

# Celtic Neo-Paganism:

## Cultural Heritage and Its Relationship with Religion in America

Rosaleen McAfee, rpmcafee@buffalo.edu

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Phillips Stevens & Dr. Donald Pollock, Department of Anthropology



University at Buffalo  
The State University of New York

Department of Anthropology

### Abstract

Resulting from Neo-Paganism's flexible nature there exists a wide variety of options for individuals looking to enhance their spirituality. People who practice under the Neo-Pagan religious umbrella often follow specific 'ethnic traditions'. One of the predominant 'ethnic traditions' followed by Neo-Pagans is Celtic Neo-Paganism. In an attempt to reinforce their spiritual practice, Celtic Neo-Pagans incorporate into their worship the use of constructed histories of the ancient Celtic peoples, as well as certain aspects of their own cultural heritage. I have researched a select group of Neo-Pagans in order to discover how these individuals' cultural heritage influences their practice of Celtic Neo-Paganism. This project is a result of six months ethnographic research on Celtic Neo-Pagan practitioners in Buffalo, New York.

### Introduction

While practices and beliefs attributed to the Ancient Celts flow through many of the Neo-Pagan movements, those who define themselves as strictly 'Celtic' have distinguished themselves from the broader Neo-Pagan umbrella. There are three main Neo-Pagan groups that consider themselves to be influenced by Celtic culture. These groups are: Celtic-Inspired Neopaganism; Celtic Reconstructionism; and Neo-Druidism. Each of these vary from one another in their extent of integration of Celtic spirituality into ritual practice. Celtic-Inspired Neo-Paganism draws from a variety of sources, and focuses on loose interpretations of ancient myths, so that these myths can be adapted to a modern context. Celtic Reconstructionism seeks to reconstruct and revive pre-Christian Celtic religions. Neo-Druidism combines the practice of Celtic-Inspired Neo-Paganism with a heavy focus on nature worship. In my ethnographic research, I worked with 'A Druid Fellowship', or 'ADF', which falls under the Neo-Druidism subsection of Celtic Neo-Paganism.

### What ADF Believes

The quote below, taken from ADF's website, sums up their major beliefs succinctly: "We're researching and expanding sound modern scholarship about the ancient Celts and other Indo-European peoples, in order to reconstruct what the Old Religions of Europe really were. We're working on the development of genuine artistic skills in composition and presentation. We're designing and performing competent magical and religious ceremonies to change ourselves and the world we live in. We're adapting the polytheologies and customs of both the Indo-European Paleopagans and the Neopagan traditions that have been created over the last fifty years. We're creating a nonsexist, nonracist, organic, and open religion to practice as a way of life and to hand on to our grandchildren. We're integrating ecological awareness, alternative healing arts, and psychic development into our daily activities. Together, we're sparking the next major phase in the evolution of Neopaganism and planting seeds for generations to come" (Ár nDraíocht Féin Core, 2012).

### Sample Questions

Interviews were given to individuals in the local Neo-Pagan community. Here is a sampling of questions asked during these interviews:

1. Did you hold any previous religious beliefs before adopting Celtic Neo-Paganism? If so, what were they? Were they of your choosing or your family's?
2. Why does Celtic Neo-Paganism appeal to you?
3. What is your cultural/ biological heritage? Do you find it relevant to your adoption of this belief system?
4. How often do you practice, and does your practice consist of primarily independent or group worship ?
5. Has your practice had an influence or impact on any other aspects of your life other than any specific religious experiences?
6. Has your practice influenced your understanding of your cultural heritage? If so, in what ways?
7. If this practice has led you to feel more connected with your heritage/ self, how has it done so?

## Culture



## Heritage

## Religion

### Method

My research is based on interview and participant observation, as well as an integration of experience and education resulting from six months attendance at the University College Cork, in Cork, Ireland. Ethnographic research was done at gatherings in Buffalo held by the Neo-Druidic, Neo-Pagan group 'A Druid Fellowship', or 'ADF'. Formal interviews were conducted with Neo-Pagans who are active in ADF, as well as individuals practicing other forms of Neo-Paganism. Informal discussion occurred with over fifteen Celtic Neo-Pagan practitioners. Research influencing my project is focused on cultural anthropology, but also draws from folk studies, religious studies, and sociology in order to provide a more holistic understanding of this specialized topic.

### Conclusions

At the onset of my research, I expressed an interest in understanding how Celtic Neo-Pagans' cultural heritage led these individuals to choose this specific ethnic tradition. Through my research, I have found that, while most individuals did not choose Celtic Neo-Paganism specifically because they had ancestral ties to 'Celtic' culture, all participants indicated that incorporating an understanding of their heritage and cultural background helps them to develop a better sense of spirituality and self-understanding. From these findings I have concluded that embracing and developing an awareness for ancestral heritage and Celtic culture may enhance practitioners spirituality, although it is not always the dominant theme of practitioners' focus.

Not all Celtic Neo-Pagans are engaging with the idealized image of the Celts put forth in popular culture. Instead of representing a historical accuracy, the Celtic culture being interpreted acts as a symbol toward which worship may be directed in an attempt to enhance practitioners' spirituality. As promoted by ADF, this increasing respect for fact-based practice is passed onto Celtic Neo-Pagan practitioners such as those I interviewed, who are now knowingly engaging with their own history, 'Ancestor' worship, and understanding of Celtic culture accordingly.

Through research and ethnographic experience, it has become evident that the question I originally asked Neo-Pagans, "How has your cultural heritage led you to practice Celtic Neo-Paganism?" required re-evaluation. This question, amended as a result of my research, is now "How has your cultural heritage enhanced your spirituality, and how has following Celtic Neo-Paganism helped you to become more in touch with this heritage?". Understanding Celtic Neo-Paganism through the framework of this revised question helps to better explain the relationship that exists between cultural heritage and Neo-Paganism. Through a practitioner's selection of Celtic Neo-Paganism, cultural heritage is constructed and perpetuated. Both the Neo-Pagan and the broader academic community can expand their understanding of contemporary Neo-Paganism by recognizing this conclusion; and in acknowledging this fact and addressing Celtic Neo-Paganism accordingly, these communities may begin to understand contemporary spiritual beliefs from a more realistic point of view.

### References

Ár nDraíocht Féin, Core. (n.d.). Retrieved March 10, 2012, from <http://www.adf.org/core/>

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