

St. Cuthbert's legacy of environmental concern on the Farne Islands

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Abstract

This is the first in a series of short papers investigating connections between faith and environmental concerns. It will focus on these issues within landscapes of overlapping religious and ecological importance. This initial paper will attempt to outline the legacy of St. Cuthbert and the early Celtic Christian church on the Farne islands in the extreme north east of England, exploring the idea of the natural setting as a place of refuge and sanctuary.

Keywords

St. Cuthbert, Holy Island, Lindisfarne, Eider, Retreat, National Trust

Visitors to St.Cuthbert's Church in the village of Amble, Northumberland without much local knowledge may find themselves intrigued when studying the various stained glass windows that adorn the 19th century church. The windows portray many of the most important episodes of Cuthbert's life. Yet among them it is possible to come across a number of panels emphasizing the more mundane. In particular, images of local wildfowl from the region including seagulls and ducks catch the eye. The East window added in 1927 contains a fine composition of Cuthbert as Bishop of Lindisfarne (a small isle known also as Holy Island) surrounded by eider ducks resting at his feet. It alludes to one of the reasons why St. Cuthbert has remained such

a popular religious figure into this century, particularly in his native North of England. It is a striking image of the saint as both representative of the early Christian church in Northumbria, and protector of wildlife. That being said however, it does not imply his was merely a parochial fame. As Sawyer (1998:5) points out, Cuthbert was revered in the years after his death as far away as continental Europe where churches were eager to possess early copies of Bede's "Life of St. Cuthbert".

In recent years with people's increased awareness of environmental issues and as many search for a quieter contemplative rhythm to offset the stresses of modern life, there has been a surge of interest from the general public in sites which cater for aspects of spiritual healing within a natural environment. Lindisfarne or Holy Island, and the nearby smaller Farne islands provide precisely this kind of setting. The number of modern pilgrims has grown steadily over recent years as people seek peace and tranquility within an area of outstanding natural beauty. The reasons why this place continues to inspire will be outlined below.

Holy Island and St. Cuthbert

Lindisfarne lies just off the coast of Northern England, close to the border with Scotland in the modern county of Northumberland. The island is linked at low tide by a natural causeway to the mainland. It was a key strategic site from at least the sixth century onwards in the constant battles between the Celtic tribes fighting to re-take their former lands from the newly settled Angles. By the seventh century at a time when the area was incorporated in the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Bernicia with its capital at nearby Bamburgh Castle, Lindisfarne's importance grew. Having earlier converted to Christianity King Oswald of Bernicia invited Bishop Aidan of

Iona to set up a priory on Lindisfarne in 634. Aidan brought with him the beliefs and customs of the early Celtic Christian church, and founded the priory in about the same year that scholars believe Cuthbert was born.

The exact place of Cuthbert's birth has been contested over many centuries. Some regard him as a person of noble Irish birth, a Celt, others as having been born in Scotland in the traditions of the Celtic Christian faith. Others still see him as being a Northumbrian Angle and therefore representative of the distinctly English tradition of the early Christian saints. Whatever the truth behind his early years, his life in Northumbria, particularly at the priory on Holy Island, and later as a hermit on Inner Farne Island, led him to be regarded for many centuries as possibly the most venerated saint in England.

Cuthbert played an especially important role after the Synod of Whitby in 664. He was required to help implement the newly accepted Roman customs that replaced the older Celtic ones in Bernicia. It was a critical time in the early emergence of the Christian faith in Northumbria and required great political skill on the part of Cuthbert to persuade others to follow alternate ways. He himself had been brought up in the tradition of the Celtic church, and was therefore ideally placed to convince his brethren to accept unequivocally the new Roman customs. In his own lifetime as monk, bishop and hermit, Cuthbert developed a widespread reputation for wisdom, humility, spiritual devotion and healing. This wisdom and understanding would have been greatly appreciated at this time when the church was evolving quickly in a land which a few decades previously had been completely pagan, and where Celtic traditions and customs still remained strong.

Many centuries later, during the medieval period, reverence for St. Cuthbert continued to be widespread, with a cult growing up around beliefs

in the curative powers of Cuthbert's relics kept in Durham Cathedral. In this century within the context of a wider modern Celtic spiritual revival, St. Cuthbert's legacy has equally been sought as a clear reference point for today's political and environmental issues. Cuthbert is still regarded as the patron saint of North England and his feast day on March 20th continues to be celebrated. The name of Cuthbert and his reputation as a widely revered figure in early British Christian terms was highlighted last year in 2011 when the British Library made an announcement broadcast nationwide on the BBC concerning the Cuthbert Gospel. This document is believed to be the earliest known example of a European book with binding still intact. It dates from the end of the seventh century and remains in outstanding condition despite it having been crafted over 13 centuries ago. The British Library hoped to acquire the book for the nation and set up a fundraising campaign to buy it for nine million pounds. By April 2012, after the library's largest ever fund raising campaign, the book was acquired in partnership with Durham University and Durham Cathedral, and it will be displayed equally at the library and in the North East. As the Dean of Durham remarked, "The Cuthbert Gospel speaks powerfully about Northumbria's golden age whose spiritual vision, intellectual energy and artistic achievement continue to inspire us today" (<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk>). This confirms how the legacy of Cuthbert is still relevant, particularly in the north of the country. However, another key reason for his continued popularity lies first and foremost in the way he is regarded as a pioneering nature conservationist.

He showed great insight, unheard of at the time and extremely rare over the following centuries, to implement strict rules that oversaw the protection of wildlife. This concerned specifically the Eider duck on the Farne Islands where he spent much of his later life. It was this compassion for other creatures that has made Cuthbert a focal point for those seeking

a link between the early Christian saints and modern environmental movements. The respect for the natural environment and the creatures it contained reflected aspects that many today still see as vitally important. Cuthbert's legacy embodies some of the basic beliefs that stem from early Celtic Christian spirituality.

A great number of scholars have suggested that there never was an organized "Celtic Church" as such, or indeed that the notion of Celtic spirituality as a distinct concept is untenable. Many point out local differences even within Irish and British spheres at the time. Additionally, scholars are keen to show that the early Christians in Ireland and Britain, while very much of the Celtic world, were not anti-Roman. Despite these facts, there is no refuting that today the blending of awareness between nature and spirituality which many see as a cornerstone of the ideology of the early Celtic Christian church established in Britain at Iona and later at Lindisfarne, is an aspect of belief that finds continued support in a 21st century landscape with all its inherent environmental problems. In Lindisfarne, a form of Christian worship and reflection which takes into account the local natural landscape and expresses clear concerns about the environment is experiencing a strong revival, a revival that has at its root the 7th century concerns of St. Cuthbert. Gorazd (2001) notes that Celtic Christianity's "holy places retain their unique spiritual atmosphere and a pilgrimage to them can enrich anyone who is appropriately motivated and spiritually sensitive."

St Cuthbert and the Eider

Cuthbert found it necessary to retreat from the busy religious and political world of the monastery to search for greater spiritual understanding in quieter places. Holy Island with its close links to the Northumbrian court

and constant stream of pilgrims made it difficult for him. So in 676 he retired to a cave on Inner Farne seven miles across the sea from Holy Island. There he lived a hermit's existence. The Farne islands are comprised of 30 or so tiny sea swept rugged islands, some only visible at low tide, some with strange names like Elbow, Fang, Nameless and Goldstone. Here on the largest, Inner Farne, was a place where he could meditate and dedicate his time to reflection in a stunning natural setting. It is as inspirational today as it was 13 centuries ago.

The name of the isles may have come from "Farena Ealande" or the "Island of Pilgrims". What is certain is that Cuthbert was often sought out even here for his wisdom, until he finally retreated into a cave only giving blessings to the outside world from a rough window. It was while he lived on this island that he enacted laws protecting Eider ducks and other wildfowl from being killed. His foresight in regards to the Eider duck in particular cannot be underestimated. The ducks, (*Somateria mollissima*), not averse to living in close proximity to man, were very susceptible to those wishing to kill them for meat or eggs or feathers. Cuthbert may have realized that the birds could be harvested in a sustainable manner for their highly prized feathers without recourse to killing them. Eider farmers still today are able to pluck feathers from the soft down of the female, a process that causes no harm to the bird. He therefore forbade their killing and in doing so helped protect countless other species on the Farne islands too, an act which some environmental groups have promoted as perhaps the world's first attempt at wildlife protection.

The eider remained a close symbol connected with St. Cuthbert both during and after his lifetime. There are apocryphal stories that state he even allowed eider ducks to nest on the steps of his altar. Certainly the link with the birds has always remained strong, as is attested to by Amble church's

stained glass windows and the fact that in Northumbrian dialect the eider duck is still known today, as a Cuddy's duck, cuddy being a diminutive form of Cuthbert. This link between St. Cuthbert and the Eider is one that is frequently referred to in local sermons of late. "Cuthbert as environmentalist, and Northern Saints as birdwatchers" is just one such example of a growing trend within the church of giving sermons focusing on the strong relationship between Christian faith and the need to protect the local natural environment. (Dr. Stephen Cherry 2010 January) Cuthbert did not restrict his ornithological traits only to the Eider though. He was also linked to other species too. Bede related how Cuthbert was so in tune with the local wildlife that he received apologies from crows that had attempted to fly off with part of the church's harvest.

Holy Island Today: Faith and Feathers

Holy Island today remains a very popular destination for visitors to the far north- eastern corner of England. Lindisfarne receives over 650,000 visitors every year, many of them Christian pilgrims following the footsteps of the early saints. The pilgrim's path that Cuthbert would have taken 13 centuries ago still exists and can be crossed at low tide by those not wishing to resort to modern transport to reach their destination. Today the resident population of Lindisfarne is only 160, although numbers increase dramatically in the summer months when many Christians of various faiths come to stay. Recently other attractions based around the life of St. Cuthbert have started to bring more people to Holy island, boosting the local economy which profits from increased tourism, but which at the same time is trying to balance those benefits without losing its identity as a historically important site of worship. The collaboration between bodies such as Scottish Natural Heritage and the Northumbrian Tourist Board has meant that many visitors are now

able to walk the 100 kilometres from Melrose in Scotland where Cuthbert trained as a novice monk, to Holy Island. The walk ideally entails a four-day trip over hills and scenic areas connected with Cuthbert's life is known as "St. Cuthbert's Way." The path represents one example of an ecologically sound type of tourism of which Cuthbert himself may well have approved of in essence. It is unlikely he would have felt the same towards the day trip visitors to Holy Island who pour off large coaches in their hundreds, flooding the island for the few hours when Lindisfarne is not cut off by the sea.

Holy Island, as already mentioned, was the focal point of a vibrant cult centered around St. Cuthbert throughout the Middle Ages. Over the centuries the island remained a beacon attracting pilgrims and in the 19th century became a renowned tourist attraction in Victorian times. By the early 20th century the island's tranquillity was threatened, despite its remoteness, with increased visitor numbers. Increased links by rail as well as better roads for private vehicles had meant access had become much easier. Entrepreneurs eager to make a quick fortune made plans to commercially exploit the area, plans that had they come to fruition would have destroyed Cuthbert's ideals concerning the place as a spiritual retreat within a natural setting. Sense prevailed however, and in 1925 the National Trust, Britain's guardian body of traditional areas and historic buildings and monuments stepped in. The Farnes were bought for the nation, and although tourism would expand slowly over the years, there remained an understanding that the spiritual values and ecological ideals of the place deserved to be kept untainted by modern mass tourism.

The post war years brought more and more visitors, often by coach from the mainland. These brief visits boosted the local economy. Souvenirs were sold, local boarding houses increased the possibilities of accommodation and the island's connection with St. Cuthbert was pushed to the fore to

promote retail success. All sorts of links with the saint were stressed, including the making of rosaries from tiny seas shells called crinoids found only on Inner Farne. These shells, which are known locally as "St. Cuthbert's beads" were marketed under the same name and continue to be popular today.

However, in the 21st century more emphasis has been put on promoting the island in an ecologically informed manner. The reputation of Holy Island as a unique place embodying Christian nature tradition and pre-Christian Celtic nature spirituality has been pushed to the fore. St. Cuthbert's link with wildlife has been increasingly championed of late. The Farne islands are today an internationally renowned bird sanctuary and it is for this reason that hundreds of ornithologists are attracted to the place every year. Over 100,000 nesting birds including puffins, guillemots, kittiwakes and of course eider ducks make their nests on the islands in the breeding season from May to July. Little has changed in this respect since Cuthbert's day, except that the protection laws are even stricter now. St. Cuthbert's former home on Inner Farne is now visited by a great number of nature enthusiasts from all over the world. The old lighthouse keeper's cottage and the building that housed the original generator for the lighthouse now house a team of researchers from the University of Newcastle, many of them experts in complex environmental issues.

Close by is the tiny St. Cuthbert's chapel which was built in honour of the saint in 1300. The place still retains the mixture of the spiritual power and natural beauty that has always enticed man to settle here. As one visitor put it "The feeling of peace that comes over you in this distant location is exceptional. There is no sound of civilization at all, just the cries of birds and the crashing of the waves."

In the past few years there has been a concerted effort by local groups

affiliated to churches on the island of Lindsfarne to host a number of varying spiritual, religious and cultural events. These are attended by people from many different backgrounds. Members of various churches, including those of the Anglican faith, run the events. Their church, St. Mary the Virgin, was built on the site of the wooden church first constructed by St. Aidan in the early 7th century. Other events have been organized by the Catholic Church, the United Reformed Church and other religious groups that run retreat centres on the island.

In 2005, the national newspaper "The Guardian" ran an article in its environment section under the headline "Birdwatch Northumbria", championing the recent efforts of groups such as the ones on Holy Island. It mentioned the growing interest on ways to increase understanding of both the island's religious and ecological importance through retreats combining the hobby of birdwatching and the discussion of spiritual matters. The article stressed the "orni-theological" approach of the retreat and noted how it harked back to Cuthbert's understanding of the location as a religious sanctuary within a natural setting.

One place hoping to provide a sense of the spirit and values which St. Cuthbert preached during his life is the St. Cuthbert Centre, which has as its mission the aim to create "a centre for hospitality for those who seek solitude to renew their faith through short term retreats". It is this centre that runs one of the most popular annual events called "Faith and Feathers". The centre runs the three-day event jointly with Marygate House, an ecumenical retreat centre. "Faith and Feathers" is a retreat combining bird watching with matters of faith. The participants are often from many denominations, although some have no religious affiliation at all. Some are birding enthusiasts wanting to find some peace and calm within the boundaries of the bird sanctuary. More than anything this retreat seems

to promote a vision of Holy Island that links back clearly to St. Cuthbert and the early saints. The hope seems to be that through this joint venture there will be a greater understanding of the need to continue Cuthbert's vision of Holy Island as a sanctuary in the widest meaning of the word, so that the place remains for future generations.

21st Century Lessons for Overlapping Nature Protection and Spiritual Retreats

Magnus Magnusson titled his 1984 book about Lindisfarne "The Cradle Island" and there is no doubt that the island's role as a pivotal part in the early growth of Christianity in England means that it remains a vitally important location in terms of its spiritual contribution. What is more, there are few places where faith overlaps so effortlessly with nature. It still wishes to remain true to this meaning of sanctuary despite the best attempts of the modern world to encroach and overpower. As Wild notes, "The challenge today is to strike the best balance between spiritual, natural, community and economic values and interests" (www.sacredland.org/holy-island)

As I have discussed in this brief paper, one of the ways in which local groups are addressing the challenges of the 21st century is to revert to the ideas which Cuthbert himself saw as so important. The need for a clearer understanding of the complex layers that make up island life in this century is vital. Equally important is the ability to accept Holy Island as a simple place, a sanctuary that allows the individual the chance to reflect, make good decisions and be compassionate both to fellow man and the other creatures that share our world. St. Cuthbert understood these simple, but important values, and it is heartening to see some groups on the island planning retreats that follow his example.

In recent years Holy Island and the Farnes have suffered similar

problems to other larger island communities in Britain. Incomers have pushed up housing prices, local youth has left for the mainland in search of jobs and “excitement” while what Wild terms “the long established families” with “deep rooted cultural ties” have been faced with the common 21st century fear of rapid change to their way of living. However, certain local groups led particularly by the small, but vibrant religious communities on the islands have shown that there is a way of approaching these issues that is constant with the roots of the community. Within his 7th century Christian framework of beliefs, Cuthbert recognized that compassion for other creatures was imperative. Today, that necessity for maintaining species has never been more urgent, and people on Holy Island seem to be realizing how interconnected we need to remain in order to keep our environment healthy for future generations. Holy Island is one local eco-system where man, wildlife and the spiritual are all intertwined.

St. Cuthbert, whose remains lie in Durham Cathedral would no doubt be troubled by the thought of so many visitors to his beloved Farne Islands, just as he was by those who came seeking him out in his seclusion as a hermit 13 centuries ago. However, he would also no doubt be pleased to see how far his initial laws on wildlife protection have come, and would be glad to see that the faith of a new generation of Christians remains as staunch as in his day, and still in some measure indelibly linked with the wildlife he first sought to protect. It can be hoped that under the guidance of thoughtful guardians who share Cuthbert’s simple ideals, Holy Island and Inner Farne will remain a sanctuary where faith and spiritual matters can be more easily understood in a peaceful remote environment. A lack of integrity in the modern world, especially in terms of tourism and people’s willingness to sacrifice the future for immediate gains is all too common, but there is a flicker of hope on Holy Island that by following Cuthbert’s lead the place will

continue as a retreat where the spiritual values of nature take precedence over any short term economic benefit.

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論文要旨

ファーン諸島の自然環境に関する 聖カスバートの伝承

ダニエルズ, アンドリュー

本稿は、信仰と自然環境に関する研究シリーズの初稿であり、宗教と自然環境が重複して持つ事柄を扱っている。イギリスの北東末端にあるファーン諸島の聖カスバートの伝承とケルト人の初期キリスト教会の概説を試み、世俗の及ばない聖域としての自然環境について論じたものである。

キーワード：聖カスバート、聖なる島、リンディス島、アイダーダック、修道院、史跡