

Interview with Mar Alexei

Fr Franček: You are a druid. What does that mean? What do you believe solemnly as druid?

Mar Alexei: I am a Druid. What that means is that I have reached the Druid grade in a reputable Druid Order. To my mind that is important. You can't just proclaim yourself to be a Druid. It requires training, and learning like any craft. I am a member of the largest Druid order in the world, "The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids" founded by The Revd Ross Nicholls, known as Chief Nuinn, in 1964, as a reform of the Ancient Druid Order which traces a lineage back to 1717. Chief Nuinn was ordained a deacon by Archbishop Tugdual II of St Dolay one of my antecedents in the apostolic succession. In my profession as an explicitly Christian Druid I see myself as continuing and developing the vision and work of both St Tugdual II (he has been canonised by the Celtic Orthodox Church) and Chief Nuinn. So now, as well as being a Druid grade member and tutor in the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids I am also the Chief of The Druidic Order of the Most Holy Trinity, a self-consciously Christian Druid Order which I founded last year.

Some people nowadays who know something about Druidry think of it as part of the Neo-pagan movement, but such is not necessarily the case. Since the first of our Druid ancestors converted to Christianity nearly two thousand years ago most Druids have been Christians. The "paganisation" of Druidism from the late 20th century onwards is as much a result of post-modern secularisation and anti-clericalism as anything else and it falls to me and others with a similar vision to keep the Celtic Christian form of Druidism vibrant and viable.

My faith is that of a Christian, and quite an orthodox Christian at that, but to my basic panentheistic form of liberal Christianity my Druidry gives me a certain means to enchant my life and world, a reverence for nature, a sense of oneness with all that is and a set of magickal and psychic techniques which make life much more rewarding and enjoyable. A Christian Druid does not for example merely pray to God, he learns to connect with his own potential divinity in, with and even as God.

Fr Franček: You are also a gnostic. How do you perceive your gnosticism?

Mar Alexei: *laughs* ... I don't think I have ever publicly described myself as a Gnostic, lest I should be mistaken for a Valentinian Gnostic or connected with any other form of *dualist* gnosticism. I am firmly a monist – believing in the essential oneness of all beings and the universe itself.

Theologically therefore, I would have much more in common with members of the family of

“metaphysical” churches, such as the United Church of Religious Science, than with most neo-Gnostic churches such as the Ecclesia Gnostica. However, I would not reject the Gnostic label altogether and would substantially agree with Bishop Edward Matthews of the Liberal Catholic Church International who wrote in his Liberal Catholic Catechism, if you would permit me to quote it at this point:

16. “What does the Liberal Catholic Church aim to be? It aims to be a Gnostic Church.

17. Like the Gnostics of the early Christianity? No, not entirely so.

18. What difference would there be? The Church aims to avoid reproducing certain extravagances of the early Gnostics.

19. In what manner does the Church aim to be a Gnostic Church? By aiding its members to reach for themselves this certainty of knowledge.

20. What is this true knowledge called? The true Gnosis, of which St. Clement of Alexandria wrote so fervently.

21. By what means does the Liberal Catholic Church expect to bring its members to this true Gnosis? By the ancient Paths of Purification, Illumination and Union, which in olden times brought the candidate to this certainty.”

This, I think you will agree, is a sort of Gnosticism which one could interpret as perfectly orthodox, from a liberal perspective at any rate.

Fr Franček: ... Why have you found shamanic training and Celtic healing practices beneficial to the Druidry course you have taken?

Mar Alexei: ... While the OBOD course does contain many suggestions for putting the theory of Druidry into practice I personally found I needed more structure and experience shared with others than the correspondence course could offer. This prompted me to seek out John and Caitlin Matthews, a couple of renowned Celtic scholars and founding members of OBOD who, almost

single-handedly, rediscovered Celtic shamanism. One could scarcely find nicer, more spiritually mature, knowledgeable and grounded teachers anywhere. I still hold them both in the greatest respect. I attended John's introductory course and then did three of Caitlin's advanced courses finding each weekend course remarkably nourishing. The Celtic shamanism and later the Celtic Reiki too help me to find a practical use for the large amounts of myth and lore which I have been trying to digest from my studies. These practices enable me to live the creative, imaginative sort of devotional life I crave and also help me to stay grounded and in touch with the needs of the body as well as the soul. Happily through teaching, which I love, I can pass these skills on to others.

Fr Franček: ... Are some currents of gnostic Christianity compatible with Druidry?

Mar Alexei: ... Absolutely. In fact, I would say that the only forms of Christianity incompatible with Druidry are the fundamentalist Christianities such as Roman Catholicism, most Eastern Orthodoxies and evangelical Protestantism. Druidry can be a supplementary spiritual path and enrich the faith of any open-minded nature loving liberal Christian. After all dear father, the present Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury is a Druid in the Welsh Gorsedd and even Her Majesty the Queen and the Prince of Wales are members of the same order.

Not only of course does the answer to your question depend on “which Christianity”, it also depends on which “Druidry”. There are some neo-pagan Druid groups in which a majority of members are ignorant anticlerical heathens who would not welcome Christians of any sort and nor would we wish to join them! One needs to be careful not to generalise about either Christians or Druids as both come in many different shapes and forms!

Fr Franček: ... Was Winston Churchill really a Druid and why?

Mar Alexei: ... Yes indeed. Sir Winston Churchill was a member of the Ancient Order of Druids, a male only order of fraternal Druids. This order was founded in 1781 in London and is very similar to freemasonry in some respects. However, even amongst the druids of AOD, there is a knowledge of and respect for the “old ways”, for example, it is said that when during the blitz the ravens flew off in fright from the Tower of London, the very next morning Bro Churchill sent for another flock to replace them. This is because the ravens at the Tower are totemic guardians connected with the ancient Celtic god Bran the Blessed whose head is said to be buried on the White Hill beneath the

Tower of London. Bran is a protector of the realm and Churchill didn't want to take any chances! As to why Bro Churchill joined the AOD, well, about that I have no idea, but I could speculate that he was prompted by a mix of motivations such as patriotism, curiosity and friendship. I doubt that spirituality had much to do with it, but I may be wrong!

Fr Franček: ... Can you describe that hand-fasting of a Buddhist and Shinto and where was it?

Mar Alexei: ... Ah yes, one of my favourite memories of a rite of passage since I began this ministry some five years ago. As I like to tell people, "I once did a Buddhist/Shinto hand-fasting ceremony with a Celtic flavour in a Whisky Distillery on the Isle of Islay". It was a beautiful location and a lovely hand-crafted ceremony compiled in consultation with the couple, who were, likewise, beautiful people. It is such a pleasure and a privilege to officiate at marriages and happily in Scotland I am legally enabled to do this. Each ceremony is unique and as I said, this one in particular, blended many different quite compatible spiritual traditions. I am a universalist at heart and believe in an essential mystical oneness of experience at the heart of each of the faith traditions. For me, nice as that wedding ceremony was, the communion ceremony the next morning at the Kildalton High Cross, a beautiful Celtic carved stone cross, was an even more precious memory. I gave communion to a great gathering of diverse folk. Some were Japanese Buddhists and some were local Presbyterians, and all received the Body of Christ with great devotion and appreciation, as indeed one would expect at such a beautiful and holy place. It was the perfect place for a Christian Druid act of worship and I absolutely believe that the Spirits of the place welcomed and blessed us all.