

# **How is contemporary Wiccan religion and culture representative of Ancient Celtic lore, culture and beliefs?**



Extended Essay: World Religions

Le Jardin Academy



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## ABSTRACT

It has been theorized that the past is continuously present in everything that exists today. One example of this claim can be seen in the beliefs and culture of the contemporary Wiccan religion. After thorough examination, there is an obvious connection between the basis of the Wiccan religion and the beliefs, culture and lore of the ancient Celts. In response, this investigation will examine the question: How is contemporary Wiccan religion and culture representative of Ancient Celtic lore, culture and beliefs? The scope of the investigation is a comparison between not only the fundamental beliefs of both Celts and Wiccans, but also an examination of the similarities involved in their social stereotyping. To begin, the essay examines first the culture and beliefs of the ancient Celts and their alienation from the rest of European society and then makes a direct comparison through a succeeding examination of Wicca culture and beliefs. Following these separate investigations, the essay brings to light the direct and somewhat more inferential connections between ancient Celtic beliefs and contemporary Wiccan religion. Finally, the investigation then shifts to discuss social stereotyping and prejudices separately experienced by each group and how both were challenged to overcome these. This may be a section that provides extensive evidence in support of the connection between Celtic and Wicca as it does not simply express that both groups fell victim to stereotyping, but rather that they were stereotyped in the same light. Finally, it was concluded that Celtic and Wicca are connected in many ways, to include their beliefs, traditions, culture and even social existence, and that it is relationships such as this that resulted in the realization that nothing ever goes extinct; all of history is living in the present in everything that can be seen.

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## INTRODUCTION

Separated only by time, ancient Celts and contemporary Wiccans have constructed a bridge between their two worlds, passing through history. Both share certain similarities, some deliberate, some not, within their beliefs, culture and lifestyles that to say that the former is too ancient to take part in modern existence would be categorized as mere ignorance. This is the most valuable aspect of this investigation: it brings to light a connection between the ancient and contemporary world, disproving any theory that would go as far to say that any ancient society is dead, that it is lost among the past. Rather, their connection tells of how the past is apparent in any and all forms of humanity and that everything seen or experienced within this present, is the continuous, cyclical history of the world.


## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION TO THE CELTIC PEOPLES

Once spanning most of Europe, from the Atlantic to modern day Turkey, the Celtic peoples were a widespread force, so prodigious and seemingly so unstoppable. They were the “barbarians” of the north, branded as uncivilized bearded wild men whose crazed militaristic tactics were feared by all those who opposed. In the eyes of most Europeans, Celtic people lived in bog huts, spoke alien languages and worshipped obscene gods. ““No one else wanted to live where the Celts did,’ a Breton man said. ‘Those places were poor and remote, and no one spoke their languages.’” (O’Neill, 76). Despite the burden of these early stereotypical prejudgments the Celtic civilization established resilient control within the Western Hemisphere, marking its place in history as one of the most powerful human forces of the ancient times.



Contradictory to the common belief, the Celtic people were highly civilized with sophisticated technology and luxuries that only the wealthy within other European civilizations could afford. “By the time Caesar landed in Britain in 55 BC, even the northern Celts were living in warm, well-insulate houses. Some of their timber mansions were greater feats of engineering than any Greek or Roman temple.” (Robb). This difference in depiction and reality fosters doubts about any other preconceived notions relating to the time of ancient civilizations. These newly discovered theories of the actuality of Celtic life brings to light the question: to what extent is what we know portrayal instead of reality? To discover that the vast Celtic civilization, for years prior to Roman discovery had been living an artistic and urbane lifestyle, one of “healthy and elegant people” (Robb), is to discover a whole other page of the book, shattering previous affirmations and rewriting history itself.

Consistent with tradition, the Celtic Empire was doomed to fall, its lands invaded and claimed by a rising Roman power from the south and later, groups such as the Vikings, Normans and Anglo Saxons of England. As the Celts were driven westward, away from their original homelands, it seemed as though their culture, beliefs and world were shrinking as well, slowly disappearing from existence. “By the end of the Middle Ages, Celtic culture was headed toward extinction, its remnants pushed to the very western edge of Europe” (O’Neill, 76). Adopted into the Roman Empire and its Christian faith, the Celts, “continued to worship their own gods and goddesses” (Cotterell, 92) succeeding the decline of their Empire. Fortunately for historians, their faith was not completely lost as the “conversion did not mean the wholesale destruction of the Celtic heritage” (Cotterell, 92). There were few monks who “took great care from the fifth



century onwards to write down the ancient sagas” (Cotterell, 92), a rare act as the Celts, who valued oral tradition, usually “distrusted script and preferred to rely on speech and properly trained memories” (Cotterell, 92). As a result, historians are now able to examine ancient Celtic lore, religion and beliefs.

## SECTION II: CELTIC BELIEFS, RELIGION AND LORE

The world of Celtic beliefs, lore and religion was centered around one source of power: nature. The natural world was the mother, the protector. From a young age, the Celts learned to respect the world around them, believing the land, sky, plants, and stars to be the strongest forces. “An interest in nature and the experience of the divine as immanent. Closely connected is a desire to respect the environment.” (Power, 2). Their goddess Anu (or Gaia) was the goddess of plenty; she was “mother earth” and was believed to reside in every living thing. She could inflict natural pain unto the world as she saw fit and those Celts truly devoted to her could feel when she was likely to impose her wrath. In addition to Anu, the Celts devoted themselves to hundreds of other gods that represented every component of the physical, conceptual and celestial worlds.


The natural world was so intricately integrated into Celtic belief that according to Celtic myth, there was more than one physical world. Referred to as “otherworlds”, these mystical planes of the universe were “invisible realms of gods and spirits, fairies, elves and misshapen giants” (Cotterell, 104). Rather than categorizing destinations such as “heaven” or “hell”, the Celts believed one of these otherworlds acted as a place of reincarnation, a paradise where “souls



rested prior to their rebirth in the world” (Cotterell, 92). The otherworlds had been and always were present, with “the veil between the visible and invisible worlds...gossamer-thin and easily torn” (Cotterell, 104). Both mystical and real worlds were connected, bound together by the flow of a strong life force. In fact it is “on the eve of Samhain, October 31, [that] all the gates to the otherworld open and wondrous spirits emerge” (Cotterell, 104), allowing the Celts to reestablish their relationship and natural connection with the otherworlds. Samhain also provides the opportunity for souls to reenter the visible world as reincarnated beings.

Since the eve of Samhain only occurred once a year, Celts had various ways to communicate with the otherworlds. Seers were people within Celtic life who “acted as gates between the natural and supernatural forces” (Cotterell, 114), gates between the living and dead, between the visible and invisible worlds. Each seer was “endowed with extraordinary gifts of prophecy, wisdom and healing” (Cotterell, 114) and often partook in enchantment rituals. Through the use of cauldrons, a common motif in Celtic mythology, seers could provide life restoration, instill wisdom, satisfy or even foster spiritual insight. To use the term comparatively, seers were the sorcerers of the Celtic world, some of the more famous being, Merlin, Amairgen, Taliesin, and Cathbad.

Separate from their mythical beliefs, the Celtic peoples believed in an equal treatment of women throughout all aspects of life. This equality is demonstrated by the Celtic worship of many gods that were neither definitively male nor female. This allowed the god to relate to all aspects of life from both male and female approaches, as well as eradicate the problem-causing



gender barrier. There was “a certainty of the equality of women in the early ‘Celtic church’” (Power, 2) that was unrivaled by any other civilization of its time. In a way, this implementation of gender acceptance in society, elevated the Celtic civilization from many Eastern and Western societies that heavily discriminated women. It’s ironic to think that the Celtic peoples were seen as barbaric, uncivilized and illiterate when in reality, their way of life was heightened due to this early form of gender equality.

Another idealistic attribute of Celtic religious practices was the idolization of spontaneity in everyday life. The Celtic belief encouraged worshippers to practice freely and without confinement. There was “a belief in the spontaneity... as expressed in worship, lack of structure and perceived liturgical freedom” (Power, 2), allowing a feeling of “free will” to be integrated into Celtic society. This was another form in which the Celtic peoples distanced themselves from their time, as many of their beliefs, to include the treatment and role of women in society as well as the implementation of spontaneity, embody ideals that are valued in contemporary cultures and societies.

### SECTION III: WICCAN CULTURE

As the centuries passed, Celtic religion and beliefs seemed to have been forgotten, lost like a fading fog. However, even though Celtic myth seems to have seeped into extinction, it has inspired religions that are prominent in modern-day society. Wicca is one of these religions in which ancient Celtic beliefs, lore and religion are exemplified.






“Wicca, which emerged in the 1940s in England, is the original form of modern Pagan Witchcraft” (Yardley, 2) and became recognized as a valid religion in the United States in 1986. It is believed that “the word Wicca was derived from the Celtic word *witan*, meaning ‘to know’”, therefore meaning “a wise person” (Netzley, 264). It was created by witches in the 1940s as a substitute for the common term “witchcraft” so that it would not be associated with “a history of negative connotations” (Yardley, 2) focused on black magic, sadistical sacrifices and devil worshipping rituals. Similar to the way that Catholicism is a form of Christianity, Wicca is a form of Paganism, a religion embodying ancient Celtic beliefs, specifically the inclination towards nature and the belief in divinities possessing male and female characteristics (Ogden, 221). Through these fundamental ideals, the Wiccan belief emerges, based on Paganism, inclusive of practical witchcraft. However, as with most religions, Wicca is not solely a belief, but a culture in itself.

Whether practicing their magic alone, i.e. solitaires, or in small groups, i.e. covens/circles, many Wiccans follow the same fundamental beliefs that guide their everyday actions. These basic beliefs first include the “focus on worshiping and honoring of the Goddess” (Netzley, 263). The Goddess is an all-powerful being whose “divine force has both masculine and feminine elements” with both “masculine and feminine energy of creation with her” (Netzley, 263). Sometimes Wiccans will recognize the male aspect of the Goddess called the Horned God (Ogden, 221), however he is overlooked, considered inferior to the Goddess. Demonstrative of his inferiority, the wheel of the year, a calendar within Wiccan culture that “refers to the seasons or cycles of nature” (Netzley, 262), acts as a symbol of the role the




Goddess and God play “at certain times in the year’s cycle” (Netzley, 263). It is commonly believed that the wheel signifies a myth through which the endless Goddess and God relationship is demonstrated. The myth tells of how “the Goddess gives birth to the God” (Netzley, 263), who, after maturing, “unites with her, creates a new child, and dies, whereupon she awaits his [re]birth so the cycle can begin anew” (Netzley, 263). The wheel, which has no beginning or end, demonstrates another Wiccan belief: life is part of an endless circle.

There are various methods through which Wiccans worship the Goddess, depending on the witchcraft tradition. However, the Goddess is often seen as having more than one state of being and many different personifications. In recognition of the Goddess’s many forms, some Wiccans may worship goddesses from other pantheons, to include Greek, Roman and Celtic goddesses. “In the 1960s, most American Wiccans worshiped the goddess Diana...from Greece and Rome” (Netzley 263), however a decade later, Wiccans began to shift focus to mainly Celtic deities due to the “first contemporary indications of group challenges to mainstream religious misogyny” (Griffin) aime. With the conclusion of the Vietnam War, a social reform of anti-establishment had birthed within much of North America. This was inclusive of prominent feminist movements advocating that religious bias was based on the deity of a god, Goddess worshipping religion to be matriarchal and God worshipping religion to be patriarchal. Social relationships during this decade may explain the shift of focus towards Celtic deities as Celtic religion provided support for a feminine importance and a freedom to worship without the restrictions of a more conservative or orthodox religion.



In addition, another fundamental Wiccan belief is one intertwined very deeply within the culture: environmentalism. “Most Wiccans...worship nature spirits, or at least honor nature in their rituals” (Netzley 263) as they consider “nature to be a part of the divine forces of the universe” (Netzley 264). Most Wiccan rituals are held outdoors, often times in the nude, called skyclad, and call upon the elements of earth, fire, air and water to perform said rituals. Rituals are held so Wiccans may feel closer to nature. Wiccans also hold a strong belief in an apocalyptic millenarianism ideal, that either through natural causes, or through the fault of humans, the world will fall into some sort of apocalyptic state. However rather than marking the end of all mankind as it is, this event would transform the world to become a better place. With a strong spiritual connection to Gaia, the Celtic Goddesses of Nature, the Wicca seek to acquire a “sixth sense”, allowing them to feel when the time has come for Gaia to unleash her wrath on the human world (Yardley).

With a close relationship to nature, Wiccans believe that “divinity exists within themselves” (Netzley 264) and that as worshipers of the natural world, they should “treat their bodies with the same respect and reverence as they treat the earth, eating healthy foods and otherwise taking good care of themselves” (Netzley 264). Due to this prevalent ideal of self-respect, Wiccans have developed a philosophy that their culture revolves around. Called the Wiccan Rede, it states “An’ it harm none, do what thou wilt” (Netzley 265). Wiccans as whole believe that intentionally harming others damages one’s own spirit, will and psyche. However, there are varied interpretations to what the Rede actually means. Some believe exactly what the Rede seems to say: that someone can “do whatever they like as long as their actions do not hurt



anybody else” (Netzley 265). Others think that the Rede “obliges people to do what the deity intends for them to do, because following this path will surely harm no one” (Netzley 265). Then there are even those believing that doing harm unto someone is acceptable in the situation of self-defense, some believing that it is always wrong to do harm unto another, and some believing that intentionally harming someone only violates the Rede if magic is involved. This is why “Wiccans do not generally perform evil or black magic” (Netzley 265) as they strongly believe in the power of a recycled evil.

As demonstrated by the varying opinions on the interpretation of the Wiccan Rede, it is apparent that Wiccan communities are becoming more diverse in their beliefs and opinions. Even the “Council of American Witches”, which met in 1973-74 to discuss fundamental Wiccan beliefs, found it difficult to identify them simply because there were many differing opinions. It is within this very act of undefinability that the most fundamental component of the Wiccan religion lies; there are no definite limits to this belief. There is freedom to be diverse, to opinionate and to worship as is desired.

#### SECTION IV: CONNECTING CELTS AND WICCA

Sharing a value in oral tradition, its interesting to note that contrary to more widespread popular religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, Celts and Wiccans demonstrate a lack of religious publications such as the Holy Bible, the Koran or the Torah. This avoidance of publicizing script that define strict worshipping rules embodies the Celtic and Wiccan belief that text was a poor form of record, as it was not subject to change. The ideal of an open ended form



of worship was something the Celts heavily stressed and was a component that Wiccans (as the religion emerged and grew in popularity) accepted and integrated into their ideals as well. An idolization of spontaneity embodied by Celts and Wiccans spurred a lax in establishing institutional meeting places as part of their religions. There were and are no churches, mosques, temples or synagogues, among the two religions. The natural world was and is the place of worship and ritual for both, providing a connection to their gods and goddesses living within the surrounding environment.

This expresses another commonality shared by Celts and Wiccans alike: the importance of nature and environmentalism with their daily life. For Celts, myth described nature's inclination to an ideal of mysticism among the otherworlds that acted as a place for all forms of beings whether be spirit, god, fairy or deceased soul. Celts also aimed to establish a tie with Anu (or Gaia), the mother of the earth, and devoted themselves to her and all that she represents. Similarly, Wiccans worship the natural spirit of Gaia, valuing a connection with nature as a divine universal force so they may feel an impending natural transformation of the world. Wiccans perform many rituals in the presence of nature as it is the place where divinity exists. For Celts and Wiccans, to respect nature is to respect the gods and goddesses that are apart of the natural universe.

The most interesting evidence demonstrating the connection between Celtic and Wiccan religion is the ideal of a gender equal society. Elevating themselves from ancient European societies that were defined by gender divisions, the Celts recognized the importance of the



woman, emphasizing this belief within their definitive gender-lacking deities. In accordance with worship, the line between male and female was faded, suggesting both genders played a role in all aspects of life. In comparison, Wiccans worship the Goddess, a powerful being possessing both masculine and feminine energy, around whom majority of Wiccan religious belief and action takes place. The Wiccan religion, like the Celtic religion, also highlights freedom to practice, entailing gender equality among practitioners and seemed to have an influence in the huge amount of support for the Wiccan religion during feminist movements of the late 60s and early 70s.


Lastly, even though there had never been any definitive credo stated by the Celts, as they were not inclined to record through script, it has been theorized that they believed in the ideal that one's own body, if truly connected to the natural world, should be given the same treatment as nature itself and should be respected as if divinely worshipped. In addition to the prospect of self respect, Celts were heavily inclined to believe that life is cyclical and that damage will always return to its origin. Among Wiccans, this cyclical idea of "recycled evil" was expressed as the Wiccan Rede: the universal golden rule shared around the world that one must do unto others as they would have done unto themselves. Wiccans also share in Celtic belief of treating one's body as a temple to be worshipped and protected. These similarities shared by Wiccan and Celtic religions demonstrate a strange interconnectedness between ancient and contemporary times.



## SECTION V: OVERCOMING OF CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

Unfortunately, not exempt from societal prejudice, both Celts and Wiccans, with such unorthodox beliefs, experienced and still experience stereotyping and social injustice. Specifically, Celts fell victim to cruel stereotyping regarding their lifestyles and religious beliefs. Among ancient Europeans, the Celt was considered primitive, barbaric and illiterate and it was this bias that not only alienated the Celts, setting them apart from the newly emerging, “more advanced” societies, but also immortalized them through particularly daunting myth and legend. These early depictions of the Celtic peoples influenced the common European belief for years to come and perhaps played some role in the devastating downfall of the Celtic Empire.

Comparably, from the birth of the Wicca religion in the 1940s, practitioners have experienced a similar social attack as the Celtic peoples had. Many viewed Paganism as a practice of barbaric witchcraft, categorizing it as a form of satanism and associating it with dark, sadistical magic, rituals and sacrifices. Margot Adler reflects on being a Wiccan and mentions that “it was all very secretive...no one said anything...people were afraid of losing their jobs” (Adler, Web). With good reason, as many publicized Wiccans were scorned, or feared; many lost their jobs in addition to suffering damage to property through vandalism and hate crime. Trey Capnerhurst, who even detests simple Halloween witch stereotypes that depict green skinned and broom riding hags, has discussed that after she was publicly identified as a Wiccan during a local office race, she “...became the poster girl for paganism” (Burke). Capnerhurst experienced neighbors threatening to “burn down the house she shares with her family” (Burke), job loss and lots of people claiming the relatability of the 1999 horror film “Blair Witch Project”.



Social equality for Pagans and Wiccans alike seems to be gaining some ground as recent years have spawned new development towards a more religiously tolerant society. Specifically, change has occurred within the United States military in regards to accepting many forms of minority worship among military members. According to Stefani Barner, the wife of an aircraft mechanic, there is surprisingly a huge amount of religious intolerance within the military. As practicing Pagans, Stefani and her husband Robert have been “subjected to attempts at Christian evangelism from other troops” (Willis, Web) and even asked if “they sacrificed goats” (Willis, Web). It was not until 2007 that Pagan veterans could have the “pentacle—the symbol of their faith—inscribed on their tombstones in military cemeteries” (Willis, Web). However, the main focus for militarily employed Pagans is the appointment of a Pagan military chaplain. With an estimated 20,000 “Pagans in uniform” (Willis), the importance placed on the presence of a chaplain, who is “key for soldiers to practice their faith during military service, especially overseas” (Willis), is extremely high. There were several attempts by Wiccan circles to secure a Pagan military chaplain candidate and in 2006, the “Sacred Well Congregation” came close to sponsoring Captain Don Larsen. However, because he had “converted to Wicca from Pentecostal Christianity” (Willis) while stationed as the serving chaplain in Iraq, his original sponsor “revoked his endorsement” (Willis) and he was shortly dismissed. Larsen’s dismissal became a controversial issue as many argued that he was “a victim of unconstitutional discrimination” (Cooperman). Unfortunately, prejudice and stereotyping of the Wiccan people often seems to be a result of sincere naivety. Even though Wicca is “recognized as a religion by federal courts and





the Internal Revenue Service, [it] is often falsely equated with devil worship” (Cooperman); this may explain why many cast aside the idea of equality for any and all Pagans.

And so it has come to the final connection between two worlds that, when thoroughly compared, have seemingly molded into one. Just as the Celts were isolated by a Europe literally overcome with expanding empires, to live in their bog huts and speak their alien tongues, Wicca practitioners have and still experience such social alienation. It is undeniable that every religion has encountered such discrimination, but for Celtic and Wiccan alike, the similarity in the way each was so negatively labeled as demonized and barbaric and then detached from it all is strangely fated.

## CONCLUSION

Strangely fated: to be connected in such a way that cannot be considered mere coincidence. This explains the link between Celtic culture, beliefs and lifestyle and contemporary Wiccan religion. Separated by hundreds of years, the relation within the Celtic and Wicca embodies an ideal that is so readily referenced when explaining the importance of history: the past does and always will repeat. Everything that has ever existed is connected by a string running through time, a string that runs in every direction, colliding with itself, creating knots and loops, an intricate system of interconnectedness. Create one loop and it will eventually lead to another, just as the Celtic world has eventually led to the foundation of the Wiccan religion. Significantly, the string is always there, never does it fade, break or simply disappear from existence. That is why the historian can be called a historian. History is the tracing of the string,



following its path back to the origin and highlighting the eventual point that it leads to; the historian is simply the traveller. And as he moves through time, this connection that ancient Celtic beliefs and contemporary Wicca share, is something that not only becomes apparent, but is something to raise inquiries, inspiring movement along the string towards a different direction.



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