

Summary of Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul ¹

by John Philip Newell – 2024

John Philip Newell's *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* is a tour through Celtic Christian wisdom, using nine key figures (plus a treasury of Celtic prayers) to show that **everything is sacred**—the earth, the human soul, and all creatures—and that much of our personal, social, and ecological crisis comes from forgetting this.

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Overall Purpose and Thesis

Newell argues that beneath much of Western Christianity there runs a largely-suppressed **Celtic stream** that has always emphasized:

- The original **goodness and sacredness** of creation
- The **divine image** in every person
- The **interconnectedness** of all life
- The call to **justice, compassion, and care for the earth**

He believes our age of ecological devastation, social injustice, and spiritual disconnection is fueled by “**soul forgetfulness**”—forgetting what our souls already know: that we and the earth are holy. The book retrieves the voices of nine teachers (from Pelagius to contemporary poet Kenneth White) as guides back to this awareness.

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Introduction – Listening for What the Soul Already Knows

In the introduction, Newell sets the frame:

- Celtic spirituality, he says, is **not a set of doctrines**, but a way of seeing and listening—paying attention to the presence of the Sacred in all things. [Shalem Institute](#)
- The problem of our age is not lack of information, but forgetting: we have “forgotten” the deep wisdom woven into our being and into creation itself.
- He introduces his method: tell the story of **nine witnesses** whose lives and teachings embody “Celtic wisdom for reawakening to what our souls know and healing the world” (the subtitle).

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¹ Used ChatGPT to create a summary of Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul by John Philip Newell. ChatGPT organized summary by the book's structure and included reference URL's used. www.lifesjourney.us - November 2025

The introduction also hints at Newell's recurring critique: **Roman imperial Christianity** increasingly emphasized sin, separation from God, and control, in contrast to Celtic voices that stressed blessing, intimacy with God, and the sacredness of the earth.

Chapter 1 – *Sacred Soul: Pelagius*

Pelagius (ca. 360–430), a British monk, is Newell's starting point for "sacred soul."

Key points:

- Pelagius taught that what is **deepest in us is of God**—every human being is born good, radiant with divine light. [Bookey+1](#)
- He rejected the idea that we are fundamentally depraved; instead, we suffer from **forgetfulness** of our sacred nature, not from an irreparable corruption.
- Newell describes Pelagius's understanding of **grace** in three forms:
 - *Grace of nature*: our very existence and the goodness of creation are pure gift.
 - *Grace of illumination*: the clarity to see the sacred in ourselves and in the world.
 - *Grace of forgiveness*: mercy when we act against our deepest truth. [Bookey](#)
- Pelagius affirmed **human dignity** (including that of women) and insisted that we must see every newborn as bearing the divine image.
- His emphasis on sacredness challenged imperial power structures (religious and political) that depended on fear, guilt, and hierarchy. This led to accusations of heresy, trials, bans, and eventual condemnation.

Newell presents Pelagius as a **misrepresented teacher** whose core message was: *see yourself and others as sacred, and act accordingly*. This has direct ethical implications—especially for how we treat the marginalized and the earth.

Chapter 2 – *Sacred Feminine: St. Brigid of Kildare*

Brigid of Kildare embodies the **sacred feminine** and the spirituality of thresholds.

Key threads:

- Brigid's legendary **birth at dawn** symbolizes her role at thresholds:
 - Between pre-Christian and Christian traditions
 - Between divine and human
 - Between humanity and the earth
 - Between the womb and the birth of new life [Bookey+1](#)

- She carries forward aspects of an earlier earth-centered goddess tradition into Christian sainthood, showing continuity rather than rupture between indigenous Celtic and Christian wisdom.
- Brigid is portrayed as:
 - A champion of **hospitality and generosity**
 - A figure of **compassionate leadership**, who acts without waiting for permission when someone is in need
 - A symbol of **spring, fertility, and earth's renewal**, connecting women's bodies, seasons, and spiritual creativity
- The chapter challenges patriarchal theology and invites the church and world to recover **feminine images of the Divine**—not as a niche theme, but as essential to healing our relationships, communities, and ecology.

Newell uses Brigid to say: **without the sacred feminine, our spirituality remains distorted**, skewed toward domination rather than mutuality.

Chapter 3 – *Sacred Flow: John Scotus Eriugena*

John Scotus Eriugena (9th century) is Newell's voice for **sacred flow**—the divine presence as a river of life running through all things.

Core ideas:

- Eriugena understands the universe as a **theophany**—everything that exists is a manifestation of God's self-expression. [Bookey+1](#)
- He teaches that there are **two “books” of revelation**:
 - The *little book*: Scripture
 - The *great book*: the living universe—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, sky, all creatures
We need to read both; focusing only on scripture shrinks God's voice, while focusing only on nature misses the call to ethical faithfulness. [creationgirl.com](#)
- For Eriugena, **everything is sacred**, but we live in a state of forgetfulness. Christ comes not to introduce a foreign truth but to **“lift the veil”** so we can see again who we are and how holy the world is.
- Eriugena's perspective clashes with imperial religious control because it dissolves rigid boundaries between sacred and secular, church and world, spirit and matter.

Newell uses Eriugena to reinforce a **panentheistic** (God-in-all) sensibility: *the divine flow permeates everything, and our task is to awaken to it and live accordingly.*

Chapter 4 – *Sacred Song: The Carmina Gadelica*

Here Newell turns from individual teachers to a **collection of folk prayers and songs** from the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, the *Carmina Gadelica*.

Highlights:

- Collected in the 19th century but rooted in much older traditions, these prayers bless daily tasks: milking cows, kindling fire, going to sleep, waking, traveling, and more. [Bookey+1](#)
- They reveal a worldview in which **ordinary life is saturated with blessing** and where the elements—earth, air, fire, water—are experienced as sacramental.
- God is invoked in intimate, poetic language, interwoven with the natural world; there is no split between “religious” activities and daily work.
- Newell sees in the *Carmina* a model for **re-sacralizing the everyday**: recovering songs, blessings, and rituals that keep us aware of the holy in ordinary time.

This chapter shows that Celtic spirituality is not only for theologians and mystics; it’s embodied in the **songs of the people**, shaping how they live with land, animals, and each other.

Chapter 5 – *Sacred Imagination: Alexander John Scott*

Alexander John Scott (1805–1866), a Scottish theologian and mentor to George MacDonald, represents the **sacred imagination**.

Key points:

- Scott insisted that **imagination is a primary organ of spiritual knowing**, not just a faculty for fantasy. It allows us to perceive depths of reality that bare rationalism misses.
- He challenged a narrow, dogmatic Christianity that prioritized correct belief over **inner experience and moral transformation**.
- Scott emphasized that **God’s presence and truth are wider than the church**, showing up in art, literature, nature, and the human heart.
- His openness led to suspicion and marginalization within religious institutions, but Newell presents him as a forerunner of a more **creative, expansive, and inclusive** Christian faith.

Newell’s larger point: if we are to heal the world, we must reclaim **imagination** as holy—able to envision a more just and earth-honoring way of being.

Chapter 6 – *Sacred Earth: John Muir*

With **John Muir** (1838–1914), Newell turns to a figure many know as a conservationist, but he reads Muir as a **Celtic-souled mystic of the earth**.

Themes:

- Muir experiences wilderness as **cathedral**—a place of direct encounter with the holy, often more alive to him than institutional religion. [Barnes & Noble+1](#)
- He insists that mountains, forests, glaciers, and animals have intrinsic worth, not just utility for humans.
- Muir’s passion leads to **activism**: the creation of national parks, advocacy against exploitative logging and development.
- Newell highlights the Celtic resonance: seeing **Christ in the wild**, honoring the sacredness of landscape, and joining contemplation with concrete action to protect the earth.

The chapter holds up Muir as an example of **earth-based prophecy**: deep love of place that naturally issues in resistance to destruction.

Chapter 7 – *Sacred Matter: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), Jesuit priest and scientist, embodies the vision of **sacred matter**.

Main threads:

- Teilhard integrates **evolutionary science** with Christian spirituality, seeing the cosmos as a vast process of unfolding consciousness moving toward an “Omega Point” in God. [Faith Tides+1](#)
- Matter is not opposed to spirit; rather, **spirit is the inner face of matter**, and matter is the outer face of spirit.
- He refuses any divorce between spirit and matter; this led to significant silencing and restriction by church authorities during his life. [Faith Tides](#)
- For Newell, Teilhard stands in a Celtic lineage that insists **the divine is at the heart of matter**—the evolutionary story itself is sacred text.

This chapter deepens Newell’s ecological message: to care for the earth is to participate in the **ongoing Incarnation**—God’s life manifesting in material reality.

Chapter 8 – *Sacred Compassion: George MacLeod*

George MacLeod (1895–1991), founder of the modern Iona Community, represents **sacred compassion** linking contemplation, justice, and community.

Key insights:

- MacLeod rebuilt the ruined Iona Abbey as both a **physical and symbolic act**—rebuilding the church as a community committed to peace, economic justice, and care for creation. [Shalem Institute](#)
- He insisted that Christ is found where **suffering is greatest**—among the poor, unemployed, and marginalized—and that worship must lead to action.
- For MacLeod, there is **no separation** between altar and city street, liturgy and labor.
- Newell presents him as a model of a **contemplative activist** whose compassion is grounded in the conviction that every person and every part of the earth is beloved of God.

Here the Celtic theme of sacredness becomes sharply political: to see others and the earth as holy demands a different economics and social order.

Chapter 9 – *Sacred Journey: Kenneth White*

Finally, **Kenneth White** (b. 1936), Scottish poet and founder of “geopoetics,” stands for the **sacred journey**.

Core ideas:

- White calls us to **rediscover the earth** and let it reshape how we see, speak, and act. The earth is not backdrop but **sacred text**, to be read with attention and humility. [Shalem Institute+1](#)
- Journeying—walking, traveling, crossing boundaries—is a spiritual practice that opens us to global, inter-cultural, and interfaith wisdom.
- His “geopoetics” seeks a language and way of life that respond to the earth’s beauty and pain, beyond narrow nationalism or religious tribalism.
- Newell sees White as a contemporary Celtic prophet, drawing the tradition into a planetary horizon.

This chapter broadens Celtic wisdom into a **worldwide pilgrimage**, inviting readers into ongoing movement rather than a settled, closed system.

Conclusion – Toward Healing the World

In the conclusion, Newell ties the nine themes together:

- **Nine “sacreds”** – soul, feminine, flow, song, imagination, earth, matter, compassion, journey – are presented as **facets of one reality**: the holiness of everything. [Barnes & Noble+1](#)
- The book insists that our ecological crisis, our violence, and our injustices are spiritual crises: they flow from a theology and culture that **lost sight of original blessing** and divided spirit from matter, heaven from earth, sacred from secular.
- Reclaiming Celtic wisdom doesn’t mean idealizing the past, but **letting these voices help us reimagine**:

- How we see ourselves (as bearers of divine light)
 - How we see others (as equally sacred)
 - How we see the earth (as the body of God)
 - How we live (with justice, compassion, simplicity, and reverence)
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Appendix – A Nine-Day Cycle of Meditative Awareness

The appendix offers a **practical nine-day prayer and meditation cycle**, each day focusing on one of the “sacred” themes (soul, feminine, flow, etc.), with short readings and suggested practices. [Barnes & Noble+1](#)

It’s meant as a way to:

- Move this wisdom from **ideas into embodied practice**
- Train our perception so that we actually *live* as if the earth, our neighbors, and our own lives are holy.