

Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism

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History:

The idea of reconstructionist Pagan religions has been around since at least the mid 1970s and is discussed in Margot Adler's 1979 edition of *Drawing Down the Moon*. Some organizations, like ADF, have been doing reconstruction work for many years, but their focus was never purely or particularly Celtic.

Many individuals were in dialogue about what constituted genuine early Celtic religion and spirituality, and how to educate others about the differences between Wicca and the various forms of Celtic Paganism. These discussions initially took place in Pagan publications and around the fire at Pagan gatherings starting in the early 1980s. With the growth of the internet, dialogue on PODSnet Celtic, the GENie network, Celtic-L and other online forums became the critical factor leading to a rapid spread of information after 1989. The phrase Celtic Reconstructionist (CR) began to gain common use during 1992 and 1993 to describe individuals who were trying to understand, research, and re-create an authentically Celtic path for modern Pagans.

With the founding of the Nemeton-L email list for Celtic Pagans and Druids in 1994, the movement began to coalesce, bringing together individuals from all over the globe. Each person brought their own visions to this and the other forums that were subsequently formed. Groups began to come together locally, and eventually national organizations began to be founded on these principles. Articles were written and archived and information was freely shared.

Most of the founders of CR came from Wiccan backgrounds, with influences from ADF, Keltria, and other similar groups. Together and separately, they researched texts, studied Celtic languages, did meditations and spirit journey work, wrote poetry and articles, and worked to

gather enough material to create the groundwork for a modern Celtic tradition that respects the ancient sources while rejecting those components of early Celtic religions that are inappropriate for modern worshippers, such as human sacrifice, slavery, and other strongly patriarchal elements of those early societies. Ethical concepts were sought out, sorted through for relevance, and applied to daily lives.

Because of the limited nature of source material on Celtic tribal Paganism, these people also took inspiration from other cultures to help try to fill in the holes for building ritual and community. Norse research, village Hinduism and puja practices, ecstatic traditions like Voudon and Umbanda, and animist tribal religions were examined for similarities to what appeared in the primary and secondary sources on Celtic religions. The works of Sean Ó Tuathail were instrumental for many in this building movement, rejecting a four-element model and proposing a Three Realms cosmology consisting of the triad of Land, Sea and Sky. His phrase, *An Thríbhís Mhòr* (the great triple spiral) came into common use to refer to the three realms.

At this writing (July 2003) there are active groups and individuals on the net, and a number of online forums for discussion, though some of those are rather small. The Imbas website archives many important formative articles on CR and other similar traditions, and newer forums like the LiveJournal *cr_r* community and the Multicultural Polytheistic Hearth have hosted influential discussions.

CR makes no claims to being a True and Authentic Survival of any Celtic tradition. We acknowledge fully and openly that what we practice are a set of modern creations, based in and inspired by early Celtic beliefs. We follow our inspiration while remaining as true as we can to the guidelines we find in early texts, the

work of scholars and archaeologists, and the practical aspects of what works well for us. CR is a constantly growing and evolving path, seeking learning, mystic and ecstatic experience, and the intense life of the spirit.

Core beliefs

Our path is polytheist and animist. We believe there are many deities and that they are separate entities worthy of worship. We believe that the ancestors and land/nature spirits are also individual entities worthy of recognition, petition and reverence. These entities exist on a continuum and are not separate groups firmly divided into categories. Most CR's believe that deities and spirits are active in the world and their personal lives, influencing them and responding to prayer, offerings and sacrifice. We believe the world is inspirited. Some believe that not just animals and trees have souls, but that mountains, streams, holy wells and other natural phenomena have spirits as well. Some believe that created objects can be imbued with spirit. Individuals and groups frequently follow one or more deities that they consider special or tutelary, or particularly linked with their region or their focus of activities. Many individuals dedicate themselves to one or more patron/matron deities.

Celtic deities are the primary focus of our worship. While many CR folk worship other deities from other cultures, they are usually worshipped separately and in formats considered culturally appropriate to those deities. CR practitioners rarely mix and match deities or spirits from different cultures -- even different Celtic cultures -- in the same ritual. If it happens, it is always with respect for each culture and deity involved. All deities are respected, but not all are worshipped. Consistent with the belief that deities have individual desires and personalities, CR's attempt to avoid calling upon or working with deities together who are seen as actively at odds with one another in the lore. CR's feel that while worship is appropriate, groveling before deity is not. Our deities demand personal responsibility and that we act from a position of strength and self-respect.

Many CR's see the cosmos in terms of three realms of Land, Sea, and Sky. Others map an Underworld, Middleworld, and Upperworld

onto their understanding of cosmology. Still others use the concept of an Otherworld or Otherworlds which coexist with this one. All of these Otherworlds are considered real and accessible to those with appropriate skills. In all of these approaches, fire plays a different role than in mainstream Neo-Paganism and Wicca. Fire, particularly fire arising from water, can be seen to symbolize imbas or awen -- divine inspiration. Some see it as the central pivot upon which the cosmos turns -- a spiritual equivalent to the world tree.

A world tree is seen as the center of the cosmos, upon which the various worlds are suspended or through which it grows. This tree can be physically represented as either a real tree, or as a pole which may also be considered the centerpost or roof-tree of a ritual area or one's home.

Deity and spirit are seen as being similar to humanity in that they have moods, wants and desires, and that they are not necessarily all good and loving at all times. That there are dangers in the spirit world is acknowledged and accepted. Offerings are sometimes given as appeasements as well as gifts to these beings.

When "elements" are discussed or used in ritual (and not every CR uses them), the numbers vary from seven to eleven or more, based on a concept of different aspects of the physical natural world as "elements." Physical phenomena such as rain, sun, clouds, plants, stones, soil, sea, wind, and others are our "elements" and are sometimes equated with parts of the body or philosophical concepts important in the lore as laid out in some of the primary source materials. Sun, for instance, is sometimes equated with the face, stars with the eyes, cloud with mind or thought, and plants with hair. This said, most of CR has little use for correspondence charts, finding that the universe is organic and doesn't fit well into grid boxes.

In Irish and Scottish branches of CR, the body is seen to have an internal energy structure that is modeled as three cauldrons within that provide and process energy and inspiration from the deities. The state of the cauldrons in one's body may be reflected in physical health or emotional state. Healing and meditational work are often done with these cauldrons.

Men and women are equal in power and capacity for leadership within CR. Both will be found in roles as researchers, scholars, clergy, warriors, craftspeople, household or tribal leaders, and every other part of CR. Gods and Goddesses are all given reverence, the emphasis varying by individual and group. Some groups and individuals, including the various Brigid Orders, focus only on Goddesses. CR has full and equal participation by sexual minorities -- many of its founders and thinkers are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered. Feminism is seen by many as a vital component in their philosophy, practice and personal work.

Though many people of Celtic ancestry are drawn to CR, being of Celtic descent is not required. We give respect to all of our ancestors and teachers, whether or not they were Celts. Many of us have non-Celtic ancestors, or no Celtic ancestry at all, but we all acknowledge the early Celtic peoples as spiritual ancestors on our individual quests. Knowing that humanity originated on the African continent, we believe that we are all of one blood, all one human family. CR as a whole is strongly anti-racist and welcomes people of all races, ethnicities and colors who wish to follow Celtic deities in a CR style.

Our work to reconstruct an authentic Celtic Religion has been influenced by indigenous practices of other cultures, such as Vodoun, tribal animism, and Hinduism. However, we do not simply incorporate parts of these traditions, nor do we claim to represent them -- they have their own clergy and communities. Rather, we do what we can with the Celtic lore; where there are missing pieces, we look to surviving traditions with similar practices for ideas on how to fill in the blanks while maintaining a Celtic spirit. Knowledge of other traditions also serves as valuable feedback for examining and validating material that comes through individual inspiration.

Because of our links with nature spirits, and the fact that the land we live on is sacred, many CR's consider environmental concern and activism a deep part of their practice. Many immerse themselves in local ecology, finding it important to know the plants, birds and animals as a way of connecting with local land and nature spirits. Nature metaphors are

common in the language of CR philosophers, ritualists and thinkers, and we trace this back to the long tradition of nature poetry and mysticism in Celtic lands. Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism often form strong components of individual CR practice.

Scholarship, mysticism, ecstatic experience, and personal inspiration are all valued in CR. All are necessary, though some individuals and groups will move toward one or another as primary for them. Research skills and wide reading are deeply respected in the movement. Understanding of and appreciation for history are also important. Knowledge of Celtic languages is not necessary, but a working vocabulary of technical terms is valued and respected. Some conduct ritual partly or entirely in a Celtic language when possible. Individual inspiration and the fruits of meditation, ecstatic experience, and mystically oriented work are also highly valued. All are debated, shared, and examined for inclusion in individual and group practices.

Role of clergy

Where clergy exists in CR -- and in many branches there is no formal clergy at all -- they are frequently teachers or composers and leaders of group ritual. Clergy may act as healers or arbitrators in disputes, depending on the community in which they participate. They are often diviners, philosophers and theologians within the movement, though none of these activities are restricted to those identifying as clergy. CR clergy may describe themselves as Draoi or Filidh, or by other terms in other Celtic languages.

Within the community, clergy are generally acclaimed by the group or local community they serve. They may also be acclaimed for their work and contributions to the overall CR community through their reputation online or by their writings or festival work.

CR is not a "Religion of Clergy" as Wicca and general Druidism tend to be. Warriors, farmers, ranchers, writers, craftspeople and many others may follow a household or homesteading path, or worship and practice with a group that has clergy. Craftspeople, writers and others may identify as Aes Dána or "people of art." Individuals may consult someone they consider clergy on their own

rather than being a part of a group. All are welcome, whether they feel a pull toward service as clergy or not.

Organization of groups

Groups organize in ways unique to each group. There is no overall structure followed by all, or even a majority of CR practitioners. Some identify as Groves, others as Tribes or Tuatha, others as families or households, while still others might organize as Druidic Colleges, Hedge Schools, Brigid Orders or the like. There are no rules governing the creation or practice of groups aside from the general principles and ethical considerations of the tradition itself.

Standards of conduct

CR practitioners believe that there are limits to what we can and should do in an ethical and social sense, based on concepts taken from the Brehon Laws of Ireland and other traditional sources, such as the Instructions of Morann mac Main or the Welsh and Irish Triads. Some CR's subscribe to a set of Virtues similar to the Nine Noble Virtues of Asatru. A common set of virtues followed by many emphasizes Truth, Honor, Justice, Loyalty, Courage, Community, Hospitality, Strength, and Gentleness.

Warriors are honored in most forms of CR, but violence is not their first or most obvious solution to any problem. Individuals within CR may be military or veterans, or they may be peace activists. In some cases, they are both, and many others are part of a wide spectrum between. The place of the warrior is seen as legitimate protection of the tribe, not indulging in first strikes against those who have done no harm.

CR firmly and absolutely rejects racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination that divide people into warring camps.

Holidays

CR follows the four main festivals of the early insular Celtic peoples. These are:

Oíche Shamhna/Samhain
Lá Fhéile Bríd/Oímealg
Lá Bealtaine/Bealtaine
Lá Lúnasa/Lughnasadh

Different groups and individuals may name (or spell) these festivals differently, in the language of the culture whose practices they are working to reconstruct. Names might be in Gaulish, Cornish, Welsh, or other languages. Gaulish CR's generally celebrate festivals on a modification of the Coligny Calendar. Generally speaking, the seasons are marked by changes in weather and the local landscape (first frost, budding of crocus, or other phenomena) rather than by the strict observation of calendar dates. With CR practitioners all over the globe, we do not see it as useful to chain any celebration to a calendar date.

In addition to these four main holidays, individuals or groups may have festivals or devotions to individual deities, or in accordance to local seasonal phenomena that are meaningful to them. In the US Pacific Northwest for instance, some CR's celebrate annual salmon runs. Others might observe the festival of Epona at the beginning of December, or the Manx tradition of paying rent to Manannan near the summer solstice.

Ways of Worship

Worship varies greatly in CR. Commonalities generally rest in philosophical agreement rather than a consistency of ritual patterns between groups or individuals.

CR practitioners do not cast circles, unlike many other Neo-Pagan traditions. The feeling in CR is that the entire world is sacred, and so we do not have to delineate our sacred spaces. Some acknowledge the four or twelve winds, marking the division of the world into quarters or provinces. Most CR's set up altars, hearths, or shrines in their homes, some dedicated to individual deities, others to spirits or ancestors, and some also set up altars for particular magical purposes, such as healing or seeking inspiration. Many altars don't take the standard Neo-Pagan form of tables in a house or temple set with objects on them, but might be a place at the roots of a tree, a cairn of stones, or a small outdoor fountain or pond.

Deities are invited to our worship as our guests and the focus of our devotions. Spirits and ancestors are also invited. Most rituals involve offerings of food, drink, incense, or other

things. Sometimes requests are made of the deities, spirits or ancestors, though this is not a mandatory part of ritual. If requests are made, offerings are always given. Divination is frequently done after offerings to determine if they are acceptable.

Those who worship Brighid may organize into "cells" of 19 individuals (some groups only admit women) to keep her sacred flame. These cells often consist of individuals scattered all over the world who keep the flame on a particular 20 day schedule, where the 19 individuals take shifts, and Brighid herself is said to tend the flame on the 20th day. Most groups do not have set required ritual, but ask that each person dedicate their work that day to Brighid. Followers of other deities may do similar meditative and vigil work, either alone or together.

Some CR's are working toward modern formats for sweat-house rituals, as they are known to have been part of early insular Celtic healing practices, and may have been used for purification and visionary purposes as well. Dream incubation and practices for accessing inspiration, called imbas in Irish or awen in Welsh, are also being explored. Mala or rosary type meditations have also taken a place in CR, inspired by A Circle of Stones by Erynn Rowan Laurie. Many people have taken these basic ideas and created their own meditations geared toward their personal deities and cultural patterns.

Many CR's consider each act of daily life a form of ritual. Some take inspiration from the Carmina Gadelica and create songs and prayers for each task done during the day. Other CR's make offerings when harvesting or wildcrafting herbs. Such rituals are seen as being equally as or more important than major festival rituals or group rites. These are usually very free-form and vary from day to day and purpose to purpose. Often our prayers and charms have been rewritten from Medieval sources. Many Christian parts of manuscripts seem to be later additions to texts with an otherwise strongly Pagan spirit, and re-dedication to a Pagan deity feels sound and natural. We don't believe that "ritual" must be formal to be useful or effective, and such daily acts are in line with a tribal and culture based way of life.

Some rural CR's who raise animals for food may make offerings to the animal and offer that animal's spirit to the deities as a sacrificial rite. Sacrifice of this sort is only done when an animal is already to be slaughtered for food. Other sacrificial rites include breaking ritual objects and offering them in bodies of water, burning items in a fire as a gift for deities or spirits, or making figures of sacred herbs to sacrifice for other reasons.

Magic is a part of CR practice. Though it is not nearly as central to us as it is to some other Pagan paths, it tends to be very pervasive in everyday ways. CR doesn't work in Platonic, Hermetic, or Ceremonial Magick formats, nor from those assumptions about the cosmos and spirit world. Ogam is a common vehicle for divination, along with the taking of omens from birds or cloud-watching. Dream and vision states are important sources of divination and inspiration. Poetry and music are frequently seen as a foundational component of CR magic. Charms modeled after those found in traditional Celtic folklore are often used, with poems sung over them to give them power. Reverence to deities and the help of spirits is almost always a part of CR magic.

This article was written for "Witchvox":

http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=uswa&c=trads&id=6645

More Information on CR:

<http://www.paganachd.com/faq/>