

# Church–State Right-Ordering: St. Columba’s Early Medieval Example in the Insular Isles

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## *Introduction*

The Eastern Christian teachings of the Desert Fathers heavily influenced the development of the pre-schismatic Church of the Insular Isles, an area that today comprises Ireland, England, Wales, and Scotland. The relationship between Church and State was influenced as well by principles rooted in the early Irish legal concept of *sóerad*, the freeing and ennobling of the Church by State powers. Unlike much of the early Christian world, over which Rome had imperial sovereignty, Ireland – where the initial Christianization of the Insular Isles took root – was never invaded or governed by Roman forces. As a result, the dark and medieval ages in Ireland saw a melding of pre-Christian Irish legal precepts with an acceptance of Christianity by the ruling powers, which were dynastic clans more akin to tribal governance than the Roman political system.

## *Sóerad Defined*

Under *sóerad*, there was conceived to be a ‘right-ordering’ in the relationship between the Church and State, in which the latter promoted the freeing and ennobling of the Church, such that it was not subordinate to or in tension with other sources of governance in the society. This principle had been codified in the legal system of pre-Christian Ireland in the relationship between the Druidic priesthood and tribal chieftains. With the introduction of Christianity, the holy men and women of Christ were afforded the same kinds of privileges and protections *sóerad* had ensured for their predecessors. The Church was to be accorded freedom from the following: collection of fees by secular authorities,<sup>1</sup> interference on the part of secular powers in either the spiritual or earthly concerns of the monastery, compulsion to provide monks as conscripts for military

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Veitch, “The Alliance between Church and State in Early Medieval Alba,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 205; Benjamin T. Hudson, “Kings and Church in Early Scotland,” *The Scottish Historical Review* 73, no. 196, part 2 (October 1994): 168.

undertakings (including both fighting and military building projects conducted under rulers' authority), and compulsion to host secular powers' delegations in the monasteries (at great expense). Monasteries in lands over which Rome had sovereignty after the Freedom of the Church in 313 AD were not protected against these encroachments on their freedom.<sup>2</sup>

The Church was also afforded the right to be granted land by secular leaders, to receive monetary support from the authorities, and to collect tithes from the public so as not to be financially reliant exclusively on secular powers.<sup>3</sup> The State was to respect and uphold the religious tradition of the Church, and its rulers were to turn for counsel to Church leaders to obtain insight prior to important decision-making in the secular realm.<sup>4</sup>

*Sóerad* was rooted in doctrine that framed a good ruler as a secular leader who was deserving of blessings from the divine realm. In the Christian era, a worthy king would seek to do God's will, under guidance from holy men and women while adhering to the teachings of the Church. The underlying premise of this precept was that royal authority came from God; a priest or abbot/abbess was therefore the appropriate arbiter of who should be deemed fit to serve as ruler.<sup>5</sup> The Irish legal principle was evocative of Old Testament texts such as Samuel I in which a good King's reign produces bounty, not war and deprivation, while a bad King's rule results in hardships.<sup>6</sup> God was believed to be the source of benefits flowing from a good King's reign, hence, only a pious King could achieve such fruits for his kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

The advantages to a King of forging a positive relationship with the spiritual leaders in his realm were clear within the framework of *sóerad*. In an era of great religious devotion, a King would be viewed as strengthening his rule if his people believed his dominion was in keeping with God's will.<sup>8</sup> Enemies would be deterred from regicidal attempts because the King had divine protection. In battle, such a King would be

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<sup>2</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 204.

<sup>3</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 205; Hudson, "Kings and Church," 168.

<sup>4</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 213.

<sup>5</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 218.

<sup>6</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 211; Michael J. Enright, "Royal Succession and Abbatial Prerogative in Adomnan's *Vita Columbae*," *Peritia* 4, (1985): 83–103.

<sup>7</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 211–212.

<sup>8</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 208.

seen to have Divine intercession at his disposal to defeat his enemies.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, he would be conjoined with Christ by receiving anointment at the hands of holy men or women. This, in turn, would solidify his standing on an eternal plane, beyond his time on the throne- a form of immortality could be conferred upon him.<sup>10</sup>

### *St. Columba's Background*

The right-ordering principle was robustly manifest in the nature of the relationship between secular powers and St. Columba of Iona's monastic *paruchia*, a family of monasteries, and its *comarbai*, a network of successor abbots-monasteries throughout the Insular Isles developed under the spiritual direction of the Columban federation. St. Columba was born in Donegal, Ireland in roughly 521 AD. He is believed to have been given his early spiritual training under the direction of St. Finian (or Ninian<sup>11</sup>) of Moville in County Down. Columba's work as a spiritual leader took place predominantly in Alban Dalriada, an area of present-day western Scotland that encompasses the Inner Hebrides. It is here that the island of Iona became the site of his original monastic establishment. At the height of the influence exerted by the Columban *comarbai*, the imprint of *sóerad* disseminated widely beyond this tiny isle.<sup>12</sup> Evidence of *sóerad* stretched east from Iona to Lindisfarne (eastern coast of Yorkshire, England), to the Pictish region of Dunkeld and Kinriment (now St. Andrews in Scotland, on the North Sea coast) and on to Gaul and the Frankish Carolingian court. It also shaped Church-State relations to the west of Iona, in the Irish Dalriadan sections of Ireland, heavily influencing the early Irish Christian Church. Columba anointed kings and rulers in his day. His blessing was held to confer Divine sanctioning of these leaders. He infused the values of the Church into the society at large, to the benefit of both.

### *The Backdrop to Columba's Spirituality*

Before detailing specific examples of how the principle of *sóerad* was manifest in the Columban tradition, it is important to frame the nature of his spiritual orientation. Although traces of the Desert

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<sup>9</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 208.

<sup>10</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 218.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Owen Clancy, "The Real St. Ninian," *The Innes Review* 52, no. 1, (Spring 2001): 1-28.

<sup>12</sup> Hudson, "Kings and Church," 153.

tradition in the Insular Isles faded with the eventual transition of the Church to a more episcopal Rome-based model, and suffered erosion with dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII, it is helpful to fill in the backdrop against which St. Columba's spiritual tradition was set. In the past, scholars were not convinced that the teachings of the early monastic Fathers and Mothers of the Church from the Egyptian desert and monasteries reached as far as the Insular Isles. Research undertaken in recent years has shed much light on the sources of the early Christian world of the Insular Isles, establishing beyond question how seminal an impact the Desert tradition had.

### *St. John Cassian as a Principal Link from the Desert to the Insular Isles*

A pivotal figure in this transmission was St. John Cassian. He was likely born around 360 AD in the Dobrogea, a section of Scythia Minor in which current-day Constanta, Romania is located on the Black Sea Coast. From his youth, he was fluent both in Greek and Latin. In 390 AD, he journeyed to Scetis with companion Germanus, to seek the wisdom of the Desert Fathers. Cassian wrote the teachings to which he gained access in two books called the *Institutiones (Institutions)* and the *Collationes (Conferences)*. Importantly, he was received by the Desert Fathers as one of their own, and selections from his writings were incorporated into the Greek canon of Desert teachings, an indication of the esteem in which he was held. He was one of the very few Desert Fathers known to have been fluent in Latin as well as Greek, which afforded his works great receptivity in the Insular Isles where knowledge of Greek was rare. Cassian's spirituality was influenced not only by the Desert hermits but by Evagrius of Pontus and Origen, both of whom had deep grounding in the neo-Platonic tradition. After spending a decade in the Desert, he set out for Constantinople, where St. John Chrysostom ordained him a deacon in 403 AD. Upon Chrysostom's illegal expulsion from Constantinople, Cassian was sent as an envoy to Pope Innocent I in Rome to plead Chrysostom's case. In about 415 AD, Cassian established two monasteries in Gaul, near Marseilles, one for nuns and the other for monks; he served the latter, St. Victor, as Abbot until his death in 432 AD.

### *Cassian's Influence on Insular Christianity*

When Cassian was at St. Victor, many sought his wisdom, including important figures in the episcopal ranks in Gaul. One such noteworthy Bishop was Eucherius of Lyons, co-founder of the Lérins

monastery. He was inspired by Cassian's teachings to write a letter titled *De Laude Eremitae* (*In Praise of the Desert*),<sup>13</sup> which encapsulated many aspects of Cassian's work, especially from the *Conferences*, which set out "the training of the inner man and the perfection of the heart."<sup>14</sup>

An analysis of source materials found in the library of Iona in the seventh century reveals that *In Praise of the Desert*, as well as a Latin translation of Athanasius' *Life of St. Anthony* and other patristic sources, were brought (perhaps by monks on pilgrimage to and from the Holy Land) from Gaul to the Columban monasteries on the Insular Isles.<sup>15</sup> An elegiac poem commemorating Columba's work, "Amra Choluibh Chille," ("In Honor of Columba") likely written shortly after Columba's death on Iona in 597 AD, refers to the importance to the saint of both Cassian's and St. Basil's teachings.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, a collection of teachings, the *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* (*Collection of the Laws of the Irish*), promulgated in the eighth century by Insular monks, provides evidence of Columba's reliance on Cassian's *Conference 19* stressing the desirability of cenobitic foundations as pioneered by St. Basil in Egypt.<sup>17</sup> "Altus Prosatur" ("High Creator"), a powerful poem very likely to have been written by Columba himself, reflects an eschatological framework bearing strong resemblance to Cassian's teachings in the *Conferences*, which are rooted in Cassian's spiritual forebears, Evagrius, Origen and the neo-Platonic tradition.<sup>18</sup> Passages from the Hebraic Book of Enoch, included in Origen's corpus, are cited in "High Creator" as well.<sup>19</sup> The Columban monastic family and its spiritual descendants were deeply faithful to the sources of the Christian teachings as shaped by the early patristic teachers of the East.

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<sup>13</sup> Marilyn Dunne, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83.

<sup>14</sup> Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas O'Loughlin, "The Library of Iona in the Late Seventh Century: The Evidence from Adomnan's *De Locis Sanctis*," *Eriu* XLV, (1994): 33–52.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Owen Clancy and Gilbert Markus, G., eds., *Iona: the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 107–109; Michael Richter, *Ireland and Her Neighbours in the Seventh Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), 54.

<sup>17</sup> Hudson, "Kings and Church," 156; Clancy and Markus, eds., *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Clancy and Markus, eds., *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, 217.

<sup>19</sup> Clancy and Markus, eds., *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, 212–213.

## *Examples of Sóerad in the Columban Tradition*

One of the most dramatic manifestations of *sóerad* in Columba's work stemmed from his consecration of Aidan mac Gabrain as the ruler of Alban Dalriada. The degree to which secular powers relied on their spiritual leader to define who was most worthy to serve as King was a direct function of *sóerad* governing the relationship between the State and the Church. Columba's role in the selection and anointing of Aidan is strongly evocative of Samuel, Judah and other Old Testament figures who ordained kings.<sup>20</sup> By virtue of having such a holy man confer blessing on him at Iona, Aidan was understood to be God's choice as ruler.

As a consequence of this, Alban Dalriada was elevated from a relatively subordinate province of Irish Dalriada to a position of primacy in Irish Christianity, a position that gave it far greater power vis-a-vis both the Irish Church and Ireland's governing authorities.<sup>21</sup> It also established a base of secular power for Alban Dalriada that spread across the Insular Isles, to Pictland and Northumbria. The symbiotic interplay between *sóerad* as a defining paradigm and Columba's deep spiritual leadership of numerous monastic communities was potent: his federations were uniquely protected in their surrounding secular societies so as to be able to survive and thrive for generations.<sup>22</sup> The designation of Aidan by Columba as the God-chosen ruler, whose descendants were destined to rule in perpetuity, has echoed down to the present day. The current monarchy in Britain, the House of Windsor, is said to have descended from Aidan's bloodline.<sup>23</sup>

Columba's holiness as a spiritual leader rendered him prophetic, enabling him to play a role in shaping other changes in ruling dynasties. He prophesied that Eochaid Buide mac Áedáin would succeed to the throne of Pictland, followed by his sons. This occurred, followed by a vastly more receptive Pictavian relationship to the Columban federation. He also prophesied that Aed mac Ainmirech's son, Domnall mac Áedo, would succeed to the Uí Néill throne in Ireland, which likewise took place. This helped to strengthen the Alban Dalriadan model Columba exemplified in his native land.

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<sup>20</sup> Ian Finlay, *Columba* (London: Gollancz, 1979), 151.

<sup>21</sup> Finlay, *Columba*, 151. Mairie Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 33.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Finlay, *Columba*, 146–147.

The imprint of Columba's *sóerad*-based Church-State relationship remained in evidence for centuries following his death. The 8<sup>th</sup> Century *Collection of the Laws of the Irish* details Gaelic Church reform texts of the Culdees or Céli Dé (members of monastic communities), working under authority of the Columban *comarbai* through Abbot Diarmait. It stresses the necessity of *sóerad* in the Church-State relationship, including the necessity of freedom of the Church from interference by the laity and their secular rulers.<sup>24</sup>

The work of the ninth century Irish Leinsterman, Sedulius Scottus, also embodied Columba's *sóerad* teachings. Sedulius spent most of his adult life on the Continent, in Francia. He wrote a seminal tract for the Carolingian court on the proper relationship between the ruler and the Church, called *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis (Book of the Right Christian Leader)*. Ionan monks before Sedulius, such as Fergil (or Vergil) in Salzburg and Dicuil at the Carolingian court, had sown the seeds of Columba's teachings and had tilled the soil of the Frankish leaders so that Sedulius' message was welcomed.<sup>25</sup> He counseled the monarchs to protect the privileges of the Church and to spread the Christian faith.<sup>26</sup> He cautioned them to refrain from making important decisions regarding ecclesiastical matters without full consultation with spiritual elders.<sup>27</sup> He also stressed that kings should be instrumental in the convening of holy synods and to assist the Church in its role in society.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the ninth century, when the direct influence of Columba's king-making had begun to fade in Pictland, the Columban *comarbai* gathered force once again and assisted King Giric in his efforts to re-establish *sóerad* after dismantling the prior regime's Rome-based model of State supremacy over the Church.<sup>29</sup> Not long after this, in what is now Perthshire in Scotland, at the start of the tenth century, King Constantin and Columban Bishop Cellach agreed near the royal monastery of Scone to re-implement *sóerad* as the proper relationship between Church and State according to the Irish teaching.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Veitch, "The Alliance between Church and State," 200.

<sup>25</sup> Clancy and Markus, eds., *Iona: The Earliest Poetry*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Veitch, "Church and State," 203.

<sup>27</sup> Veitch, "Church and State," 114.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsay Davies, "Sedulius Scottus: *Liber de Rectoribus Christianis*, a Carolingian or Hibernian Mirror for Princes?" *Studia Celtica*, XXVI/XXVII (1991/92): 35-36.

<sup>29</sup> Clancy, "Iona, Scotland and the Celi De," in *Scotland in Dark Age Britain: Proceedings of a Day Conference held in Aberdeen 18 February 1995*, 118, 121-125.

<sup>30</sup> Clancy, "Iona, Scotland and the Celi De," 125-126.

## *Conclusion*

The wisdom of Columba's teachings on *sóerad* and its role in facilitating a potent synergy between secular and spiritual leadership left a lasting imprint on the Church-State relationship beyond the ninth century. The question of whether any contemporary system of similarly symbiotic Church-State relations could be forged is beyond the scope of this paper: however, it is an important query for us to consider.