

The Christianization of Political Discourse: Reflections on the Irish Evidence

Abstract:

A wealth of political writings survives from early Christian Ireland. While traditionally this material has been understood in terms of a dichotomy between “pagan” and “Christian,” recent scholarship has borrowed the category of the “secular” from late antique studies to make sense of early Irish intellectual culture and its political discourses. This article builds on this trend to reveal, through close examination of seventh-century Irish writings, a multitude of differently Christianized discourses existing simultaneously, sometimes even within a single text. Just as the boundary between the “pagan” and the “secular” was not fixed, so too the boundary between the “Christian” and the “secular,” giving rise to many different ways late antique Christians (in Ireland and elsewhere) could speak about politics. Much late antique scholarship on the “secular” assumes it was a passing phase ending in Christianization, but this research argues that “secularity” retained its importance in societies where Christians constantly debated and disagreed over where the boundaries of the “Christian” lay.

Ireland does not often feature in late antique studies.¹ This is a gap for which many reasons exist: the tendency for late antiquity to be defined in terms of the late Roman empire or the eastern Mediterranean necessarily limits the significance of Irish evidence, itself often very difficult to access and analyse; this is further exacerbated by a regrettable tendency (by scholars of both Ireland and late antiquity) to treat early Irish history as separate from the European mainstream. Despite a long tradition of interest in the great *peregrini* (Columbanus in particular tends to be seen as a European figure), unfortunate circumstances led to Ireland’s marginal role in the ground-breaking *Transformation of the Roman World* project

¹ For a recent shift in the scholarship see below n. 22.

which laid so much of the foundation for recent generations of European scholarship on late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.² The absence of Ireland is particularly unfortunate in the study of late antique political thought because of the astounding quantity of material that survives from early Ireland that touches on political ideas and which raises interesting questions about how politics might have been shaped and reshaped as Christian.³

My aim in this article is primarily to introduce some of the most interesting of that material, to show how it can be fruitfully understood in a late antique light and how it, in turn, can perhaps enrich our understanding of developments throughout the late antique world. Part I briefly describes the evidence for early Irish political thought here examined and outlines the traditional historiographical debates over whether this thought is Christian or pagan. Part II then shows how ideas derived from analogous questions in late antique studies, especially that of the “secular,” can help us understand the Irish evidence – pushing attention away from the Christian (or other) nature of Irish political ideas, to look at the degree to which the discourse framing an essentially secular (that is, neutral) political thought has been Christianized. In Part III I elaborate on this insight by a detailed examination of a single text, showing how multiple, differently Christianized, discourses all existed simultaneously in seventh-century Ireland, while in Part IV I then carry this conclusion back into the study of late antique evidence more generally to see how it might help us nuance understandings of the secular and Christianization.

Reflecting on the Irish evidence suggests that the lines between the “Christian” and the “secular” could be drawn in so many different places in late antiquity that Christian politics could take on multiple guises in a single political culture. What explains the shape of

² On this see I. Wood 2016, 16-17.

³ Note the absence of Ireland and Irish material from the magnificent essay which has inspired my title: G. Koziol 2014.

a given text's Christian politics was not the content of its thought but the framing of its discourse. The existence of multiple sources of intellectual comment on politics, very noticeable in Ireland but true generally in late antiquity, meant the co-existence of varied, differently Christianized political discourses.

I

Early Irish material on political thought comes in both the vernacular and in Latin. A vast quantity of Old Irish texts survive, especially of a legal nature – some of these law codes and compilations naturally deal with political ideas, such as *Críth Gablach* which addresses questions of personal status;⁴ there is also a substantial amount of what we might call saga material: narratives that deal with the Irish mythic or pre-historic past.⁵ These are all almost certainly centuries later in composition (at least as they now survive) than the period in which we are interested. What I will focus on are the vernacular “mirrors for princes,” sometimes known as *tecosca* literature. These mainly take the form of advice on how to rule for a mythological ruler given by a mythological sage; the surviving texts may have been recited at royal inaugurations as guidance on just and moral kingship.⁶ As with the sagas there are issues with the dating of many of the *tecosca* texts, but one undoubtedly falls within our period: *Audacht Morainn* (The Testament of Morann) has been dated for the most part to 700 or earlier on linguistic grounds, making it one of the earliest complete works in Old Irish.⁷

The pre-700 material in Latin is much more copious than in the vernacular and includes hagiography and exegesis that can shed light on early Irish political thought – but once again I am going to focus on normative texts dealing with kingship that are closely

⁴ E. MacNeill 1921-1924. For discussion see T. M. Charles-Edwards 1994.

⁵ See, e.g., R. O'Connor 2013.

⁶ Charles-Edwards 1994, 117-18; O'Connor 2013, 283-4.

⁷ F. Kelly 1976; A. Ahlqvist 1984; J. Bisagni 2015. For more on manuscripts, editions and literature, see D. Ó Corráin 2017, 2: 1188-90.

related to the vernacular mirrors for princes.⁸ Key is chapter 9 on the “unjust king” in the moralising treatise *De duodecim abusivis*, but this shows close verbal similarities to the chapter “De regno” from the canon law collection known as the *Hibernensis* and both overlap in content with *Audacht Morainn*. The *Hibernensis* was compiled at some point in the decades on either side of the year 700, apparently by two monastic scholars, one of whom was based at the island monastery of Iona, off the coast of Scotland.⁹ *De duodecim abusivis*, an extraordinarily popular text in the Carolingian ninth century, certainly comes from seventh-century Ireland and, although the details of its context are likely to remain obscure, it probably was written around the midpoint of the century by someone well-read in patristic literature.¹⁰ Now known as a work of Pseudo-Cyprian, the early evidence for its use suggests that it was originally associated with the names of Augustine and Patrick in particular.

Special interest has traditionally been given to the ways that these writings share an emphasis on the cosmological significance of the king’s justice. All of them relate the fertility of the soil and animals, the clemency of the weather, the agreeableness of the climate, and the existence or lack of disease to the ruler’s performance of justice. The vernacular material speaks of the ruler’s “truth” or “justice,” the so-called *fír flathemon* – that is the ability of the king to give correct judgement and to speak the truth in his role as judge. Failure to speak the truth and provide justice on the king’s part upsets the entire natural world to the detriment of the whole kingdom; in this way the ruler is automatically rendered invalid by passing a false judgement, something often represented in narrative form in the later saga material.¹¹ Take

⁸ On hagiography see N. Stalmans, 2003; J.-M. Picard 2012; M. J. Enright 2013. On exegesis see C. O’Brien 2021.

⁹ See, now, R. Flechner 2019, for edition, translation and detailed commentary. Michael J. Enright has published much on the political thought of “De regno” in the *Hibernensis* (much of it going beyond the limits of our knowledge): see, especially, M. J. Enright 1985.

¹⁰ H. H. Anton 1982; A. Breen 1987; R. Meens 1998; A. Breen 2002; S. Meeder 2018, 65–74. For full bibliographical details, see Ó Corráin 2017, 2: 745–8.

¹¹ B. Jaski 2000, 72–81; O’Connor 2013, 78–80.

the example of *Audacht Morainn*. The wise man Morann on his deathbed provides advice for the new king, Feradach Find Fechnach:

Tell him, it is through the justice of the ruler [*fír flathemon*] that plagues and great lightnings are kept from the people. / ... It is through the justice of the ruler that abundances of great tree-fruit of the great wood are tasted. / It is through the justice of the ruler that milk-yields of great cattle are maintained. / It is through the justice of the ruler that that there is abundance of every high, tall corn. / It is through the justice of the ruler that abundance of fish swim in streams. / It is through the justice of the ruler that fair children are well begotten.¹²

The significance of this cosmological view of kingship has caused much debate in the historiography of early Irish thought. Traditionally it was assumed that this was essentially a pagan understanding of kingship, rooted in the sacral office of rulership in pre-Christian Ireland.¹³ The vernacular material preserved, almost unblemished, an ancient political thought that in the case of *Audacht Morainn* might easily date back to the first century AD. It was argued that these ideas about cosmological kingship continued to circulate after conversion to Christianity in an essentially unmodified form, the Latin texts only applying a thin veneer of Christian ideas to the basically pagan content, rooted in an archaic vision of kingship. This interpretation of early Irish political thought must be understood as just one element in the dominant paradigm in the first half of the twentieth century for understanding early Irish society, which was that Christianity in general had only the most limited impact on a society which maintained essentially iron-age worldviews well into the Middle Ages.

¹² *Audacht Morainn* §12-20 (Kelly 1976, 6-7).

¹³ R. Mitchell-Smith 1927; D.A. Binchy 1970, 9-10; F. J. Byrne 1973, 7-27; P. Mac Cana 1979. For a summary of the material on pagan Irish “sacral kingship”: Jaski 2000, 57-88.

Key here was the distinctive characteristic of early Irish intellectual history: the existence of a non-clerical scholarly elite. These were the *filid*, the poet class whose power and influence derived from their mastery of Ireland's ancient vernacular lore; while members of this group compromised with the Christianity that ended their days as priestly druids, they never lost control of the intellectual capital capable of swaying the political and imaginative life of their societies. From this group emerged the saga literature, the poetry, the wisdom literature of the *tecosca* and the vast corpus of laws and taboos which regulated all social interactions in Irish life. By preserving this knowledge in a way that failed to happen for similar bodies of native lore elsewhere, so the scholarship went, the *filid* kept Ireland in intellectual stasis for centuries, preserving an archaic Indo-European world in the far corner of the Latin West.¹⁴ Against this interpretative backdrop, unsurprisingly, early Irish political thought was understood as, in essence, unchristianized and pagan.

This orthodoxy started to be challenged from the 1950s, but it was in the 1980s really that a new generation of scholars dismantled it.¹⁵ They described the school of Celtic Studies they critiqued as “nativism,” not of course a designation embraced by any of the so-called “nativists.”¹⁶ Their contention, particularly clear in a long review of Binchy's edition of the Old Irish corpus of legal texts by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breathnach and Aidan Breen, was that early Ireland was much more open to external influence than the “nativists” allowed – especially in the form of Christianity and Latin learning.¹⁷ That review showed how many of the native laws, which Binchy and his colleagues had assumed to derive from pre-Christian, archaic thought, were nothing more than vernacular calques of canon law or the Vulgate Old Testament. This was because the “nativists” had erred in seeing the *filid* as a

¹⁴ D. A. Binchy 1943; M. Dillon 1947. For a good summary of this intellectual tradition, see M. Fomin 2013, 28-55.

¹⁵ For overviews of the debate: T. Ó Cathasaigh 1996, 58-63; E. Johnston 2013, 16-18; M. Williams 2016, 46-9.

¹⁶ E.g. K. McCone 1990, ch. 1.

¹⁷ D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and A. Breen 1984.

crypto-pagan intellectual elite; instead the “anti-nativists” described the *filid* as fully integrated into the Christian, clerical elite – related by blood, sharing institutional homes in monastic communities, often themselves actually clerics.¹⁸ Early Ireland did not have two different scholar classes, one Christian and one non-Christian: there was a single “mandarin class,” steeped in the Bible and Latin.¹⁹

The changed outlook ushered in by the “anti-nativist” approach obviously resulted in a very different reading of the early Irish material on kingship. In the early 1990s, “anti-nativists” suggested that the cosmological aspects of kingship could have been understood in terms of the Old Testament, where similar links between justice, piety and prosperity appear.²⁰ Since all the surviving sources for early Irish political ideas and discourse come from texts written down after conversion by Christians, often working in religious institutions, they cannot have been understood as pagan in seventh-century Ireland and later. Hence, even if there were once a pagan Irish sacral kingship and even if the surviving material provides some insight into its ideology, both the Latin and the vernacular writings on kingship arose from a Christian intellectual context, and whatever pagan political thought they preserve, the “anti-nativists” argued, is thoroughly Christianized in the surviving material.²¹ In this challenge to “nativism” the lack of explicit mentions of non-Christian cult, or the overall Christian framing of a text, was enough to establish that the political thought expressed within it must have been Christianized.

Outside the realm of polemic, the actual practice of scholarship on early Ireland cannot solely be described in terms of two completely opposed camps, and since the 1990s in particular the move has been towards a compromise position using both “nativist” and “anti-

¹⁸ For the non-pejorative use of “anti-nativist” as a contemporary description: A. J. Hughes 1990.

¹⁹ Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen 1984, 394.

²⁰ McCone 1990, ch. 6, esp. 138-45.

²¹ Enright 1985, 48-63; C. Doherty 2005; O’Connor 2013, 275-85; D. Ó Corráin 2010, 287-90.

nativist” insights.²² Most scholars would now agree that the *filid* were a class distinct from the Christian clerical elite; while in some cases personnel overlapped, essentially the *filid* and the clergy were groups who derived their authority from the command of two different bodies of knowledge. The learning of the *filid* was not pagan, but it was not straightforwardly Christian either – rather, Elva Johnston has suggested that it is best understood as secular knowledge in a Christian context. In the same way that classical learning could be utilized by both pagan and Christian Romans, so too native Irish lore did not necessarily have a clear religious identity. The *filid* who maintained and produced it were, nonetheless, themselves Christians who interacted and overlapped, but never corporately merged, with the ecclesiastical elite.²³ Johnston, who has done much to establish this as the new orthodoxy, has also, interestingly, done the most to incorporate early Irish history into its wider late antique context.²⁴

II

As part of that process, Johnston has drawn on recent late antique scholarship (especially that of Robert Markus and Éric Rebillard) that has emphasised the shared cultural context for Christian/pagan interaction in the late Roman world, the grey areas where religious affiliation was just one element in people’s identities – and not necessarily the most important one. Johnston has suggested that this literature helps us understand aspects of political discourse in early Ireland, particularly royal rituals like the so-called “Feast of Tara,” which had traditionally been understood as a pagan survival (a fertility ritual inaugurating the king’s rule) into the Christian sixth century; this, Johnston argues, may only have come to be seen “as profane and antithetical to a truly Christian kingship” slowly.²⁵ To use Robert

²² See Williams 2016; for comment, also, J. Wooding 2009.

²³ T. M. Charles-Edwards 2006; Johnston 2013, 18-23, 134-44, 155-6; J. Carey 2018, 57-60.

²⁴ E. Johnston 2017; E. Johnston 2018a.

²⁵ E. Johnston 2018b, 9-11, 18-21. The classic interpretation is that of D. A. Binchy 1958, 134-8.

Markus's terminology, developed in a hugely influential series of publications on late antique Christianity, Irish royal inaugurations may have been "secular," religiously neutral, before they came to be seen as profane and pagan.²⁶ It is worth noting that ideas about secularity and religious neutrality derived from scholarship on the late antique Mediterranean world are applicable to the Irish evidence not least because Ireland provides some of the best evidence for late antique people understanding their own relationship with the pre-Christian past in just such a complex fashion; Irish texts argue "that non-Christian did not necessarily mean un-Christian."²⁷

Key here is the story of the compilation of the *Senchas Már*, best attested in the so-called "Pseudo-Historical Prologue" (a probably late eighth-century text), but apparently circulating in other writings from about the 680s.²⁸ *Senchas Már* is a vast compilation of vernacular legal material, and the "Pseudo-Historical Prologue" explains what it contains by recounting how the native Irish elite were initially worried by the arrival of St Patrick and the Christian message of forgiveness, which they feared would lead to wholesale robbery and murder; the King of Tara and his court therefore killed Patrick's charioteer, occasioning the saint to call down the wrath of God – thereby proving that Christian forgiveness had limits. After the chief poet of Ireland created a compromise position between native justice and the Gospel (essentially punishment in the present and forgiveness in the afterlife), Ireland's laws were codified. This process is explicitly described as the editing of pre-Christian laws by a nine-person committee (three kings, three bishops and three *filid*); the native legal corpus was

²⁶ R. A. Markus 1990 remains fundamental. Subsequently, others have taken up Markus's insights: R. Miles 2005; Al. Cameron 2011, 697, 705-6, 784-91; R. Lim 2012. For a recent critique of the concept: M. P. Gassman 2020.

²⁷ Johnston 2018b, 19.

²⁸ See P. Wadden 2016 (esp. 146 for dating), for an up-to-date overview of the scholarly literature, of which the most important is K. McCone 1986; J. Carey 1990; L. Breatnach 2011. The story of the prologue is attested in *Cáin Fhuithirbe* (to be dated to 682) and *Córus Bésgnai* (possibly 660-680s): L. Breatnach 1986; Wadden 2016, 144. See Johnston 2013, 18 for brief comment on how this text shows an Irish "secular" approach to the past (Johnston 2018b, 19 does not use the term); cf. McCone 1990, 100, who argues that the story shows the *Senchas Már* "was held to be God's law as promulgated by His apostle Patrick".

found correct and sufficient except regarding what we would describe in modern terms as “religion.”²⁹ I quote from one tract, included in *Senchas Már*, which gives probably the earliest detailed account of the difference between the native “law of nature” and the Christian “law of the letter”:

There is much in the law of nature which they [*filid* and prophets of pre-Christian Ireland] covered, and which the law of the letter did not cover. / ... What did not conflict with the word of God in the law of the letter and with the conscience of the faithful was combined in the order of judges by the church and learned poets. All of the law of nature had been proper except for the Faith [*cretem*] and what is proper to it, and the attaching of the church to the lay people [*tuaithe* – usually translated “kingdoms” or “tribes”], and the due of both parties from each other and to each other.³⁰

The “Pseudo-Historical Prologue” does not present Christianization as a change in the religious framework underpinning early Irish law from paganism to Christianity, but the addition of something previously missing to a nonetheless “proper” body of legal knowledge, which can easily be separated from any questions of religious belief or organisation, which is “secular” in other words. This casts a different light on how we could understand the vernacular sources for early Irish political ideas like *Audacht Morainn*: the discourse of that text is “secular” in that it does not depend on explicit references to either paganism or Christianity, but rather roots its authority in an ancient Irish past.

Audacht Morainn’s prose introduction identifies it as the “testament of Morann son of Móen to Feradach Find Fechnach son of Craumthann Nia Nár” in the context of the latter’s restoration of his rightful rule over Ireland after rebellion; while this may be a latter addition

²⁹ For edition and translation of the text: McCone 1986, 7-8, 29-30 (for Dubthach’s judgement); J. Carey 1994 (for the rest of the prologue).

³⁰ *Córus Bésgnai* §36-7 (L. Breatnach 2017, 34-5). For discussion: McCone 1990, 92-6.

to the text, the opening verses of the work make clear that this location of the advice in Ireland's pre-Christian past was always intended.³¹ The cited authorities on kingship in the broadly contemporary *Hibernensis* are, in contrast, books of the Bible (e.g. Kings, Wisdom, Isaiah, Ezra, Leviticus, Judges, Job, Ecclesiastes under the name of Solomon – as well as the Gospels), Church Fathers (e.g. Jerome, Augustine, Gregory Nazianzus, Isidore), ecclesiastical authority in the form of a synod and late antique Latin historiography, including Orosius.³² Despite many similarities in terms of content, *Audacht Morainn* and the *Hibernensis* frame their political ideas very differently: the latter employs a highly Christianized authorizing language, the former does not. To describe *Audacht Morainn* as secular is not, consequently, a judgement on whether the ideas it presents are compatible with Christian belief – it simply describes the fact that they are presented in a religiously neutral fashion. Such “neutralization” of the religious, and therefore potentially controversial, elements of political thought is very familiar to late antique scholars of the fourth century.³³

The differences go deeper than just external claims to authority: the *Hibernensis* shows a real interest in how royal power relates to the Church and monastic communities, whereas there is no mention of the existence of the Church, or any other priesthood or religious professionals, in *Audacht Morainn*. This does not mean that the vernacular work has not been shaped by Christianity: the advice “let him estimate the creations of the creator who made them as they were made” and the claim that “he whom the living do not glorify with blessings [*bendachtnaib*: a loan word from the Latin *benedictio*] is not a true ruler” both suggest a background in Christian piety.³⁴ But the Christian context almost entirely obscured in *Audacht Morainn* has pride of place in the *Hibernensis*'s account of kingship. Hence, I

³¹ *Audacht Morainn* §1-3 (Kelly 1976, 2-5); Bisagni 2015, 152-3. See McCone 1990, 73-4, on how later works claimed that Morann was a pre-Patrician convert to Christianity, having travelled to the apostle Paul.

³² Flechner 2019, 1:145-59, 2:581-91.

³³ H. Leppin 2012, 259-65.

³⁴ *Audacht Morainn* §32, 59 (Kelly 1976, 10-13, 18-19). The second example may however be an addition to the original text: Bisagni 2015, 149.

think it best to talk in this article about political discourse, rather than just political thought. The traditional historiographical focus on the religious content of early Irish political thought (and therefore whether a given idea was “really” pagan or Christian) might be less helpful than looking at the religious framing of that thought. In *Audacht Morainn* and the *Hibernensis* we see two approaches to political discourse, two ways of expressing the same basic body of thought on kingship, arising from one and the same society.

Similar phenomena are familiar from scholarship on the late antique Roman world: towards the end of the fourth century, for instance, Theodosius the Great was the subject of praise for similar virtues in both the strikingly secular panegyric of Pacatus and the overtly Christian funeral oration of Ambrose.³⁵ The Bishop of Milan presented a highly Christianized view of the imperial office as one marked by self-control and humble restraint, symbolized by the use of one of the nails from Christ’s cross as the emperor’s bridle: “why is there a holy thing upon the bridle, unless it is to curb the arrogance of emperors, to check the wantonness of tyrants ...?”³⁶ Ambrose presented his audience with an emperor “subsumed completely into the language of” the Psalter, and completely framed in Christocentric terms.³⁷ By submitting to penance at the bishop’s hands Theodosius had re-enacted the humility of Christ; as Christ saved souls through humility, so too did Theodosius spare his enemies through humble mercy.³⁸ But the virtues that Ambrose talked about in utterly Christian terms could be celebrated in much more neutral language, as Pacatus had done a few years previously. Pacatus had described imperial modesty, self-restraint and clemency in secular terms: Theodosius lived “with the austerity of leaders of old, the chastity of pontiffs, the

³⁵ Pacatus, *Pan. lat.* 2(12); Amb., *De obitu Theodosii* (CSEL 73: 371-401).

³⁶ Amb., *De obitu Theodosii* 50 (CSEL 73: 397-8; trans. Liebeschuetz 2005, 201): “Quare sanctum super frenum, nisi ut imperatorum insolentiam refrenaret, conprimeret licentiam tyrannorum...?”

³⁷ N. McLynn 1995, 358.

³⁸ Amb., *De obitu Theodosii* 16-17, 26-7 (CSEL 73: 379-80, 384-5).

moderation of consuls and the affability of candidates for office;" no references to Christ were necessary to explain the emperor's "merciful nature."³⁹

The concepts of the "secular" and "neutralisation" now frequently applied to fourth-century Roman political texts clearly help us to analyse the Irish comparanda. The Irish evidence also, potentially, helps us to nuance understandings of the significance of the late antique "secular". Robert Markus's own model included the idea of a "de-secularization" of Western Europe between the years 400 and 700 and one of the key causes of that de-secularization, Markus believed, was the overwhelming Christianization of political discourse: "a radically Christian society" emerged, in which "the principles of all major spheres of public activity and the norms governing them were increasingly formulated in Christian terms."⁴⁰ Hartmut Leppin's alternative stress on "neutralisation" similarly assumes that this was a passing phase, as the space for grey areas narrowed and Christian discourses and practices became increasingly hegemonic throughout the fifth and sixth centuries.⁴¹ The Irish evidence stands outside such models because Ireland never seems to have followed the path to the total Christianization of the "principles of all major spheres of public activity." On the whole, Irish vernacular texts appealing to the pre-Christian past and framing their political ideas in secular terms seem to postdate the existence of more Christianized Latin sources like the *Hibernensis*: the "secular" was not just a passing phase.⁴² Late antique studies of Christianization increasingly stress the incomplete, complicated nature of that process, but

³⁹ Pacatus, *Pan. lat.* 2(12).20.5, 44 (trans. Nixon and Rodgers 1994, 470, 511): "iam te ipsum qua publice qua priuatum uideret priscorum duritia ducum, castitate pontificum, consulum moderation, petitorum comitate uiuentem"; "clementiae tuae morem."

⁴⁰ R. A. Markus 2010, 361.

⁴¹ Leppin 2012, 256-75.

⁴² O'Connor 2013, 282. For the general shift from Latin to the vernacular in Ireland between 800 and 1000 see Johnston 2013, 128-9.

reflecting on the Irish evidence may shed further light on the particular complexities in how political discourse changed.⁴³

III

To elaborate on this point I want to drill down into one of our Irish Latin texts to see how it reveals how discordant an apparently Christianized political discourse might be in the seventh century – giving a Christian shape to politics was not straightforward. I want to look at *De duodecim abusivis*, examining chapter 9 and its structure in a little detail, because it is usually taken as the most unambiguous example of a highly Christianized concept of kingship at work in late antique Ireland. Several distinct sections can be noted in this chapter:

- a) The nature, name and function of the king (drawing on Isidore, *Etymologiae* IX.4; Psalms 88.15; Proverbs 16.12);
- b) Definition of *iustitia regis* 1 (many echoes of biblical vocabulary; Ecclesiastes 10.16 quoted verbatim);
- c) The consequences of unjust rule, primarily ‘cosmological’, ending with the *exempla* of Solomon and David;
- d) Definition of *iustitia regis* 2 (no echoes of biblical vocabulary);
- e) The afterlife of the ministerial king.⁴⁴

What is most noticeable is that there are actually two separate definitions of the king’s justice given in the text. The *Hibernensis* (either adapting *De duodecim abusivis* itself or drawing on a related but somewhat different version of the text) conflates these two definitions into a single canon attributed to St Patrick, but in the treatise they remain not only physically separate within the body of the work, but noticeably separate in terms of content.⁴⁵

⁴³ On Christianisation, as well as Markus 1990 and Leppin 2012, see P. Brown 1995 and E. Watts 2015.

⁴⁴ I have been influenced by Fomin 2013, 61-105.

⁴⁵ Flechner 2019, 1:148-9, 2:583. On the differences between the texts: Anton 1982, 582-6; Fomin 2013, 68-70.

The opening of chapter 9 is grounded in Latin and Christian learning: the king has a duty to correct others, and therefore himself, based on the supposed connection between *regere* and *corrigere* common in Latin writings, and given recent expression (for the author of *De duodecim abusivis*) by Isidore of Seville.⁴⁶ The author grounds kingship in justice and truth in words that probably come from a conflation of Old Testament texts. This sets up the first definition of the king's justice:

Truly, the justice of the king is to oppress nobody unjustly through power, to judge between a man and his neighbour without taking account of persons, to be the defender of foreigners, orphans and widows, to restrain thefts, to punish adultery, not to exalt the wicked, not to support the unchaste and actors, to rid the earth [land?] of the impious, not to allow parricides and perjurers to live, to defend the churches, to support the poor with alms, to appoint the just over the business of the kingdom, to have old, wise and sober counsellors, not to heed the superstitions of wizards, soothsayers and prophetesses, to dispel anger, bravely and justly to defend the fatherland against enemies, to have faith in God in all things, not to lift up the soul on account of prosperity, to bear patiently all adversities, to have the Catholic faith in God, not to allow his sons to act wickedly, to persevere with prayers at the regular hours, not to eat food before the appropriate hours. For “woe to the land whose king is a boy and whose princes eat in the morning.” [Ecclesiastes 10.16] These things create the prosperity of the kingdom in the present and lead the king to the better heavenly kingdom.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Isid. *Etym.* 9.4.

⁴⁷ *De duodecim abusivis* 9 (*TU* 34:51-2; trans. A. Breen 1988, 400-404): “Iustitia vero regis est neminem iniuste per potentiam opprimere, sine acceptione personarum inter virum et proximum suum iuste iudicare, advenis et pupillis et viduis defensor esse, furta cohibere, adulteria punire, iniquos non exaltare, impudicos et histriones non nutrire, impios de terra perdere, parridas et periurantes vivere non sinere, ecclesias defendere, pauperes elemosynis alere, iustos super regni negotia constituere, sense et sapientes et sobrios consiliarios habere, magorum et ariolorum phitonissarumque superstitionibus non intendere, iracundiam suam differre, patriam fortiter et iuste contra adversarios defendere, per omnia in Deo confidere, prosperitatibus animum non elevare, cuncta adversa patienter tolerare, fidem catholicam in Deum habere, filios suos non sinere impie agere, certis horis orationibus insistere, ante horas congruas non gustare cibum. “Vae enim terrae, cuius rex puer est et cuous

There can be no doubt that here we have a very Christianized vision of royal justice: not just the quirky quotation from Ecclesiastes, but also statements about judging without distinction between persons and protecting widows and orphans have clear biblical origins and were widely repeated in late antique and early medieval Christian advice to rulers;⁴⁸ many of the statements obviously sit comfortably within the wider context of the Christianization of royal office and emerge from a late antique Roman ideal of the good ruler as the supporter of orthodoxy and the defender of the Church. The strong emphasis on the punitive elements of just rule finds parallels across the Latin West in the sixth and seventh centuries, and obviously derives from the Isidorian emphasis on “correction.”⁴⁹ Maxim Fomin’s close verbal study of the text suggests a high level of dependence on the Vulgate and Aidan Breen (the most recent editor of *De duodecim abusivis*) has suggested evidence of patristic reading in the citation from Ecclesiastes.⁵⁰ It has even been suggested to me that the Ecclesiastes quotation’s apparent concern for the age of a monarch suggests growing concerns about child-rulers in seventh-century Merovingian Frankia, suggesting a field of vision for this text certainly not limited to Ireland – although I know of no early medieval text where this biblical verse was directly linked to the issue of a child king and so would be cautious about assuming this verse had to have been taken literally.⁵¹

principes mane comedunt.” Haec regni prosperitatem in praesenti faciunt et regem ad caelestia regna meliora perducunt.”

⁴⁸ E.g. Exod 22.22; Deut 1.17; Deut 10.18; 1 Pet 1.17. *Ep. Austras.* 2 (*MGH, Epp* 3: 113); Isid. *Sent.* 3.52.2 (*CCSL* 111: 305).

⁴⁹ Isid. *Sent.* 3.48.5b, 3.50.4 (*CCSL* 111:297, 302), stresses the punitive, coercive elements in royal justice and correction. Frankish sources emphasise the fear the king’s punishments should inspire in the wicked: Chlothar II, *Edictum* 11 (*MGH, Capit.* 1:22); *Epistolae aevi Merovingici collectae* 15 (*MGH, Epp.* 3:460).

⁵⁰ Fomin 2013, 74-94; Breen 1988, 169-71.

⁵¹ My thanks to Marios Costambeys for suggesting this point. A full study of medieval uses of Eccl 10.16 will appear in Emily Ward’s forthcoming monograph on royal childhood and child kings; I am very grateful to her for discussing the matter.

It is only after this section that the “cosmological” materials, which find such strong parallels in other Irish writings, appear – first in a description of the consequences of royal injustice and then the second definition of the king’s justice:

Because of this [the injustice of a king] often the peace of peoples is broken ... likewise the fruits of the earth are diminished ... the deaths of loved ones and children bring sorrow, attacks of enemies everywhere lay waste the provinces, beasts ravage the herds of cattle and of flocks, tempests of the air and the turbulent atmosphere prevent the fecundity of the earth and use of the sea, and frequently the blasts of lightnings burn up the crops and the flowers and shoots of the trees. ... Behold, how much the justice of the king is worth to the world is evidently clear to those who consider it. It is the peace of the peoples, the protection of the fatherland, the safeguard of the common people, the defence of the *gens*, the cure of the weak, the joy of men, the temperateness of the air, the calmness of the sea, the fecundity of the earth, the comfort of the poor, the inheritance of sons and the hope of future blessedness for himself.⁵²

In this section of the text the biblical vocabulary of the first definition of justice disappears – Fomin’s analysis of the text suggests a noticeable change of style and source material from what has come before.⁵³ While acknowledging the general similarities to biblical ideas that the “anti-nativist” school highlighted, one must point out that no specific borrowing from the Bible, such as in the earlier section, appears in the second definition of *iustitia regis*. Efforts to find patristic sources for this section of the text have

⁵² *De duodecim abusivis* 9 (TU 34:52-3; trans. Breen 1988, 404-8): “Idcirco enim saepe pax populorum rumpitur ... terrarum quoque fructus diminuuntur ... carorum et liberorum mortes tristiam conferunt, hostium incursus provincias undique vastant, bestiae armentorum et pecorum greges dilacerant, tempestates aeris et hemisperia turbata terrarum fecunditatem et maris ministerial prohibent et aliquando fulminum ictus segetes et arborum flores et pampinos exurunt. ... Ecce quantum iustitia regis saeculo valet, intuentibus perspicue patet. Pax populorum est, tutamen patriae, munitas plebis, munimentum gentis, cura languorum, gaudium hominum, temperum aeris, serenitas maris, terrae fecunditas, solacium pauperum, hereditas filiorum et sibimet ipsi spes futurae beatitudinis.”

⁵³ Fomin 2013, 94-105, 108-9.

come to naught, but the broad parallels with the *tecosca* material are quite clear.⁵⁴ Of course, Christian elements are hardly completely absent here. Between my sections c and d the author points to Solomon and David as examples of how a just king sees his heirs succeed him and an unjust one does not;⁵⁵ the second definition of justice ends with a similar reference to the king's salvation as the first definition. Nonetheless, the two definitions are radically different in feel and focus. It looks to me like the author of *De duodecim abusivis* dealt with different source material which he found difficult to integrate into a single whole. And those different sources display different degrees of Christianization of discourse: one draws less frequently on Christian sources, refers less frequently to Christian society, appeals less frequently to Christian authorities.

So, it is not just the case that *Audacht Morainn* and the *Hibernensis* sit at different ends of the spectrum of the Christianization of secular Irish political discourse; *De duodecim abusivis* reveals to us how a single text might incorporate multiple voices, each coming from a different place along that spectrum. To further complicate matters, while the evidence of *De duodecim abusivis* would suggest that a punitive vision of justice, supporting capital punishment for instance, was associated with the most Christianized forms of political discourse, it is worth noting that according to the "Pseudo-Historical Prologue" to the *Senchas Már* punishment was associated with the pre-Christian, secular Irish legal tradition: "There was in the first law of the men of Ireland that which God has not forgiven in his New Law. ... It is thus that the two laws were fulfilled. The criminal was killed for his crime and his soul was forgiven."⁵⁶ The execution of criminals seems here associated with "the first law of the men of Ireland," not the new Christian

⁵⁴ Cf. Breen 1988, 169-72.

⁵⁵ *De duodecim abusivis* 9 (*TU* 34:52-3): "Propter piaculum enim Salmonis regnum domus Israhel Dominus de manibus filiorum eius dispersit, et propter iustitiam David regis lucernam de semine eius semper in Hierusalem reliquit."

⁵⁶ For the text and translation: McCone 1986, 7-8, 29-30.

dispensation.⁵⁷ Similar ideas on the importance of the death penalty in *De duodecim abusivis* and the “Pseudo-Historical Prologue” are differently framed by two different political discourses, one suggesting links with the post-Roman Christianity of the European continent, the other highlighting continuity with the native past.

It seems to me, therefore, that the Irish evidence suggests a whole babble of seventh-century voices who disagree, in sometimes subtle ways, over quite what is Christian and what secular and frame their political discourse accordingly. *Audacht Morainn* might give us a vision of royal justice where explicitly religious elements are kept at a distance, whereas the second definition of the *iustitia regis* in *De duodecim abusivis* presents a more Christianized take on the same traditional material. More Christianized, but not as heavily Christianized as the first definition of justice in that text, which in turn seems to put in an utterly Christian context ideas about justice and punishment that the author of the “Pseudo-Historical Prologue” considered secular and pre-Christian. The compilers of the *Hibernensis* ignored the differences between the two definitions of the *iustitia regis* in *De duodecim abusivis*, conflated them and emphasised not merely their Christian, but their ecclesiastical nature also, by virtue of their placing within a canonical collection. In other words, I think we can see that people disagreed about what was secular and what was Christian perhaps just as much as they did over what was secular and what was pagan.

IV

What might this Irish evidence contribute to our wider appreciation of the Christianization of political discourse in late antiquity? It all depends on how “odd” one

⁵⁷ Modern scholarship often associates the death penalty in early Ireland with clerical interest and Christian Roman influence: McCone 1990, 98-99; Ó Corráin 2010, 294-5, 311; D. Ó Cróinín 2017, 101. But the “Pseudo-Historical Prologue,” while highlighting the biblical case for punishment, also suggests (accurately or not) that the death penalty was a traditional part of Irish legal practice. For discussion: McCone 1986, 15-18; Carey 1990, 7; D. Bracken 1995. For recent discussion of the interplay between native traditions of compensation and Christian ideas of punishment in Irish law: J. Bemmer 2018.

thinks Ireland was in the Latin West.⁵⁸ The richness and long continuation of a secular political discourse in Ireland, the fact that “all major spheres of public activity and the norms governing them were” were not “increasingly formulated in Christian terms”,⁵⁹ has usually been related to the honoured and significant position of the *filid* within Irish society and their control of important intellectual resources. But this aspect of the Irish landscape may have been less unusual than was once assumed. Recent scholarship on early medieval England raises the possibility that there too existed a secular class of intellectual specialists and a distinctive body of learning that co-existed with the monastic world of Latin and biblical scholarship but maintained its distinction from it.⁶⁰ In the post-imperial world Roman learning did not completely retreat to the cloister; beneath the small crop of significant lay intellectuals who emerged in the late antique and early medieval West was a fertile soil of public notaries, lay scribes and secular administrators who authorized themselves through non-clerical forms of knowledge.⁶¹ If we can understand the *filid* better through comparison to late Romans, then perhaps we can understand late antique officials and administrators better by comparing them to the *filid*: both were non-clerical, intellectual elites consisting (mostly) of Christians whose status depended on pre-Christian traditions. While we can usually only approach the political ideas of our lay intellectuals via the clerical texts directed to such an audience,⁶² in light of the Irish evidence, we can imagine that they too produced a variety of Christianized political discourses.

Take some of the Frankish evidence, which tends to be quite rich because we have clerical letters to kings written from the late fifth through to the ninth century. Many of

⁵⁸ Cf. K. Hughes 1973, 21.

⁵⁹ Markus 2010, 361.

⁶⁰ T. Lambert 2017, 75-6, 139-41; R. Shaw 2018, 184-5.

⁶¹ See R. McKitterick 1990; P. Wormald and J. L. Nelson 2007; A. Rio 2009; W. Brown et al. 2012; P. Brown 2013, xl-xlii. Leppin 2012, 275, notes how this limited the impact of “totalisation” by Christianity.

⁶² R. Whelan 2018.

these have an important place in the historiography, especially Remigius of Rheims' famous letter to Clovis and Cathwulf's letter to Charlemagne (key evidence, of course, for the influence of Irish texts on the continent).⁶³ Rather more obscure is the letter to Theudebert I written by Bishop Aurelianus (of an unknown see): in most scholarship this has been taken as a Christianized recitation of traditional Roman imperial virtues for a ruler, but Hans Hubert Anton has pointed out how the letter exceeds traditional political discourse to end up stressing the king's identity as a Christian rather than as a ruler, while Robin Whelan has recently pointed out that the letter accepts, without critique or challenge, the existence of a secular sphere as the wider political context in which Theudebert's Christianity could be practiced.⁶⁴ Aurelianus explicitly stated that he would not deal with "secular" or "temporal" matters, by which he mainly seems to have meant the extent of Theudebert's royal power. Aurelianus concentrated on the virtues of royal justice and sociability as the "eternal" and "religious" aspects of kingship and in this regard he spoke of Theudebert's ability to "maintain humility in exalted positions" and provide "mercy amongst the wretched, moderation amongst subjects, extravagance in gifts, counsel amongst doubts, constancy in adversity" – for the most part a traditional list of royal virtues that no late-Roman panegyrist would have found problematic, but for Aurelianus part of what a "Christian prince" owed God.⁶⁵ Performance of these royal

⁶³ See M. Garrison 1998; J. Story 1999; G. Barrett and G. Woudhuysen 2016.

⁶⁴ R. Collins 1983, 20-24; P. D. King 1988, 135; Y. Hen 1998, 282-3; H. H. Anton 2005, 315-17; R. Whelan 2021, 28-30.

⁶⁵ *Ep. Austras.* 10 (*MGH, Epp* 3:125): "Ac perinde non mihi in votis hoc commemorandum est, quod tempora caelebrant, sed quod aeternitas probat: religiosam potius actionem taxavimus, quae documentis evidentior est facta quam linguis, nec minus invicta meritis quam triumphis, cuiusque iam effectui laudabili velociora sunt exempla quam nuntia. Ideoque tropheis titulisque saecularibus sufficit loquacitas orbis. Multum namque tuis onusta virtutibus currit fama: cum pondere et veris opinionibus iam adsueta, de te tantum didicit non mentiri. Praetereo generis tui stimma sidereum; taceo et illud, quod unicus sceptris, multiplex populis, gente varius, dominatione unitus, solidus regno, diffusus imperio. ... Didicisti itaque, quam sit arduum excelsa conscendere, et docuisti, quam magnum sit in sublimibus humilitatem servare. Quae de primis prima dicenda sunt, quae potissimum de cumulo praesumenda? Quid, inquam, potius aut prius dicimus, misericordiam in miseriis, temperantiam in subiectis, affluentiam in donis, consilium in dubiis, constantiam in adversis? ... A christiano principe inestimabilis ratio Deo reddenda est."

virtues mattered from an eschatological perspective in light of the Last Judgement.⁶⁶

Effectively, I would suggest, Aurelianus squeezed large amounts of a king's role into the bracket "Christian": the duty to provide justice and equity, to rule in the interests and with the support of his (elite) subjects. The pomp and domineering elements of monarchy remained within the "secular." I would agree with Whelan here concerning Aurelianus's acceptance of the secular, while perhaps further stressing that the bishop's capacious vision of what was Christian clearly aimed to side-line that element of government.

Whelan notes that Aurelianus's letter gestures towards a "secular mindset in the ruling elites" that the bishop corresponded with;⁶⁷ I want to think about how those elites might have spoken about Christian kingship in a different way to Aurelianus.

Interestingly we have another view of Theudebert I as a Christian prince in a letter written by the king's own son Theudebald (or rather written on his behalf by a member of the predominantly lay chancery) to the emperor Justinian.⁶⁸ This seeks to defend Theudebert's reputation as a Christian ruler which Justinian had clearly traduced, presumably in the context of the difficult ongoing diplomacy with the Empire over Frankish involvement in Italy.⁶⁹ Theudebald turned, not to the virtues of justice and the care for the subjects that Aurelianus had encouraged Theudebert to understand as displays of his Christianity, but to matters directly related to religious cult, the spread of Christian practices and the extermination of pagan ones. He celebrated his father for having destroyed pagan shrines and raised up churches to unprecedented heights.⁷⁰ Neither

⁶⁶ *Ep. Austras.* 10 (*MGH, Epp* 3:125-6).

⁶⁷ Whelan 2021, 29.

⁶⁸ On Merovingian royal letters as lay products: B. Dumézil 2018, 159-60. See, for instance, *Ep. Austras.* 48 (*MGH, Epp* 3:152), which was drafted by the Mayor of the Palace, Gogo.

⁶⁹ For the context and purpose of this letter: A. Gillett 2019, 180-87.

⁷⁰ *Ep. Austras.* 18 (*MGH, Epp* 3:132): "Illud namque inter omnia valde animis nostris molestiam generavit, quod tantum ac talem principem ac diversarum gentium domitorem post mortem pagina decurrentem videmini lacerari, qui vivens imperatoribus ac regibus vel gentibus universisque fidem immaculatam promissasque semel amicitias firmis condicionibus conservavit et, pro christianae religionis intuitu, non, ut scribitis, loca sacrosancta distituit, sed magis pagana consumpta excidio suis, Christo auctore, temporibus in meliore culmine revocavit."

Aurelianus nor other clerics of the early Merovingian era discussed matters of cult or evangelisation (spreading the faith, stamping out idolatry, etc) in their letters to kings;⁷¹ nonetheless, that is what Theudebald thought of when he thought of Christian kingship. The political discourse between the Austrasian and Constantinopolitan courts was, therefore, differently Christianized to that which appeared in an episcopal letter of admonition directed toward the Austrasian court.

Context obviously matters, and partially, no doubt Theudebald's letter reflects expectations established in the East, where, under Justinian, Christian rulership was becoming noticeably more pro-active in its involvement in the support of the true faith and the ending of alternatives; we do not know about the context for Aurelianus's letter. But considering the Irish evidence, we may also want to wonder whether the royal household were unconvinced by Aurelianus's attempt to Christianize (that is, to label as "Christian") the king's traditional interactions with his subjects. Justice, humility, gift-giving: these may all still have been framed as "secular" rather than as "Christian" in some circles, requiring a "Christian prince" to interest himself in the issues of cult and belief that may have appeared more unambiguously Christian to governing elites. Theudebert's government had been run by men like the *magister officiorum* Parthenius, an aristocrat from a distinguished Christian Gallo-Roman family, who put the fruits of an excellent secular education (including knowledge of Caesar's commentaries) to service a career in administration.⁷² Parthenius was hardly directly analogous to an Irish *filí* but he, nonetheless, belonged to a class who may have preserved secular political discourses, while nonetheless being proudly Christian. Martin of Braga's *Formula vitae honestae* may

Gillett 2019, 185, suggests that the pagan shrines were ruined in the past, but B. Dumézil 2005, 228, assumes that Theudebert had destroyed them.

⁷¹ E.g. *Ep. Austras.* 2 (*MGH, Epp* 3:113); *Epistolae aevi Merovingici collectae* 15 (*MGH, Epp* 3:457-60).

⁷² On Parthenius see 'Parthenius 3', in *PLRE*, 2:833-4.

give us some insight into how men like Parthenius spoke: this work for the court of a sixth-century Suevian king provides moral lessons, themselves mostly drawn from Seneca, “without the precepts of the divine Scriptures,” suggesting an audience that did not frame its ethics in Christian terms.⁷³

Following Whelan, Aurelianus recognised the mindset of court elites, while perhaps not objectively describing it – as a work of admonition, his letter may have argued the standard royal virtues were Christian precisely because they were not so described at court. I suspect that Aurelianus, Parthenius, Theudebert and Theudebald (and even Justinian) all essentially agreed on what a king ought to do – the content of their political thought was probably very similar if not identical; but the way they spoke about politics is likely to have varied considerably (and was probably never consistent for any one individual either). A shared body of political thought would have looked very different depending on where one drew the line between the “secular” and the “Christian.” Aurelianus’s letter constituted an invitation to the Austrasian court to read vast swathes of good kingship as Christian kingship, but when the court was under pressure to defend Theudebert’s Christian kingship it fell back on a narrower, more cult-focused, vision. Like in the Irish case, the fact that different people spoke differently about the same basic political thought may explain why we have sources that point in different directions.

In other words, I think the Irish material on political thought can fruitfully be placed within a broader late antique context, not only because late antique methodologies prove useful in getting Irish scholarship out of a binary “pagan versus Christian” rut, but also because reflecting on the Irish evidence enriches our understanding of the late antique

⁷³ Martin of Braga, *Formula honestae vitae* 1 (Barlow 1950, 237): “Titulus autem libelli est Formulae Vitae Honestae, quem idcirco tali volui vocabulo superscribi, quia non illa ardua et perfecta quae a paucis et egregiis deicolis patrantur instituit, sed ea magis commonet quae et sine divinarum scripturarum praeceptis naturali tantum humanae intellegentiae lege etiam a laicis recte honeste que viventibus valeant adimpleri.” Cf. Damián Fernández 2017, 182.

dynamics of Christianization. The “secular” and cognate terms are often conceived by those who champion them as passing phases in a journey towards Christian hegemony over discourse and practices. Ireland presents us with a Western European society where things were clearly more complicated than that – not because archaic paganism maintained a grip on the commanding heights of intellectual production, but because of Ireland’s very late antique “secularity.” Reflecting on the Irish evidence suggests that political discourse need not have been universally Christianized by the seventh century, because institutions and intellectuals provided the basis for continuing disagreements over where the boundary of the Christian lay. More than that, the Irish evidence perhaps even questions whether “secularity” or “neutrality” should be seen as inevitably fated to wither away, rather than as elements retaining their importance within societies filled with Christians who maintained varied discourses, shaping Christian politics in different ways.

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