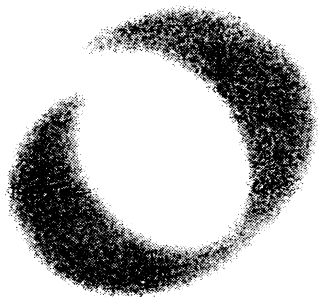


THE EVIL FOMORIANS



n a pilgrimage to Ireland to explore sacred sites and re-connect with the ancient gods, we crossed the sea to Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands. Our goal was to experience, through visionary work and shamanic journeying, the two spiritual forces that the early Irish called Manannan mac Lir and Tethra, the gods of the sea. In doing so we hoped to examine the nature of good and evil, for Manannan belonged to the Tuatha Dé Danann ("the people of the goddess Danu"), the gods of order and harmony, while Tethra was a god of the Fomorians, the deities of chaos and destruction.

Sitting on the perpendicular cliffs at Dun Aengus, an Iron Age stone fort perched 200 feet above the sea, we looked over the precipitous edge to the waves pounding against the walls of rock. We gazed out into the watery distances that stretched toward the horizon, an ambiguous line cutting softly through the mists that separated sea from sky. Somewhere out there at the world's edge, or perhaps here at the edge of the land where we sat, were the powers of the sea we came to seek and understand.

During the hour when we were engaged in visions and rituals to honor these two sea gods, the sky darkened with heavy clouds from the west, the wind picked up and howled erratically off the rocks, and around our ears rain began to fall. Caught by the blustering wind, it pricked our faces like small fierce darts. Some of us moved back from the edge of the cliff for safety. Clearly an ominous power or presence had arrived.

When we finished our work, the wind and rain immediately ceased, the sky brightened once more, and everything in nature turned peaceful and pleasantly rhythmic again. The only sounds came from the strong reassuring surf pounding against the base of the cliffs and birds screeching as they wheeled off the rocks and out over the waves.

The thirteen of us pooled our experiences and concluded that we had indeed encountered Tethra, the Fomorian god of the sea.

For the
ancient Irish,
evil was seen
not as an
aberration
but as an
essential
part of the
universe.



by Tom Cowan

But exactly what had we experienced? Who are the so-called “evil” Fomorians? Why are they considered evil? And what specifically do these old Irish gods teach us about the nature of evil and the essence of the universe?

Descriptions of the Fomorians traditionally depict them as misshapen, grotesque, distorted, ugly — often having only one eye, one arm, and one leg. They are the gods of violence, destruction, and chaos. Their very appearance contradicts the symmetry, balance, and rightful proportion we expect and hope for in life.

Perhaps Balor of the Evil Eye can serve as an example. Balor’s eye was so harmful that whatever it gazed upon shriveled and died. In stories that depict him as a giant, several men are needed to lift the eyelid, which mercifully remains closed most of the time.

At the Battle of Mag Tuired, Balor and the Fomorians were defeated by the Tuatha Dé Danann and banished from the Irish mainland. They now dwell somewhere far out in or under the sea. But they were never destroyed, and they return from time to time to wreak havoc in nature, in civilized society, and in our personal lives.

Not all of the Fomorians are grossly misshapen. In some stories, one of the Tuatha Dé marries a Fomorian and produces likable and heroic offspring. The god Lugh, for example, has a Fo-

sons; the Tuatha Dé want to live and work within those harmonies and prosper.

Brigid, a goddess of the Tuatha Dé, is married to Bres and acts as a mediator between the two factions of deities during the Battle of Mag Tuired. In this role, according to Celtic scholar Miranda Green, Brigid serves as an ancestor-deity or mother-goddess whose mission is to assure the



THE GODS OF THE OTHERWORLD, AS DEPICTED BY JOHN DUNCAN

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morian mother and a father from the Tuatha Dé. The god Bres, known as “the Beautiful,” also has mixed parentage. His Fomorian nature, however, dominates and ultimately destroys his reign over the Tuatha Dé.

As ruler, Bres demands stiff tribute in cattle from the Tuatha Dé to the point of ruining their prosperity and reducing them to servility. When guests stay in his camp, he is stingy in providing food and drink. When defeated in battle, he pleads that his life be spared, promising the Tuatha Dé unnaturally bountiful harvests of crops and livestock. In other words, as king he threatens to destroy the Tuatha Dé society, as a royal host he disregards the fundamental Celtic values of generosity and hospitality, and as a defeated warrior his plea-bargain to save his life threatens to disrupt the natural agricultural cycles.

Rejecting his bargain, the victorious Tuatha Dé ask him simply to teach them the appropriate times to plow, plant, and harvest, which he does. In other words, Bres, the Fomorian, seeks to destroy the natural harmony of the sea-

well-being of Ireland. This goal necessitates making peace between the two armies so that neither side will be devastated.¹ Obviously Ireland’s well-being requires both the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians. In some mysterious way that we may never fully under-

stand, the “evil” Fomorians play an important, even necessary role in the grander scheme of things.

A curious episode occurs during this war. Lugh, the champion of the Tuatha Dé, casts a spell on the Fomorian armies with an interesting ritual. He stands on one foot, places one arm behind his back, and closes one eye as he delivers his curse. In other words, he assumes a “Fomorian pose” to put a spell of destruction on the enemy army. This is found in other cultures as well, and may be a universal method of cursing. One assumes a pose that is a distortion of what we consider normal human symmetry and proportion, so that the wish to destroy another’s balance or harmony becomes more effective.

Most people today believe that cursing is evil, even though there is a long and respected tradition of cursing in Ireland and other countries. Saints cursed, widows and poets cursed, and in modern times a priest’s curse is considered to be especially powerful. The first recorded curse in Ireland was actually a poet’s satirical invective against Bres for not being generous in his hospitality. Individuals

who are proud of their skills in this arena point out that Jesus himself cursed a fig tree that produced no fruit.

In fact some believe the word "curse" comes from the Old Irish word *cursachadh*, which has fallen into disuse and is no longer found in Irish dictionaries. Irish travelers (formerly called tinkers, a wandering people who live in caravans and trailers along the roads) use a word for cursing which Patrick C. Powers suggests may come from the word *searg*, which means "wither." He points out that wither is similar to "blast," another English term associated with cursing.² The most common word for cursing in modern Irish, however, is *escaine*, which originally had the connotation of making something "unclean."

From this assortment of terms, we can trace our way back to what might be one of the earliest understandings of evil. In the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel is referred to as a *wiht unhaelo*, which is translated both as "creature of evil" and "creature of destruction." The term *unhaelo* is the root for both "unholy" and "unhealthy." Put another way, Grendel as a creature of evil is unholy, and as a creature of destruction is unhealthy. In his study of animal imagery in Western spiritual traditions, Christopher Manes suggests that our ancestors would probably not have made much distinction between the two.³ Something that is "unhealthy" is "unholy." Whatever destroys or disrupts life and its natural progression is perceived as evil.

The Celts have always had a strong sense of the ominous — those powers that cause harm, destroy life, disrupt the natural order and fitness of things. Certainly the Fomorians, in their disordered and grotesque aspects, are these very forces. And yet their role as parents and spouses of Irish gods and heroes implies that they play a necessary role in the natural order, that their destructive natures are important in maintaining the balance between life and death that makes existence possible. We cannot destroy them, nor should we want to, even though we long for the Celtic Otherworld of *Tir nan Og*, the Land of Youth, where everyone is young, healthy, and free from suffering and death.

The Celts have a rich tradition of using protective prayers and practices to ward off destructive forces. Called "encompassing spells," "breastplate prayers," and "loricas," these petitions usually follow a formula of calling upon the saints or divine powers to encircle and protect the one who prays from specific evils. Two prayers, one to Christ and the other to Brigid, will demonstrate this.

The shape of Christ be toward me,
The shape of Christ be to me,
The shape of Christ be before me,
The shape of Christ be behind me,
The shape of Christ be over me
The shape of Christ be under me,
The shape of Christ be with me,
The shape of Christ be around me.

I am under the shielding of good Brigid
each day;

I am under the shielding of good Brigid
each night;

I shall not be slain,
I shall not be sworded,
I shall not be put in cell,
I shall not be anguished,
I shall not be wounded,
I shall not be ravaged . . .
Nor fire shall burn me,
Nor sun shall burn me,
Nor moon shall blanch me.
Nor water shall drown me,
Nor flood shall drown me,
Nor brine shall drown me.
Nor seed of fairy host shall lift me,
Nor seed of airy host shall lift me,
Nor earthly being destroy me.
I am under the shielding of good Brigid
Each early and late, every dark, every light.⁴

The idea of being encircled by protective powers is central to Celtic thinking about evil. The ring forts and earthenwork circles that date back to early Celtic and pre-Celtic times may be the original encirclements of protection for ancient communities. In general, they are rings of stone or earth that wall in the holy places and protect them from the unholy forces without. They have their counterparts in the Christian era in the round circular enclosures of monastic settlements. Some monasteries were even built directly upon or near the older encampments, as the monks and hermits realized the sacred and protective power of these sites.

The practice of dedicating space to guardian spirits and deities was critical for protection against the powers of destruction, whether they were seen as enemy armies, evil gods, ill-tempered fairy folk, or demons from the Christians' hell. The circular enclosure defines the inner sanctuary from the outer realms where wild beasts, wild men, and wild spirits dwell. Like the Fomorians, banished beyond the shores of Ireland, the evil spirits, ferocious animals, and human outcasts live outside the walls, beyond the realms of sanctity and security.

A practice to renew and strengthen the protective power of a consecrated space is to make "the circuit" at auspicious times of the year. This activity involves walking the borders with fire or water to bless the land and its boundaries, saying the protective prayers and calling upon saints, angels, and holy ones to guard the land and its inhabitants from all evil. Making the circuit is still practiced in Celtic societies, whether to bless a farm or a suburban house.

Another personal protective practice in the Celtic tradition is the *caim*, a ritual of drawing a circle around yourself with the right index finger, pivoting sunwise, and repeating one of the loricas or protective spells. The invisible circle creates a barrier that protects you from harm.

A possible reason for these practices is the Celtic belief that evil spirits cannot follow or negotiate a curved line. Circles, spirals, and sinuous patterns found in Celtic braids and knotwork are all shapes to thwart the approach of malevolent spirits or cause confusion among them. The

circles and spirals on the stones used in Neolithic passage tombs, such as at Newgrange, may also have served this purpose, although they were carved before the Celts arrived. The designs protected the souls of those buried there, as well as the living who used these structures for ritual and ceremony.

So are the Fomorian — those necessary forces of destruction and chaos — really evil? We might have to conclude that they are *not* evil if we pursue an interesting line of Celtic thinking about the nature of the universe. There is a persistent belief going back into pre-Christian times that nothing is truly evil for the simple yet difficult reason that evil does not exist.

Celtic consciousness is reluctant to see the universe in dualistic terms. There are no rigid delineations of black and white, past and present, natural and supernatural, good and evil. Evidence for nondualism can be found throughout Celtic history. The Druids taught in triads, making pronouncements composed of three separate statements. To require students to put their thoughts into three sen-

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tences would effectively prevent dualistic thinking, since any two opposing ideas would have to be reconciled by a third. Jean Markale, a leading Celtic scholar, even sees Hegelian philosophy, with its notion of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, as echoing an earlier nondualism taught by the Druids.⁵ A less academic example of such thinking is the propensity among the Irish to answer the most straightforward question with the disarming comment "Well, it is and it isn't."

To get a deeper understanding of the nonexistence of evil, we might consider two Celtic mystics and theologians who were accused of heresy by the Roman Church and suspected of resurrecting pagan and Druidic beliefs about the nature of the universe: Pelagius and John Scotus Eriugena.

Pelagius was born in Britain in the latter half of the fourth century, the son of a Welsh bard, whose training in that century would still have been closely allied with former Druidic practices. When Pelagius came to Rome, he caused a stir with his teachings on social justice, the redistribution of wealth, and a greater and fairer role for women in society and the Church. He was also criticized for the way he wore his hair, which might have been tonsured in the old Druid fashion: shaved from ear to ear across the front of the head and allowed to grow long down the back. Celtic monks, who continued to wear this fashion in Pelagius's day, outraged more orthodox ecclesiastics who sported the Roman style of tonsure: a shaved crown leaving a ring of hair around the head.

Whatever Pelagius's hairstyle may have been, he preached

that divine Goodness permeated everything and everyone.

There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent. When God pronounced that his creation was good . . . it was his breath [that] brought every creature to life. . . . God's spirit is present in all living things [and] makes them beautiful. If we look with God's eyes, nothing on the earth is ugly.⁶

Pelagius argued that evil only refers to sinful human acts, but these acts do not come "through a fault in our nature." Our basic human nature is good, and when we fall into the habit of doing harm, it appears as evil and we call it such. In reality, evil is merely a fog that blinds us to our true nature and prevents us from acting in accordance with it. Our true nature, like that of everything, is goodness.

Pelagius based his understanding of goodness on St. John's Gospel (the favorite Gospel of the Celts because of its mystical and nondualistic themes), which clearly states in its Prologue that the divine light "enlightens every person who comes into the world" and that this "light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out."

From this notion, Pelagius argued logically that children are not born with any guilt of original sin. They are born innocent, he said, and if you want to see what God looks like, merely look into the face of a newborn child. The only sins for which we are guilty are the ones we actually commit ourselves — a rather sensible idea, but not in keeping with the hardening Roman Catholic orthodoxy concerning original sin. For Pelagius, no one born after Adam and Eve inherits or suffers from their sin. The divine light that makes all things good is present not only in human beings, says Pelagius, but in all of nature as well. "When our love is directed towards an animal or even a tree, we are participating in the fullness of God's love."

Ideas like these did not sit well with Church authorities, and a concerted effort, led by St. Augustine, emerged within the Church to persecute Pelagius and his followers. But Pelagius's ideas may never have been entirely stamped out. There is a folk belief found in Ireland even in recent times that the Emerald Isle escaped all the consequences of the Fall from Eden, that original sin never took hold in Eire. Could this be a still-resounding echo of the teachings of Pelagius?

Four hundred years later John Scotus Eriugena, a ninth-century Irish mystic and scholar, continued these teachings concerning the goodness of creation. He wrote that God created the universe out of his own essence, which is "the light of the created universe."⁷ He pointed out that even rocks, which seem to be inert, have the divine light. To this day, scholars debate Eriugena's (and Pelagius's) apparent animistic and pantheistic teachings.

We tend to forget that "Christian animism" was the dominant worldview in Europe until the seventeenth century, when the scientific revolution proposed that material things are inert, lifeless, soulless. (Soullessness would eventually even be extended to animals.) The concept of the

anima mundi, the World Soul, is found in the writings of most theologians and mystics up to that time. For example, the great twelfth-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen, who administered an important abbey in the German Rhineland, an area with considerable Celtic influence, echoed Eriugena's remark about stones this way: "Even the stones under your feet worship God, for hidden within every stone is a divine spirit. All creatures are animated by this life."⁸

Eriugena wrote that divine Goodness "is the essence of the whole universe." If so, nothing can be evil, and hence evil as an entity cannot exist. When we "do something evil," we are going against our divine nature, causing that divine light to dim and flicker, but as St. John says, darkness will never put it out.

Eriugena spoke directly against dualism; for him, the distinctions we make in viewing pairs of opposites are illusions that do not exist in God or in his divine essence. Male and female, hot and cold, visible and invisible, and all other such pairs are distinctions which appear only at the surface of life, not at its heart.⁹ Eriugena went so far as to say that God is "inseparable" from all He has created. He even believed that God could not exist without "the diversity" of creation. Or to put it even more bluntly, as he did in a homily on the Gospel of St. John, "For whatever truly is . . . is He."¹⁰

Is this Druidic teaching? Possibly. A Druid is supposed to have said to Pythagoras, "I believe in one Divinity alone who is everywhere, since He is in all." Like other animistic cultures, early Celtic peoples probably found no theological conflict in believing both in an all-pervasive Divine Spirit and in lesser deities who rule the specific forces of wind and fire, starlight and winter storms, the fecundity of the earth and the fertility of the surging sea.

But let us return to the Fomorians. I suggest that we think of them as the Anglo-Saxons thought of Grendel: "unholy" because they are "unhealthy." They threaten the natural rhythms of life with unexpected violence and chaos. And yet these bringers of destruction are creatures of the same Creator. They too share in the divine nature, their essence is also goodness, and the harm they do is part of some larger good, known perhaps only to the Creator.

Nevertheless knowing this does not eradicate our fear and loathing of them. Our drive for life is too strong, and we oppose the forces that destroy or pervert life, turning it from what we perceive as its natural path. The "fight or flight" response takes hold of us when we are confronted by threatening forces, whether they manifest in nature, such as forest fires and hurricanes, or in society, such as industrial complexes and economic systems that keep people poor or destroy the great diversities of life.

We oppose the Fomorians' influence in ourselves as well. If we allow them to enter our personal lives and dwell there, their power becomes available to us and we can use it to "do evil." We then become forces of chaos and destruction, as terrorists, child abusers, rapists, or murderers, or in lesser but still harmful ways. In Christian terms, we sin.

When the Fomorian energy consumes us and we willingly engage in it to cause harm, we become like the Irish warrior Cuchulain in his murderous and uncontrollable

battle rage. He revolved in his skin, so that his feet and knees were behind him, and his buttocks and calves came to the front. His mouth opened so wide that his gullet was visible. He belched fire. One eye fell back into his skull, while the other grew to enormous proportion and protruded outside its socket, hideously flopping on his cheek. The tip of each strand of hair spit out sparks of fire and drops of blood, while a thick stream of black blood rose above his head as high as a ship's mast.

Cuchulain's physical appearance was the embodiment of evil. He was frightening to both enemies and allies alike. But he was not evil. Nor are we wholly evil even in our murderous rages, for the divine goodness that is the essence of all things will not allow the Fomorian influence to totally prevail in us or in the universe at large.

That day on Inishmore, Tethra did not totally prevail. He had his hour of threats and bluster. Fomorians will never prevail. Life is too strong, too powerful to be destroyed. What we learned on those ancient cliffs is that in some way as mysterious as the sea itself, the forces of creation and destruction are both necessary. Those old gods are still around and always will be. And we will probably continue to think of them as evil or good depending on whether they threaten or protect our well-being. But no god is evil. To borrow Pelagius's insight, it is not through any fault in their nature that some gods — some storms, some people — do harm, for all created things serve a greater and grander whole, which for want of a better phrase, we might call the divine goodness or the essence of the universe. ■

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NOTES

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3. Christopher Manes, *Other Creations: Rediscovering the Spirituality of Animals* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 80.
4. Alexander Carmichael, *Carmine Gadilica* (Hudson, N.Y.: Lindisfarne Press, 1992), pp. 256, 238-239.
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6. J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997); all quotes from Pelagius are from pp. 11-16.
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