman ethnography, or a medieval literature that had to pass through clerical filters in order to reach us. Small wonder, then, that Dumézil's theories have won wide acceptance and have been adopted by others. As Lindow remarked, Dumézil's Scandinavianist critics were in a minority and seemed likely to 'fall increasingly silent'.[24]

---

[23] For the 'sovereign' gods, see Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1948, English trans. by Derek Coltman, New York, 1988; also Dumézil, *Le troisième souverain: essai sur le dieu indo-iranien Aryaman et sur la formation de l'histoire mythique de l'Irlande*, Paris, 1949, and *L'Idéologie*, pp. 108-18. Dumézil's general approach to his disparate texts is 'structuralist' rather than 'historicist': see John Lindow, 'Mythology and Mythography', in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds), *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, Ithaca and London, 1985, pp. 22-67. For sketches of Dumézil's intellectual career, see the interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur* for 14 Jan., 1983, pp. 50-4, and Arnaldo Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians*, Middletown, Conn., 1987, pp. 289-314.
[24] *Op. cit.*, pp. 42-8, esp. p. 47.

No one questions Dumézil's great achievements as a comparatist; yet an attempt somehow to apply his work to the what and why of how religious conversions took place leads to questions rather than to answers. Dumézil's main concerns were not with radical change, but with deep-lying continuities in his Indo-European system of thought. His preferred materials were mythological and/or literary texts in the many Indo-European languages; and as one would expect from a man of his philological training, he ranged backwards and forwards in time noting patterned similarities, rather as one moves between the reconstructed linguistic forms of *Ur*-Indo-European and the speech-forms actually attested in historical times. In short, Dumézil explored internal continuities and modifications rather than external contacts.

With a mention now of other aspects of Dumézil's thinking, other ideas enter the present discussion. For although Dumézil made it clear that his Indo-European ideology included religion, it also took in division of labour, law, literary culture, and a philosophy of the cosmos. The threefold partition of the abstract 'functions' among priests, warriors and free farmers implies an ideology of social structure; for it's hard to suppose that the Indo-Europeans of (say) 3,000 years ago first excogitated an ideology and then created a society in order to embody it. Rather, the ideology would be an intellectual superstructure built upon an existing economic and social base. That proposition obviously calls to mind Émile Durkheim's ideas about how 'collective representations' form and tend to perpetuate themselves, and about how rites and beliefs in general (Durkheim thought) are symbolic representations of society itself, and of its modes of differentiation.[25] And indeed Dumézil was perfectly familiar with French sociological thought about societies and their symbolic structures; he had studied under Marcel Mauss and much admired him. Nevertheless, Dumézil's attitudes towards the sociological school of Durkheim and Mauss seem to have fluctuated, perhaps because of political differences among them. And in a way uncongenial to the French sociologists, Dumézil seems also to have been attracted by Frazer's way of arguing by analogy in *The Golden Bough*, and by Frazer's way of showing the long persistence of certain patterns of thought. In the decades between the wars, Dumézil also found impressive the explorations of Germanic folklore carried out by Lily Weiser and Otto Höfler; and they, too, were interested in long continuities of thought, though not in the same ones as Frazer. In making connections at a distance of two thousand years, then, between Aryaman in India and

---

[25] See the discussion in Robert Murphy, *The Dialectics of Social Life: Alarms and Excursions in Anthropological Theory*, London, 1972, pp. 163-70.

Eremon in Ireland (to revert to the little example mentioned above), Dumézil was perhaps consciously, but not very explicitly, working with an apprehension of thought-patterns for which literary evidence provided analogies and indices rather than philologically provable connections; or with an idea of old thought-patterns which did not depend on complete fixity in their symbolic systems: so that the structures of the old ideology endured whether they found expression in religious texts, or in epic poetry, or in historicised myth.

But as for symbolic structures in general, there has more recently been some division of opinion between anthropological theorists who privilege what verbal informants *say* (or have written), and those who privilege the observation of actual social behaviour. Belief and social action, it is said, are often actually discrepant, though societies often tolerate the discrepancies well enough.[26] For his part, Dumézil did not speculate much on the realities of social behaviour among the ancient Indo-Europeans. He preferred their texts, and in any case the details of ancient social realities are generally inaccessible. He did once say, however, that Indo-European society might not have been totally compartmentalised into the three 'castes' of priests, warriors and farmers. The actual carriers of the three functions were perhaps a limited number of families or clans, to whom the mass of the population entrusted themselves according to circumstance and need.[27] In that case, the hegemonic families or clans would have exercised social and economic power to a degree that may not seem attractive to us now. Mythology, furthermore, is not the same thing as religion, as Lindow points out.[28] For my present limited purpose, Dumézil's work seems to cast no great light on the Celtic paganism from which the Irish converted to Christianity, but it amply confirms what archaeological evidence and the Roman writers both point to: that the prehistoric Indo-European religion and its particular realisation in Ireland can be classed among 'archaic' religions.

2

I return for a moment to my starting point: if we want to get an idea of how the Irish conversion from Celtic paganism to Christianity took place, we need to understand something of both those complex systems of belief,

---

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 157-63.

27 Dumézil, *L'Idéologie*, pp. 17-18.

28 *Op. cit.*, pp. 22-3.

and of how they interacted; but our information is less detailed and coherent than we would wish on both sides of the interaction. It seems necessary, then, to turn to wider and more general theories about religious systems and religious change; and these theories are usually based on things observed in other places in the world, and much more recently than the fifth century. I am thinking especially of a general typology proposed by Robert Bellah; one need not accept all the details and implications of the typology to find it interesting and potentially helpful towards a resolution of the 'Irish question'. Here I take up only two of Bellah's five typological categories.[29] In the terminology that Bellah uses, Celtic paganism would be a 'traditional' or 'archaic' religion; and in Christianity it encountered a 'world', or 'historic', or (Germanically) a 'world-historical' religion. At least that label helps us escape some of the problems involved in Dumézil's methodology, for Bellah's typology would assimilate Indo-European religion to the general group of 'archaic' religions of the world. Its Celtic branch would inherit its characteristics, perhaps retaining some traits of 'primitive' religion as well. (I leave aside the question of what the religion of the historical Celts may have owed to the pre-Celtic inhabitants of the territories they seized.)

Archaic religions, according to Bellah, typically display a complex of gods, priests, sacrifice and worship. Gods control the human and natural worlds, and human beings must deal with them in a purposive and regulated way. Such dealings are the particular business of priesthoods who devise, operate and control a system of communication between the gods and human beings. Priesthoods may also elaborate large cosmologies in which all things divine and natural have their place. The organisation of archaic religions, however, tends to be merged with the general organisation and structure of the society; and when population increases enough, a two-class social system may appear. This will consist (and here is another Weberian idea) of a lower status-group comprising farmers and artisans, and an upper status-group of land-owning aristocrats who monopolise military and political power and have the priestly class as their allies. Noble families sometimes claim descent from divine ancestors, and sometimes divine powers are attributed to kings in addition to their political, legal, military and other functions.

---

[29] Robert Bellah, 'Religious Evolution', *American Sociological Review*, 29, 1964, pp. 358-74, esp. pp. 361-6. As Bellah's title suggests, he elaborated on Max Weber's theories about 'primitive' and 'world' religions, which were in turn strongly influenced by evolutionary and rationalistic ideas current in the late nineteenth century. See Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford, 1993, pp. 7-10.

These are of course very general propositions and make best sense when read in the context that Bellah provides. But they seem to fit what written sources tell us about the Celts quite well. I give a few examples of the fit. We can at least trust Caesar when he says that Gaulish religion looked to him like a variation on other contemporary 'archaic' religions that he knew, including his own Roman religion which was Indo-European in origin; and Caesar laconically adds that the Gauls had much the same idea of the gods as everyone else.[30] The Romans also recognised the Celtic druids of Gaul and Britain as a priesthood, though they probably had little direct acquaintance with druids in Ireland. To Diodorus Siculus, the Gaulish druids were 'philosophers' who, as it were, could speak the language of the gods and so communicate effectively with them about human affairs. The gods required sacrifices, and part of the druids' great authority lay in their power to exclude from sacrifice anyone who displeased them, exclusion from sacrifice amounting to exclusion from society. In Gaul, the druids and the military aristocrats (*equites*) were in political alliance to exercise hegemony over an immiserated class of economic producers.[31]

A thousand years or so later, druids at least had a place in Irish cultural memory. According to Patrick's seventh-century hagiographer Muirchú, druids counselled the pagan king Loegaire not to listen to the saint, and by magic they tried to oppose him; but the saint defeated and destroyed them through the power of God.[32] In medieval Irish fiction, druids also act as privileged advisers to kings.[33] Druids, however, may best be regarded as a sub-group within a more extensive native Celtic intellectual and learned class, to the whole of which the word 'priesthood' is not appropriate. This class included 'bards', and those whom Strabo, IV.iv.4, calls *vates* and whom the Irish later called *filid*, the words coming from separate linguistic roots which imply visionary powers. In medieval Irish fiction, the *filid* possess magical arts, especially that of 'satire' — versified obloquy directed against those who failed to live up to social norms or who gave other cause for displeasure. So great were the powers of the *filid* that it was said that they raised not only blushes of shame on the faces of their victims, but

---

[30] *Gallic War*, VI.17.1-2.

[31] Diodorus Siculus, V.31; Strabo, IV.iv.4; Caesar, VI.13. For general accounts of the druids, see Nora K. Chadwick, *The Druids*, Cardiff, 1966, and Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, London, 1968.

[32] *Four Latin Lives of St. Patrick*, ed. Ludwig Bieler, Dublin, 1971, pp. 87-97. A version of the story is translated in de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 183-5; compare also I Kings 18:17-40.

[33] As in Kinsella's *Táin*, pp. 84-5, 218-9, etc.

actual weals and blisters; and sometimes satire even caused death.[34] Sometimes again in literary texts, self-interested *filid* abuse their powers and are punished for it, as in the story of Aithirne and Luaine;[35] and sometimes poets work directly for rulers.[36] In this respect, the *filid* sound like opportunist Weberian 'magicians', and might fit Bellah's category of 'compact' and 'primitive' religion rather than his 'archaic' stage.[37] Finally in this little list of probable 'archaic' features in Celtic religion, I mention certain medieval Irish texts where kings are described as if they had cosmic powers: so that when a king reigned well and judged justly seasons were good and crops abundant, but the reigns of unjust and ungenerous kings were marked by dearth and calamity.[38]

I've been able to give here only a superficial idea of how Celtic paganism might approximate to Bellah's category of 'archaic' religions; but I think it's reasonably concordant with the Greco-Roman and Irish written sources, and perhaps with Dumézil. Now in or about the fifth century, this 'archaic' Celtic religion in Ireland encounters Christianity. In Bellah's terms, Christianity is an 'historic' religion, others being Buddhism and Islam.[39] Following Weber, Bellah has the historic religions originating well after Indo-European times and mainly in the first millennium before the Common Era, Islam being the latest of them. According to Bellah, historic religions share a number of common features. They are 'dualistic' in the sense that they propose the existence of a realm which quite transcends the present world. This transcendental realm is a higher reality, a reality

---

[34] See Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, Princeton, 1960, esp. ch. 1.

[35] Summarised in *ibid.*, p. 27.

[36] As in Kinsella's *Táin*, pp. 168-9.

[37] Bellah, *op. cit.*, p.363, and Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, London, 1966, p. 88.

[38] See Maartje Draak, 'Some Aspects of Kingship in Pagan Ireland', in *The Sacral Kingship: La Regalità Sacra*, Leiden, 1959, pp. 651-63. Draak gives a temperate account of this matter, and cites several of the important medieval texts, including the twelfth-century account by Giraldus Cambrensis of a royal inauguration in Ulster accompanied by horse-sacrifice. The Celtic learned class was an enduring institution. Elizabethan Englishmen glimpsed court poets attending Irish kings and nobles: ragged men with an air of filthy and barbaric magnificence. I met one man in Australia who claimed to and probably did belong to an ancient Celtic school of esoteric knowledge. Though our relations were friendly, I didn't greatly like him. He had, I thought, the dissociated abstractedness that you find in some creative artists and some religious cranks — as if their eyes gaze not the ordinary world, but on another world that is more interesting to them, and more real. Look at such people, and you may see a self-absorbed egotist, or a shabby fraud. Look again, and you may see something out of the common.

[39] *Op. cit.*, pp. 366-8.

infinitely superior to that visible in the present world, which in consequence is implicitly devalued. Historic religions thus claim to offer deeper insights into the ultimate conditions of human existence, to reveal a clearer conception of the flawed human self and to open up a way to salvation which often entails renunciation of this present world. In archaic religions, the priesthoods were usually too deeply merged in the general social structure to exert any leverage on its existing conditions: druids, for example, controlled the traditional knowledge and wisdom of the Gauls, but they were content to maintain their alliance with the military aristrocrats and enjoy their privileges. Historic religions, on the other hand, are typically founded by 'charismatic' figures (the Weberian term) and have potential to bring on great social changes. They demand more than assent and conformity, they demand adherence and commitment; by their universalism, they transcend local conditions. Historic religions may retain the practices of ritual and sacrifice which the archaic religions had already developed, but they also organise their adherents into close-knit communities. By their reliance on writings associated with charismatic founders, they entrench and promote literacy. Secular rulers find in the end that historic religions cannot be fully controlled, since part of their essence is that they originate and maintain transcendental standards against which the rulers themselves may be criticised and judged.

Bellah's typological distinction between archaic and historic religions seems to offer some insight into what was involved when Irish pagans began to convert to Christianity. To put it portentously, the deepest change would be a shift from a monistic to a dualistic and transcendental conception of the ultimate grounds of human existence, though the change in faith would not, of course, have affected all converts equally or simultaneously. Even allowing for self-interest in Patrick's writings and sectional interests in the seventh-century Patrician legends, we can perhaps see that saint as a charismatic figure entering an 'archaic' society and appealing first to those whom it had marginalised. According to Patrick, the Irish were already receptive to asceticism, and when Irish Christianity took a monastic turn in the 'age of saints', the monks' renunciation of the world, the severe austerities that they took upon themselves and the high value they set on *peregrinatio* all seem well-documented in Irish and non-Irish historical and literary sources. Both developments would contrast with the archaic, pre-Christian Celtic religion.[40]

---

[40] For a sympathetic view of monastic renunciations of the world, see Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-111.

Supposing that one accepts Bellah's general typology of religions as useful orientation in trying to think about the Irish conversion, one would still like to understand the process in more detail. And it is here that the work of the Africanist Robin Horton may become relevant, or at least some of the issues that Horton raised. I had better say immediately that with respect to my Irish question, I feel that Horton's own ideas are less helpful than the discussions which they provoked. I'd better say, too, that I've not noticed Horton mentioning Bellah; yet since both scholars were working within the same general framework at about the same time, I mention their names together.

Horton (I understand) has taught anthropology in Nigerian universities for the last thirty years or so. To those who lived through them, they must have been crowded years: the end of the colonial regime and political independence; state-building and the Biafran war; the winds of change in Africa; modernisation, incorporation into the world economy, the growth of huge cities — all this happened within less than a lifetime. Comparable changes had taken place in western Europe centuries beforehand, but there they came more slowly: a millennium separated conversion to Christianity from the Industrial Revolution. Much of Horton's work, so far as I know and understand it, has naturally been concerned with the intensive culture-contact between 'traditional' African society and nineteenth- and twentieth-century western Europe with its version of Christianity. I choose and attempt to outline three major issues which Horton's work raises; for the detailed argumentation, one reads Horton *in extenso*. I think I can see these ideas of Horton's as being applications, developments or revaluations of sociological and anthropological themes and problems, current in one way or another over the last hundred years, and still evolving. They have had their vicissitudes in sociological theorising and debate; and it's as artificial to separate them from that complex of theory, and from one another, as it is to disengage them from the Nigerian context and the preoccupations of Africanists. For the present limited purpose, however, it's convenient to take one by one the following: Horton's views on rationality; and on social microcosms and macrocosms; and his 'thought-experiment' suggesting how the historic or world religions of Christianity and Islam may have amounted to little more than catalysts in religious changes which Africans themselves had already begun. I further have the impression that one of Horton's underlying purposes was to correct an older European perception that African thinking was somehow significantly different from what had

developed in Europe, especially from the seventeenth century onwards. Horton probably aimed at a vindication of Africanity in Nigeria and in its religion; and such vindications, or revaluations, have been a major concern of Africanists since the end of the colonial era.[41]

First, the matter of 'rationality'. It has been an important topic in religious and sociological debate for more than a century, both in respect of European self-questioning and in respect of the European encounter with other cultural traditions.[42] Without trying to be philosophically or sociologically precise about it, I should like to distinguish two aspects of 'rationality', both of which I believe Horton invokes: one is the nature and distribution of rationality among human beings generally, and the other is the conditions under which what we call rationality seems to have developed.

Now when Europeans reached Africa and other parts of the world, it sometimes seemed to them that they had arrived where their familiar writ of European rationality did not run. Indigenous peoples were capably transacting the ordinary business of human existence, but in some respects their modes of thinking seemed non-rational or even irrational. In the earlier part of the present century, these apparently different modes of thinking greatly interested theorists who had already absorbed the idea of evolution; and in a book now notorious for political incorrectness, Lévy-Bruhl sought to define what he called 'primitive mentality'. In 1964 Robert Bellah still referred to Lévy-Bruhl, suggesting that there had been a stage in religious evolution when thinking was more 'fluid' or 'compact' than Europeans usually suppose their own to be; and that while this non-'rational' thinking was a dominant mode, the self, including the religious self, remained merged in the totality of its society. That mode of thinking was distinct from and older than what Bellah typically finds in 'historic' religions.[43] Robin Horton on the other hand sought to show that African rationality is little different from its European counterpart.

---

[41] See, for example, T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo (eds), *The Historical Study of African Religion*, London, 1972; Terence Ranger, 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History', in Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-98.

[42] You can of course trace reflections on rationality and rationalism back to the Enlightenment, or to the Ionian Greeks; but I don't seek to do that here. For an account of Weber's views, see Bendix, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-79. For collections of essays, see Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan (eds), *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies,* London, 1973; Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West*, Cambridge, 1993.

[43] See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare, with new Introduction by C. Scott Littleton, Princeton, 1985; also Hefner, *op. cit.*, p. 8 and n. 6.

In a wider field, Horton turned to ways in which Europeans and Africans have evolved theories of causality. Much that happens in the world is caused by entities or forces that are both invisible and universal; and both Europeans and Africans, in different idioms, clearly recognise the difference between personal and 'common sense' perceptions of causality as opposed to impersonal and 'theoretical' systems of explanation. In these respects, Africans and Europeans have thought along similar lines; the main difference in the idioms deployed lay in the Europeans' earlier development of literacy, and in their earlier discovery through commerce and exploration of the macrocosm beyond their own shores.[44] To put it another way: centuries earlier in Europe, Christianity had been 'rationalised' (in Weber's sense of the word) by the establishment of centralised priesthoods, by literacy, by the closure of the canon of sacred texts, and the like. The active centres of Christianity, Weber thought, had been towns and cities, and its most important adherents had been urban middle-class people working as artisans and traders. Those were occupations that did not completely depend on the processes of nature and were to some extent insulated from its unpredictability, as agriculture is not; and they were occupations that demanded calculation and planning, especially when commerce expanded to include long-distance maritime trade.[45] Rationality in the conduct of economic life would cumulatively encourage theorising about the explanation, prediction and control of what Horton calls 'space-time events'. Now 'traditional' West Africa had not lacked urban centres; but the rationality of West African religious thought and the rationality of its European counterpart, though in principle equal, had had different bodies of experience to work upon, and were hence related in different degrees to the transformation of the 'traditional' life-world.

For Bellah, see esp. his pp. 361-4 in *op. cit.* Bellah defines what he means by 'evolution' carefully; he is not uncritical of Lévy-Bruhl.

[44] Robin Horton, 'Destiny and the Unconscious in West Africa', *Africa,* 31, 1961, pp. 110-16; 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', *Africa,* 37, 1967, Part I, pp. 50-71, and Part II, pp. 155-187. At the beginning of this dense, two-part article, Horton mentions his early training in biology, chemistry and the philosophy of science. On p. 52, he observes that some of the puzzles raised by Lévy-Bruhl 'have never been solved by anthropologists'. He also alludes to Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka,* London, 1961, as does Bellah. Students of religious change were reading the same books at about the same time.

[45] For some account of Weber's thinking on these matters, see Bendix, *op. cit.,* pp. 1-10 and 83-97; Hefner, *op. cit.,* pp. 14-18; Robin Horton, 'African Conversion', *Africa,* 41, 1971, pp. 85-108, esp. pp. 98-100.

The matter of 'rationality' in religion is, however, even more complicated than this, as Horton shows. Religions, he suggests, can have two broadly separable aspects. One of them might be called 'theoretical' or 'cognitive', though Horton prefers to speak of theoretical systems 'intended for the explanation, prediction, and control of space-time events': these 'events' include most human fortune and misfortune, individual or collective. The other aspect of religions is sometimes called 'emotional' or 'personal'; though here Horton prefers 'communion', meaning (roughly) a human being's sense of a close relationship with a god or spirit conceived as a person. 'Communion' of this kind is not 'rational', in the ordinary sense of the word, but perhaps takes the form of deep emotional involvement with an *alter*, or Other. Among the Yoruba a sense of identification with an *orisa* or 'god' may result in the *orisa*'s taking intermittent trance-possession of the worshipper; one might also think of Bernini's Saint Teresa. In archaic religions, and in some historic religions such as Christianity (to use here Bellah's terms), gods are thus theoretical entities controlling the cosmos, and at the same time they are enough like people for relationships with them to seem or feel like an extension of social relationships among human beings.[46]

In historic religions, the balance between these two aspects of religion (i.e. explanatory theory and communion) does not necessarily remain the same. Take cosmology. Medieval Christianity, while offering a communion with God, also elaborated models of cosmology in which every aspect of the created universe had its proper place. One model was that of the Great Chain of Being, a chain which extended from God the Creator down through the angels and humanity to the non-rational beasts, plants and stones. This was the 'old' philosophy. The 'new' philosophy of the seventeenth century called it all in doubt. ''Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone', wrote John Donne in 1611. From about then onwards, the Church gradually ceded most theorising about the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events in the world to the natural sciences, as Horton's term 'space-time' suggests. In Christianity (one simplifies grossly) religious emphasis shifted away from cosmology towards a complex of ideas and feelings centred on 'communion'. It was this later form of Christianity that reached Nigeria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But in itself 'communion' can take more than one form; and Horton distinguishes between 'this-worldly' and 'other-worldly' orientations in it, perhaps somewhat like the medieval distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In the first kind of communion, one may have the sense of

---

[46] *Ibid.*, pp. 95-7.

walking through the world with God: an integration of the self may be one consequence of it, the enhancement of relationships with fellow human beings another; for the relationship with God is the model for all relationships. In the second kind of communion — insulated, contemplative, ascetic — the self is integrated in a different way, a way which may result in the attenuation of ordinary 'this-world' human relationships. 'Other-worldly' communion of this kind is not confined to Christianity, of course; and certain remarkable persons are able to maintain a balance between both kinds of 'communion'.[47]

Discussion of differences between European and African rationality and of their separate idioms leads to a second complex of ideas associated with Horton's work: microcosm and macrocosm. It sometimes seemed to European discoverers and colonisers that much of the non-European world was timeless and unchanging, especially if they compared it with their own urbanised nation-states and reflected on their written history. The non-European world seemed a world of 'microcosms', to use Horton's word: simple, rural micro-worlds, rather insulated from one another and from the macrocosm of the wider world; places where daily occupations and face-to-face human relationships had always been closely interwoven. That older view of the non-European world has proved too simple. Pre-colonial Africa had in fact known violent large-scale political movements, and it is now clear that religious and other kinds of trans-regional association extended over wide areas of the continent. The microcosms were not as insulated as they may have seemed.[48] All the same, industrialisation and modernisation had the same impacts in Nigeria as they did everywhere else. The life of microcosms was disrupted. Nigeria began to be incorporated

---

[47] See *ibid.*, pp. 95-8. In hagiographical tradition, there is perhaps a recognisable difference between (say) Tirechán's account of St Patrick's practical activity in founding churches on the one hand (as in de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-9), and Bede's story about the extreme asceticism of Drycthelm on the other. See Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-5, together with her account of the tensions between the 'Celtic Order' and the 'Roman Order', pp. 118 ff.

[48] For a sympathetic presentation of the older view, see Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and its Transformations*, Ithaca, 1953, esp. pp. 11-63. Contemporaneously with colonisation, Europeans could see the destruction of their own microcosms, as Ferdinand Tönnies' observations on 'Gesellschaft und Gemeinschaft' showed as early as 1878, and the poetry of Jammes and Verhaeren a little later. For more recent studies of African complexities, see Robin Horton, 'A Definition of Religion, and its Uses', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 90, 1960, pp. 220-6; Horton, 'African Conversion', p. 86; Deryck Schreuder and Geoffrey Oddie, 'What is "Conversion"? History, Christianity and Religious Change in Colonial Africa and South Asia', *Journal of Religious History*, 15, 1989, pp. 496-518, and Terence Ranger, 'The Local and the Global in Southern African Religious History', in Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-98.

into the world economy, first by the export of cash-crops, then of oil. Growing towns and cities drew in migrants from the countryside as young men left the fields to become clerks, teachers and traders in the years between the world wars.

Now comes Horton's 'thought-experiment'. It goes something like this. You begin with the 'typical traditional cosmology'.[49] What is this cosmology, and what is its rationale? It is a theoretical system for the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events. How does it function? It functions through two 'tiers' of beings who are unobservable, universal and personal; their activities underpin events in the visible world of human experience. What are the two tiers? The lower tier consists of 'lesser spirits'; among the Yoruba, they include well-known figures like Ogun and Shango, together with some hundreds of others. These lesser spirits are responsible for many space-time events, and are closely involved in human affairs. If they are displeased by immoral human behaviour, they may inflict misfortune on the culprits. Human beings may learn the will of the lesser spirits by divination; they may seek their favour by sacrifice; with beneficial results they may cultivate communion with them. In the upper tier, a supreme being stands alone; among the Yoruba, he is Olorun. Olorun caused the creation of the world, and in a rather remote fashion he still presides over its functioning. By contrast with Shango and the rest, Olorun has no elaborated cult, and morally he is neutral. So far, all this sounds pretty much like one of Robert Bellah's 'archaic' religions. Then, about the beginning of the twentieth century, comes intensive European contact with all its apparatus. Great social changes in Nigeria follow. In particular, modernisation weakens the boundaries that had insulated the microcosms, and brings the world macrocosm plainly into view. How would Nigerian thought respond to the changes? What, in the thought-experiment, would one then expect to happen to the two-tier system?

For the purposes of the thought-experiment, we need to remember two things (though Horton does not quite spell it out like this[50]). First, Africans are rational. Then, their two-tiered religion was a theoretical system for explanation, prediction and control. Confronted by great social changes, and being rational, Africans adapt their system to the new circumstances: so that since the lesser spirits tended to be associated with the old microcosms, the boundaries of which were dissolving, and since rapid change was obliterating many fields of experience with which their cults had been associated, then you would expect the lesser spirits to lose their

---

[49] 'African Conversion', p. 101.

[50] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

importance in human affairs. Conversely the supreme being, who had previously seemed remote and to whom no strong cult was attached, would now appear as a fit ruler of the newly-discovered larger macrocosm: he had, after all, created the world. He would assume that concern with moral behaviour which one could no longer plausibly attribute to the retreating lesser spirits; and as the lesser spirits lost importance, the cult of the supreme being would be elaborated. And so, according to the thought-experiment, the two-tiered African traditional cosmology would adapt itself to new socio-economic conditions by means of rational internal adjustment. As the economic base changed, the ideological superstructure would change, too. But what about the proponents of the 'world' religions who were active in Nigeria as modernisation made its impact? Neither the preachers of Christianity nor of Islam were necessary to effect the shift of the traditional religious economy from a polytheism towards a monolatry. Islam and Christianity, Horton concludes, need have been no more than catalysts in a process which was already 'in the air'.

Horton's paper on 'African Conversion' actually begins circuitously with a detailed review of John Peel's *Aladura: A Religious Movement among the Yoruba* (London, 1968), and this strategy suggests that Horton wanted to show that the actual history of conversion to Christianity in Nigeria tended to confirm the thought-experiment which he then went on to make. In the nineteenth century, he says, Christian missionaries at first made little progress. Later, when the supreme being of Christianity became associated with the newly-revealed macrocosm and its modernisations, Africans listened to the missionaries more readily. They joined African branches of European churches. Later still, having become dissatisfied, some Christian converts seceded from these churches in order to found their own 'African' churches. About 1920, the 'African' church movement was superseded by the Aladura movement, apparently a more radically Africanised form of Christianity.[51] Or, to put it another way, the original cosmology — that theoretical system for the explanation, prediction and control of space-time events — reasserted Africanity and reshaped the importation which had influenced it. (One remembers also how Dumézil suggested that the *structure* of the Indo-European 'ideology' persisted, though its forms of expression might change.)

I've already been presumptuous in dealing so summarily with Horton's ideas. I may have misrepresented them, though not wilfully. African specialists have also commented on them, one of whom will be mentioned presently. I add now just a few remarks. First, Horton observed in 1971

---

[51] For the details, see *ibid.*, pp. 85-93.

that it was already too late to study traditional Yoruba religion in action. Much of it was probably destroyed during the plague years of 1919-21 and 1924-26, which were also years of growth for the Aladura movement.[52] Then, I don't quite understand how the Yoruba concept of Olorun as supreme being interacted with the new supreme being of Christianity or of Islam. Did an elaboration of the cult of Olorun actually take place? Or did a partly Christian concept of the supreme being come to fill Olorun's 'slot' in Yoruba cosmology, leaving their system, *as* a system, not much altered? Someone will know the answers to such questions, but I don't. A trouble with 'thought-experiments' may be that if you include too many variables in them, they don't work; and Horton, having discussed at some length the concept of 'communion', says practically nothing about it with reference to Olorun. It's not too hard to see the argument about how Yoruba 'rational' ideas about the cosmos may have changed, but by what mechanism did they transfer their feelings of 'communion' from the old lesser spirits to their altered concept of the supreme being? In any case, Horton's thought-experiment looks like a sort of inverted form of a methodological problem that Max Weber had raised: would the European capitalist system have taken the form which historically it did take if, in the religious sphere, there had been no development of the Protestant Ethic? Horton's thought-experiment seems to ask, would Nigerian religion have moved from polytheism towards monolatry under the impact of world capitalism if, in the religious sphere, no monolatric model had been provided by Christianity and Islam? Horton's thought-experiment suggests that the answer to the latter question would be yes; but as Bendix remarks, the answers to such questions about causal analysis of religious change remain 'proximate'.[53]

In Horton's work on conversion as I've been outlining it, I don't on the face of it see immediate solutions to my problems about what happened when Celtic paganism encountered Christianity. First and most obviously, if it was fifty years too late in 1971 to observe the daily realities of Yoruba religion, it's too late by twenty or thirty times that much to know the daily realities of religious life in Ireland in the fifth or sixth centuries. As for 'rationality', if we take Irish paganism as a branch of 'archaic' Indo-European religious philosophy, and if we also accept Dumézil's view of its underlying theoretical system, then that paganism can be called 'rational'. Philosophically, the elaborated three functions of sovereignty, force and productivity were perhaps adequate to Bronze Age human experience. In

---

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 87 and 99.

[53] *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-4 and n. 2.

practical matters, the Celtic learned class offered to explain and predict space-time events by divination and mantic utterance; and by means of sacrifices to gods they attempted to control or influence those events.[54] To Irish Celts, however, encyclopaedic works such as the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, fixed as they were in writing, must have seemed revelations of a world of knowledge not only wider in scope, but also (after their fashion) more rigorously intellectualised than anything they had themselves; at least they synchronised their own historical traditions with Christian world chronology. More importantly, the Christian cosmology, accessible in Genesis and in hexaemeral commentaries, must have looked quite different from the archaically Indo-European. Once it had been absorbed, the sacred history of the Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation would mark the great difference between what Bellah calls 'archaic' and 'historic' kinds of religious vision.

Like pre-colonial Africa 'archaic' Ireland was no doubt a world of microcosms, being divided first into its 'five fifths' and then into *túatha* or tribal units; yet also like pre-colonial Africa, Ireland was not entirely sundered from the greater European macrocosm. The British Isles had long had a place in international maritime trade, and for two or three centuries before St Patrick's time the Irish were in indirect contact with the Roman world empire through its British province, where Christianity was of course known.[55] All the same, any Roman impact on Ireland cannot have been anything like the impact of industrial Europe on Nigeria; and if that Roman impact were a 'cause' of the Irish conversion in anything like the sense of modernisation being a 'cause' of the revision of the two-tiered Nigerian cosmology, then the dynamism inherent in that cause was strikingly less powerful. I can't see, either, how socio-political causation of any kind can account for the *quality* of some of the Irish responses to Christianity — especially that passionate commitment to ascetic monasticism which they seem to have made their own. And lastly, thinking of the Yoruba lesser spirits and high creator-god and of their relativity to one another, I can only say that as far as I know the western Indo-Europeans did not clearly recognise a supreme being who had created the

---

[54] Dumézil said in the 1983 *Nouvel Observateur* interview that he would have found the Indo-European ideology a prison; he would not have wished for a society that had *Männerbünde* and druids. Three or four thousand years earlier, and in the absence of alternatives, *Männerbünde* and druids may have served their purposes well enough.

[55] See, for example, E. G. Bowen, *Britain and the Western Seaways*, London, 1972; Tacitus, *Agricola*, ed. Ogilvie and Richmond, ch. 24, and pp. 38-9 and 235-8; Harold Mytum, *The Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, London and New York, 1992, esp. ch. 3, 'The belief system'. For excursions of the Irish abroad, see *ibid.*, pp. 21-43.

cosmos and continued to rule it. In the Roman, Scandinavian and Celtic mythologies (so far as I understand them), the sovereign gods of Dumézil's first function come into being a generation or two after a creation which they had not effected.[56] And although, according to Dumézil, the Indo-Europeans had a concept of cosmic sovereignty, sovereignty was but one component in a tripartite ideology; the sovereignty needed the other functions of force and fecundity to complement it, just as they needed the sovereignty, and each other. In short, Yoruba and Indo-European cosmologies (so far as I understand them) do not seem comparable, and it's difficult to see how Horton's thought-experiment could successfully be replicated with the Celtic materials.

I must say, though, that some of Horton's passing remarks may be pertinent in the Irish context. He observes how 'philosophers' of the old religion may become leaders in the new;[57] and if the analogy held, it might explain how some of the old Celtic learned class successfully accommodated themselves to Christianity. Muirchú's imaginative story about Patrick's first celebration of Easter in Ireland, for example, tells how the benighted pagan druids tried to destroy the saint; but two 'poets', one old and the other young, were among the first Irish to accept him and the faith he preached. The younger of them, Fiacc, later became a venerated bishop.[58] Horton also reminds us of how change in religion does not necessarily entail the radical alteration of social structures.[59] In the age of saints, for example, Irish monasteries were sometimes founded and ruled by members of the aristocratic and hegemonic families; after the founder's death, members of the same kin would continue to rule them: St Columba and his monstery of Iona provide a well-known example.[60] Some Irish monasteries were furthermore established on lands given by a king to an individual and his successors, so that in a legal sense the monasteries were in private hands; and this institution of 'co-arbship' was consonant with Celtic custom.[61]

---

[56] See Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation*, Cambridge, Mass., 1986.

[57] 'African Conversion', p. 103.

[58] Muirchú's Latin *Life* of St Patrick, chs 18-20, trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-6.

[59] 'African Conversion', p. 92.

[60] See A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (eds), *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, London and Edinburgh, 1961, esp. pp. xxiv, 66-7, and 90-2. Columba was of the Uí Néill; his biographer Adomnan, ninth abbot of Iona, descended from Columba's grandfather.

[61] Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-4.

4

Horton described his general approach to religious change as 'intellectualist', implying that the important task with regard to religious change or conversion is to seek causal explanations for it. He did not assert that the spiritual world had no reality, but he did want to find 'this-worldly' causal explanations for changes in belief concerning it; he believed he had identified the causation at work in West African conversion. He was impatient with those whom he called the 'Devout Opposition', or the 'Comparative Religionists'. They were mystifiers and tautologists.[62] I find one among the 'Devout Opposition', however, who in a graceful response to Horton seems to suggest a more plausible model for an answer to my question about the conversion of the Irish than Horton himself. This is Humphrey Fisher, an Africanist with Islamic interests.[63] I take only one aspect of Fisher's article, which sketches the way Islam has won converts in West Africa through a gradual and cumulative process; some aspects of the process seem to be quite well documented from centuries before the industrial age. Horton had labelled Fisher's arguments for cumulative conversion as a 'juggernaut' theory, deriding the idea that anything was 'inexorable' about the advance of monolatric beliefs in West Africa. Fisher, I understand, implied that religious belief might be not a dependent variable in cultural change — that is, a variable dependent on socio-economic conditions — but an independent variable, a factor *sui generis*. In that respect, there may be a compatibility between Fisher and Bellah to be explored.

I now paraphrase some of Fisher's argument; and because I think that it might have an analogical application to the 'Irish question', I try (with all respect to Fisher) to substitute a few early medieval European illustrations for more modern West African ones, and Christianity for Islam: the justification for that being that both Islam and Christianity are 'historic' religions encountering 'archaic' ones. This is of course argument by analogy, but if there is insufficient coherent documentation from the fifth

---

[62] 'African Conversion', pp. 93-4. See also Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', Part II, *Africa*, 45, 1975, pp. 373-99, esp. pp. 394-7. Robert Bellah, with his evolutionary concept of 'historic' religions as religions of dualistic and transcendental vision, would be a 'Comparative Religionist'. For some professional critiques of Horton, see Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-5.

[63] Humphrey J. Fisher, 'The Juggernaut's Apology: Conversion to Islam in Black Africa', *Africa*, 55, 1985, pp. 153-73. Fisher is replying in particular to Part II of Horton's 'Rationality of Conversion'. I find it hard to disagree with Fisher's conclusion, pp. 169-70. The discussion to follow focusses on his pp. 155-9.

century, either for Irish paganism or for Christianity, I don't see how one can approach the Irish conversion at all except by analogies.

To follow Fisher, then, religious change in older times begins in the microcosm. Before the Palladian and Patrician missions, there will be a few Christians in an Irish pagan community, perhaps only two or three of them. Who might they be? A slave or two captured, like the youthful Patrick, in Roman Britain; an adventurer returned from Britain, having seen Christianity there, perhaps a man with important kinship connections. People like that, perhaps not even officially baptised. This phase will correspond to Fisher's period of 'quarantine': Christians exist inside the microcosm of the community, but are separate from it. Now suppose this small group of Christians increases a little in numbers, and someone ordained appears among them. If his presence is tolerated, he will be conspicuous by his dress, his tonsure, his prayers, diet, and perhaps by austerities or other customs. To the hostile druids in Muirchú's legend, Patrick was 'adze-head with his curve-headed stick' because of his distinctive tonsure and crosier; tradition also preserved some of the saint's characteristic dicta, such as *Deo gratias* ('Thanks be to God').[64] The bearing of such a man is perhaps an outward sign of his transcendental vision. At any rate, this man in orders has a few Christians to whom he ministers; they develop a little 'reference group'.[65] They are still isolated among the pagans, each 'quarantined' from the other.

Then Fisher's phase of 'mixing' may begin. The pagan microcosm will have its troubles. Children fall sick, adults have bad dreams. Traditional wise men and wise women can be consulted, but some individuals may come to the Christian cleric for help. Perhaps he can do nothing for them, but sometimes he will have a success. The success will be remembered, and perhaps recorded. Such a turning of a pagan to Christianity for the relief of ills can be found as early as Luke 7:2-10. In ch. XVII of the *Life* of St Martin of Tours by Sulpicius Severus, perhaps a contemporary of St Patrick, we hear how the pagan Tetradius successfully applied to the saint for the healing of a demoniac. The demoniac was duly healed, and Tetradius was baptised.[66] In the *Dialogues* of Sulpicius (II.iv), a pagan woman whose child has died cries to St Martin, '"We know that you are a friend of God; give me back my son, my only son!"' The saint restores the child to life. 'Then indeed a shout went up to heaven from the whole

---

64 de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 180 and 202.

65 Hefner, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-8.

66 Ed. J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina,* vol. XX, Paris, 1845, cols 169-70; trans. F. R. Hoare, *The Western Fathers,* New York, 1965, pp. 30-31.

multitude as they acknowledged Christ to be God.'[67] Or an armed conflict threatens the microcosm. The local military will take any spiritual help they can get: if this God of the Christians has power, let him be invoked. A victory will be remembered. Constantius of Lyons (perhaps St Patrick's contemporary) wrote a *Life* of St Germanus; in it he relates how Germanus was sent to Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy, which he successfully did. Then, when Saxons and Picts made joint war on the Britons, Germanus was appointed to command the defending army. Drawing up his men, he ordered them to shout 'Alleluia!' in unison when the signal was given. They did so. The savage enemy fled. Later, St Germanus single-handedly saved Armorica from the ravages of the Alans under their idolatrous king, Goar.[68] Again, in the seventh-century *Life* of St Brigid by Cogitosus, a number of rather disconnected and seemingly trivial miracles are recorded. Brigit miraculously provides honey, salt and milk when they are needed; she saves a harvest from rain; she recovers lost or stolen animals. These miracles may not be as trivial as they look; they may record the low-intensity conspicuousness in a rural community of a remarkable woman.[69]

Such things might happen by chance. What would tend to make them cohere and accumulate would be not only the focussing and perhaps charismatic personality of the cleric or missionary and his way of life, but also the regular religious services of his adherents, and the unchanging reference-point of written scriptures. Given time and favourable circumstances, those who felt attraction to the new faith would formally attach themselves to it, though still retaining many of the old pagan practices: they would be of what Fisher calls 'mixed' faith. Others would move to total commitment. General conversion would not proceed with automatic inevitability. Backslidings would occur. As Weber pointed out, some status-groups are stubbornly reluctant to abandon their old view of themselves: military aristocrats, for example, have little natural affinity with an otherworldly God who makes systematic ethical demands,[70] and that may have something to do with heroic archaisms in the *Táin Bó*

---

67 Ed. Migne, vol. XX, col. 204; trans. Hoare, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

68 Trans. *ibid.*, pp. 295-302 and 308-9. The Latin text of the *Life* of St Germanus is edited by Wilhelm Levison, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, vol. VII, Hannover and Leipzig, 1920, pp. 247-83. For general comment on this *Life*, see Nora K. Chadwick, *Poetry and Letters in Early Christian Gaul*, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 250-66.

69 Trans. de Paor, *op. cit.*, pp. 209-11, 213, 219, etc. It has been remarked that St Brigid and other Irish Christian women may have 'played a vital part in evangelising Ireland, for a woman may penetrate where a man cannot': Daphne D. C. Pochin Mould, *The Irish Saints*, Dublin and London, 1964, p. 43; see also de Paor, pp. 46-50.

70 Bendix, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-7.

Cúalnge. Eventually, perhaps after centuries according to Fisher's West African model, reforms are made and the beliefs and practices of the faith are all rendered completely orthodox. In West Africa, this phase of reform evidently followed a long, tortuous and violent path,[71] and I don't see any close parallel to it in Ireland. One might mention, though, how in the seventh century the Irish monks had to accept Roman custom with respect to the tonsure and the calculation of Easter; other reforms were made in the twelfth century. And as elsewhere in Europe, ecclesiastical authorities repeatedly tried to eliminate all pagan practices, prescribing penalties for those who took part in them.[72]

It may seem grotesque even to suggest a parallel between events in the not-too-distant past in West Africa and events in Ireland fifteen hundred years ago. Yet Fisher's scenario of conversion is based on kinds of observations which can still be made, and it seems to me, *mutatis mutandis*, inherently plausible. Where data are insufficient or incoherent, then try analogy or give up wondering how conversion went in Ireland. In a wider perspective, we may agree with Horton that conversion of a community or nation is not only a matter of faith, but also a matter of readjusting ideas of the cosmos. On the other hand, we may think that his Nigerian example cannot well be back-projected to the Europe of fifteen hundred years ago, and his particular example may have distorted his general 'intellectualist' theory. With Bellah, we may think that monolatrous, 'historic' or 'world' religions (of which Christianity is one) really do mark a recognisable stage in the religious evolution of humanity, and that they open to their adherents insights into a world not consisting entirely of space-time events to be explained, predicted and controlled. We may agree with Fisher that religion has 'a *sui generis* initiative and activity of its own',[73] and that its development cannot be reductively ascribed to social and political events. To take the matter any further, you'd need to revise the present argument, include more proven historical facts in it, perhaps invent another metalanguage. If there is an answer to the 'Irish question' with which I began, the beginnings of it may lie in the writings of those whom I've mentioned here, together with their predecessors, followers, rivals, critics, opponents.

---

71 Horton, 'On the Rationality', pp. 381-7.

72 For example, in the 'First Synod of St Patrick', para. 14, a Christian who has sworn before a druid 'as pagans do' must perform a year's penance. In the Old-Irish 'Table of Commutations', para. 5, 'druidism' and 'satirizing' were among the serious crimes for which no remission of penance was allowed. See Ludwig Bieler (ed. and trans.), *The Irish Penitentials*, Dublin, 1963, pp. 56-7 and 278-9, etc.

73 Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 169.