The thyme is nigh

ALEXANDER TULLOCH

Some religious etymologies in English

WHATEVER religious beliefs we hold or do not hold, there is no denying the fact that all cultures are affected to a greater or lesser degree by religion. Whether or not we attend church on a Sunday, the mosque on a Friday or the synagogue on the Sabbath the language we use during the rest of the week will be peppered with words and phrases which can be traced back to religious rites and practices of one sort or another. In the case of English, which has absorbed some of the vocabulary of most of the main religions in the world, the dominant influence has to be Christianity. And because the early church texts and documents were frequently written in, and heavily dependant upon, Latin and ancient Greek their influence is still detected in many of the religious and cultural references we make in everyday speech.

Much of the religious vocabulary we use in modern English can be traced back without too much difficulty to its classical roots. But, somewhat strangely, the word 'God', occupying as it does the central position of Christian belief, has caused etymologists a fair amount of head-scratching over the centuries. Even now, few etymologists seem to be prepared to go out on a limb and posit a definitive explanation of the word's derivation. The only area of agreement appears to be the conclusion that 'god' has absolutely no etymological connection with the word 'good', however tempting it might be to associate the two because of their visual and auditory similarity.

Even in the most authoritative etymological dictionaries entries under the head-word 'GOD' are punctuated with words such as 'possibly', 'thought to be' and 'perhaps'. Most authorities, however, now seem to agree that the most likely derivation involves the Indo-European root **ghu* 'to worship' and is directly linked to the Sanskrit *hu* 'to sacrifice' and *huta* 'the one to whom sacrifice is offered'. If this is the true origin then it lends weight to the suggestion that **ghu* is also the derivation of the prehistoric Germanic **guth* from which German *Gott,* Danish *gud* etc. are derived. It also points to a connection with the Scots and Irish Gaelic *guth,* meaning 'word', 'voice', which has the fascinating entry in Dineen's *Irish–English Dictionary* 'a voice as of some unspoken spirit'. And, bringing us up sharply to the modern world, the root **guth* has also given modern Irish the word *guthán* 'telephone'.

Any student of etymology with a knowledge



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of Greek could spend the better part of a lifetime ploughing through the New Testament extracting valuable linguistic information and following etymological leads. But it is not just the Bible (simply the Greek for 'book') but also religious customs, traditions and architecture that can prove to be far too interesting and absorbing for anyone interested in the history of languages to ignore.

Let's take the basic meeting place for Christians, the church. The Scots version of the word, *kirk*, actually takes us closer to the original form of the word than the English does. Indeed, most languages in Europe have versions of the word which closely resemble the Scots and are closer to the original Greek in form and pronunciation than the English version: German has *Kirche,* Icelandic has *kirkja,* Danish has *kirke,* all of which have preserved the initial /k/ sound of the Greek term from which they are derived, *to kuriakon* 'the Lord's house'. This in turn is derived from the noun *kurios* 'lord', 'master', which not only provided the New Testament epithet for Christ, *Kurios,* but is also the origin of the name which will be familiar to students of ancient history, Cyrus (the Great, 559–529 BC), the founder of the Persian Empire.

Of course the term *Lord* in English can have a religious and a secular significance and both meanings share a common origin which is far more mundane than the modern applications of the word might suggest. 'Lord' is basically a contraction of two Anglo-Saxon words *hlaf* 'loaf', 'bread' and *waerd* 'ward', 'guardian'. In other words, the original meaning of the term 'lord' was nothing more than 'the guardian of the bread'. Obviously, in Anglo-Saxon times the man who held the keys to the bread-store enjoyed considerable authority, not to say absolute power over lesser mortals. Hence the connotations of religious and secular authority we associate with the title today.

But not all countries that accepted Christianity took their term for a place of worship from the Greek *to kuriakon*. Modern countries such as France and Spain, adopted another Greek term, *ekklesia*, to denote their place where the faithful could gather for quiet communion and common prayer. At the height of Athenian civilization (5th century BC) the word meant nothing more than 'assembly'. It was a noun derived from the verb *ekkalao* 'to call out' so that the original *ekklesia* was nothing more than an assembly point for people who had been 'called out' of their homes to attend civil meetings when affairs of state had to be discussed and important officials elected. The modern French and Spanish words *église* and *iglesia* ultimately derive from this Greek word. English, however, may be said to have kept a foot in both camps as we have the noun 'church' but at the same time talk about business of an 'ecclesiastical' nature.

The Greek idea of summoning people together for the purposes of communal worship is often reflected in other languages. The Russian for a church is *tserkov'* (the Slavonic corruption of *kuriakon*) but the word for a cathedral is *sobor,* taken directly from the verb *sobrat'* 'to gather, collect'. Precisely the same idea lay behind the Greek combination of *ago* 'to lead' and *sun* 'together' which produced *sunago* 'to bring together' and the term used for the Jewish place of worship, the synagogue.

But the English word *cathedral* has its origins in nothing more grand that the humble chair. The word is derived from two Greek words *kata* 'down' and *hezomai* 'to sit' which, when run together, produce *kathezomai* meaning simply 'to sit down'. The resulting noun *kathedra* therefore means nothing more than 'chair'. This means that originally a 'cathedral' as we now understand the word would just have been a place where the bishop kept his seat, a symbol of his elevated position and authority. It would be difficult to devise a more fitting symbolism when we remember that the word 'bishop' is itself the contraction of two more Greek words *epi* 'over' and *skopeo* 'to look' so that his principal task is to 'oversee' (the Latin equivalent gave us 'to supervise') the more junior members of the clergy. In the secular world the same idea can be seen today when we talk of university professors 'having the chair' in French, English Literature or Molecular Physics. And a perfect link between church and laity can be seen in Spanish which has *catedral* for cathedral but uses the term *catedrático* for a university professor.

The German and Italian words for 'cathedral' are *Dom* and *duomo*[1] both of which can trace their origins back to the Latin word *domus* meaning simply 'a house'. But *domus* in turn was derived from the Greek verb *demo* 'to build' which is also cognate with Old High German *zimbar* 'wood for building', linguistic descendents of which are the German for a room, *Zimmer* and the English word 'timber'.

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Some religions prefer to call their places of worship *temples*. Modern English tends to apply the term to non-Christian places of worship such as those associated with Hinduism and Buddhism and of course when we turn our attention to the religions of ancient Greece and Rome we soon come across temples to Diana, Mars, Juno and countless other gods. Curiously, however, there is also something of an anomaly in the modern world: in France *le temple* is the term for a Protestant as opposed to a Roman Catholic church.

And what is the etymological difference between a temple and words such as *church* and *cathedral*? Nothing more, once again, than the Greek word from which it is derived. In this case the verb was *temno* 'to cut' and its associated noun *temenos* meaning a slice of land 'cut off' from the hustle and bustle of everyday life to provide a spot where people could commune with their god. The same word has provided us with the English verb 'to contemplate', which now means to consider carefully but its Latin ancestor *contemplari* meant 'to mark out an enclosure' with a view to building a temple on it.

In the ancient world (and still in some parts of the modern) ceremonies of worship often included animal and possibly human sacrifice. In ancient Greece this normally meant the ritualistic slaughter of a whole sheep or goat (known as *holocaust*, literally 'burning the whole') on the altar at the same time as prayers were being offered up to whichever god was being assuaged at the time. While all this was going on sweet-smelling plants would be burned so that the smoke would carry the prayers up to the abode of the gods. And this is where the etymology becomes even more fascinating.

The Greek verb 'to offer sacrifice' was *thuo* and the plant burned during the ceremony came to be referred to as *thumos*. The Romans adopted this word as *thymum* and it eventually made its way into Old French as *thym*, but the Old French had a problem getting their tongues around the Greek letter theta and would have pronounced the word to rhyme more or less with *teem*. This then crossed the channel and entered English in the form we recognise today, *thyme*, which stays close to the Greek spelling but emulates something of the French pronunciation.

So when we are in our kitchens and wish to enhance the flavour of whatever tasty dish it is we are preparing we should perhaps remember, as we reach for the rosemary and thyme, that if the ancient Greeks had not gone in for burnt offerings, the traditional accompaniment to the rosemary would have been, to paraphrase the Bard, 'a herb by any other name'. ■

Note

1 In fact Italian uses both *duomo* and *cattedrale* for 'cathedral'.

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