

RE-DREAMING THE DRUID:  
*An EcoSocial Critique of Modern Celtic Spirituality*

Jason Kirkey  
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As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century we find our world and our lives in a state of upheaval and bewilderment. The plight of modernity is the dissociation of humans from the earth. As Thomas Berry, the cultural historian and “geologist,” often writes, we are without an adequate story by which to orient ourselves to the cosmos. Instead of a story speaking to us of our continuity with the universe we have the dissociation of the human being from the earth community. It is this dissociation which makes the modern world possible with all its ecological devastation and social injustices. This marks our efforts to transform society from bewilderment to enlightenment as essentially a paradigmatic shift in consciousness. It is, at base, a spiritual imperative. Joanna Macy, one of those foremost voices of this movement, which she calls the Great Turning in *World as Lover, World as Self*, speaks of three dimensions to the process: holding actions, structural change, and a shift in consciousness (143-147). It is the latter which makes the former two dimensions both possible and effective.

It is the responsibility of our religious and spiritual traditions to participate in this shift of consciousness, to reconstitute themselves and their stories by engaging in an interpretive retrieval, reevaluation, and reconstruction (Tucker and Grim). We look to our religions for meaning, for guidance through the major questions of life, and for instruction in orienting ourselves properly to the cosmos. In this transitional periods we are dealing with questions our traditions have never been faced with, and indeed which the earth itself has never been faced with. It is necessary then to honestly evaluate the stories, practices, beliefs, and communities of our traditions to gauge how fit they are or are not for guiding us into the Ecozoic era.

It may, at first glance, appear self-evident that the Celtic spiritual traditions are ecologically viable. After all, it is an indigenous tradition of a people who, although now modernized, once lived in close relationship with the land. We look to Native Americans as a source of ecological spiritual wisdom, even in the modern world. Should we not, and could we not, also look to the modern Celtic traditions in the same, less culturally appropriating, way?

There is one major difference that must be accounted for between the various indigenous of the world and the Celtic traditions: Celtic spirituality is not a continuous tradition passed down without interruption from ancient times. It does not represent a tradition that emerged in Paleolithic pre-civilization and evolved in a less ecologically dissociative way, thus remaining in contact with phylogenetic depths of the human being. Instead, it is a reconstituted tradition pieced together by modern industrialized humans as a means of recontacting those depths. This ought to raise concerns about such a project and cause us to look more carefully at the claims of the tradition itself.

We need evaluative framework by which we might judge the efficacy of the Celtic tradition to guide us into an EcoSocial vision. Thomas Berry describes what he calls the Great Work of transforming our society from the modern paradigm to ecological postmodernism with the following words: “The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience” (159). Berry explicates this sentence throughout his essay “Reinventing the Human.” I will look at it each of his criteria for the reinvention of the human, applying them to modern Celtic spirituality in order to determine how viable the tradition is, or can become, for guiding practitioners into what Berry calls the Ecozoic era.

Berry's first statement that "we must reinvent the human" sets the premise that there is something essentially unfit about the modern industrial human, something that needs reinvention into greater communion with the ecology of the planet. This sentiment is utterly new and in response to the needs of our time. Despite the degradation of the land, which happened in Ireland and Britain during the golden age of Celtic culture the Iron Age Celts had no cause for such radical reinvention. No matter the stress caused by Ireland's deforestation the ecology could still sustain them.

Around the planet the human species now finds itself decidedly an unsustainable presence on the earth. Many biologists agree that we are already responsible for a sixth mass extinction in which 30,000 species are lost every year—potentially the largest since the extinction of dinosaurs at the close of the Mesozoic era 65 million years ago (Eldredge). We risk not only the extinction of other species during one of earth's most biologically prolific eras but our own extinction as well.

We must ask ourselves if our religious institutions and spiritual traditions are capable of encouraging the kind of reinvention necessary to change our presence on this planet from one of degradation to one of mutual enhancement. In the mythology of Ireland there are stories that can help frame the current crisis. Perhaps the most relevant ones deal with the concept of Truth, or *fírinne* in Irish, and the sacral kingship. To be king one had to be married to the goddess of the land, whose name was Sovereignty, and to be responsible for upholding a contract between the human community and the wild community of the land. It was in this relationship that the proper order of the cosmos, expressed as *fírinne*, was maintained.

Thus, we might say that the present ecological crisis is a result of our stepping out of relationship with the sovereignty of the earth, of our failure to uphold the Truth of the proper

order of things. In this instance we must widen the circle of our belonging beyond the island of Ireland to see that the whole earth is the goddess of sovereignty. In that way we might know that stepping back into a relationship of reciprocity with nature is now a planetary concern.

Next, Berry says that we must do this “at a species level.” He goes on to say that, “the issues we are concerned with seem to be beyond the competence of our present cultural traditions, either individually or collectively. What is needed is something beyond existing traditions to bring us back to the most fundamental aspect of the human: giving shape to ourselves” (160). He uses the term *inscendence* to describe the process of going within to the phylogenic and archetypal depths of the human being to recontact what the foundational roots of our identity within the context of the biosphere (Dream of the Earth, 208).

This means that the Celtic tradition, like all cultural traditions, is incapable *on its own* of ushering us into the Ecozoic era. We must return to the archetypal source of the tradition itself, returning to the well as it were, to in a sense re-dream the culture in a way which can more wholly support us in moving beyond the modern world. Because druidism and Celtic spirituality as a whole is, by and large, a reconstruction or a revival of an eclipsed tradition, it finds itself in an auspicious position. Although our lack of knowledge about the mode by which the culture existed in ancient times is unfortunate, and resulted in the loss of much wisdom, it means that the modern tradition is in a perpetual state of re-dreaming itself. To practice *at all* it must be re-dreamed and this provides us with the opportunity to make it more fit for the Ecozoic era—more fit to transform the Industrial Growth Society.

This does not, however, give us license to pay no heed to the past. The Celtic culture is a living culture and as such its ancestral wisdom, traditions, and language must also be honored. As practitioners and “cultural dreamers” return to the phylogenic roots of the tradition, those

pieces of wisdom which we are lucky enough to have preserved will come to be seen in a new, multilayered light. In this new light we must simultaneously understand the historical role of the culture and tradition as well as its place and role in the modern world.

As this is an imperative not only of the Celtic spiritual traditions but of the human species itself, the reimagined tradition can provide a cultural framework for dealing with the various aspects of our social system that also need re-dreaming. Economics, government, law, and education all must find their roots in the earth if civilization is to be a life enhancing presence on the planet. Celtic culture can provide a model of society in right relationship with the planet. What would a democracy look like that is based in the principles of the earth? What would a legal system look like that acknowledges the rights of wild non-human beings? What would an economy look like which took into account costs to the planet?

Vandana Shiva, activist and environmental thinker, points out in *Earth Democracy* that “earth democracies” are based on living cultures and that, “Living cultures allow cultural diversity to thrive from the ground of our common humanity and our common rights as members of the earth community” (11). As biodiversity is to the health of an ecosystem so cultural diversity is to the health of a human social system. A reimagined Celtic cultural and spiritual tradition is capable of providing the fertile ground for the reinvention of the human species.

“With critical reflection” is the next of Berry’s phrases with which he points to the way that we engage with the natural world: “We insist on the need for critical reflection as we enter the ecological age in order to avoid a romantic attraction to the natural world that would not meet the urgencies of what we are about” (161). This is a major area in which the modern Celtic tradition must take up the task. Although it is a form of “earth spirituality” very few books,

teachers, or training courses make a place for a critical reflection on ecology and cosmology alongside teachings on ritual, myth, and meditation.

Critical reflection is substituted for connection, for developing relationships, and for finding balance or harmony between oneself and nature. To be clear, these are all good things, important things, *necessary* things in fact. But the authentic connection and relationship can only happen if one is eco-literate. Gary Snyder asserts that “Bioregional awareness teaches us in *specific* ways. It is not enough just to ‘love nature’ or to want to ‘be in harmony with Gaia.’ Our relationship to the natural world takes place in a *place*, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (193).

We all fall in love with sunsets but we have great need to also know when the sun will set in a particular place at a particular time of year and what type of leaves, plants, and wild beings that light might find itself casting off of. We can learn much more from what the wild boar eats and where it defecates than we will from its “symbolic meaning.” Symbolism is important if we are to consider the universe as a creative intelligence, but to be in conversation with the actuality of life is the mark of critical engagement with nature. From there a relationship full of deeper meaning is possible and from the relationship springs love and reciprocity.

This relationship is the result of our living “within the community of life systems,” Berry’s fourth statement. Due to our perceived split with the earth, we are incapable, in general, of experiencing ourselves as members of a diverse earth community. Our activities must be grounded in this awareness if we are to survive, however. The Celtic traditions present us with a good workable foundation, a model of healthy human-earth relations as evidenced in the importance given to the interrelatedness of the tribe and the land. Alexei Kondratiev, a Celtic scholar, speaks to this matter in such a way that resonates with modern times:

While the narrow anthropocentrism of the industrial-capitalist is evidently a destructive lie, the truth is that human beings are caught in the midst of natural process, participating in it whether or not they choose to, constantly giving or receiving influence as the balance shifts. The most productive next step would be to *consciously* participate... (72)

Within the dualism of tribe and land relationships is the possibility for a deeper union, the realization that we not only are participant within the processes but that we are a fundamental part of the process and evolution of the universe. We are continuous and seamless with the entire earth and cosmos. It is no surprise then that the word for a tribe and the word for the place in which that tribe lives is the same: *túath*. Beyond tribe and land, then, we might speak of the emergence of a single ecological *túath*, the entering of the human into the earth community.

The next phrase, “within a time-developmental context,” articulates the imperative that we must locate ourselves within the 13.7 billion year history of the universe and its evolutionary arc. To place ourselves in such a context is to acknowledge the trajectory of time and the development of the universe toward greater depth, creativity, and complexity.

Many religions find themselves at odds with the scientific account of the universe, choosing instead the literalism of their own creation stories. Celtic culture is in a unique position in that it has no creation myth of its own, either because one was never conceived or, more likely, because it was simply lost through time. This means that it is capable of adopting the epic of the universe story as its own without infringing on the traditional cosmogony. As ecology is our means of orienting ourselves to place, cosmogony is our means of orienting ourselves to time.

Tracing this story back in time we come face to face with the reality of our nature as continuous with the cosmos, as part of all the energy that emerged in the primordial flaring forth. Berry writes, “So this story of the great journey is an exciting story that gives us our macrophase

identity with the larger dimensions of meaning that we need. To identify the microphase of our being with macrophase mode of our being is the quintessence of human fulfillment” (164). This identification of the universe as the deeper nature of the human is made possible by the story of the universe.

Finally, Berry’s last statement, that this must happen “by means of story and shared dream experience,” speaks to the universe as a creative process. The universe is dreaming itself into being. Berry calls here for a participation in the “dream of the earth,” and an awaking in the human a realization of the sacred dimensions of the cosmos. As the universe dreams itself into being, and as we are the human dimension of the universe, we too dream into being our own species. His statement comes full circle here, as the reinvention of the human is a constant process of the cosmos as it comes into greater depth of being, greater complexity, and greater creativity. To those cultural purists who might say that “re-dreaming the druid” is a transgression on the past, this then is our ultimate appeal to authority: as the universe is constantly dreaming and re-dreaming its own unfolding, and as humans are utterly continuous with this universe, we have the responsibility as participants in this process to continually dip back into the sacred depths of the cosmos, reinventing ourselves into greater unity with this evolving story.

In such a re-dreaming lies our path to the Ecozoic era. It is a human imperative that we do this, not only for our own survival, but for the community as a whole and its right to continue to flourish. To transform the very essence of what it means to be human, we must at the same time transform our cultural and social institutions so that they are aligned with our own ecological and cosmological depths. This means that as we go through the initiatory crucible that determines the fitness of the human being, that our cultural and spiritual traditions must

come with us, preserving their diverse wisdom while at the same time being re-dreamed into consonance with the cosmos. We must enact on ourselves a cultural therapy, answering Hölderlin's question, "what use are poets [and druids] in times of need?" with the image of cultural dreamers, re-dreaming the modern mind into the shared dream of the earth.

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