

# New Gods, New Shrines: Identity and De-Secularization Processes in Young Followers of Celtic Music

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In 1760, James Macpherson published the first volume of the purported poems of Ossian (an almost unknown bard from the 3rd century AD) in the most notable literary fraud of the 18th century and the cornerstone of modern Celtic myth. The success of this edition was overwhelming across Europe for two centuries. Among its 'victims' were Goethe, Byron, Walter Scott, Matthew Arnold, Fenimore Cooper, Espronceda, Pondal, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Brahms and Napoleon himself. Many celebrated personalities of the 19th century succumbed to the beauty of Macpherson's poetry, but there was something more than literary pleasure involved. The first suggestion of this paper is that Europeans needed to construct and believe in a myth like the Celtic one—mixing legend with reality and extolling nature and fantasy—at the peak of Enlightenment and the dawn of the industrial revolution. It reflected a desire to re-enchant and de-secularise the world, an initial and spontaneous sociological reaction that would be revisited in periodical waves until the present<sup>1</sup>. In fact, the poems of Ossian were “one of the first works of European Romanticism” (Moore 2003: 38). Sawyers wonders “How to explain its inexplicable appeal? [*Ossian*] offered welcome opium from the deadly reason and intellect of the Enlightenment” (2001: 127. See also Gouk 2005). Science was then replacing the old Christian God and provoking a sequence of social compensatory processes. Romanticism was in many senses an immediate historical reply to the previous period, re-opening the way to spiritual convictions, fantasy and related vital attitudes: “Romanticism and Paganism are both counter-movements—counter-Enlightenment and countercultural, respectively” (Sage 2009: 28).

This survey outlines the core hypothesis of a cyclical return of the collective processes involved in the Ossian phenomenon described, according to the contemporary evolution of the Western world as a dialectical complex where technological advances and rationality gained critical ground against the 'old' theocentric (God-centred) societal models, Celticness being an extremely suitable construct to harbour and develop certain psycho-emotional projections. As stated by Leersen: “the construction of the Celt in itself documents the revolt against rationalism and against the Enlightenment” (1996: 5). For this purpose we rely on an extensive literature as well as on several fieldworks and personal communications mainly focusing on Celtic music and its festivals, assuming the latter as events that condense larger-scale structures and where the youth attraction towards Celtic mythology may prevail over their concrete musical preferences.

Concerning our times and broadly speaking, people live in an almost perpetual state of crisis (economic, political, moral, individual and collective), leading to anxiety and uncertainty. The outcome is a natural tendency towards balancing mechanisms *in search of the lost identity*, which frequently involves a physical journey far from everyday life, such as attending Celtic music festivals (hereafter CMFs), among other options. The role of religion within this social framework might be crucial, probably responding to a universal and inescapable condition, as if it were part of the collective unconscious of humanity:

There is something eternal in religion that is destined to outlive the succession of particular symbols in which religious thought has clothed itself (Durkheim 1912: 429).

Several scholars have applied this notion in comparable estimates: “religion is present in nonspecific form in all societies and in all socialised individuals. It is part of the human condition” (Luckmann 1967: 78, in *The Invisible Religion*); “The American family [...] desperately needs a new folklore, a new driving myth” (Morrow 1992: 50); “myths are absolutely necessary to all societies not to tear themselves intensely” (Barthes 2005 [1978]: 267); “demythification has finally turned against itself [...] the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth” (Styers 2013: 76). In the synthesis by O'Connor:

In our modern society, dominated by Logos and rationality, one of the fundamental roles of myth must surely be to restore and reinstate the imaginative life. We enjoy mythological stories because they provide us with a moment when we are connected to our sense of imagination, uncluttered by the demands of rationality, space and time (2000: 3-4).

Neopagan beliefs could in this sense be responding to primordial impulses inherited from a millennia-long evolution and rather beyond the scope of reason: “[Paganism is] a collective cultural memory of sacredness of place [...] the expression of unconscious ‘rememberings’ of a Pagan past” (Weston 2013: 43). Similarly, Margry has put forward the universal condition of the pilgrimage, which could explain its current rush: “The social-cultural universality of pilgrimage lies in the *condition humaine*” (2008: 324, emphasis original). The fact is that nowadays the world is full of new religions, sanctuaries, cults and fantastic revivals that rescue a Greek, Roman, Viking, Celtic or medieval past. Society as a whole seems to seek something supernatural—or at least wrapped in mystery—to *believe* in. Some of these tendencies have evolved into conventional dogmas, others into theme parks (like Highland Mysteryworld in Scotland and Celtica in Wales), and could account for the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and similar leisure-oriented creations.

## Popular music, Celtic potential spirituality and the struggle for identity

The intersection of this tendency towards the supernatural with popular music can result in fertile creations. In general “Paganisms are full of musics [and] popular musics are full of Pagan-like interests” (Harvey 2013: X). Moreover, “popular music has already proved a highly effective medium for the articulation of Pagan ideology and aesthetics” (Weston and Bennett 2013: 1). Within this sociological framework, so-called *Celtic music* and parallel cultural productions demonstrate an overwhelming capacity to transform past and present into an unlimited semiological universe populated by all kinds of fantasies, spiritualism, medievalism, elves and nymphs, resulting in a new cosmology that re-enchants reality:

The word ‘Celtic’ excites immediately, automatically, a host of images: memories of gold and music, of bards, princes and Druids, of fighting, talking and horsemanship—or pictures of thatched cottages, round towers, harps, high crosses, rocky coasts and shawls (Delaney (1993: 15. See Campos 2009).

Stokes and Bohlman depict Celticness specifically with respect to the resurgence of religious tendencies:

Celticism thrives, as pilgrimage, in the context of New Age spirituality, postCold War religious revivalism, and a massmediated “postmodern” syncretic multiculturalism [...] indicating a globalized resurgence of a Celticism expressed in a religious idiom (2003: 10).

Recently this predisposition has dramatically expanded, in either pagan or orthodox form: “The modern Celtic spirituality movement, whether Pagan or Christian, is a part of the Celtic revival of the past twenty-five years” (Power 2006: 33).

Before these authors, JRR Tolkien had insightfully synthesised the core of the role played by Celticness in the contemporary Western world:

‘Celtic’ of any sort is [...] a magic bag, into which anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come [...] Anything is possible in the fabulous Celtic twilight, which is not so much a twilight of the gods as of the reason (1963 [1955]: 29-30).

Tolkien understood the twilight ‘of the reason’ (but not ‘of the gods’—Wagner) in the *Celtic twilight* (after Yeats’ influential volume of 1883). The writer diagnosed in advance the spiritual drought of the contemporary era and a natural reaction to it through literary fantasy. His assessment of the fundamental ambiguity and malleability of Celticness—as a ‘magic bag’ where ‘anything is possible’—is entirely right. The fact is that among the followers of Celtdom, and especially in the scenario of CMFs, there are many young people who seem to search for a parallel world that might compensate for the psycho-emotional deficit derived from extreme secularisation, striving to re-encounter their identity and re-enchant the world. This youthful need to escape from modern urban disaffection may thus lead to an unconscious attempt to (re)build identity through an inner trip to the self physically embodied in the attendance at certain events, an experience assumable as a contemporary rite of passage (Campos 2013).

Why is identity the central motif of youngsters’ psychological crisis, and why is the Celtic path an optimal solution? Besides the reasons adduced, in *Celtic Geographies* the authors establish globalisation as a very influential factor in contemporary disorientation and uprootedness (Harvey et al., 2002: 8). In any case, there is a firm wish to join a new creed and a new emotional community: “it is the *desire* to identify as Celtic that is the essential signifier for tribal acceptance” (McCoy 2013: 183, emphasis original). Interestingly, in online sites and games—where Celtic presence is massive—identity stands out as the unmistakable *raison d’être* for participants:

The celebration of identity is the fundamental, critical, absolutely core point of virtual worlds [...] everything that players do ultimately concerns the development of their own identity: who they are (Bartle 2004: 159).

The extreme malleability of the Celtic myth also helps: “many of these people are ‘Celtic’ solely on the basis of elective affinity” (Hale 2002: 159); they are ‘Cardiac Celts’ (Bowman 1996: 246), because the term ‘Celtic’ has been manipulated as a marketing tool until it “means what I want it to mean, what I feel it means, and no one can tell me what ‘Celtic’ cannot include” (O’Loughlin 2002: 49), thus pointing in the same direction than Tolkien’s argument.

### The producers and the audience

The potential of Celtic music to generate, reflect and spread a notion of mysticism is visible both in its producers and audience. Among the former, Alan Stivell has been the main composer, performer, ideologist and apostle of Celtic music for the last half-century. The cover of his LP *Celtic Symphony*, subtitled *Tír na nÓg* (1980, Fig. 1), contains elements of interest. Firstly, it shows the rocks of Stonehenge as a central motif, but this monument (built anywhere from 3000 to 2000 BC) largely predates the Celtic occupation of the British Isles, evincing the lack of historic rigour so distinctive of the Celtic phantasy. Secondly, the image gives a spiritual bias to the record, because Stonehenge is a place of religious significance and pilgrimage in Neo-Druidry (see Till 2013). The stones appear as misty and lonely, to emphasise the sensation of mystery. Importantly, the Gaelic subtitle *Tír na nÓg* belongs to Irish mythology, where it means ‘Land of the Young’, one of the names for the Otherworld. It is depicted in medieval narrations as a supernatural realm of everlasting youth, beauty, health, abundance and joy. The album has 12 parts (a bit far from a conventional ‘symphony’), whose respective names also reflect a narration as unreal as it is intangible: ‘Journey To Inner Spaces’, ‘Nostalgia For The Past And Future’, ‘Dissolution In The Great All’, ‘Vibratory Communion With The Universe’ and the like.



Fig. 1. Alain Stivell, cover of *Celtic Symphony* (1980)



On other record covers, Stivell looks almost like a priest or intermediary with the beyond, with the Celtic afterlife; for instance, on *Again* (1993, Fig. 2) he is depicted with an enhanced harp surrounded by mysterious shadows. The subtle nuance lies in the light from above that illuminates his face: he can see it, but we cannot; therefore, the audience should expect and accept his translation of that superior message. There are no remnants of any ‘traditional’ or ‘folk’ roots left in these works—either in the formal parameters or in aesthetic orientation. Celtic music has become an entirely new creation, an attractive icon closely connected to neo-spiritual tensions and social escapism.



Fig. 2. Alain Stivell, cover of *Again* (1993)

Sometimes it is an instrument that becomes the sacred totem of the Celtic tribe, as frequently happens with bagpipes or the harp. By these means its status is elevated, becoming the visible body of the divine, as on the cover of Stivell's *The Mist of Avalon* (1991), showing a spectral nymph that emerges from the harp, and returning again to medieval legends. There are also no less than half a dozen records entitled *Celtic Harp Magic* or similar, where the cover highlights the instrument as a true monument, a self-referential fetish to be worshipped (Fig. 3). Carlos Núñez—the most internationally-recognised piper from Galicia (north-west Spain) and a constant defender of the Celtic cause—showed himself “convinced of the mystical nature of the *gaita* [Galician bagpipe], which represents for him the soil, as opposed to the fire of the much larger Scottish bagpipe or the water of the Irish *Uilleann* pipes” (Llewellyn 1997: 91, emphasis original. See also Campos 2007). However other artists broadly labelled as Celtic have been more critical of the fashionable spiritualist bias, like Australian singer Mairéid Sullivan, who considers that “music is a conduit to the ancient Celtic myths and philosophies which are coming to life again to feed starved imaginations” (cited in Melhuish 1998: 36). Academics in general are also quite sceptical about the issue; for instance Bowman stresses that the Celtic mystical wave has developed into ‘a spiritual supermarket’ (2000: 71).

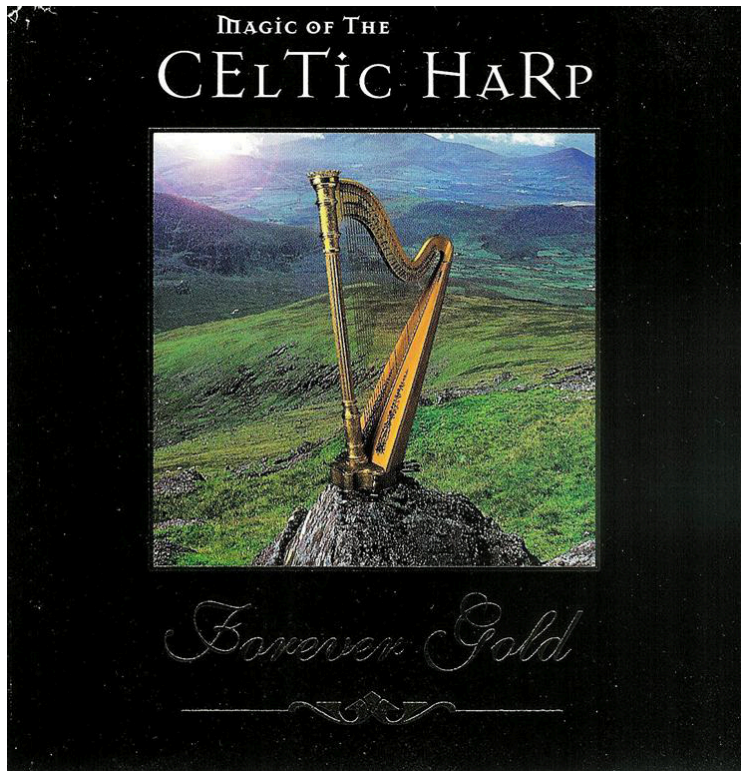


Fig. 3. Claire Hamilton, cover of *Magic of the Celtic Harp: Forever Gold* (2000).

From a functional point of view the musical instrument, worshipped as a dominant symbol in the ritual ceremonial, also helps in the construction of social values, creating or maintaining group solidarity and convictions, a fundamental task in the competition to achieve social power:

[T]otems are complex ritual figures in their own right, products of the religious imagination and the construction of overall values in the society. In worshipping their totems, people may indeed be in a sense worshipping ‘themselves’ (Stewart & Strathern 2014: 28).

## The festival

The most important manifestation of Celticness takes place at the personal meeting, the CMF. Within the framework already described, the festival acquires the condition of a sacred space, an *axis mundi*, enacting the process of searching for and finding of identity.

Celtic music festivals can become vehicles for the construction and maintenance of Celtic identities [where] despite tourism commodification the music retains the audience’s beliefs in its authenticity through their emotional experiences (Matheson 2008: 58).

We suggest that CMFs ultimately become intense communal celebrations of otherness and exploration of alternative values, with plentiful evidence to permit building a comparative phenomenological bridge to ancient pilgrimages. Effectively, the sacralisation of the *way-pilgrimage*, of the *place-shrine* (Ortigueira, Lorient, Sendim, Glastonbury, ...), of the dreamt-shared *paradise* (a pan-Celtic utopia) and of the musician as *high priest-performer* of the ritual take place in these modern events. Furthermore, music provides the meeting with a festive, lively and hypnotic character, strengthening the indicated features and enabling an instrument like the bagpipes to acquire the symbolic potential of old tribal totems. The stage at a CMF can appear like the shrine of a modern cathedral,<sup>2</sup> with coloured glass windows, priests (musicians) performing the ritual and the faithful in a trance or participating (Fig. 4). It acts as a metaphor of paradise. Thus, music becomes crucial in several symbolic ways to the festival beyond the immediate acoustic materiality.





Fig. 4. Galician band Milladoiro performing at Ortigueira Festival, July 18, 2014. Photo and permission Ary López, from *Ferrol 360*.

Additionally, as part of the struggle for a new identity, among the external signs which allow participants to be recognised as just ‘one more’ within the Celtic community, van Gennep’s *initiation rites* seem to have application as acts of separation and incorporation into a special category of people among whom bodily mark is a permanent statement of identity (van Gennep 1960 [1908]: 72). Van Gennep put forward several practices of modifying the body, like hair-cutting, ear and septum piercing, tattooing and scarifying (*ibidem*). These practices are very common among CMFs attendees.

At the festival, everyday life fades into oblivion and a different world is entered into and experienced. According to the testimonies of diverse CMFs participants:

You forget everything else, all the mundane things in life and you think ‘yeah, that was really something’. [Another respondent] It just makes me alive again [...] it’s part of my life (Cited in Matheson 2008: 68).

I find that the pace of modern life goes too quickly [...] we’re missing out on the most important things. I’m not interested in flashy cars and I’m not interested in big posh houses. I’m not interested in dripping in jewellery. I’d rather spend the money going to folk festivals [...]. I think there’s something about the simplicity of it. Maybe we’re getting in touch with our past [...]. I feel a lot of songs were coming from a time when [...] the simple things in life were important.... It’s [about] getting in touch with that sort of side of yourself (Cited in Matheson 2005: 158).

Interestingly many participants do not realise what they are looking for, or even that they are looking for something; they are ‘unconscious pilgrims’ (Bowman 2008: 244). Bowman was told about such pilgrims in Glastonbury: “People often come without fixed purpose, but find themselves finding something” (*ibidem*). This evidence from the Inter-Celtic Festival of Sendim (north Portugal) might be representative: in a fieldwork undertaken there by Susana Moreno in 2012, some young informants, when asked if they believed in Celtic myth, replied that “not at all, but without the heading inter-*Celtic* we would not come here” (personal communication, September 16, 2012). Similarly, Xavier Garrote considered that at the very beginnings of the Ortigueira festival, which he founded,<sup>3</sup> the Celtic rationale was unclear for all them, but the popular belief was alive and everybody wanted *Celtic* music: “it was a myth, but it strongly brought people together” (personal conversation, August 21, 2013). These testimonies are relevant; it can be suggested that there is magic in ‘Celtic’, and there is a need for that magic.

During the fieldwork we carried out in July 2011 in Ortigueira, one of the most interesting places to visit was the campsite and beach at Morouzos, the main quarters of the festival attendees, two miles away from town. Thousands of youngsters stayed there for four days, drunk and drugged as can be, practising nudism and free sex and out of any control. However, the CMF actually implies a liminal threshold, entering a new realm of experiences and values, the most paradoxical possibly being discipline and cordiality, strange as it may seem. As



a local councillor confirmed personally, there are almost no incidents during the festival, and a police presence is virtually unnecessary (Marián Rodríguez, councilwoman of Ortigueira for five years. Personal communication, July 8, 2011 <sup>4</sup>). The picture of the campsite (Fig. 5) was taken at a moment when no less than four or five powerful sound systems spread out all over the site were blaring out different music. But surprisingly enough, none of them had anything to do with Celtic, traditional or similar styles of music. Instead, they were listening to very loud electronic dance music (one sound system sounded like heavy metal). The fact is that their favourite music is not Celtic, and when asked directly, participants confirmed this explicitly. Our suggestion is that they go to Ortigueira searching for something different, because there are music festivals and concerts not far away during the summer season in Galicia much closer to dance and rock music. They accept *Celtic* music as a part of that discipline, peacefully sharing their lives in a Woodstock-like style. It is as if the tacit principles assumed by the attendees were sacred and untouchable, ruling everybody there, and one could speak of new dogmas, actively respected. By these means the festival becomes in addition ‘a music educational project’ (Karlsen and Brändström 2008).



Fig. 5. Morouzos campsite, Ortigueira Celtic Festival, July 2011. Photo J. Campos.

There is also a strong sensoriality at CMFs, with an overwhelming presence of music, flashing lights, the atmosphere of a summer night surrounded by nature, everything vibrating and countless young people dancing, generally under the effects of drugs and alcohol. In this sense neopagans are typically attentive to the sensual world, in clear opposition to the mind-body dualism of Christianity.

Participation frequently includes a journey, both physical and internal at the same time: it is a material and symbolic pilgrimage. Remoteness is usually very real, and in the Celtic world there are several enclaves characterised by isolation, forming a *sacred geography*: places where divine or supernatural power breaks through into the human world (Ivakhiv 2003: 13). That is the case for Iona, Beechworth, Glastonbury, Selja, Ortigueira, Lindisfarne, Skellig Michael, Aosta or the island of Ukonsaari; some of them, even though not specifically ‘Celtic’ sanctuaries, are points of touristic interest, currently visited by travellers and neopagans. As stated by Weston and Bennett “Paganism is rooted in the sacredness of place” (2013: 3). Together with the experience of the festival itself, the *journey* can be understood as a contemporary rite of passage (after the classical approaches of van

Gennep and Victor Turner), in societies that have lost the distinctive signs of identity during lifetime that characterised older ways of life. In addition, the outskirts of some of these villages are impressive, in Ortigueira consisting of high cliffs, long beaches, the ocean and wild nature. As a whole, the experience of Ortigueira can become actually liminal when compared to normal urban life.

## Conclusions

This research points to understanding Celtic music and mythology as a rather spontaneous neopagan reaction based on the transference and projection of the psycho-emotional mechanisms involved in orthodox religious dogmas and rituals into renewed cultural forms, in order to restore the cultural balance broken in Western societies since the unstoppable rise of rationalism and technology. Instead of freeing the world from religion, secularisation triggered numerous new faith communities, far removed from conventional dogmas but deeply embedded in the spiritual, as possibly happened with the seminal Ossianic wave that spread all over Europe at the peak of Enlightenment and first industrial thrust.

The Celtic complex—and particularly the CMF—involves a dense semiology, including the pastoral, nostalgia, revivalism, rejection of technocracy and a strong claim to authenticity; but also pleasure, escapism, sociability, nationalist aspirations, commercialism/merchandising and music. However, it can also be interpreted as a new rite of passage in the search for identity and as compensation for the extreme secularisation and disenchantment of our societies. In this sense, the rite of passage performed and embodied at the CMF represents a *renaissance* for the individual, ‘an arena for self-creation’ (Pike 2001: 157). The process develops into a personal metamorphosis and re-enchantment of reality, by which CMFs tend to provide sensations of well-being, contentment, satisfaction, hope and optimism, playing a notable social function in preventing the various pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless (Packer and Ballantyne 2010).

In summary, religiosity has mutated but probably not disappeared amid the secularizing rush of the rational and industrial Western world over the last two centuries. Our transcendent potential seems to survive in alternative and sometimes unconscious forms, among which Celticness appears to be a true cultural nationhood in which to hide away from the pressures of urban life, and to re-encounter with the self in a frame of sensuality and pleasure. Thus, there is a fundamental crossroads between identity search/construction and the religious/neopagan revival, whose presence seems to be pervasive worldwide in our times, putting into question the welfare state and related technological sophistication as the only real aspirations of wealthy modern societies.



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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Several key concepts of this paper deserve discussion, but we lack space for it. About the notion of ‘re-enchantment’ and related terms, see for instance Landy and Saler (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Just as many modern opera houses look like (and in fact, are) impressive and gleaming churches where ceremonial rites are performed. A large part of our analyses are not exclusive to Celtic music.

<sup>3</sup> 1978, in Galicia (north-west Spain); it is the most important Iberian CMF since then.

<sup>4</sup> At the 1996 Hebridean Celtic Festival, the organizers declared that: ‘The police said to us that this was the first Friday night they could remember when they hadn’t had any calls from the town. This was amazing compared to the usual Friday night’ (*Stornoway Gazette*, June 27, 1996: 6).