



# The Acropolis

Philosophy for today

Dec 2023  
Issue 15

Winter Edition - Philosophy - Mysticism - History - Art and more







## What is The Acropolis?

In ancient Athens the Acropolis, literally meaning the High City, was the place which supported the highest ideals of the people.

The founder of New Acropolis International, Professor George Livraga, chose this name to capture the key objective of philosophy; that we as individuals build a new high city within, that we discover the heights of our own potential, so that we may externally build a new high city, a new and better world, together. The Acropolis magazine is motivated by this objective and aims to share inspiring content, combining all the major endeavours of philosophy, art, science, education and culture.

## About Us

New Acropolis is an international organisation working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society.

For further details please visit: [www.acropolis.ie](http://www.acropolis.ie)



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# Editorial:

## The Importance of Education in Our Society

As our society is increasingly disorientated by the acts of violence in our streets and the seemingly unhinged youths that roam our capital, some responsible for wanton acts of destruction, we find ourselves confronted with a difficult question - how did it come to this?

Many dismiss these people, generally young men, as mere thugs, too lazy to seek or hold employment. Others elevate their position to that of an ideology based in right wing politics. But as philosophers, lovers of truth and students of history, it is easy to identify them as the lost generation of a broken education system.

Etymology reminds us that education (from the Latin *educare*) means 'to bring out'. Namely, to help bring out the best in people by nurturing their potential. It is a way of educating which we have long since abandoned in favour of a utilitarian approach focused almost solely on the technical competencies needed to establish one's career.

For inspiration, we can look to the works of influential 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant to help us understand the importance of education better.

His views on education, encapsulated in his work "*Über Pädagogik*" (On Pedagogy), can be synthesised into a comprehensive understanding of the importance of education within the framework of his philosophical ideas. Kant's philosophy on education is deeply rooted in his broader philosophical system, and several key themes emerge:

**Autonomy and Rational Development:** Kant sees education as a means to cultivate individual autonomy. He contends that education should aim at developing the individual's rational capacities, enabling them to think independently and make informed choices. Through the process of education, individuals can attain intellectual maturity, freeing themselves from dependence on external authorities.

**Moral Education:** Kant places a strong emphasis on the moral dimension of education. He argues that education should not only impart knowledge but also instil a sense of moral duty. For Kant, a well-rounded education is one that fosters ethical awareness and a commitment to moral principles. He believes that morally educated individuals contribute to the creation of a just and morally upright society.

**Enlightenment and Self-Improvement:** Education, according to Kant, is a pathway to enlightenment. He envisions education as a process through which individuals overcome ignorance and self-imposed immaturity. Kant's concept of enlightenment involves the idea that education liberates individuals from a state of tutelage, encouraging them to think for themselves and actively participate in the progress of society.

**Practical Reasoning:** Kantian education emphasises the cultivation of practical reasoning. Beyond theoretical knowledge, education should equip individuals with the ability to apply reason in practical situations. This practical aspect of education aligns with Kant's broader ethical philosophy, where the moral agent uses reason to determine and act in accordance with universal moral principles.

In synthesising Kant's views on education, one can discern a holistic approach that combines intellectual and moral development, aiming to produce individuals who are not only capable of critical thinking but are also committed to ethical conduct. Kant's philosophy on education reflects his overarching concern for human autonomy, enlightenment, and the establishment of a morally just society.

Alain Impellizzeri  
Director of New Acropolis Ireland

# Cold Winter Nights - Warm Winter Hearts

Over the course of 2023, The Acropolis Magazine will publish four quarterly editions delving into the four essential archetypes of culture as understood in antiquity; those of Beauty, Justice, Wisdom and the Sacred, which can express their form through Art, Politics, Science and Religion.

For this Winter issue we explore the ideal of the Sacred, as revealed in the forms of Religion and Mysticism.

All articles in the magazine are contributions by members of New Acropolis. Research and views expressed in each article are those of the individual authors and may not represent the collective views of New Acropolis.

We hope you enjoy!

Editorial Team  
Alain Impellizzeri – Director  
Pascale Naveau – Editor  
Paul Savage – Design  
Tim Leahy – Contributor

# Philosophy and the sacred

Some of my readers might be confused, asking themselves what is the connection between philosophy, a purely rational discipline, and the sacred? Isn't mysticism the domain of religion?

This misunderstanding is rooted in the fact that today we use the name philosophy for two completely different things. To be more precise, at some point in history the discipline of philosophy had split in two separate paths that had grown so far apart that today they constitute almost two completely different things. As a result, we must clarify which of these two philosophies we are referring to when we make the connection with the sacred.

The first kind of philosophy is the original one. According to tradition, the Ionian Pythagoras was the first Philosophos, that is, Lover of Wisdom, but its roots are much more ancient, and can be found in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India, among other places. French philosopher, Pierre Hadot, wrote that originally philosophy "was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being," and Lithuanian philosopher, Agnis Uzdavanyis, adds that the aim of philosophy was "to contemplate the cosmic order and its beauty; to live in harmony with it and to transcend the limitations imposed by sense experience and discursive reasoning," and that the ancient philosopher "tried to awaken the divine light within, and to touch the divine Intellect in the cosmos." We shall call this original path, 'philosophy in the classical tradition', because it refers to philosophy as it was originally practised, and to make things easier, I will capitalise the word Philosophy when referring to this original practice of philosophy.

The later kind of philosophy began as a small deviation from the main path, diverging out somewhere in the Middle Ages, and then widening out to become the path trodden by most. Based today on secular humanistic values, it aims to be "purely" rational, and distances itself from any whiff of mysticism. Today, when most

people speak about philosophy, this is what they are talking about. This is the type of philosophy you would most often find in the modern university and in academic discourse.

While this kind of philosophy has its charms, it often leads to a dead-end; an ivory tower where new intellectual realities are conjured, which usually have no relation to everyday life, nature, or other human fields of experience.

Originally, Philosophy was never too far from mysticism. In fact, elements that we usually attribute to religion – rites, prayers, meditations – were commonplace and inherent to Philosophy in the classical manner. "If I were a nightingale, I would perform the work of a nightingale, and if I were a swan, that of a swan. But as it is, I am a rational being, and I must sing the praise of God. This is my work, and I accomplish it, and I will never abandon my post for as long as it is granted to me to remain in it; and I invite all of you to join me in this same song. You might think you're reading the writing of a Christian saint, but this is actually Epictetus (Discourses, 1.16.20-21), among the most famous of the Stoics. Stoicism has recently become very popular in the Western world, but in an attempt to literally demystify it, i.e. in order to fit it to modern mentality, some of its aspects have been conveniently neglected.

If philosophy has no connection to the sacred, why would such a rational and logical philosophy such as Stoicism speak of "singing praise to God"? And this is not an unusual exception. In fact, the earliest Stoics of Athens, were even more religious in outlook, as Cleanthes's "Prayer to Zeus" attests. The Stoics, moreover, were relatively late comers to the Philosophy scene. Its founder, Zeno of Citium, who started teaching Philosophy in Athens at around 300 BCE, already had at least three hundred years of philosophical tradition to rely on. And this tradition was anything but secular and rationalistic in the modern sense of the word.



The first known philosophers, the so-called “Presocratics”, were often travelling mystics and poets, speaking in obscure symbolical and mystical language, often taken too literally by contemporary scholars. The first among them was Thales of Miletus, who is seen today as the first physicist in the modern sense, theorising that the material source of everything is water. But this same physicist also said that “everything is full of gods,” and that “rocks have souls.” Not precisely the words of a materialist. Of course, contemporary scholars are inclined to celebrate the elements aligned with modern secular beliefs, while the inconvenient elements are seen as forgivable errors made by a scientist taking his first steps in rational research.

Perhaps the greatest philosopher-mystic was Plato himself, whose dialogues are filled with gods, priests, oracles, symbols, and myths. It is quite surprising that he was able to maintain his stature despite the many irrational (or perhaps para-rational?) elements strewn out throughout his dialogues. Plato, moreover, did not

**Often “those who believe their own religion on faith, will regard that of every other man as a lie, and hate it on that same faith,” as Helena Blavatsky wrote.**

only write dialogues, for his followers have insisted that he had unwritten teachings, which came to life especially with the so-called Neoplatonists, among the greatest of which were Plotinus, Iamblichus, and Proclus. And if we can make out any of Plato’s unwritten teachings through the teachings of these, then they must have been even more spiritual than his written ones.

Plotinus reads like an eastern mystic. He constantly exhorts us to transcend the limitations of the rational mind, and to elevate our consciousness to the God within, which Plotinus called The One, or The Good. Iamblichus, oft considered the second founder of Neoplatonism, developed a philosophical system called theurgy – divine work. According to Iamblichus, and later Proclus, through specific rites and prayers, the philosopher can come closer to the divine, and find his place in a chain of being that goes without stop or break from the highest (Plotinus’s One) to the lowliest of human beings.

As we can see, in its 1000 years of pre-Medieval history, Philosophy has been inherently linked with mysticism. During the Middle Ages, philosophy was hijacked by religious dogma, and philosophers were limited in what they could say, think, or write. Philosophy became the intellectual justification of preconceived beliefs; a few underground Philosophers, however, continued travelling the old path of Philosophy under various guises, alchemy for instance. After the Middle Ages, with Christianity’s fall from grace, the academy tried to extricate itself from its shackles, and to rid itself from anything that vaguely smacked of religion, which was seen as a primitive stage of the intellectual development of the human being. Sticking to the middle way is extremely difficult, and very quickly the academy bound itself to new chains; those of materialistic positivism. It was only then that the final split between philosophy and Philosophy was made evident; philosophy becoming purely rational and theoretical, while Philosophy remaining a practice of a few.


It is important to clarify, however, that even though Philosophy and the sacred have always been closely linked, the reader should not hold the mistaken notion that Philosophy is a religion in the modern sense of the word. A religion is a specific form of worship, particularly one of those that have appeared throughout the course of history, i.e., Judaism, Islam, Shinto, Mithraism, etc. Usually, these religious forms accumulate many elements that are sadly more human than divine. They are frequently based on faith in external authority, and many times they are adopted by convenience or convention. Moreover, religious people have been known to be bigoted towards followers of other religions. Often “those who believe their own religion on faith, will regard that of every other man as a lie, and hate it on that same faith,” as Helena Blavatsky wrote.

A philosopher is free to practise whatever religion they choose, but in Philosophy there is no external salvation or redemption; one can receive teachings and examples from others, but no person, or god, can save you but your own efforts. Moreover, Philosophy seeks the truth wherever it may be found, without dogmas of belief or nationality. Philosophy as the love of wisdom seeks the unity beyond all the various expressions since wisdom or truth are not the property of any one religion.

In conclusion, contrary to what we may have been taught to believe, mysticism, and the sacred, are not primitive elements, detached from any intelligent philosophy. These are elements integral to human existence. As the eminent historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, wrote: “The Sacred is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a phase in the history of that consciousness.” In its original form, Philosophy can be seen as a path to approach the mysteries of life, to get closer to an intuition of a higher cause, God, the Universe, or whatever name we choose for it. Philosophy, therefore, and the Sacred are not as separate as they may seem. They are simply two aspects of a unified human experience.

Gilad Sommer

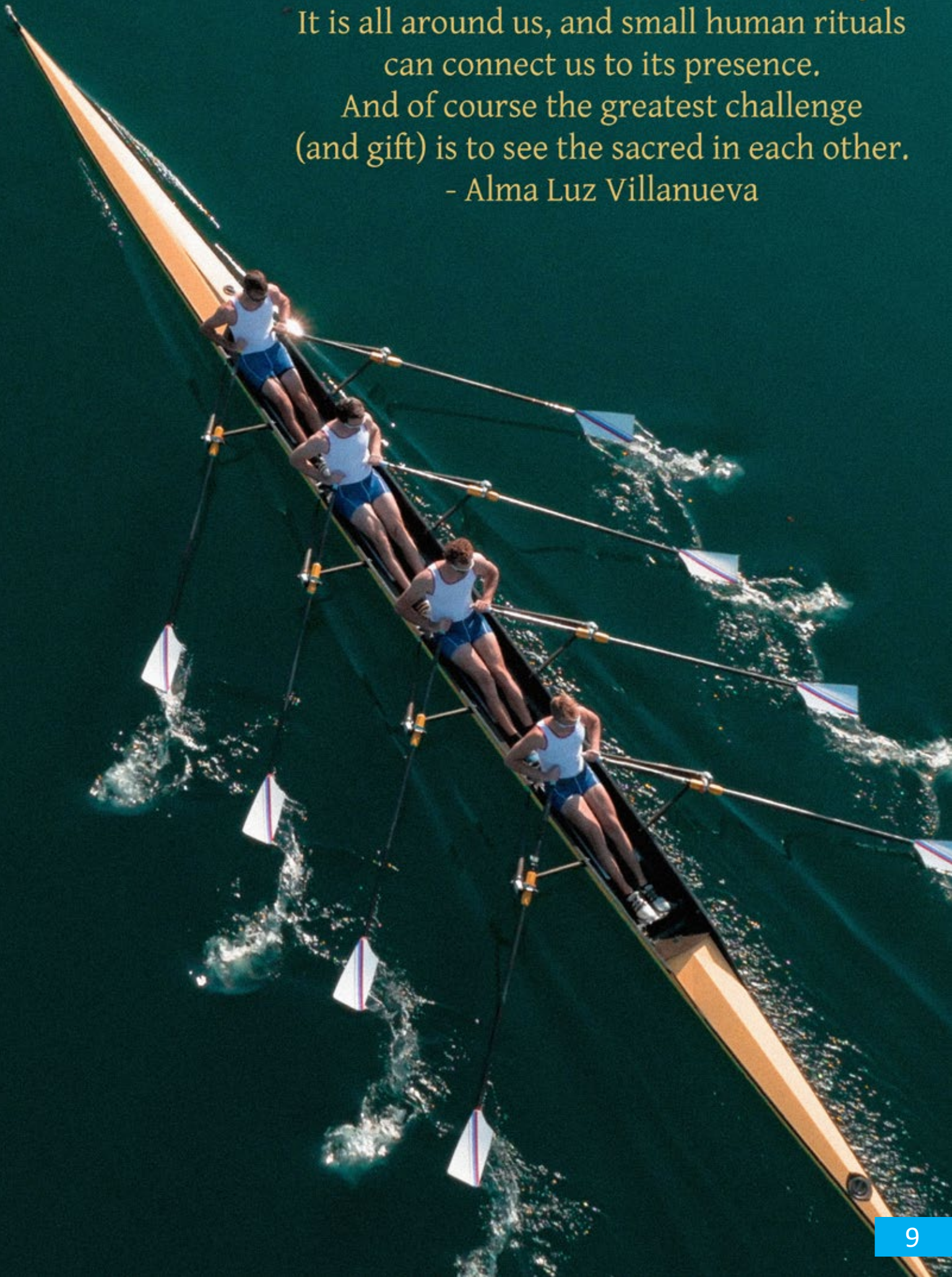


A photograph of a woman with short grey hair and glasses, smiling broadly while cooking in a kitchen. She is wearing a yellow patterned long-sleeved shirt and a grey apron with a black tree pattern. She is wearing white oven mitts on her hands as she stirs a pot on a gas stove. The kitchen has a large window in the background, a wooden cabinet, and a stainless steel sink. The text is overlaid in the upper right corner.

**My religion is  
very simple.  
My religion is  
kindness.**  
- Dalai Lama



The sacred is not in heaven or far away.  
It is all around us, and small human rituals  
can connect us to its presence.  
And of course the greatest challenge  
(and gift) is to see the sacred in each other.  
- Alma Luz Villanueva





# Written in Stone

Irish High Crosses





The high cross is one of the greatest artistic achievements of the early Middle Ages in Ireland. Carved in stone, these spectacular monuments have long remained as iconic cultural landmarks on the Irish landscape. These symbols of Christianity first appeared from around the ninth century, and continued to be made until the twelfth century. They were created by Irish monastic communities - groups of Christian monks and nuns who lived in monasteries, and devoted their lives to their church. But why were the high crosses created?

### **What are High Crosses?**

The Irish high cross is a stone-carved cross, standing vertically. Usually carved from sandstone, they are richly decorated, adorned mainly with intricately carved compositions of biblical scenes on all sides. Typically, the intersection of the horizontal and vertical members is supported by a ring or circle of stone. Often called a ringed cross or Celtic Cross, the ringed design is a distinctive feature of Irish high crosses, and has become a symbol of Ireland to this day.

They can measure up to six metres in height and are usually situated outdoors. They were not used to mark graves, unlike the more modern versions to be seen in cemeteries throughout Ireland today. In the Middle Ages, high crosses were probably colourfully painted, though evidence of this is long gone, due to weathering over the centuries. It should be noted that Christian artwork of the time, such as the Book of Kells, exhibited glorious use of colour in its iconography. About 250 ancient high crosses survive in the Irish landscape to this day.

### **When were they made?**

In antiquity, the Celtic Irish worshipped pagan gods. This changed when Christianity came to Ireland some time around the 4th or 5th century CE, probably from neighbouring Roman Britain. Some believe that Saint Patrick brought Christianity to Irish shores, after he had been taken from his home in modern day Wales and brought to Ireland as a slave. In the following centuries of the Early Middle Ages, Christianity spread throughout Ireland. Monastic settlements grew into great centres of learning, in places such as Armagh, Clonmacnoise, Kildare and Glendalough.

Stone crosses probably evolved from earlier examples initially made of wood, and later made of metal. The Celtic Cross design is thought to originate on the island of Iona on the west coast of Scotland. Around 563 CE, an Irish abbot named Saint Columba, or Columcille, and twelve followers crossed the Irish Sea to Iona. There they founded a successful monastery, which converted the local Pictish tribes to Christianity. Later, during the eighth century, Celtic crosses started to be produced on Iona. Around the same time, the Book of Kells is thought to have been created there. In common with the Book of Kells, the Cross of Patrick and Columba in Kells, county Meath, depicts the symbols of the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) - symbolised by the angel, the lion, the calf and the eagle. Due to the Viking raids starting in 794 CE, many Irish monks left Iona and

returned to Kells in Ireland, bringing with them the Book of Kells, and perhaps, the design of the Celtic Cross. Some historians believe that the characteristic ringed design of the Celtic cross may have come originally from Jerusalem, via Egypt.

Examples of high crosses exist in Britain also, particularly in Celtic areas, such as parts of Scotland, Wales, and Devon and Cornwall in England. However, most high crosses in Britain were damaged or destroyed during the iconoclasm that occurred after the Reformation.

### **Where are the best examples?**

#### **Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise, County Offaly:**

Dating from c. 900 CE, this cross is four metres in height, and is noted for the excellence of the relief sculpture, depicting scenes from the Crucifixion, the Last Judgement, and Christ in the Tomb. An inscription asks for a prayer for Flann Sinna, King of Ireland, and Abbot Colmán, the patrons who commissioned the cross.

#### **Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, County Louth:**

Built circa 9th or 10th century CE, this cross stands at 5.8 metres high. An inscription on the base of the cross in the Gaelic language translates as "a prayer for Muiredach who had this cross made".

#### **Cross of Patrick and Columba, Kells, County Meath:**

Erected in the 9th century, this cross is 3.3 metres in height. It is richly decorated with a mix of ornamental and figure carvings.

### **How were they made?**

Making a high cross was a major undertaking, requiring time and resources, such as skilled stonemasons. The high cross consisted of three separate stone pieces: the base, the cross itself, and a capstone on top. The stone blocks were erected at the chosen location before any sculpting was done. The blocks had carved joints so that they could be connected together securely. Once the cross was in-situ, stonemasons began the work of carving the iconography onto the stone.

On earlier crosses, decoration was in the form of abstract, geometric patterns - celtic knots, interlace patterns and vine scrolls were popular. Later, biblical scenes began to be introduced, with increasing complexity. Sandstone was the stone of choice, because it was readily available in the Irish landscape, and relatively easy to sculpt, but other stones such as granite and limestone were also used. However, high crosses were almost always outdoors, and sandstone weathers over time when exposed to the elements of wind, frost and rain, and particularly to acid rain. As a result, the iconography on some high crosses has been significantly eroded, making the images difficult to discern. It is likely that, during the Middle Ages, crosses were painted to







Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly - wikimedia

highlight the scenes depicted on their surfaces.

### Where were they sited?

Crosses were usually located on the grounds of monastic communities. They may have been used as points of assembly for religious ceremonies. Some crosses may have been positioned to mark the boundaries of territories belonging to monasteries. These are called *termon* crosses, *termon* being a Gaelic (Irish) word meaning sanctuary or boundary.

Crosses were positioned with the main faces in an east-west orientation, facing sunrise and sunset.

### Why were they created?

It is probable that high crosses were used for Christian teaching purposes, however, evidence of this is limited. At this time in the Middle Ages very few people were educated, so it's possible that the high cross iconography was used to educate and preach about the bible to illiterate Christians. This is why the biblical iconography depicted on the crosses have been referred to as "sermons in stone". Historians believe that it is more likely that high crosses were made for a learned audience, consisting of monks, patrons and other nobles. Therefore, Christian ideas were conveyed to an educated monastic community and possibly, but to a lesser extent, to the largely illiterate laity. They may also have been built to commemorate the opening of a new monastery, or the death of a king. It is thought that they may have represented a status symbol, for the monastery or wealthy patron who commissioned them.

### Symbolic Meaning

Long before the arrival of Christianity, the people of Celtic Ireland had a tradition of erecting standing stones, called pillar stones. These sacred stones are believed to represent the *Axis Mundi*, or World-Axis - the link between the above, or 'heaven', and the below - earth. Pillar stones were usually erected in their natural shape, and symbols were etched onto the surfaces. These symbols included knots, symbolically representing unity and strength, and spirals, representing life and eternity. The written language of the Irish Celts, known as Ogham, was sometimes used in engraved inscriptions on pillar stones. The iconography of the Irish Celtic cross may be seen symbolically as the synthesis of Christian and pre-Christian Celtic traditions.

The Roman emperor Constantine legalised Christianity in 313 CE which led to the adoption of the religion throughout the Roman Empire. Constantine introduced the chi-rho symbol, depicted as:  $\chi\rho$ . Chi and rho are the letters X and P, the first two letters of the Greek word  $\text{ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ}$ , meaning *Cristos* or Christ. The symbol is made by superimposing the capital X and P. The chi-rho symbol appears on many high crosses in Ireland.

The characters and scenes depicted on high crosses suggest a strong influence from European Christian art on Ireland during that time. Monks and sculptors may have travelled between Ireland and Europe, and brought Christian art motifs from Roman Europe with them. A major theme of cross iconography is the "help of God in adversity", for example Daniel in the Lion's Den. The theme of biblical miracles is also common, such as the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Eschatological themes also feature. Muiredach's Cross has iconography depicting scenes from The Day of Judgement, as well as the Blessed and the Damned on Judgement Day.

The Irish high crosses represent far more than just the crucifixion, more than Jesus' death. In fact, many earlier crosses do not depict Jesus himself on the cross. Rather, the cross itself represents Jesus symbolically, in terms of the crucifixion and resurrection. From a Christian perspective, it represents the saviour's passion and redemption.

### Conclusion

The arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the late twelfth century heralded the beginning of the end of high cross production in Ireland. The 250 or so monuments that still survive on the Irish landscape today hold a special significance. They have become an emblem of Irish and Celtic identity, and are an important part of our heritage. They act as a constant reminder of our unique artistic past and of Ireland's outstanding contribution to art, architecture and education.

Tim Leahy



## Stoicism and mysticism

Stoicism is a school of Hellenistic philosophy that flourished in Ancient Greece and Rome. The Stoics believed that the practice of virtue is enough to achieve *eudaimonia*: a serene, flourishing life, lived in accordance with the best in us. They also believed that the world is governed by a rational and providential principle, which they called *logos*, fate, or nature. The Stoics aimed to live in harmony with this principle, by using their reason (i.e., *Nous*, or the mind) and following their moral duties.

Mysticism is a term that refers to the experience of direct or intuitive contact with the divine, the transcendent, or the ultimate reality. Mysticism, which often involves a conscious effort to connect, through practice, to higher states of consciousness, can be found in various religious and philosophical traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The relationship between Stoicism and mysticism is complex and controversial. Some scholars have argued that Stoicism is a form of naturalistic or rational mysticism, which does not rely on supernatural revelation or miracles, but on the recognition of the immanent presence of the divine *logos* in the world and in oneself. According to this view, Stoicism offers a way of attaining mystical union with the *logos* through ethical and intellectual perfectioning (i.e., in accordance with *Nous*, the highest principle in the Human Being). Other scholars have denied that Stoicism is mystical at all and have emphasized its rational and practical aspects.

One of the most prominent Stoics embracing a mystical dimension in his philosophy was Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and author of the *Meditations*. Marcus Aurelius wrote his personal reflections during his military campaigns and administrative duties, as a way of coping with the challenges and hardships of his life. He was influenced by the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus,

who taught him to focus on what he could control (his thoughts and actions) and to accept what he could not control (external events and circumstances). He also drew inspiration from other philosophical traditions, such as Platonism, Pythagoreanism, and Peripateticism.

Marcus Aurelius expressed his mystical views in several passages of his *Meditations*. He often referred to the *logos* as his guide and guardian, and as the source of his wisdom and virtue. He also described his sense of awe and gratitude for the beauty and order of the cosmos, which he regarded as a manifestation of the *logos*. He urged himself to contemplate the unity and harmony of all things, and to see himself as a part of the whole. He also affirmed his belief in providence (or fate), which he understood as a benevolent plan for the good of all beings. He sometimes used metaphors and imagery to convey his mystical insights.

Despite his aim to connect with *logos* and the universe, Marcus Aurelius did not neglect his practical duties as an emperor and as a human being. He constantly reminded himself of his moral obligations to his family, friends, subjects, and enemies. He also acknowledged his own limitations and faults and strove to improve himself through self-examination and self-discipline. He did not seek to escape from the world or to isolate himself from others, but to live according to nature and *Nous* in every situation.

The quotes below, from “*Meditations*,” summarise Marcus Aurelius’ view of mysticism:

“Everything is interwoven, and the web is holy; none of its parts are unconnected. They are composed harmoniously, and together they compose the world.” (7.9)



This passage denotes a mystical view of the Cosmos: humans share a common reason with God and each other, which allows them to access the truth and the law of nature, unified as a sacred, meaningful whole. He implied that everything in the universe was connected by the divine logos (universal reason, destination) that governed it. Beauty and order of the cosmos can be appreciated by living in harmony with the logos.

"Look round at the courses of the stars, as if thou wert going along with them; and constantly consider the changes of the elements into one another; for such thoughts purge away the filth of the terrene life." (7.47)

This quote shows fascination for the movements and patterns of the celestial bodies, which exemplifies -the intelligent and divine order that governs the universe. In meditating on the transformations and cycles of nature, Marcus Aurelius cleanses his mind and soul from the distractions and corruptions of the earthly life, urging himself to contemplate the unity and harmony of all things, and to see himself as an integral part of the whole.

"Live in harmony with the logos and you will live a life that is great and beautiful and rational." (10.12a)

This sentence demonstrates the commitment to live in accordance with the logos as the highest goal and the greatest good for humans. Following this principle several qualities of virtue like happiness, beauty, and intelligence can be achieved.

"Whatever happens to you has been waiting to happen since the beginning of time. The twining strands of fate wove both of them together: your own existence and the things that happen to you." (10.5)

In our lives, which are interwoven on the path of Nature (providence), nothing happens by chance or accident. Marcus Aurelius here accepts his fate with calmness and dignity, and he does not complain or resist what happens to him.

"The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts: therefore, guard accordingly, and take care that you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reasonable nature." (5.16)

This piece shows an ethical view of happiness, and it contains a warning against the dangers of false and harmful thoughts. He implied that by being virtuous and acting with dignity in accordance with the highest in us, we could attain a state of inner peace and joy which is aligned with the divine logos and "reasonable nature".

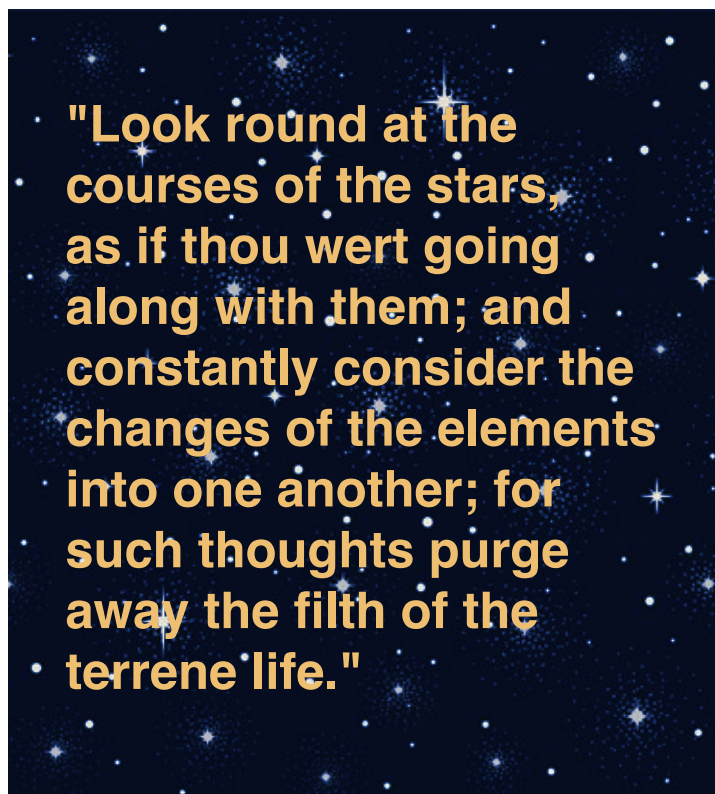
"Remember how long thou hast been putting off these things, and how often thou hast received an opportunity from the gods, and yet dost not use it. Thou must now at last perceive of what universe thou art a part, and of what administrator of the universe thy existence is an efflux, and that a limit of time is fixed for thee, which if thou dost not use for clearing away the clouds from thy mind, it will go and thou wilt go, and it will never return." (2.4)

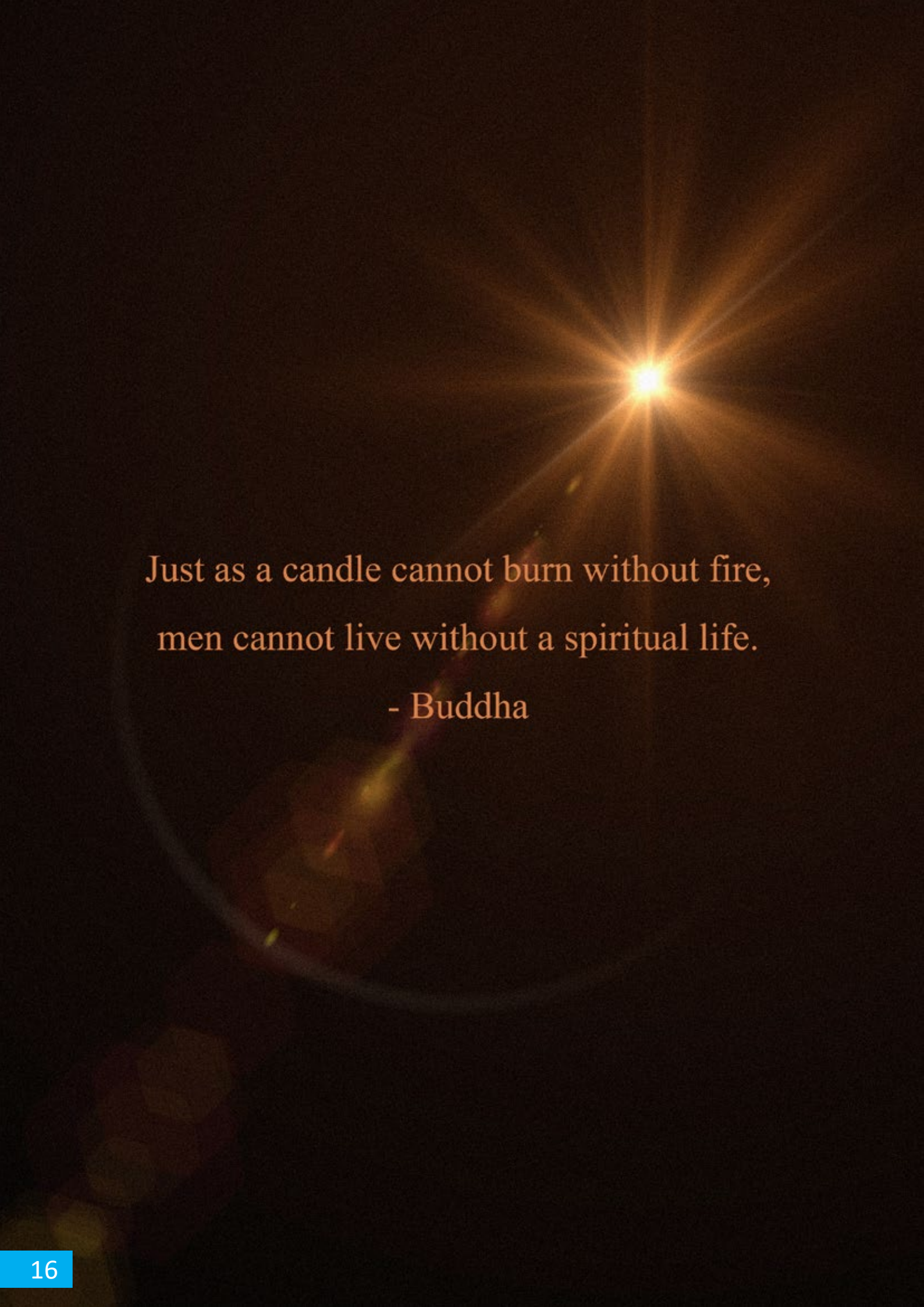
This extract encapsulates the brevity and fragility of human life, which can be easily extinguished. The deep connection to the cosmos and the divine logos, regarded as the source and ruler of all things, provides a compelling reason to use time wisely and to free the mind from ignorance and vice, to achieve happiness and virtue.

Marcus Aurelius was not the only Stoic who had a mystical orientation. Other examples include Cleanthes, who wrote a famous hymn to Zeus as the supreme ruler of the cosmos; Seneca, who praised the natural wonders of creation and expressed his longing for immortality; Epictetus, who spoke of God, or the divine principle, as his father and friend.

In conclusion, Stoicism and mysticism are not incompatible concepts. Some Stoics combined their ethics with their mystical intuitions and sought to achieve a balance between their human and divine planes of existence. They regarded philosophy not only as a way of thinking, but also as a way of living, loving, and connecting with the rest of humanity and the universe as a whole.

Marta Terrile





Just as a candle cannot burn without fire,  
men cannot live without a spiritual life.

- Buddha



**We can easily forgive a  
child who is afraid of the  
dark; the real tragedy of  
life is when men are  
afraid of the light.  
— Plato**



# THE DREAMING



## The Dreaming - Kate Bush Album Review

One of the most unexpected and delightful events in pop music over the last few years has been the revival of interest in the music of English singer-songwriter Kate Bush. Thanks to its use in the Netflix series 'Stranger Things', her 1985 track 'Running Up That Hill' has become a hit all over again, introducing her to a new generation of listeners and stoking up considerable interest in her back catalogue.

This article examines her 1982 album 'The Dreaming' which is considered her least commercial work, but contains some of her most experimental songs along with a strong streak of mysticism and the esoteric.

Kate Bush was born on 31st July 1958 and grew up near Bexhill, Kent in the south-east of England. Her father, John Carder Bush was a medical doctor and her Irish mother, Hannah, was a nurse. A musical prodigy, she was writing songs from an early age and was signed to EMI records at the age of 14. Rather than being rushed into the studio immediately, she was allowed to spend several years honing her craft before she made her recording debut.

In 1978, Bush's debut single, 'Wuthering Heights' was released and promptly became a massive hit, reaching #1 in the UK where it became the first #1 to be entirely written by a woman. It repeated this feat in Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and Portugal and marked out Bush as a unique talent. The very subject matter of 'Wuthering Heights' was unusual. Inspired by Emily

Bronte's 1847 Gothic novel, it was sung from the point of view of the doomed heroine Cathy who is now dead, but is calling to her lover, Heathcliff to surrender his soul to her.

'Wuthering Heights' was followed by Bush's debut album 'The Kick Inside' which was a stunning work from a woman still in her teens. The lyrics tackled diverse, often challenging themes such as brother-sister incest on the title track, period pains on 'Strange Phenomena' and Bush's search for spiritual and religious enlightenment on 'Them Heavy People'. Bush performed the tracks in her distinctive soprano voice, often accompanying herself on the piano.

Two years later in 1980, Bush hit another milestone with her album, 'Never For Ever' which she co-produced. When it hit UK #1, it made Bush the first British female solo artist to have a #1 album on the UK charts. The themes on this album were as challenging as ever- a mother grieving her dead soldier son ('Army Dreamers'), nuclear war ('Breathing'), wedding day murder ('The Wedding List') and inappropriate relationships ('The Wedding List'). Even the upbeat number 'Babooshka' had a dark theme- it was a twisted tale of a woman trying to test her husband's fidelity.

Following the triumph of 'Never For Ever', Bush began working on her fourth album, 'The Dreaming' Given full artistic control, she was credited as the sole producer and departed from a winning formula by moving down



a dark, uncommercial route. The result was an album which bamboozled the critics, but is now regarded as a high point of her career.

What is most immediately noticeable about 'The Dreaming' is that it does not have the clean sound of Bush's previous albums. This time, the sound comes across as muddy and complex which means that there is little here that is suitable for daytime radio. Bush makes extensive use of the Fairlight Synthesiser as an instrument which allows her to create soundscapes from a full orchestra to animal sounds. She also uses her voice as an instrument, manipulating her vocals to create sound effects and assume the roles of various characters in her songs.

On the title track 'The Dreaming', it refers to the mythology of Australian Aboriginals who believe that their lands remain inhabited by their ancestors who have taken on heroic or supernatural abilities. This is contrasted with the behaviour of the white settler who habitually dispossessed the Aboriginals of these sacred lands for mineral exploitation. This track heavily features the Australian instrument, the didgeridoo and has Bush deliver her vocals in an Australian twang.

The opening track 'Sat in Your Lap' could be interpreted as Bush's search for spiritual and intellectual fulfilment and how it is proving elusive ('some say that knowledge is something that is sat in your lap/ some say that knowledge is something that you never have'). The desire to better oneself ('I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a scholar') is derailed by the desire for a quick fix ('I want the answers quickly, but I don't have the energy' 'Just give it quick/gimme! Gimme! Gimme!'). All very weighty issues for a pop song, but it still proved to be a substantial hit single on its release. Propelled by heavy percussion and the use of bullwhips as instruments, it also featured an inventive video with Bush on roller skates wearing a dunce's hat.

Composed as a waltz, 'Suspended in Gaffa' also concerns the search for fulfilment, namely finding religious fulfilment, (the whispered line 'I caught a glimpse of God, all shining and bright') only to find that such a moment is fleeting and ephemeral ('I try to get nearer, but as it gets clearer, there's something that appears in the way').

'Leave it Open' moves into darker territory. Full of electronic and vocal sound effects and with an arrangement like a piece of heavy rock music, the ominous atmosphere is enhanced by the repeated lines 'harm is in us' and 'we let the weirdness in'. It may be a good thing to keep one's mind open, but be careful what you let in.

Towards the end of the album comes 'Houdini', a track which explores the possibility of life after death through Bush adopting the persona of Bess Houdini, the wife of legendary escapologist, Harry Houdini. Written about

Bess' attempts to contact Harry through a medium after his death while expressing scepticism ('the medium roams and rambles/ not taken in, I break the circle/I want this man to go away now'). She goes on to recount how she aided Harry's seemingly death-defying stunts by passing a key from her mouth to his just before he is immersed in water, thereby allowing him to escape the chain in which he had been fettered. If she and her husband were able to fool so many people, perhaps it is not surprising that she may not have any faith in the ability to contact her husband through the use of supernatural.

**'The Dreaming' which is considered her least commercial work, but contains some of her most experimental songs along with a strong streak of mysticism and the esoteric.**

The supernatural is certainly present on closing track 'Get Out of My House', perhaps one of the most angry, confrontational tracks ever recorded by Bush. Who or what she wants out of her house is not clear, but the rage and possibly fear is there in her shrieked vocals and in the ominous feeling that the track is building up to a climax. Bush later said that she was inspired to write the track after watching the films *The Shining* in which supernatural forces consume the characters and *Alien* in which the crew of a spaceship are terrorised by an aggressive and deadly extraterrestrial. Vocal sound effects are maximised on this track with Bush's voice turning into what sounds like a donkey braying. It is an unsettling and quite stunning end to this album.

'The Dreaming' was not a commercial success on its release and reviews ranged from the baffled to the dismissive. Bush herself even referred to it as 'my 'she's gone mad' album'. In retrospective, it can be seen as a brave, uncompromising album which marked out Bush as one of the most talented and innovative female vocalists from the UK. The abstract, sometimes obscure themes of the album show that Bush is a songwriter unafraid to enter the realms of philosophy and mysticism. The production may be dense and hard to penetrate, but it helps to accentuate the feeling that this is an album designed for intense, active listening rather than just to be heard. For somebody discovering Kate Bush for the first time, 'The Dreaming' will make for a challenging experience, but one certainly worth the time of the listener.

Andrew Hudson



# Angkor Wat

## - Reflections on a timeless wonder

When we are looking at ancient temples and monuments there is always an element of mystery that engulfs us. The Taj Mahal, a monument to love and loss felt by the emperor Ustad Ahmad Lahori towards his wife and queen of the Mughal Empire. Or the pyramids in Egypt as a testimony to the Egyptian civilisation and their strive towards unity. Angkor Wat is no exception.

The enormous and majestic stone temples in the rain forest of Cambodia are awe inspiring at first sight and bring us in contact with a timeless message inspired by Hindu teachings which find their way into the bas reliefs but also express themselves through the statues and the architecture itself. It provides us with a vision of life told on the grandest of scales, but at the same time on a level that feels intimate and personal.

Since its discovery in 1860 by French naturalist Henry Moreau, who travelled to south east Asia in search of exotic plants and insects but discovered Angkor Wat by accident, what a sight this must have been. And since his discovery, excavations have only revealed some of the mysteries contained within the walls of Angkor Wat. As recent as 2019 discoveries made through Lidar imaging showed us the sheer extent of the city of Angkor with its many temples, pagodas and canals previously unknown. Henry Moreau's accounts were by no means the first discovery of Angkor Wat, as Portuguese and Spanish explorers told of a stone city in the southeast Asian forests. But their accounts were so fantastical that the common understanding was that such a place couldn't possibly exist. Only the detailed reports of Henry Moreau prompted further exploration.

The Khmer, who ruled between 9th - 15th century, built their main temple or "Wat" at Angkor or "Capital City". Its construction was commissioned by King Suryavarman II and took approximately 30 years and 300,000 workers to complete. To this day Angkor Wat remains the world's largest religious structure, dwarfing the Vatican four times over and even exceeds the area covered by the pyramids in Egypt. It served as the main temple to the Khmer for around 200 years until Angkor was abandoned. The gradual decline of the Khmer was largely caused by the unsustainability of the ever growing city of Angkor. At its height it is estimated that 700 - 900,000 people lived in close proximity to the temple. As a comparison London at the same time was home to a population of circa 80,000 people. Due to its location deep in the forests of

Cambodia the Khmer could not build conventional roads and pathways but rather carved out and constructed a network for channels, bridges and dams. This intricate network of waterways, and canals became increasingly more sophisticated but also more complicated to maintain. However it also ensured a notably higher standard of living than the surrounding areas achieved. When there was civil unrest in the outer areas of the city the neighbouring Chams repeatedly invaded and ransacked Angkor and eventually succeeded in capturing it. The Khmer fled Angkor and relocated their capital to Phnom Penh, where it is still today. However the Chams lacked the knowledge and skill to keep the city running smoothly and eventually they abandoned it, only for it to be gradually reclaimed by the encroaching rainforest, until its discovery by Henry Moreau.

When visiting Angkor today we are greeted by a rich and intricate array of bas reliefs all around the city and the temples within it. Their narrative changes as we progress from the outer parts of the temple complex to the inner sanctuary from representations of everyday chores and interactions to the more symbolic understanding of life. Before crossing the man-made moat that surrounds Angkor the reliefs depict the construction of the city, of dinner preparations, military displays and scenes of bartering at the market. These carvings help us to understand a bit more about the mundane aspects of the reality the Khmer faced. However, immediately after crossing the bridge we approach "The churning of the sea of milk" - a 49m long bas relief that shows two enormous armies engaged in a sort of tug-of-war.

The rope they are pulling is wrapped around a cauldron in the centre between the two armies and as either side gains the upper hand in this struggle the cauldron is swivelled in one direction or the other. A symbolic act rich in meaning which we will revisit a little later. As we progress through the main gate of the outer walls of the temple we find ourselves in the vast open plain. A place in stark contrast to the rest of the crowded city, and a sense of calm settles over this area for the visitor as the journey inwards continues in a more serene and centred fashion.

Here only priests and temple staff would take up residence and tend to the temple and its gardens. Religious celebrations were held here; we can find libraries and other smaller temples in this part of the





Churning Wall at Angkor Wat, Cambodia-wikimedia

complex. It is a place to create space not only on the external but also internal dimension.

As we walk towards the centrepiece of Angkor along the wide stone path we encounter statues of the Naga, the cobra, and the Garuda, the bird. Beginning with the Naga as a representation of physical life in all its aspects it also represents the energetical double movement of life. While the head of the snake is moving forward, its body creates this movement by harmonising apparently opposing forces. Also, the snake is bound to the ground yet is capable of raising its head to gain a new perspective. So despite being submerged in the thick vegetation of the jungle it is in a position to rise above the muck it is apparently trapped in.

The Garuda on the other hand is representative of the elevated, higher states of consciousness; of a different dimension of life that the Naga is aspiring to when raising its head. The connection between the two is represented by the Garuda carrying the Naga in its claws. The Naga however is not the prey of the Garuda as its head is erected. Also the wings of the Garuda are spread wide in an attempt to bring the Naga to ever new heights of perception.

On the inner temple the architecture becomes less elaborate and expansive but rather gaining in height, inviting us to turn our gaze upwards. The narrative on the innermost temple also takes on a more and more symbolic context from Hindu mythology. We find the Swaragas and Narakas, heavens and hells. Hell in Hinduism takes on a notably different form than what is understood to be hell in western civilisations. While there is punishment for sins committed it is possible to redeem oneself and be reborn, as reincarnation is a firmly believed concept in the Hindu tradition.

Furthermore we can see depictions of Vishnu fighting victorious battles, either directly or in the form of Krishna. These stories take centre stage as King Suryavaman II. is breaking with old traditions to dedicate temples to Shiva, the destroyer, but rather to Vishnu, the Preserver. Together with Brahma, the creator, they form the holy trinity of Hinduism. It is also Vishnu in the form of Krishna that advises Arjuna in the battle of the Kurukshetra, the last image on the outside walls of the inner temple, also known as the Bhagavad Gita. To this day the Bhagavad Gita remains one of the most famous and

popular myths that have lasted through the ages and stood the test of time. Part of the Mahabharata the Bhagavad Gita tells of an ancient battle for the city of Hastinapura, the city of the Elephants. It is a symbolic battle of humankind for timeless and universal wisdom, represented by the Elephants of Hastinapura.

On the battlefield the armies of the Pandavas and Kuravas meet with the hero of story, Arjuna, placing his chariot right in the middle between the two armies. To guide the chariot with its 4 horses he has Krishna with him. The battle represents the battle of the human being between its higher aspirations, represented by the Pandavas and our lower, more instinctive tendencies, represented by the Kuravas.

The Pandavas seek to rule Hastinapura for the wisdom it contains, to rule justly and generously, while the Kuravas see only the material riches, the power it represents and are driven by selfish desire and personal ambition. As the leaders of both armies are descendants of the old blind King, Arjuna finds familiar faces on both sides of the battlefield. Disheartened by this he turns to his advisor Krishna to ask him what the appropriate course of action is. This is where the Bhagavad Gita, the song of the blessed, begins. Throughout the story Krishna reveals himself as the voice of the god, by imparting on Arjuna fundamental laws of life so that he is better able to make his own decisions.

The Bhagavad Gita serves as a symbolic battle of each human being fighting against its own shortcomings, fears, challenges and inner conflicts and to emerge victorious. Arjuna serves as the archetype of each human being seeking to engage in this most noble of battles. When we are reaching the inner sanctum of Angkor, we find a simple structure. Four pillars in the shape of a closed lotus flower forming a square with a higher one in the centre emanating an elevating spirit and representing the highest point of Angkor. Not only physically but also symbolically as an expression of a unity within ourselves and the world around us. It brings us closer to the realm of the gods and archetypes and serves as a physical expression of the struggle to reach our centre from which we can act more justly and harmoniously, with more compassion and benevolence.

But Angkor does not only serve as a model for the journey of humanity. On a larger scale the moat that surrounds the temple is a representation of Prakriti, the primordial ocean, out of which the manifested world arises and strives towards a single point of unity, the highest tower of the inner temple. All matter in the universe is in constant movement towards this goal and Angkor represents this journey carved out of stone. Angkor Wat in all its glory is more than just an impressive structure of monumental proportions, but an expression of the vision of life and its laws according to Hinduism. The symbolic meaning of the bas reliefs and of the architecture itself continues to inspire visitors from around the world to this day with the timeless message contained within its walls and art.

Markus Edin

# The Experience of the Mysterious

## - The Non-Rational Dimension of the Sacred

"The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science"

- Albert Einstein

"Anyone who has had an experience of the mystery knows that there is a dimension of the universe that is not that which is available to his senses...such a moment of participation involves a realisation of the wonder and sheer beauty of existence"

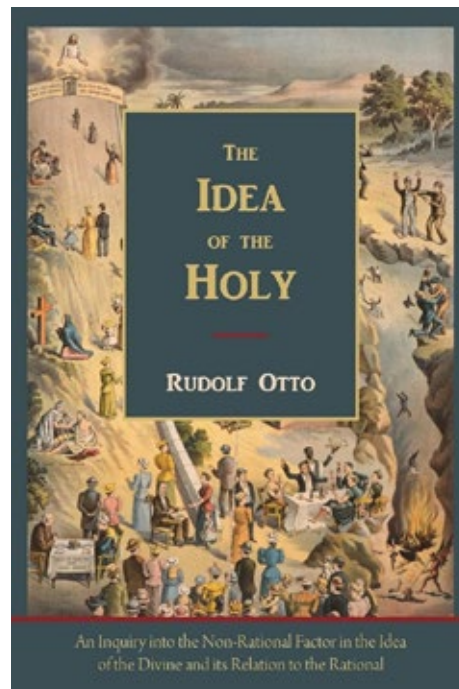
- Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth

Having climbed a high mountain and overlooking the horizon or listening to the crashing waves on the seashore, there is a sense of wonder, calmness, awe in the face of the beauty of nature. This experience is common for all human beings, regardless of their culture, background or geography. This experience can be called an experience of the sacred, a feeling or intuition of the oneness or unison with nature, where there is no separation between the being in nature and the being within oneself. In the Hermetic tradition, it is referred to as the Macrocosm and Microcosm, that the same living organising principle exists in us and the universe and in realising that, there is a moment of oneness. It is a fundamental experience of being human.

Rudolf Otto in his book "The Idea of the Holy" focused on the experiential dimension of the sacred rather than the rational concepts built around it to try to characterise it. There are certain experiences in life that cannot be adequately explained using reason, they are non-rational or supra-rational. That is not to say that reason is not important and useful, it certainly is, but it is one avenue to understanding. There is understanding also through feeling and through our intuition. Falling in love, the aesthetic shock in the presence of a great work of art, the intuition that there is more to life than the physical, these are experiences that evoke a feeling or intuition and go beyond the representation of life that we have inherited today in our society, which tends to be materialist and reductionist.

Otto introduced the term "numinous", to describe the feeling that is evoked when encountering the sacred or the mystery in life. He used the Latin word *Mysterium* which means mystery in English, but it is not like a crossword to be solved or an intellectual puzzle that challenges the mind but this mystery points to an aspect of reality that is hidden from us yet it is accessible.

In his work Otto articulates the qualitatively distinct nature of the encounter with the mysterious. This type of experience defies adequate expression through rational language, and can only be conveyed analogically using ideograms or symbolic representations. Otto gives some characteristics.



**Mysterium Fascinans:** The fascinans represents the captivating, attractive, and alluring aspect of the numinous experience. It's the sense of fascination or enchantment that accompanies encounters with the divine or the sacred.

**Mysterium Tremendum:** Otto explains that there is also a Tremendum, a fear or terror in facing the mystery. It is not a normal fear one is familiar with such as passing an exam or public speaking but is of a different nature. It denotes a specific kind of emotional response. One element is awe, a feeling of reverential respect mixed with fear. In Japanese art, temple guardians can awaken fear from their menacing presence to prepare us to enter a sacred space. Another element is majesty, the might, power and the last element is the energy or wrath. The power in nature, its destructive power, its great expanse, can awaken wrathful mystery. In Tibet the 'gods', which represent the principles of life or the laws of life can either be benign or wrathful in their form. As Joseph Campbell pointed in "The Power of Myth", quoting from "The Arabian Nights": "When the angel of death comes it is terrible; when he has reached you, it is bliss".

**Ineffability:** The Mysterium cannot be adequately described or explained through ordinary language or concepts. It transcends the limits of human understanding and defies clear articulation. That is why symbols and myth have been used as another way to aid in understanding this.

**Wholly Other:** The numinous represents something wholly other and distinct from the ordinary, mundane world of daily life, but it is not separate from daily life, or



**Nature and the Sublime:** Many people feel a sense of the numinous when surrounded by the sublime beauty of nature. Its magnetising force aligns us within but how can this magnetising force be self generated?

inaccessible. A presence of consciousness can have moments of numinous experience in daily life but it requires a certain concentration of mind and inner work to facilitate this encounter.

**Universality:** Otto argues that the numinous is a universal human experience that transcends specific religious or cultural boundaries. It is a fundamental aspect of consciousness and not superficial or peripheral.

The aspects of the Fascinans and Tremendum can be experienced at the same time, which is one of the paradoxes of life. We can feel awe towards a person who is charismatic, be drawn to them but at the same time be afraid of them.

Otto thought that the experience of the numinous is central to religious encounters and is at the core of religious and spiritual beliefs. It forms the basis of religious awe, rituals, and a sense of the divine. However it is also described by scientists in their investigation into the laws of nature. Many of the pioneers of Quantum Mechanics describe having mystical experiences delving into the furthest reaches of the physics of matter. Albert Einstein as shown in the epigraph above demonstrates this. Also an inspired artist connecting to an ideal produces a piece of art that has a magical impact on people, this is also a mystical experience. These mystical experiences have a transformative effect on the person.

**Why are there mystical experiences at all?** The philosopher Plato gives an interesting insight. According to Plato, the soul exists before entering the physical world and has knowledge of eternal truths and forms. However, when the soul becomes associated with the body at birth, it forgets this pre-existing knowledge. Learning, therefore, is not the acquisition of new information but rather the recollection or remembering of what the soul already knows. A mystical experience is a moment of recollection of a timeless truth that awakens us to the realisation that there is more than what we see with our physical eyes, that there is something invisible in life that gives direction and sustenance to the visible. Otto describes that a common characteristic of mysticism is the identification of the personal self with the transcendent Reality in life. What are the different ways to participate in the numinous, described by the philosopher Pierre Hadot as

spiritual exercises? Below are some practices that can help foster that connection with the mystery that is both within oneself and nature.

**Nature and the Sublime:** Many people feel a sense of the numinous when surrounded by the sublime beauty of nature. Its magnetising force aligns us within but how can this magnetising force be self generated?

**Rituals:** A ritual is to give meaning to what we do, an action that has a physical and metaphysical intent.

**Timeless Teachings:** The contact and practice of timeless teachings from philosophies of the ancient Eastern and Western traditions can awaken and gradually unveil some of the mysteries in life.

**Art:** Certain works of art, music, or literature have the power to evoke a sense of the numinous. A painting that captures a sublime landscape or a piece of music that stirs deep emotions can transport individuals beyond the ordinary and into a realm of awe and wonder.

**Personal Transformation:** Moments of personal growth or transformation can lead to experiences of the numinous. Overcoming challenges, self-discovery, or moments of profound insight give individuals a sense of encountering something greater than themselves, leading to a deep sense of reverence.

In the ancient world, there were Mystery Schools to help the individual to understand and go through these inner experiences, so to aid them in their inner journey and transformation. The Mystery Schools fell in the West with the arrival of Christianity but there is still a longing within the human being today, as Plato describes, to give birth to their inner being or self.

In conclusion, mystical experiences are part of being human and they point to a dimension of life that gives deeper meaning, clarity and joy to our lives. One of the challenges in describing mysticism is the limitation of language to articulate it, as described at the beginning of the Taoists text "The Tao Te Ching" where it says "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao". The numinous can be fostered in the large and the small moments in life, we don't have to wait for the big experiences but it is in the small experiences of daily life that give the most opportunity to encounter them. It requires opening the head and the heart into a state of active receptivity which is not easy for the rational discursive mind to do as it tends to look at life in a black and white way and to separate things into disconnected boxes. There is a famous Zen proverb: "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water", the key message here is not what we do but how we do it that is important, by being present and conscious in what one does brings another dimension into life, it brings magic.

Michael Ward



# The land of saints and scholars

## exploring Ireland's ancient druid past

Ireland has long been known as “the land of saints and scholars” and many attribute this title to the island’s rich Christian and monastic heritage originating in the Middle Ages. But even before this period, Ireland had a long history and reputation as an epicentre of Celtic pagan practice, which found its bastions in wisemen known as Druids. In fact many of the masterpieces of Christian Ireland such as the “Ardagh Chalice” and “Book of Kells” which support the reputation of past ‘Saints and scholars’ can be seen to imbue a deep influence of Celtic pagan teaching which preceded it.

As the origin of the word Druid is not specified for sure, we can not be exact. The most popular understanding is that it comes from the Irish Gaelic word for an oak tree “doire” which is often regarded as wisdom. Druids were concerned with the natural world and its powers and they regarded trees as sacred, with the oak tree being seen as the most sacred.

The Druids had and played a significant, important role amongst the ancient Celts, both for the common and noble people alike. The Druids were held in the highest regard within their society for their wisdom and unbiased fairness.

The Druids are referred to in documents as far back as the 4th century BC. The oldest detailed description comes from Julius Caesar, in his book “Commentarii de Bello Gallico”, a description or record of the Gallic Wars from 58 to 52 BC, which was Caesar's first hand account of the years he spent fighting the Celtic and Germanic peoples in Gaul.

In his description of the Druids, Caesar wrote;

"The Druids officiate at the worship of the gods, regulate at the public and private sacrifice, and rule on all religious questions. Large numbers of young men flock to them for instruction, as they are held in great honour by the people"

( Gallic Wars, V1:13)

He further added that they were exempt from military service and from paying taxes. They also had the power to excommunicate people from religious festivals, making them social outcasts.

Along with first hand accounts from the Romans, we do see other evidence of Druid and shamanic pagan practice dating much further back. Ancient cave paintings dotted around Europe and notably in Ireland, structures such as Newgrange in county Meath, which is said to be approximately 5,200 years old, show evidence of their function as places of ritualistic and spiritual practice. Newgrange is specifically positioned to face the rising winter solstice sun each year so that the sun shines down a narrow passageway to illuminate the inner chamber. This is a clear example of how focused our Celtic ancestors were on the cosmos and held a deep mystical reverence for their relationship with it.

In other ancient sites around Ireland, we also see some evidence of the language they used to write in called “Ogham”. It is believed however that Druidic law forbade its followers to write down any of its religious





The most popular understanding is that it comes from the Irish Gaelic word for an oak tree “doire” which is often regarded as wisdom.

teachings. Druids for this reason were known to be educated through a long and gruelling process of rote memorization. It is said it took up to twenty years of study and practice to become a Druid. The Druidic main focus in their studies were Philosophy, Law, Mythology, Astronomy, Lorekeepers and Medicine, among many other subjects.

Like many ancient indigenous tribal beliefs, Druids like shamans were believed to have a connection with the ‘other world’ in which they could communicate with the spirits and escort souls of the dead to the afterlife. They were also very important councillors to chieftains and often advised whether the gods favoured going into battle.

The Druids were polytheistic believing in a pantheon of gods, often related to elements of nature. And it was the element fire which represented their highest god “Be’ al” which was said to be the one supreme god and source of all beings. Druidic tradition also believed in reincarnation. They believed the human soul was immortal and upon death, passed into the body of a newborn child.

With the introduction of Christianity across Europe in the Middle Ages, Pagan worship became more marginalised or in some cases was enveloped into the Christian tradition. It was not only in the symbolism and art we noted at the beginning of the article with the “Ardagh Chalice” and “Book of Kells”. Many feast day celebrations the Church has throughout the year are rooted or inspired by pagan tradition with “Samhain” and “Beltane”, the

Celtic festivals of Winter and Spring as prime examples.

As we have discussed, Druids and Celtic Pagan worship was centred primarily upon the nature they were immersed in but also in the cosmos that they observed throughout the years. It is a tradition that we can take great inspiration from for its focus upon man's intrinsic relationship with the natural environment and universe.

David Murtagh



God has no religion.

- Mahatma Gandhi







# Philosophy Culture Volunteering



## Philosophy

To be a philosopher is a way of life which is committed to the best aspirations of humanity.

Philosophy, when it is practical, is educational.

It helps us to know ourselves and to improve ourselves.

## Culture

The practice of human values is the basis for a model of active and participative Culture, which brings out the qualities of each person, broadens the horizons of the mind and opens the human being up to all the expressions of the spirit.



## Volunteering

Volunteering is the natural expression of a spirit of union with life and humanity, which manifests in the practice of values such as unselfishness, and a commitment to strive for the common good.

It is by practicing the universal values of philosophy that we can deeply transform ourselves and turn our ideas into action.

The practice of philosophy develops self-confidence, moral strength and resilience to face the difficulties and crises of life. It allows us to become an actor of change in our lives and around us.

Our introductory course in practical philosophy offers a series of theoretical and practical classes to progress in self-knowledge, to practice taking advantage of every circumstance in life without forgetting to develop solidarity with others.

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