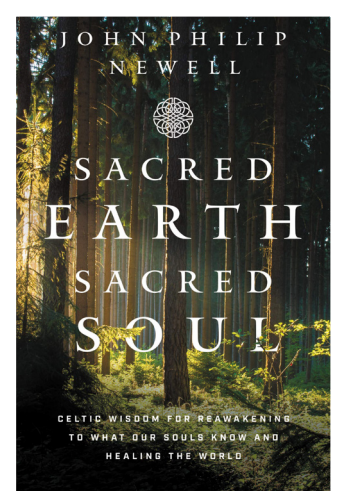




CBF Book Discussion Guide

by Meg Lacy Vega



Sacred Earth Sacred Soul

By John Philip Newell

About the Author

John Philip Newell is a poet, peacemaker, minister and scholar. Born in 1953 in Ontario, Canada, Newell was educated in both Canada (MacMaster University) and Scotland (University of Edinburgh). Throughout his career he served as a pastor (Church of Scotland), a university chaplain, the Warden of Iona Abbey in Scotland and the Companion Theologian for Casa del Sol in New Mexico. In 2016, he began the School of Earth and Soul (originally called the School of Celtic Consciousness) and teaches regularly in the United States and Canada as well as leading international pilgrimages exploring Celtic spirituality. He has authored over 15 books, including *Sounds of the Eternal*, *The Rebirthing of God* and *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*. The latter was the 2022 Gold Winner of the Nautilus Book Award for Spirituality and Religious Thought of the West.

About the Book and How to Use

Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul explores a Celtic “way of seeing” and ponders what this tradition carries that is needed by Christians today. The book is structured around the writings and thoughts of nine Celtic leaders throughout the ages, each revealing and embodying a portion of Celtic Christian thought. The questions below are organized in chronology with the book, but do not feel you need to move through them

in a linear fashion. If your group will be meeting only once, instead of trying to cover all the questions, you may wish to pick and choose only a few that feel resonant. In honor of the book’s theme, you could invite participants to sit outside as you gather, or to find another way to be tangibly connected to the earth. Allowing space for silence, reflection, journaling and communing with nature is encouraged.

“We know things at the core of our being that we have not necessarily been taught, and some of this deep knowing may actually be at odds with what our society or religion has tried to teach us. The book is about reawakening to what we know in the depths of our being, that the earth is sacred and sacredness is at the heart of every human being and life-form.” - Newell

Gathering Questions

Read the quote above. What inner-knowing was stirred or reawakened in you as you read *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*? How does the theology of Celtic Christianity seem at odds with what religion and culture have taught us?

Each chapter of *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* focuses on a different leader in Celtic Christianity and their contribution to a theology of sacredness. Which leader/chapter resonated with you most? Which one challenged you most?

Rev. Meg Lacy Vega is a writer, speaker, yoga instructor and retreat leader who is passionate about creating spaces for rest and spiritual renewal. Meg lives outside of Chattanooga, Tennessee, with her husband and two pups, Ruth and Olive. You can find Meg on instagram at @meglacyvega.



Book Discussion Questions

Considering Celtic Perspectives

- Pelagius stated, “when we look into the face of a newborn, we look into the face of God” (pg. 32). How does this statement fit or challenge your theology?
- The author draws on the concept of the sacred feminine throughout the book, but most clearly in the chapter on Brigid of Kildare. What was your reaction to the idea of the sacred feminine?
- It is John Scotus Eriugena who first said, “there are two books through which God is speaking: the book of holy scriptures and the big book of the universe” (pg. 88). Have you heard this before? Do you agree?
- Newell speaks of a new wave of spiritual seekers committed to communion with nature, though disconnected from institutional religion (pg. 92-93). How can the church come alongside these seekers on their spiritual journey?
- Chapter 4, “Sacred Song: *The Carmina Gadelica*” is filled with spiritual songs, and much of Chapter 9, “Sacred Journey: Kenneth White” is filled with poetry. What song, poem or blessing in this book was your favorite? Did you notice any contrast between the theology of Celtic song and writing and what is in your hymnal?
- Newell explores how Muir’s friendship with Jeanne Carr was what Celtic tradition calls an *anamchara*, a friendship of the soul (pg.153). Who has been an *anamchara* for you? What would it look like for Christianity to reclaim the practice of spiritual friendship?
- Celtic theology challenges many traditional or orthodox Christian views, such as the doctrine of original sin, or the view that God required Jesus’ death in order to forgive humanity (pg. 185). How did this book challenge or transform your theology?
- McLeod spoke of Iona as a “thin place,” a place where the distinction between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the physical, is only thinly veiled (pg. 207). What has been a “thin place” for you in the world?

Closing Questions

Many of the leaders Newell presents in this book encountered significant resistance, even silence, from religious authorities, peers and governments—much like Jesus himself! Why do you think Celtic Christian thought encountered resistance? Does it still today? Who benefits from it being silenced?

George McLeod’s question to Newell stuck with him, “Newell, what are we going to do about this?” As Newell summarizes, “He was inviting me to do, to speak and act, to give voice and embody vision” (pg. 214). After reading this book, how can you put your learnings into action?

Benediction

From McLeod’s Blessing, pg. 198

Almighty God...

sun behind all suns,
soul within all souls...

Show to us in everything we touch and in everyone we meet
the continued assurance of thy presence around us,
lest ever we should think thee absent.

In all created things thou art there.

In every friend we have

the sunshine of thy presence is shown forth.

In every enemy that seems to cross our path,

thou art there within the cloud

to challenge us to love.

Show to us thy glory in the grey.

Awake for us thy presence in the very storm

till all our joys are seen as thee

and all our trivial tasks emerge as priestly sacraments

in the universal temple of thy love. Amen.



Further Reading

- *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer* by John Phillip Newell
- *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* by John O'Donohue
- *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* by John Phillip Newell
- *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* by John O'Donohue
- *The Soul's Slow Ripening: 12 Celtic Practices for Seeking the Sacred* by Christine Valters Paintner
- *Birthing the Holy: Wisdom from Mary to Nurture Creativity and Renewal* by Christine Valters Paintner