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Nature as Sacred

An Examination of Ecological Practices in Contemporary Irish Neo-Paganism

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An Examination of Ecological Practices in Contemporary Irish Neo-Paganism

Master's Thesis

To Fulfil the Requirements for the Degree of Erasmus Mundas Master of Religious Diversity in a Globalised World at the University of Groningen under the supervision of Professor Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen) and Professor Pedro Mantas España (University of Córdoba)

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection between religion, ecology and science within contemporary Irish neo-Paganism. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, it observes how the neo-Pagan belief in the sacredness of nature encourages ecological values and pro-environmental behaviour. Guiding the study is Bron Taylor's theory of 'Dark Green Religion', that poses that when people view nature as sacred and worthy of reverent care, the belief system creates a deep ecological awareness. The research highlights how the neo-Pagan participant's beliefs and rituals hold a deep connection to the landscape with participants having an animistic, reciprocal relationship with the world around them, whilst viewing themselves as interconnected with nature. This ecological worldview then translates into particular forms of environmental activism including 'magical activism'.

The research presents how Ireland's complex colonial history encourages practitioners to consciously reclaim and reconnect with pre-colonial traditions, making their relationship with the land unique compared to other neo-Pagan practices found in Britain. Through the use of the Irish language, practitioners believe that they can better engage in ritual and landscape, as opposed to the use of the English language.

The findings demonstrate how Irish neo-Paganism integrates spirituality and ecology informed by a historical consciousness. The study contributes to broader discussions surrounding the relationship between religion and science by outlining how spiritual practices can harmonise the two through ecological principles.

Chapter 1 Introduction

"You cannot be a modern Shaman, or a Druid, or anything under the Wiccan or Pagan Umbrella, and not take care of the Earth."

- Participant 5

These words, shared by one of the participants within this research study, capture the essence of the neo-Pagan worldview, where care for Earth is not optional, but an essential duty. Rooted in a deep reverence for nature, Irish neo-Pagans see environmental responsibility as a natural extension of their spirituality. This study intends to explore how belief systems as such, that are often overlooked in mainstream discourse, shape ecological awareness and action.

In the midst of a mounting ecological crisis, the understanding of how religious frameworks inform environmental ethics is both timely and necessary. Mainstream environmental discourse on religion and ecology, often centred on the Judeo-Christian tradition, has tended to frame religion and science as opponents (Thomson, 209: 1). This binary has dominated the science and religion debate, reinforcing the assumption that faith-based worldviews resist scientific reasoning or hinder ecological action. This study shifts the focus towards nature religions, specifically, Irish neo-Paganism, arguing that such religions have been overlooked in the conversation about environmental responsibility (Hedley Brooke and Numbers: 2011: 19). Far from opposing science, neo-Pagan worldviews often blend spiritual and scientific perspectives, offering alternative models for ecological awareness and engagement (Aburrow: 2008).

In the Irish context, I propose this investigation holds substantial weight; the country's religious landscape has been shaped by the powerful dominance from the Catholic Church, intense colonial rupture from Britain, and a growing disillusionment with institutional religion. Although neo-Pagan movements have been studied in other cultural contexts, Irish neo-Paganism remains largely understudied. Yet it provides a gateway to an extremely unique perspective shaped by Ireland's postcolonial history, Celtic Catholicism (due to the deep syncretic nature of Christianity on the island) and, Irelands deep folkloric connection to both land and nature. Each of the factors combined make Irish neo-Paganism particularly rich for investigation in navigating both spiritual and ecological roots.

This qualitative research examines how contemporary Irish neo-Pagans perceive and enact their relationship with nature, specifically investigating how their spiritual beliefs translate into ecological awareness, lifestyle choices and activist practices asking the central research question of:

How do neo-Pagan communities in Ireland promote ecological values through their belief in the sacredness of nature?

This research draws upon Bron Taylor's concept of Dark Green Religion (2005), which refers to the belief systems that view nature as sacred and worthy of reverent care, grounded both in spiritual and scientific understanding. Taylor (2005) argues that such worldviews, although not always institutionalised religions, inspire and promote ecological behaviours, forming a synergy of spiritual- environmental care. In this study, the framework proposed by Taylor, works as a lens in understanding Irish, neo-Pagan cosmologies, beliefs, and rituals as active responses to the environmental degradation that we observe around us.

Five participants were interviewed across the Island of Ireland to explore the lived experiences and belief systems of neo-Pagans. Through semi-structured interviews, I was able to uncover the beliefs of contemporary Irish neo-Pagans, revealing their strong roots in animism and the interconnectedness of human and nature. These epistemologies then transformed into particular ecological lifestyle choices and varied forms of environmental activism, all of which were recorded and analysed. Additionally, the study also highlighted how neo-Paganism deeply diverges from the dominant religions of Ireland and broader Western society, particularly those holding anthropocentric worldviews, historically rooted in Judaism and Christianity (Hedley Brooke and Numbers, 2011: 1)

As outlined above, academic research on Irish neo-Paganism remains limited, and to date, no study has examined how Irish neo-Pagans engage with ecology and environmentalism. This thesis seeks to address that gap by exploring how these communities express care for the environment through their belief in the sacredness of nature, the extent to which their beliefs align or diverge from science, and how these beliefs might contribute to reshaping the broader science and religion debate. To guide this investigation, the following research objectives were established:

1. Document and analyse the ways Irish neo-Pagans express their belief in the sacredness of nature through rituals and beliefs.

2. Examine the ethical and religious framework that explain the Irish neo-Pagan approach to human-nature relationships.
3. Assess the ecological contributions of Irish neo-Pagan communities to environmental activism and discourse.
4. Assess the extent to which neo-Pagan practices diverge or align with scientific perspectives on ecology.

To address these objectives, this thesis is divided into ten chapters, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Irish neo-Paganism and ecology. Following this introduction, Chapter Two presents the Literature Review, outlining the key scholarly conversations that frame this research. It begins with an overview of neo-Paganism in Ireland, tracing its historical roots and contemporary expressions, it then observes the global Pagan belief in the sacredness of nature. Thereafter, the review presents key discussions on environmental ethics in the Pagan perspective and the view of the relationship between humans and nature and perspectives on the religion and science debate. The chapter concludes by identifying the gap in scholarship on Irish neo-Pagan ecological thought. Thereafter, Chapter Three outlines the Conceptual Framework, introducing Bron Taylor's theory of Dark Green Religion as the guiding conceptual lens within the study. Chapter Four them presents the Methodology of the research detailing and justifying the qualitative design of the study.

From Chapter Five until Nine, I dedicate the space to the findings and discussion of the research, with each of the chapters organised thematically to reflect the main areas explored through the interviews. The thematic chapters are as follows: the Spiritual Identity and Path of the Neo-Pagan, the Belief in the Sacredness of Nature, Environmental Stewardship and Ecological Activism, Human-Nature Relationships and Religion and Science. Each chapter weaves together the participant narratives and relevant scholarship, offering a nuanced and grounded representation of Irish neo- Pagan ecological thought.

Finally, Chapter Ten offers a concluding reflection that draws together the key findings and a revising of the study's central research question in light of the data presented. It will consider the impact of Irish neo-Pagan ecological practices for the field of religion and ecology and the broader discourse surrounding science and religion. In doing so, this thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of work challenging dominant paradigms in both religious studies and

ecological thought, highlighting that belief systems which are often marginalised in academic and public discourse, hold vital insights for responding to our ecological crisis.

Through the focus of contemporary Irish neo-Paganism, this thesis offers a unique contribution to the field of religion and ecology. It seeks to present voices that are too often overlooked in both academic and public discourses, demonstrating how alternative, or indigenous spiritual frameworks inform ecological engagement and challenge traditional binaries between science and religion. I invite a reimagining of what constitutes as environmental responsibility though neo-Paganism as a meaningful site of ecology and planetary care.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review aims to explore the relationship between religion, ecology, and science, with a focus on contemporary Irish neo-Paganism. Structured thematically to mirror the core areas of this study, it begins by examining the Irish neo-Pagan spiritual identity and its roots in pre-Christian Celtic traditions. The second section explores the belief in the sacredness of nature, particularly through animism, which plays a significant role in shaping the central neo-Pagan ontology. In the third section, I will review the current literature on the view of human–nature relationships from a neo-Pagan perspective. Thereafter, I will address ecological activism within Pagan communities, observing how belief and ritual inform ecological stewardship. Finally, the fifth section presents the religion–science debate, showing how neo-Pagan worldviews often embrace ecological principles in ways that challenge conventional boundaries between spirituality and rational inquiry.

Neo-Paganism as a Nature Religion

To begin this section, it is useful to explore the concept of 'Nature Religions' as a foundation for understanding neo-Paganism in Ireland. A nature religion, according to York (2000) is a religion or spirituality that views the earth as something sacred and to be cherished. Multiple related terms are used to describe similar concepts including natural religion, nature worship, nature mysticism, paganism, animism, and pantheism (Taylor, 2005: 2661). Albanese (1990:7) conceptualises nature religion as a symbolic centre surrounded by a constellation of beliefs, behaviours and values ranging from indigenous spirituality to contemporary environmental spirituality and neo-paganism.

There are assumptions embedded in both public and academic discourse surrounding the notion that nature religions are primitive, regressive, or dangerous (Taylor, 2005: 2662). This ideology has been persistently influenced by the historical tensions between the Abrahamic religions and the pagan, polytheistic, and usually indigenous religions of the land. St. Patrick is known for arriving in Ireland in the 5th century and replacing Celtic Paganism with Christianity. The saint's hagiographer, Muirchu Moccu Machtheni, a 7th century monk authored 'Vita Sancti Patricii' (the Life of Patrick) where he recounts Patrick's efforts to convert the Irish from their native Paganism to Christianity. Muirchu recalls "… when Patrick came, the worship of idols

was abolished, and the Catholic faith spread all over the country" (Muichu, I:10:7). The Pagan Celts were described as "strange, barbarous and heathen" (I. 10. 1) showing the deep distaste for the customs in place prior to the arrival of Christianity. This attitude primarily remained in place and those who subscribe to nature religions in the Western world tend to be viewed on the cusp of society.

Neo-Pagan Expressions in the Irish Context

Contemporary Irish neo-Paganism refers to a diverse set of spiritual paths that draw inspiration from both Ireland's pre-Christian past and the broader global Pagan revival. Jenny Butler (2011: 16), the leading scholar on contemporary Paganism in Ireland, defines paganism as, "an umbrella term used to refer to a variety of spiritual practices." The prefix, 'neo-'distinguishes modern forms of Paganism from ancient traditions, while also acknowledging that today's practices are creative, eclectic, and constantly evolving. Irish neo-Paganism is not a unified movement, but rather it encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs and practices. There are both solitary practitioners and those involved in structured groups and communities (Butler, 2009: 68).

The two most prominent paths within neo-Paganism in Ireland are Druidry and Witchcraft, and within witchcraft there are a further stream of paths including, Wicca, Hereditary Witchcraft, Traditional Witchcraft and Hedgewitchery (Butler, 2011, 17). While Irish neo-Pagans share many features with the international Pagan movement, such as reverence for nature, ritual practice, and polytheism, their practice is also shaped by distinctly Irish elements. Many incorporate native mythologies and folk traditions, and some engage directly with the 'old gods' of Ireland, believing that these deities remain spiritually present and accessible today (Butler, 2011: 19).

One point of complexity within the Irish neo-Pagan identity is the ambiguity around its classification as a 'religion'. Butler (2011: 17) notes that some neo-Pagans, particularly Wiccans, may identify as priests or priestesses of a mystery tradition and undergo initiatory rites that resemble religious ordination. Others reject the label of 'religion' altogether, preferring instead to describe their practices as a personal spirituality or philosophy of life. This rejection often stems from negative experiences with institutional religion, particularly Catholicism, which some perceive as rigid, patriarchal, or dogmatic. In contrast, neo-Pagan

spirituality is valued for its flexibility, experiential focus, and emphasis on personal autonomy.

Currently, no official statistics record the number of neo-Pagans in Ireland and the Irish census does not include Paganism as a religious category. As such, Butler's (2024: 506) ethnographic research remains the primary source of insight into the community. Whilst there is no statistical data on the educational or sociological-economic backgrounds of Pagans in Ireland, research from other countries suggest that neo-Pagans tend to be high educated. Berger (2003:1) found that neo-Pagans in the United States tend to obtain higher levels of education than the general population and Davy (2007:2) similarly observed that neo-Pagans tend to come from middle-class backgrounds, despite choosing lifestyles that may place them below a middle-class standard of living. Notably, Butler's research focuses solely on the the Republic of Ireland. She highlights that no studies have yet been completed on the neo-Pagan community in the Northern Ireland and due to the thirty-year civil conflict between Catholics and Protestants, known as 'The Troubles', one must be aware this may affect the neo-Pagan identity in Northern Ireland.

The Historical Roots of Paganism in Ireland

As briefly aforementioned, many modern day neo-Pagan practices in Ireland are based on pre-Christian religious and cultural traditions. Christianity supposedly arrived in Ireland around 433 AD, however this dating is deeply contested in scholarship and many scholars would assume this was earlier (Higgins, 2024: 57, Kenny, 1966: 160). Before Christianity's arrival on the island, Ireland obtained many unique characteristics that shaped religious and social life (Higgins, 2011: 2). The island's law system, for example, was known as the 'Brehon Laws' which governed society; they were in place in each small kingdom and are referenced in mythologies and sagas, signalling their widespread cultural legitimacy (Higgins, 2011: 4).

Much of the knowledge regarding religious and cosmological beliefs in pre-Christian Ireland come from Medieval Christian writings, raising questions about how accurately they reflect authentic Pagan worldviews (Butler, 2024: 513). Monks began collecting or creating stories of an Irish past from the seventh until the eleventh century. As Johnston (2018: 6) points out, while these sources must be approached with caution due to the lack of contemporary Pagan records, they nevertheless retain valuable insights. Following Johnathan Wooding's line of thought, Johnston argues that the absence of direct sources does not justify the dismissal of

pre-Christian belief systems. Instead, such texts remain meaningful for contemporary interpretation and reconstruction.

This presents a particular challenge for Irish neo-Pagans. As Butler (2024:513) explains, many practitioners believe they are reconnecting with the faith and cosmology of their pre-Christian ancestors, although this connection is filtered through a Christian interpretive lens. Despite this, early Irish literary sources serve as a gateway to understanding deities, heros and otherworldly symbols providing neo-Pagans with a mythological foundation. In the Irish context, many neo-Pagans engage with these medieval texts, often through translations, suggesting a demographic with a strong academic inclination.

The Christianisation of Ireland was marked by processes of syncretism, rather than oppression (Hughes, 1966:10, Johnson, 2019:2, Butler, 2024:509). Unlike the ways in which Christianity was enforced in Britain by the Roman state, there was accommodation between the Pagan religion and the incoming Christian faith, making this transition rather harmonious (Butler, 2015: 210). Druids, for example, the traditional guardians of Paganism, converted to Christianity and continued using many of the same practices, guised under a different god. Pagan Ireland placed great emphasis on the sacredness of wells and trees, and through the writings of St. Patrick's hagiographer, Bishop Tírechán, we learn that St. Patrick understood this significance as he incorporated them into the 'new' religion.

According to Celeste (2014: 79), Patrick expressed an awareness of the Pagan belief in the 'Otherworld' and approached these Pagan sacred sites, finding many a Druid there. Tírechán, records Patrick's creation of wells, specifically at the churches he founded, to gain traction from the Pagans. Patrick baptised new converts using these wells, considering their previous Pagan significance in a new and Christianised manner. In a similar vein, the Irish Celts venerated certain trees, particularly the oak tree which once acted as a site for nature veneration, were then repurposed into Christian spaces such as altars (Bradley and Walsh, 1991: 45). Adaptations as such contributed to what scholars refer to as 'Celtic Christainty,' a Christian tradition deeply influenced by an earlier Pagan worldview.

Celtic Christianity and the Lasting Influence of Paganism on Irish Culture and Identity

Ireland has long been celebrated as a bastion of Christianity, famously referred to as the "Land of Saints and Scholars." As Butler (2024: 197) observers, this reputation stems from the early

medieval period, when monastic learning flourished and religious devotion became deeply connected with the Irish landscape and cultural memory. With the onset of colonisation and the subsequent formation of the Irish Free State, Catholicism came to serve as both a spiritual and political symbol of Irish national identity. As Butler (2024: 508) and Rountree (2020:20) argue, Catholicism in Ireland was not only a religious force but also an ethnic and cultural identity marker, particularly in contrast to Protestant British identity.

Yet, as Catholicism gained more prominence it still retained Celtic ties, not isolated from Ireland's pre-Christian past. This syncretic nature is observed though the veneration of local saints, some of whom were deities, and seasonal festivals like Imbolc, now known as St. Brigid's Day, that retained their cyclical, nature-based significance. As Rountree (ibid) notes, in Catholic societies like Ireland and Malta, there is a shared "cultural logic" between Pagan and Catholic practices that has allowed for symbolic overlap and even mutual reinforcement. Irish Paganism, in particular, thrives in this in-between space, not as a rejection of Catholicism but often as a re-engagement with deeper indigenous traditions through a modern spiritual lens.

A striking example of the persistence of folkloric belief in contemporary Ireland is the 1999 Latoon Fairy Bush protest. Led by renowned seanchaí (traditional storyteller) Eddie Lenihan, the protest aimed to prevent the destruction of a whitethorn tree because it was believed to be a "fairy tree," during the construction of the M18 motorway in County Clare. Lenihan argued that the tree was a crucial meeting point for supernatural forces and that disturbing it would bring "death and great misfortune for motorists" (Lenihan, 2009, p. 165). The campaign was successful: the planned route of the motorway was altered to preserve the tree. This event illustrates the enduring influence of myth, landscape, and ancestral reverence in Irish cultural consciousness, where ancient beliefs still command respect in public discourse and planning.

Even among non-Pagans in Ireland, there remains a pervasive mystical reverence for nature and unseen forces. This sensibility can be observed in traditional Irish death rituals, such as covering mirrors or stopping clocks during wakes to respect the spirit. As Witoszek (1987) notes, these practices, although largely unsanctioned by Catholic doctrine, they offer symbolic frameworks for navigating grief and are likely remnants of pre-Christian cosmologies.

Therefore, found even outside of the neo-Pagan religion, nods towards Celtic culture have remained strong in Ireland, embedded in everyday customs. Despite the strong dominance of Catholicism, this occurs subconsciously as simply cultural acts. Neo-Pagan groups, on the

other hand, purposefully and intentionally reconnect with this Celtic lineage and draw upon this ancestry to inform their spiritual identities, ritual practices, and ecological values.

Reclaiming the Sacred Landscape

While Celtic cultural motifs continue to appear in Irish society, neo-Pagan communities revitalise and reinterpret these traditions as part of a living spiritual path. Rather than inheriting cultural practices neo-Pagans approach them with intentionality.

One of the most significant movements within Irish Paganism is modern Druidry. Those who consider themselves as Druids can either self-identify or be part of a more structured Druidic order. As a revivalist tradition, it draws inspiration from the perceived priestly caste of the ancient Celts. Although historical records on ancient Druids are sparse and mediated through Christian sources, modern practitioners use mythology, sacred landscapes, and reconstructed ritual to ground their spiritual identity. This engagement with place is often framed through the lens of ecological reverence. As Butler (2020: 623) notes, Druidic groups such as the 'Grove of Shinann' conduct ritual pilgrimages to mythologically significant sites honouring river deities such as Sinann as active spiritual presences in the land. Wiccan groups in Ireland have undergone a process of cultural adaptation, resulting in the emergence of a specifically Irish form of the tradition known as "Celtic Wicca." While Wicca originated as a British initiatory religion, Irish practitioners have localised it by exclusively venerating Celtic deities and aligning ritual practice with the Irish seasonal calendar. This localisation process also highlights the importance of place-specific spirituality and reverence for the Irish landscape (Butler, 2012: 187).

Although neo-Paganism in Ireland is not officially recognised as a religion by the Irish State, the community is active, visible, and increasingly organised. As Butler (2020: 623) points out, the participation of President Michael D. Higgins in a Bealtaine fire ceremony on the Hill of Uisneach in 2017 marked a symbolic moment of public recognition for Pagan practice. Yet, despite these moments of visibility, neo-Pagan groups remain marginal in broader religious discourse and lack formal census representation.

I must highlight that there are many elements of Irish neo-Paganism that sets it apart to other forms of Paganism found in Western Europe. Firstly, for many Irish neo-Pagans, the land is not only a backdrop to their spiritual practice but a central living presence within it. As Butler

(2024: 205) explains, Irish neo-Pagans tend to form an emotional relationship with landscape seeing it as sacred land imbued with ancestral memory. The land is a space where the neo-Pagan can connect with the divine through local spirits and energies from the past, this is especially thought of at Irelands megalithic monuments such as Newgrange. Here Pagans meet to honour their ancestors, the season and the land, particularly at honourable holidays within the Celtic calendar, such as Summer and Winter Solstice. This reverence for the land is intensified by Ireland's colonial history, where reclaiming native landscapes acts a process of cultural restoration making this relationship rather emotional. Especially given the impact of the 1830 English sanctioned ordnance survey of Ireland that caused natives to be cut off from their culture (Rollins, 1985: 35).

On that note, another majorly significant element of Irish neo-Paganism is that of language. Gaelige is one of the oldest written vernaculars in Europe and Irish inscriptions can be traced back to the 4th century in Ogham script. The Irish language was largely spoken across the island until the seventeenth century, when English colonial rule and policies of anglicisation led to its gradual decline. This process of declination was further accelerated by The Great Famine, a period of mass starvation and disease, as many Irish speakers died or immigrated, so many in fact, that the Irish population has not yet to this day recovered to its pre-famine levels. Today, the Irish language is a minority language is only spoken fluently by a small percentage of the population. However, it remains very strongly associated to a cultural identity, the Nationalist movement and the essence of 'Irishness'. Butler (2015: 209) found that for many neo-Pagans, the Irish language served as a way to connect to the landscape and deities. Even though not all neo-Pagans could speak fluent Irish, they at least incorporated some words and phrases into their rituals as a sign of respect and to encourage authentic connection to the land and the 'Otherworld'.

Butler observes, however, that the Irish language is not used in an exclusionary way in neo-Pagan circles; highlighting how this may differ to Ethnonationalist Pagan circles in continental Europe. In terms of identity, Irish neo-Pagans often draw upon a broader sense of 'Celticness' rather than narrow forms of nationalism. The movement tends to express Romantic Nationalism which has a focus on shared folklore, myth, and landscape, rather than ethnonationalist or exclusionary ideologies. This sets Irish Paganism apart from some of the more politicised or racialised Pagan movements seen elsewhere in Europe (Butler, 2015: 198).

Tensions do still exist within the community around questions of authenticity, ancestry, and cultural belonging. Some groups promote an inclusive, elective Celtic identity, what Bowman (2000) calls “Cardiac Celts,” those who feel spiritually Celtic irrespective of birth or lineage. Others emphasise genealogical descent or linguistic proficiency in Irish as markers of legitimate spiritual connection. This complexity demonstrates that while neo-Pagan groups share many ritual and ecological commitments, they remain internally diverse in their approaches to identity, heritage, and authenticity.

I have aimed to provide a thorough overview of Neo-Paganism in Ireland, making a clear distinction between unconscious Celtic cultural practices and intentional Pagan belief systems. The following sections explore some central beliefs and worldviews within contemporary Neo-Paganism. As aforementioned, reasearch conducted in the Irish setting is scarce. I therefore draw upon findings from other studies elsewhere that will be later compared to the Irish context.

The Sacredness of Nature

Central to neo- Paganism is the belief that nature is sacred and worthy of reverence. While dominant scholarship has often dismissed sacred beliefs in nature as primitive or regressive, recent decades have witnessed a notable resurgence of these traditions, driven in large part by growing ecological concerns. This revival is not marginal or isolated but forms part of a broader cultural response to the ecological crisis, influencing both societal values and individual spiritual practices. Overend (1998: 2) argues that this resurgence must be understood through the dual lenses of globalisation and local identity formation. Drawing on Robertson (1992), Overend highlights how the interaction between global ecological awareness and local cultural revival is essential to understanding the contemporary relevance of nature religions.

These traditions offer alternative cosmologies and ritual frameworks that foreground human embeddedness within natural and cosmic cycles. A key feature of this revival is the re-emergence of life-cycle rituals, marking birth, maturity, and death, which re-integrate the individual into the rhythms of the natural world. Overend refers to this phenomenon as “re-ritualisation,” a process that helps individuals reconnect with nature and navigate existential transitions in a time of environmental uncertainty. As such, the resurgence of nature religions signals a response to modern ecological realities.

What Makes Nature Sacred to Neo-Pagans?

The belief in the sacredness of nature within Neo-Paganism is deeply informed by an animist ontology. Animism, which is closely linked to Pagan worldviews has undergone significant scholarly reinterpretation in recent decades. Whilst early anthropologists such as E.B Tylor (1871) dismissed animism as a 'belief in spirits' and a primitive stage of religious evolution, the view reflected a Eurocentric bias and hierarchical understanding of religious development. Contrastingly, scholars now regard animism as a legitimate way of knowing the world.

Nurit Bird-David (1999:67) reconceptualises animism as a 'relational epistemology' shifting away from E. B Tylor's definition, arguing that it represents a valid and culturally embedded way of knowing, rooted in relationality. Drawing on her work with the Nayaka people of South India, Bird-David shows how entities such as trees, hills and deities are experienced as relational beings and that personhood is formed though mutual interaction. Graham Harvey (2006, 2013) also defines animism as the perspective that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human. Influenced by Irving Hallowell's study of Ojibwa ontology, Harvey frames animas as the recognition of other-than-human-persons, that beings such as animals, rivers, landscapes and stones are engaged with humans socially rather than used instrumentally. This framework challenges the dominant Western thought of dualisms between subject and object, where human is superior to nature.

Rountree (2012: 308) notes that many contemporary Pagans identify as animists, believing that parts of the natural world such as trees, mountains and rivers are ensouled and capable of interaction. This perspective allows one to understand why Pagans contemplate the land as sacred in a realistic sense, rather than metaphorically. For many Pagans, this animistic view is integrated within their Neo-Pagan practice serving as an ontology and as an ethical guide in navigating their treatment and attitudes towards the more-than-human world (Harvey, 2009: 393).

This worldview has also been echoed in legal and philosophical thought, most notably in Christopher Stone's 1972 seminal essay, 'Should Trees have Standing?' Stone argues that natural entities (trees, rovers, forests etc.) should be granted legal rights and be recognised as subjects and not only objects of legal concern. Stone (1972) traces legal history and argues that it is marked by a successive expansion of rights to those who would have once been deemed unthinkable candidates for personhood: women, children, and slaves. Through the

extension of the legal standing to natural entities, Stone believes that it would both operationally snd symbolically affirm their worth, allowing guardians including environmental NGOs or individuals to represent their interests in court.

Grounded in animistic ontologies, Pagans view the natural world as worthy of care and respect. This is reflected in Pagan Federation Ireland's first principle: "Love and Kinship with Nature." The federation explains that there must be a reflection of humans being part of nature and not superior to it. It is evident that nature is not just respected symbolically but it is regarded as a living presence that deserves kinship and protection.

Environmental Stewardship and Neo-Paganism

The relationship between neo-Paganism and ecological activism has received growing scholarly interest, particularly in light of the escalating global environmental crises. Due to Pagan's spiritual commitment to the sacredness of nature, Neo-Pagans are often involved in environmental initiatives and aligned with broader ecological movements. While specific research on this relationship within the Irish context remains limited, studies conducted elsewhere provide valuable insight.

Spiritual Ecology

For many Pagans, ecological engagement is a spiritual imperative rather than a political identity. As confirmed in Sommerlad-Rogers' (2014: 244) peer-reviewed study, 'Environmental Attitudes and Behaviours among Pagans': 90% of Pagans engaged in some environmental practices and the longer one was involved in Paganism, the stronger their environmental activism became. The study showed that Pagans made environmental choices based on their reverence for the Earth and part of their spiritual practice was spending time on environmental concerns. Their reverence for the Earth ultimately motivated their environmental care.

The Celtic Druid Temple, located in County Roscommon, also exemplify this link between spirituality and ecology. This site serves as Druid school, a central place for learning Ancient Irish Spiritual tradition and as a central Pagan location for environmental activism and community engagement. Being a focal point for environmental activism, the Druid school planted over 16,000 broadleaf trees as part of its commitment to restoring Ireland's Indigenous Woodland Nation (Celtic Druid Temple, 2024). Guided by principles of sustainability, the

Temple generates its own electricity through solar and wind energy and emphasises the importance of 'comprehending and cooperating with Nature' (Celtic Druid Temple, 2024). This ethos reflects the Druidic sense of ethical responsibility toward the natural world, rooted in the belief that nature is sacred. The Temple's integration of environmental values into ritual and community life highlights how Irish neo-Pagan groups actively embed ecological consciousness within their spiritual praxis.

Diverse Expressions of Ecological Engagement

While neo-Paganism is often associated with nature-consciousness, this association is not always uniformly expressed. Halstead (2023), writing in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin, ponders if Pagans truly live up to this reputation. While he acknowledges that many prominent Pagans serve as, "shining lights of sustainable living and environmental activism," he also observes that some may "lack an ecological commitment." Halstead (ibid) argues that while many neo-Pagans identify with nature spirituality, the movement obtains such a wide range of diverse beliefs and practices, this may not be uniform. Some beliefs emphasise a deep ecological awareness and encourage environmental activism, whereas others place focus on the ritual or mythology with a symbolic connection to nature. Halstead (ibid) believes that there is in fact, a need for neo-Pagans to engage more coherently with pressing environmental issues, with a particular emphasis on climate change. He proposes that in order for neo-Paganism to be considered a religion, there is a need for spiritual practices to be aligned across the neo-Pagan spectrum. Given Halstead's (2023) stance, there is no research to indicate that Pagans do not exhibit pro-environmental care.

Horton's (2014) ethnographic research on Heathenry, a neo-Pagan path reviving Old Norse traditions, further complicates the picture. Members of this community interpret the natural world through Norse Lore and often feel a deep connection to the earth and therefore, act on their environmental concern. Horton reported a deep tension within the community: some conservative, patriarchal attitudes in the Heathen communities led them to dismiss environmental practises like vegetarianism as they viewed it as a "radicalised liberal tree hugging trend" (Horton, 2014: ii). Horton (ibid) argued that this results in cognitive dissonance: their pagan belief in the sacredness of nature then conflicts with the reluctance to adopt eco-friendly habits that they viewed as too feminine or political. Therefore, it is clear that views on all environmental lifestyle choices are not consistent across all neo-Pagan groups.

Everyday and Magical Activism in Neo-Paganism

Other Pagan paths reveal diversity in a different direction, adapting ecological ethics to urban environments. In Funey's (2004) study, 'A Nature-Based Religion in the City: Contemporary North American Pagan Relationships with Urban Environments,' Furney found that Pagans do not seek ecological perfection but rather 'infuse the urban with the spiritual" (ibid, 114) by envisioning their environments as part of a sacred ecology. For Furney's participants, sustainable living was not framed as a rejection of modernity, but as a conscious, thoughtful engagement with their environment. Furney terms this as an expression of an "ethics of awareness." This finding challenges assumptions that nature spirituality is incompatible with urban life and demonstrates how Pagan ecological ethics are adapted to diverse settings.

While formal activism remains rare, many Pagans seek for ways in which they can contribute to environmental stewardship though means that they can access. Liz Cruse (2021) discusses the neo-Pagan presence in mainstream environmental organisations, and writes, "the visible Pagan activist is still the exception rather than the rule." She continues by expressing that at large environmental demonstrations, one may observe plenty of visibility from the likes of 'Greenpeace', 'Friends of Earth' and religious groups like Methodists or Muslims, but she asks, "where are the Pagans?" highlighting that in mainstream environmental NGOs there is little formal Pagan presence and despite many Pagans deeply supporting these causes, they seldom join or publicly identify with these groups.

Cruse (2021) believes that Pagans often are involved in campaigns in a subtle or an individual way and draws upon the example of the British Pagans taking part in protests in the 1990s to save woodlands (the Oxleas Wood and Twyford Down). Similarly, the movement regarding the Irish Fairy Tree, stopped the building of a motorway that would have intervened with a particular nature site. She notes that these Pagans join grassoot direct actions rather than official organisations and Cruse believes that Pagan environmentalists tend to operate outside of the spotlight of 'green' organisations making their involvement less visible. Without the presence of official activist groups, both protests achieved their aim. As well as participation in grass root initiatives, many Pagans take part in 'Magical Activism' or 'Activism through Ritual'. This form of engagement fuses spiritual practice with ecological and social concerns, whereby ritual acts become a medium for expressing and enacting environmental care.

Rachael Roberts (2011) conducted research on the 'Reclaiming Witchcraft' tradition, a form of neo-Paganism founded by Pagan author and activist, 'Starhawk', established in the 1970s in California and found inspiration from British Traditional Wicca. Roberts (ibid, 247) reported that many of the participants in her study held the belief that aspects of industrial capitalist society are damaging the Earth and therefore, it is being deeply wounded and in need of healing. The Witches believed that a way of healing the Earth from damage was though ritual. The ritual, 'Waters of the World' involved the Witches bringing water from different sources and placing it on an altar to ritually link the practitioner to global eco-systems and cultivate a sense of protection. This may have been conducted in either a symbolic or magical way; the connection of the ritual nevertheless generated a sense of responsibility and care for the Earth's waters.

Similarly, during the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Reclaiming practitioners organised a long-distance group meditation intended to send healing energy to affected ecosystems (Roberts, 2011: 248). Both examples show that for some neo-Pagans, activism need not be physical or institutional to be meaningful; rather, ritual is considered a spiritually charged and ethically motivated form of environmental engagement. This reflects a worldview in which ecological harm is not only a material crisis but also a spiritual and emotional one that demands both outward and inward forms of response.

Sarah Pike (2001) echoes this interpretation in her ethnographic study, 'Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community'. Pike discusses the rituals that are undertaken by neo-Pagans and how they are infused with intention and political and ethical significance. Her ethnographic accounts of neo-Pagan festivals showcase how ritualistic acts are not merely symbolic or personal but can carry transformative communal and activist meanings. Pike (ibid, 196) reports that, "healing is the central discourse of many neo-Pagan festivals," with rituals often focusing on personal and collective wounds, ranging from experienced abuse to ecological grief. In the Women's healing Circle at 'Rites of Spring' in 1997, women were granted the opportunity to discuss painful aspects of their lives. The participants in the ritual smudged one another with burning sage and were led though a 'tree of life' meditation in which they were asked to stand in a circle and feel their roots going down through their feet into the molten fire of the earth's core. The participants were asked to channel the healing energy. Such practices illustrate how ritual serves as a powerful tool for confronting both ecological grief and personal or collective

wounds, reinforcing neo-Paganism's emphasis on interconnection, healing, and the sacredness of all life. Taken together, the studies show that Pagan forms of ecological activism are not always visible or formally organised. They occur through ritual engagement, which is equally as meaningful in the Pagan worldview.

The Neo-Pagan view of Human-Nature Relationships

This section of the literature review observes the key scholarly debates on how neo-Pagan worldviews view the relationship between humans and nature. Neo-Paganism tends to challenge dominant anthropocentric paradigms by presenting humans as part of a larger, interconnected ecological web. Neo-Pagan traditions place value on reverence and relationality with the more-than- human world, shaping environmental behaviour. A study has not yet been conducted on Irish neo-Pagan's perspective on the human-nature relationship; however, this section draws upon research that has been conducted within Pagan communities elsewhere.

Interconnectedness

A central feature of the neo-Pagan worldview is the belief in the interconnectedness of all life forms and the rejection of dualisms that position humans as above nature. This relational ontology is expressed through animistic language and cosmologies that reflect an ecological kinship with the other-than-human world. As Rountree (012: 308) explains, neo-Pagans often reject anthropocentrism and view humans as one kind amongst many: tree-people, bird-people and stone-people, who all possess agency and value.

Douglas Ezzy (2009) suggests that the neo-Pagan sense of kinship with nature allows for a deep empathy towards the more-than human world. This connection can shift how individuals experience the boundaries of the self and nature. Through both both physical and imaginative engagement with the natural world, neo-Pagans may come to feel as though their identity is intimately entangled with the landscape around them. In this view, interconnectedness is not merely a metaphor or symbolic, but rather a lived and embodied experience. In this light, interconnectedness with the natural world is not an abstract idea, it is a felt experience in the neo-Pagan perspective.

Anthropocentrism

Naturally, due to the belief in the discussed interconnection between humans and nature, Pagans deeply reject the notion of anthropocentrism. The debate has been lengthy on the role of institutional religion in the shaping environmental attitudes. The pioneering works of Clarence Glacken (1968) and Donald Worster (1977) traced how Western religious and philosophical traditions have shaped ecological thinking. Both works highlighted the tension between Western culture and organicist and mechanist worldviews. Between those who see the world as sacred and valuable, and those who view the Earth as a stepping stone to a heavenly realm, often only placing its value on its usefulness for humans with an eschatological perspective.

Lynn White's influential essay 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis' (1967) argued that monotheistic, Western religions, particularly Christianity, harbour anti-nature ideologies, promoting an anthropocentric worldview. White believed that in particular, the medieval Catholic doctrine, obtained an attitude of human dominance over nature and that has led to the environmental crisis. White argued that because Christian theology removed spirits from nature, labeled Pagan Animism as heresy, and taught that God intended for humans to have dominion over nature, the church contributed to environmental destruction. White (1967: 1205) famously wrote, "Christianity… not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends… by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." In White's view, because of the Catholic Churches' historically focused view on the saving of human souls with little regard for the natural world, thus, they bare much guilt for the ecological crisis.

In response, members of monotheistic religions offered apologetic arguments, while scholars, both religious and secular, began reassessing biblical texts to examine whether these traditions contained implicit or explicit environmental teachings. White (ibid) suggested that traditions like Buddhism and Animism could foster pro-environmental attitudes, however recognising their perceived foreignness to Western audiences, proposed that Christians could instead draw inspiration from St. Francis of Assisi, known for his reverence for nature. A year after White's publication, Pope John Paul II (1979) declared St. Francis the Patron Saint of Ecology. Since Pope Francis' appointment in 2013, the Catholic Church has shown increased engagement with environmental issues, including climate change, urging action on

anthropogenic environmental damage. Taylor et al. (2016: 1001) suggest that this shift was a response to White's critique. Such developments have led scholars to describe this trend as the 'Global Greening of Religion.' However, the reverence for the natural world found in nature religions is of course, much more dominant than the attitudes found in monotheistic religions.

Upon discussing the negative effect of monotheistic religions on the environment, Rosemary Radford Ruether (1992), a Catholic theologian argues in her book, 'Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing', that Christian thought has been intertwined with patriarchy, linking the dominion of women with the dominion of the earth. Ruether traces how biblical ideas of subduing the earth, allowed for the exploitation of the natural world and also, marginalised people. Similarly, Plumwood (1993: 154) argues that recognising relationality is essential for overcoming hierarchical and dualistic accounts of the self and its place in both social and ecological communities. Plumwood writes that relational thinking allows people to move beyond the human- centric way of thinking about the natural world and move towards a worldview focused on care toward nature. In the instrumental model, dependency and relatedness to nature are deeply denied and this obviously results in a neglectful and unconcerned attitude towards nature in the Christian tradition.

Contrary to the attitudes found within monotheistic religions, Hengst-Ehrhart and Schraml's (2013:255) survey on Pagan communities in the Netherlands found that of 101 Neo-pagans, 92% of respondents affirmed the belief that humans are equal parts of nature, rather than separate from or superior to it. While 30% acknowledged some form of human exceptionality, these responses were often accompanied by nuanced or ambivalent interpretations, indicating that even among this minority, dominion was not a definite claim.

They also found that 74% of neo-Pagans asserted that nature possesses intrinsic value, in stark contrast to a comparative Dutch general population sample, where only 32% expressed similar views (van den Born et al., 2001). The disparity highlights that the neo-Pagan community greatly departs from mainstream societal norms, which often frame nature in terms of utility or human benefit. This worldview stems from institutional or mainstream religious views, and on that basis, the study also found that Christianity was explicitly mentioned by several participants as a contributing factor to the prevailing human-centric paradigm, often portrayed as promoting dominion over nature. In direct contrast, neo-

Paganism was described as a holistic, respectful, and life-affirming spiritual path that emphasises interconnectedness and mutual respect between all living beings.

One can gather that the Neo-Pagan perspective on human-nature relationships is of deep contrast to the attitudes found in monotheistic traditions. The worldview promotes a sense of ecological responsibility rooted in connection with nature, to Pagans, it does not feel like an obligation, but something that is intuitive.

The Religion- Science Debate

The percieved conflict between religion and science has long dominated Western discourse; John Warroll (2004: 60), for instance, declares them to be in "irreconcilable conflict." The 'conflict thesis' dates back to the 19th century, when debates surrounding evolution, empiricism and theological authority first became deeply polarised. Scholars from a range of disciplines have continued to challenge this binary. Keith Thomson (2009) notes that both 'religion' and 'science' are historically and culturally contingent terms, drawing upon Geertz and Durkheim, Thomson (ibid: 3) argues that while definitions may be helpful, they are not central to the debate itself as it is not concerned with "such niceties." Rather, the central concern of the religion- science debate is who holds interpretive power in society: God or other, and this dynamic invokes emotion, politics and institutional control. Within nature religions, this typical binary does not fit the within the belief system as 'God's is not an object of concern.

Stenmark and Brooke and Numbers argue that the infamous conflict thesis is shaped through a Christian-centric lens. Stenmark (2010: 28) warns against applying Christian- based models (for example, Barbour, 2000) across all religions, noting their incompatibility with polytheistic and animistic religious systems. Brooke and Numbers (2011: 19) similarly call for greater attention to religious diversity within the discourse, highlighting that the meaning and function of 'science' and 'religion' vary dramatically in different contexts; for example, in non-Abrahamic traditions such as those found in China, India or Sub-Saharan Africa.

This is also especially notable within neo-Pagan traditions, in line with Aburrow's (2008: 63) research, that found Pagans typically do not see a fundamental conflict between science and their beliefs. Pagans engaged with science in a way that integrated secular values of tolerance and inclusivity with a view of nature as sacred, rather than opposing scientific knowledge.

Harvey (1996: 145) explains that neo-Pagans tend to accept scientific accounts of life's origins precisely because they see the divine as immanent within nature.

Aburrow (ibid: 30) also reports that some Pagans believe science will eventually confirm aspects of their spiritual worldview. In the Pagan perspective, there is a blending of scientific inquiry and spiritual reverence enabling science not to be percieved as a threat, but rather as a complementary path in understanding the natural world. Besta et al. (2023) further supports this, noting that neo-Pagans tend to demonstrate pro-environmental intentions, grounded in spiritual ethics and a willingness to act on scientific evidence. Rather than rejecting science, Pagans embrace ecological knowledge as a way of aligning with sacred natural rhythms.

Historical narratives also play a significant role in legitimising the integration of religion and science. For many neo-Pagans, especially in the Irish context, they frame ancient Druids as proto-scientists; the spiritual leaders who observed the natural world closely. The reverence for Druids as intellectual and spiritual leaders reflects an early form of observational knowledge, in which natural phenomena was studied and interpreted though symbolic and 'magical' means. As outlined by Wedel (1920: 43) Druids were said to be able to predict a child's future based on their day of birth, and they also practiced forms of cloud divination which was known as 'neladoracht' in Irish; a term that was applied to astrology and divination more broadly. These practices were spiritual in nature but also grounded in empirical observations of weather patterns and seasonal shifts. Such traditions can represent a proto-scientific worldview in which the natural cycles were read as 'signs'.

This perspective demonstrates a deep engagement with what F. Forrester Church (1991: 10) terms as the 'transnational realm'; a domain of meaning that goes "beyond the scope of our analytical capacity to parse the creation." Church argues that the unprovable need not be seen as irrational, proposing a third category of knowledge that incorporates myth and intuition. The translational worldview then, does not reject rationality in any way but instead transcends its boundaries though embracing mythology as legitimate ways of knowing a well as scientific enquiry. Within neo-Paganism, this integrative worldview allows for the spiritual narratives to combine comfortable with scientific perspectives, showing that the two disciplines can indeed be in harmony.

Conclusion

This literature has explored the intersections between religion, ecology and science within the context of contemporary Irish neo-Pagansim. Through tracing the movement's spiritual identity, its animistic understanding of nature and its relational approach to the other-than-human world, it is evident that neo-Paganism offers a distinct and deeply embed ecological consciousness. The review has highlighted how belief and ritual are in a framework that challenges anthropocentric worldviews and reimagines humanity's place in a sacred ecology. Despite the growth in the academic fields of paganism and environmental engagement, no studies have so far investigated the relationship between neo-Pagansim in Ireland and ecological consciousness. I believe that this gap in scholarship is significant, particularly within the field of religion and ecology and the ongoing debate regarding the supposed incompatibility of religion and science. Given the unique historical and cultural context of Irish neo-Pagansim, further study is required to understand how this community regards nature as sacred and therefore, incorporate ecological principles into their religious practice.

Through the recognition of this gap in literature, the current study aims to provide new insights into the interaction of religious belief and ecological engagement, challenging the conventional narrative that religion and science cannot be harmony with one another. This study will provide a perspective not yet presented on the role of minority religions in the shaping of modern ecological thought and activism.

Chapter 3 Conceptual Framework

Introduction

This research study employs the conceptual framework of Dark Green Religion (DGR) as formulated by Bron Taylor (2010). This chapter will firstly introduce Bron Taylor's concept of DGR, outlining its key principles and the variations within the concept including 'Animism' and 'Gaian Earth Religion'. Thereafter, I will justify the application of DGR as a conceptual framework in this study. Thirdly, I will acknowledge and outline the potential limitations of employing DGR in regards to its applicability to culturally embedded spiritual traditions. The chapter will complete by highlighting DGR as a valuable conceptual framework in understanding the ways in Irish neo-Pagans construct nature as sacred and how these conceptualisations infirm their ecological activism.

Dark Green Religion

The concept of DGR can be found within the book, 'Dark Green Religion Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future' which was published in 2010 and remains a valuable resource today. According to von Stuckrad (2022: 58), it is Taylor's most influential contribution to the discussion that has only intensified since the book's publication. The book has been translated by scholars into many languages including Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish and German demonstrating the applicability of DGR across diverse regions, cultures and disciplines (ibid).

Dark Green Religion (DGR) is defined by Taylor (2010: 10) as a religion that sees nature as sacred, inherently valuable, and deserving of care. It differs from the "greening of religion," where environmental action is framed as a duty within existing world religions, especially after White's (1967) claim that Christianity contributed to the ecological crisis. Taylor employs the term 'dark' to emphasise the religion's depth of consideration for nature, but also to suggest that such religions can have a shadow side. Taylor (2010: ix) uses the examples that such religions may mislead or deceive, or it may even precipitate or exacerbate violence, normally involving radical environmentalism. As of more recently, nature religions have been spreading, rekindled, reinvented and been ecologised. Taylor (2010:13) believes that a great deal of this religious activity has been 'dark green', longing for a sense of connectedness to nature whilst perceiving earth and its living systems as sacred. DGR is considered deeply "ecological, biocentric and ecocentric" (ibid), and considers all species to be valuable asides from their usefulness to human beings. This value system is based on three key elements:

" (1) a kinship felt with the rest of life, often based on the Darwinian perception that that all forms of life evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding clique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveal show tiny human- beings are in the universe; (3) reinforced by metaphors of interconnection and the idea of interdependence found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics" (Taylor, 2010:13).

In addition to this, Taylor (2010: 14) stresses that dark and ethical perspectives are often embedded in worldviews that resonate with scientific thought, whilst also drawing on mystical or intuitive knowledge that lies beyond the reach of scientific methods. Understanding how DGR emerges, transforms, and spreads requires examining the dynamic and increasingly global context in which it takes shape. This approach also helps explain why, even though distinct forms and tendencies can be identified, the boundaries of DGR remain flexible, ambiguous, and continuously shifting resembling the fluidity of religion itself (ibid: 14).

In essence, DGR blends scientific knowledge with spiritual reverence for nature, emphasising humanity's deep connection to the natural world. Taylor's framework highlights how this perspective fosters humility, challenges human superiority, and reinforces ecological interdependence. By drawing from both evolutionary science and ecological principles, DGR cultivates a worldview where nature is not just valuable but sacred, inspiring both ethical responsibility and environmental activism.

The Four Main Types of Dark Green Religion

Taylor (2010:14) poses that there are four main types of DGR, all of which have been particularly flourishing since the first 'Earth Day' in 1970. The first two types are forms of Animism: (1) Spiritual Animism and (2) Naturalistic Animism. The other to types are forms of the Gaian Earth Religion, which is a term used for organicist and holistic worldviews: (3) Gaian Spirituality and (4) Gaian Naturalism. Both Spiritual Animism and Gaian Spirituality are classified as supernaturalistic whilst Naturalistic Animism and Gaian Naturalism are naturalistic.

For ease of understanding Taylor employs this table to demonstrate the forms of Animism or Gaian Earth Religion as either 'supernaturalistic' or naturalistic':

	Animism	Gaian Earth Religion
Supernaturalism	Spiritual Animism	Gaian Spirtuality
Naturalism	Naturalistic Animism	Gaian Naturalism

Taylor stresses that these are not four fixed and rigid groups, there are blurred lines between the four indicating permeable boundaries; they are tendencies, rather than static representations of individuals and movements.

The term 'Animism' is referring to the perception that natural entities, forces and non-human life forces have more or more of the following: "a soul, or a vital life force or spirit, personhood, and consciousness often but not always including special spiritual intelligence or powers (ibid, 15). (1) 'Spiritual Animism' covers those who believe that spiritual intelligences animate natural objects or living things, capturing the beliefs of those for whom there is some supernatural dimension to the Animistic perception. (2) 'Naturalistic Animism' the other hand, focuses on those who are agnostic or skeptical of a dimension underlying the life forms they wish to understand or communicate with (ibid).

Gaian Earth Religion sits in the organicist tradition believing the universe to be conscious it defies the naturalistic fallacy argument in ethics that suggests that nature itself provides models and natural laws to follow. (3) Gaian Spirituality perceives the superorganism, either the biosphere or the entire universe to have consciousness. It may be percieved as a god, or a great mystery. A name is usually chosen by the individual or group of the particular Gaian Spirituality to symbolise these divine cosmos. It is likely to draw on 'non-mainstream' science for data that reinforces its holistic metaphysics- it is open to interpretations found in subcultures labelled 'New Age'. Gaian Naturalism (4) on the other hand, is skeptical of supernatural metaphysics and sticks to the scientific mainstream as a basis for the understanding and promotion of holistic metaphysics. Its followers express awe surrounding the mystery of life and the universe, at times relying on religious language and metaphors of the sacred when discussing their feelings of connection to the energy and live systems in which they live and study.

Justification for the Study

As highlighted by Stuckrad (2022: 60), Taylor's concept of DGR is highly effective analytical tool for examining a wide range of spiritually, artistically and politically influential

developments in North America and Europe, many of which are now globalising. The field of nature-based spiritualities is ever-growing, with practitioners not only engaging in these traditions but also responding to academic interpretations and research; this reciprocal relationship makes them an ideal example of discourse communities.

As DGR is a working and testable hypothesis, it warrants further critical investigation (ibid). In applying the DGR hypothesis, in the Irish context, we can assess the extent to which Irish neo-Pagan practices align or diverge with the characteristics of DGR. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the conceptualisation of nature as sacred and how the beliefs that are indigenous to Ireland translate into ecological awareness and activism.

Previous research conducted by Taylor, Wright and LeVasseur (2020: 41) studied the relationship between religious beliefs, humility, and pro-environmental behaviours, with the primary focus on the USA. The research found that individuals that held anthropocentric and monotheistic religious views were less likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours. On the contrary, those with who are egocentric, Gaian, pantheistic or animistic were more likely to exhibit environmental concern and action. The study introduced the concept of 'Dark Green Humility' which integrates environmental, religious, and cosmic humility and aims to measure the relationship between environmental humility and dark green religion. The researchers found that dark green religion and environmental humility were strongly positively correlated with one another: the stronger the respondent's affinity with DGR, the greater their environmental and cosmic humility (2020: 50). The variables of the study were 'dark green religion', 'environmental humility' and 'environmental behaviours and the researchers utilised a survey which explored respondent's choices regarding food consumption, transportation utilisation and energy use in order to observe and measure the correlation.

The study provides a concrete foundation upon which this research study can build. It demonstrates that indeed DGR is a working hypothesis, and although the discussed study is in the context of the USA, it is yet to be tested in the Irish context. Generally, scholarship on Irish neo-Paganism remains sparse and no existing studies have examined the relationship between environmentalism, Irish neo-Paganism and the DGR framework. I recognise that DGR was indeed developed and based on movements in the USA and through the application of this conceptual framework, I risk imposing an external model that may have a different way of articulating the sacredness of nature. Irish neo-Paganism has deeply unique historical, cultural and mythological influences that may not fit neatly into the framework. Making matters slightly

more complicated, Ireland also has a complex colonial history that directly affects how people consider themselves as ‘pagan’ and involve in nature- based spiritualities. However, this complexity allows for an opportunity to critically engage with the conceptual framework. Rather than imposing a rigid model, I intend to investigate the extent to which Irish neo-Paganism aligns with, diverges or expands upon Taylors concept.

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to investigate the relationship between Irish neo-Pagan communities' ecological practices and their belief in the sacredness of nature, whilst evaluating how these practices relate to the discourse on the science- religion debate. Within this chapter, I will outline the specific methodological choices that I have made for this research study, highlighting the research design, data collection methods, analysis, and potential limitations of the study.

The research intended to answer the central question of:

How do neo-Pagan communities in Ireland promote ecological values through their belief in the sacredness of nature?

The following three subquestions also guided the research study:

- How do Irish neo-Pagan groups interpret the relationship between humans and nature, and how does this inform their environmental ethics?
- In what ways do Irish neo-Pagans integrate ecological principles, such as sustainability and conservation into their religious practices? (i.e do the religious rituals aim at the protraction of the environment or promotion of ecological awareness?)
- How does this promotion of ecological practices challenge or enrich the science and religion debate on environmental issues?

Research Design

Research Philosophy

I planned the research study based the interpretive research paradigm, which is particularly relevant in social science research where the researcher intends to gain a deeper understanding of social reality and human behaviour (Omodan, 2025: 63). In the case of this research study, the interpretive paradigm aligned with the central aim of understanding the complex and subjective experiences of individuals within the Irish neo-Pagan community and their relationship with ecology.

Interpretivism focuses on the belief that one's reality constructed by their personal experiences and that multiple interpretations can exist within a particular social context. As this study seeks to understand neo- Pagan belief systems and ecological values, it is essential to engage with participant's individual and subjective experiences whilst recognising that those within the broader neo-Pagan community may hold differing views. The paradigm also places great stress on the researcher's own position and views the researcher as an active participant who engages in dialogue and interpretation to make sense of the data collected (Omodan, 2025: 64). This element of the paradigm is particularly relevant in this case, as I intend to fully explore and present my positionality as the researcher.

Research Type

As Dark Green Religion served as the conceptual framework for the study and I began the investigation with deductive reasoning which tends to work from the top down, moving from theory, to hypothesis, to data, to confirm, contradict or add to a theory. Whilst deductive approaches are usually more associated with quantitive research, recent scholarship has pointed to the benefits of their use in qualitative research (Fife and Gossner, 2024:1).

Deductive qualitative analysis (DQA) provides a structure for such research; it integrates both deductive and inductive strands of inquiry. Researchers begin by operationalising key concepts from the guiding theory which are then revised in light of the collected data. This approach enables a nuanced and flexible engagement with theory, producing four types of evidence: supporting, contradicting, refining, and expanding (Fife and Gossner: 2024: 3). In this study, DQA allowed me to engage with Dark Green Religion, not only as a framework to be tested, but also as a lens to explore different dimensions of nature- based belief systems and ecological engagement. From this position, I shaped the semi-structured interviews around Taylor's core concepts whilst remaining open to emergent themes.

Research strategy

The research strategy was rooted in a phenomenological approach, seeking to gather structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Smith, 2003). In phenomenological research, the aim is to identify a phenomenon, in this case, the spiritual-ecological worldview of Irish neo-Pagans, and develop a composite understanding of how individuals experience and express it. As Creswell (2007: 10) outlines, this involves describing both what participants experience and how they experience it. This phenomenological

orientation guided my decision to use semi-structured interviews, which offered flexibility to explore personal beliefs, relationships with nature and embodied ritual practices.

Participants

Guided by the phenomenological framework, participation selection was approached purposively to ensure the inclusion of individuals whose lived experience could meaningfully illuminate the study's core themes. I selected participants who self-identify as Irish neo-Pagans and who actively engage in nature- based spiritual practices. The aim of the study was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to gather rich, in-depth research from individuals whose worldviews and experiences could contribute meaningfully to the research questions (Creswell, 2007: 125).

I recruited participants though a range of means that I was aware of prior to the beginning of the research due to my interest in Irish neo-Paganism. During the recruitment process, I firstly sent an email outlining the title of the study, the central aim and what participation in the study would entail (Annex 1). If the potential participant expressed a willingness to participate, I then emailed them a 'Participation Information Sheet' and an 'Informed Consent Form' (Annex 2).

Participant one was recruited though pre-existing but limited contact within the Irish Neo-Pagan community. I had encountered this individual briefly at public nature-based spiritual events, including those hosted by organisations such as the 'Fairy Council of Ireland'. While we were not personally acquainted, this prior initial contact helped establish trust and familiarity, which is often a feature of recruitment within, smaller networked spiritual communities. I first contacted the participant through social media, and after confirming their interest, I followed the email procedure. Roiha and Iikkanen (2022:1) found that "acquaintance interviews can offer researchers a fruitful area for using already existing common ground between them and their research participants; a prior relationship serves as a resource to build rapport with interviewees."

The website 'Irish Druid Network' was established in 2006 and supports individuals and groups involved in Druidry across the 32 counties of Ireland. The online platform lists the contact details of a number of Druid organisations, individual Druids and Druidic Groves (Irish Druid Network, 2025). From the information provided on the website, I emailed ten of the listed with three individuals confirming their interest in the study. I noticed that many of the emails I sent were returned due to the email addresses no longer being valid, suggesting that the website may not be as active as it once was. The three participants that I recruited through the Irish

Druid Network also happened to be members of the Order of the Bards Ovates and Druids (OBOD), a UK- based, international Druidic organisation with a strong presence in Ireland. As a member of OBOD myself, I was familiar with its teachings and community dynamics, which facilitated both access and trust during recruitment. However, I had not met the participants prior to the study, and the first initial contact was made via email. This ensured that while shared affiliation supported rapport-building, no prior relationship influenced the content of the interview or data generated.

I also contacted 'Moon Mná': an organisation which is dedicated to connecting women though Celtic-inspired Moon Circles, emphasising the archetypal energies of Irish Goddesses and ancestral traditions. Moon Mná offers women's circles, rites of passage and facilitator trainings grounded in Irish Goddesses traditions and lunar spirituality (Moon Mná, 2025). This led to a positive response, with an organiser willing to participate in the study and suggested forwarding the study's information sheet to other Moon Mná facilitators.

Participant	**Affiliated Organisations/Groups**	**Type of Organisation**	**Recruitment method**
1	Independent Practitioner	N/A	Personal Network
2	Order of the Ovates, Bards and Druids	International Druid Order	Initial contact via email
3	Order of the Ovates, Bards and Druids, Pagan Federation Ireland	International Druid Order, Irish NGO pagan advocacy group	Initial contact via email
4	Order of the Ovates, Bards and Druids, Irish Druid Network, Pagan Life Rites	International Druid Order Irish Druid Network Pagan Clergy Services	Initial contact via email
5	Moon Mná	Women's circles with a focus on indigenous Irish spirituality.	Initial contact via email.

Data Collection

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews via 'Zoom', the video call software along with the transcription application 'Otter', to assist with the later transcription. According to Davidson Bremborg (2011:310), semi- structured interviews are particularly useful within religious studies, as they result in rich, complex and nuanced data that shows the diversity and multifaceted nature of belief systems. The use of 'Zoom' brought many advantages to the study; as I am located in Groningen and I am conducting my research on a group based in Ireland, it allowed for great flexibility, allowing me to conduct interviews with participants located around island of Ireland without it affecting the budget or time constraints. Oliffe et al. (2021: 2) discuss the significant number of benefits of conducting online interviews for qualitative research including comfortability for the interviewee. As most of the participants in the study were then interviewed in their homes, it brought a great sense of ease and familiarity through their environment, that may not have been achieved through meeting in a neutral setting, in person. This atmosphere allowed participants to talk openly leading to rich conversations and therefore, insightful data.

I planned the interviews in order to have key themes that should be touched upon to answer the research questions whilst allowing space for new questions and themes to arise during the interview by both me and the interviewee (Davidson Bremborg, 2011: 312). In order to facilitate this, I created an interview guide (Annex 3) to ensure that the same areas of information were collected from each interviewee. This provided more structure and focus than that of a purely conversational approach whilst still allowing a degree of flexibility and freedom (Turner, 2010:756). I followed a thematic scheme with both main questions and possible follow up questions.

Davidsson Bremborg (2011: 315) believes the interview guide can be compared to a tree with many branches- the large limbs are the main questions, that force the interview into directions that need to be covered, whilst the smaller twigs are different follow up questions that are used if needed or relevant. Then, there are new sprouts- the new themes that may arise and develop, however the researcher is not aware of how far they will grow. The analogy was particularly helpful in this case, encouraging me to remain both rigorous, and flexible throughout the interview process where indeed, new ideas arose during data collection.

The central themes of the interview guide were: (1) the Sacredness of nature in Neo-Pagan Beliefs, (2) Rituals and Practices, (3) Environmental Ethics and Ecological Activism (4)

Human—Nature Relationships/ Anthropocentrism; and (5) Neo-Paganism and Science/ Religion Debate. However, throughout the interview process, the theme of Irish colonisation along with related questions of identity, language and cultural heritage merged organically in the participants responses. Whilst this was not part of the initial interview framework, it became clear that these issues are deeply intertwined with the Irish Neo-Pagan identity and thus, could not be ignored in the analysis.

Data Analysis

The interviews were completed from the 24th of March to the 4th of April 2025 and transcribed thereafter. Once the transcriptions were complete, I began organising and familiarising myself with the data, followed by the initial reading of each of the transcripts to develop a deeper understanding of the data (Creswell, 2007). I utilised thematic coding to interpret the data, using a process that was both systematic and flexible. Due to the study's theoretical grounding in Bron Taylor's DGR the coding process began deductively using both DGR and the research questions. These initial codes were developed in advance, as part of the deductive qualitative analysis approach (Fife and Gossner, 2024), with the intention of testing and exploring the application of Taylor's theory. However, the analysis also remained open to emergent themes. In line with the best practices in qualitative research (Bingham 2023, Creswell, 2007). Inductive coding was used in parallel allowing new patterns and context- specific themes to arise.

Following Bingham's (2023) five phase model of qualitative data analysis, a coding framework was developed based on the themes from the interview guide: (1) Religious/ Spiritual identity, (2) Sacredness of Nature, (3) Rituals and Practices, (4) Ecological Activism (5) Human- Nature Relationships and; (6) Scientific perspectives. The themes served as the foundation for organising the data and as I worked through each transcript, patterns emerged and each central theme was further broken down into sub-codes. The coding was conducted manually using Microsoft Word and Excel; the interview transcripts were colour-coded in Word according to central themes (Annex 4), while sub-coding occurred in Excel through the development of a code matrix (Annex 5). The Excel document was developed into the main code book, which captured the finalised set of sub-codes and corresponding illustrative data across the participants. This approach allowed me to ensure transparency, traceability and reflexivity throughout the analysis. The use of the structured code book provided a working audit trail that contributed to the study's overall credibility and confirmability (Bingham, 2023:5). As also

outlined by Bingham (ibid), it proves as good practice for the researcher to record thoughts that are generated whilst observing the data, it may include initial impressions and thoughts on the data collection and analysis process. This process of memoing during coding can assist in maintaining a record of the analytical procedure, further building trustworthiness. Therefore. space was made for this within the codebook.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of the research study, particularly given the personal and spiritual nature of the topics discussed. Brinkmann and Kvale (2018: 30) believe that the consideration of ethical issues should run through an investigation from the planning stage until the final report. In social scientific research, main ethical guidelines surround informed consent including the sharing of the main details of the study and how the participant's data will be utilised and stored (ibid, 32). As aforementioned, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the study's aims, their rights, and how their data would be used. The participant's consent was obtained prior to the interviews and confirmed again before the beginning of the interview, on video recording through Zoom. The participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without explanation.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018:33) emphasise the importance of ensuring that "private data identifying the subjects will not be reported." They further state that if a study happens to include information that would make the participant recognisable to others, the participant must agree to the release of such identifiable details. In my research, particular care was taken to uphold this ethical stand especially given the small and interconnected nature of the neo-Pagan community in Ireland where individuals may be identified though referenced to location, group, or spiritual role.

Before the interviews, each participant was informed about who would access their data, how it would be stored and used, in line with GDPR guidelines. While I have referred to the groups in which the participants are affiliated, these organisations have quite broad membership and no personal identifiers have been mentioned, such as their roles within the group. This approach ensured that individual identities remained protected despite the group affiliations being mentioned. This approach allowed me to strike a balance between contextual richness and ethical responsibility.

Methodological Limitations

Within any research study, there are of course idealistic ways in which research would be conducted without both financial and time constraints. In this case, a larger budget and extended timeframe would have allowed me to travel to and around Ireland to have the interviews in person. Additionally, with more time and resources would have allowed for a larger sample size and the opportunity to participate in fieldwork to experience and document a ritual firsthand. However, Mwita (2022: 622) outline that small sample sizes are in fact preferred in qualitative research as they allow research to be conducted with normally, a reduced number of financial resources, as opposed to quantitive studies, which require larger sample sizes. With this in mind, research problems can be resolved with a minimum amount of money and therefore, increases the chance of research problems being solved even for people whose access to financial resources are limited.

As I am a member of OBOD, my position as both researcher and 'insider' may have shaped aspects of the research process. This affiliation may have encouraged participation in the study due to this connection, which was a benefit in terms of the recruitment process, however it carries the risk of introducing bias into the interpretation of the data. As I am familiar with certain rituals, use of language and beliefs, it may have influenced how I posed questions and how I interpreted the responses. I mitigated this through maintaining a reflexive approach throughout the entirety of the study, remaining open to perspectives that may have differed from my own. Nonetheless, the dual role of both researcher and insider must be acknowledged as a potential limitation.

Conclusion

Through the adoption of an interpretivist approach, this study has aimed to understand the meanings and values of Irish neo-Pagans. The use of semi-structured interviews and a deeply reflexive, qualitative methodology, I have explored how the participants express their belief in the sacredness of nature, their ecological activism and the spiritual frameworks that guide them.

Chapter 5 Spiritual Identity and Path

This chapter marks the beginning of the findings and discussion section of this study, which explores how Irish neo-Pagan communities in promote ecological values though their belief in the sacredness of nature. In order to contextualise participant's views on nature and ecological values, it is essential to first present their spiritual identities and how they arrived at their current neo-Pagan path. While all participants identified in some way with the broad category of 'neo-Paganism', their spiritual journeys were deeply individual. Firstly, I will present the specific labels used to describe their practice. Thereafter, I will outline the transformative journeys into neo-Paganism and how these identities can be entangled with a political or queer identity. Together, the insights assist in clarifying how participants locate themselves within the wider neo-Pagan umbrella and offer an essential foundation in our understanding of the ecological values explored in the subsequent chapters thereafter.

The Neo-Pagan Umbrella

Within neo-Paganism there are an array of paths, this was clearly demonstrated by each participant as they each described their spiritual practice uniquely. The interviews confirmed that the neo-Pagan identity is both complex and entirely flexible; this flexibility is discussed by Butler (2011: 16), who affirms that neo-Paganism functions as an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of spiritual expressions. This can include solitary practitioners to those those engaged in group ritual and communal celebration of festivals. Bron Taylor (2005: ix) discusses the flexible nature of Dark Green Religion (DGR) as there is no single sacred text and no religious hierarchy; instead, it is defined by the shared belief in the sacredness of nature. Whilst Taylor identifies four main types of DGR: spiritual animism, naturalistic animism, Gaian spirituality and Gaian naturalism, he acknowledges the permeability of these categories of definition, allowing for overlap and hybridity when observing the practice.

These theoretical insights were present in the participant's descriptions of their practice: Participant 2 identified solely as a Druid, aligning themselves with a specific tradition, while Participant 5 described themselves as a Shaman. In contrast, other participants displayed a much more fluid approach in the labelling of their spiritual path. Participant 4 highlighted this through their use of multiple labels:

"I suppose I describe myself primarily as a Druid, but I would say beyond that I'm, I would call myself also an agnostic and an animist. I suppose, I'm what you call a henotheist.

There's a whole bunch of different gods you could pick as God or aspects of the One God, whatever you like. I don't particularly believe that the version I have chosen is, is the correct one? I like it. I have been studying Druidism since about 1995."

This described fluidity is a core appeal of neo-Paganism, particularly its capacity to accommodate diverse and overlapping belief systems. The inclusive nature and lack of rigid theological boundaries within neo-Paganism allows practitioners to personalise their spiritual paths. This was particularly outlined by Participant 2, who noted that their Druidic Order welcomed people from a wide range of backgrounds and belief systems:

"We have polytheists, monotheists, duotheists, atheists, animists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, you name it. People weave their own spiritual beliefs into their Druidic practice. Many members have left their religion of origin, some want nothing to do with it anymore, while others bring parts of it into their practice. Because we're not fundamentalist, that's fine. In stricter religions, you might be told you can't be a Druid if you're something else too, but that's not our approach."

Early studies of neo-Paganism place emphasis on its lack of fixed doctrine (Adler, 1979) and according to Brown (2022:1) it celebrates fluidity and diversity, and often encourages practitioners to create their own concept of divinity. This is in direct contrast to the following of rigid creeds, present in other religions and at times, Pagans take pieces of several religious paths to create their own. This is shown through the hybrid nature of participant's responses when asked to describe their neo-Pagan practice: only two of the participant's had a one-word label, whereas the rest employed multiple terms and descriptions that reflected the complexity and individuality of their spiritual path.

Waking the Path: Together or Alone?

Some of the participants expressed their affiliation with formal groups such as the Order of the Ovates, Bards and Druids (OBOD), whilst for others their practice was personal and more private. Three participants discussed their affiliation with OBOD; however, each had a different interpretation of what it meant to be part of the order. Participant 2 described themselves as firmly part of the organisation, whereas participant 3 and 4 viewed OBOD as a light structure from which they can draw from, reflecting a more private and selective engagement with the organisation. Participant 4 described themselves as being independent in their own practice whilst having completed training with OBOD, reflecting on their

relationship with the order, they highlighted both a sense of belonging and a personal evolution beyond the structure of the order:

“It took me seven years to complete. Although I do feel happy to be part of that order, there's a basic form and ritual that you learn there and I've perhaps diverged from that, but that doesn't mean I can't still be part of it. I still do participate, maybe less than I used to, but I'm still part of it.”

Contrary to this, Participant 1 described their practice as deeply personal and rejected the idea of belonging to one organised or structured group as it made their neo-pagan practice appear more like a ‘religion’. Religion, to them had seriously negative connotations due to the ‘trauma’ that has been caused by religion in Ireland; they affirmed:

“I don’t like the idea of belonging to one organised or structured group… [in Paganism] there’s no one authoritative figure setting the rules. I was raised Catholic, which was very structured and very fixed, there was one way of doing things, and that was it. Now, what I do is much freer and more open. There are overlaps with religion, but I think, because of my upbringing, there’s trauma associated with the word religion, especially given all the trauma that religion has caused in this country [Northern Ireland]. So, I guess I just feel more at ease being on my own journey rather than being told what that journey should be.”

Evidently, Participant 1 valued autonomy and flexibility in their spiritual life, placing themselves in direct contrast to the hierarchical and rigid structures they associate with Catholicism. Particularly significant is the context of Northern Ireland, where the legacy of sectarian division and religious dominance continues to leave lasting scars. Participant 1’s reference to “trauma” tied to the word “religion” speaks to the burdens of institutional faith in a society where religion has been used as a boundary marker and a tool of control and violence. Participant 1’s perspective highlights how Neo-Paganism offered them a spiritually fulfilling alternative rather than remaining in the structures of institutional religion in the post-conflict context of Northern Ireland.

The Religious Shift: Catholicism to Neo-Paganism

Each of the participants were raised in a Catholic tradition and expressed dissatisfaction with the religion. Strmiska (2005:7) notes that many people join or develop modern Pagan associations out of a deep disappointment with Christianity; a disappointment that leads one

to leave the religion of their childhood or family and seek out an alternative religious community. Butler's (2024: 509) research on Irish neo-Pagans found that the participants in her study did not feel connected to the Christianity in which they were raised, and some described a feeling of belonging when they encountered Paganism. Participant 5 described their departure from Catholicism, which was prompted by their observation of exclusion, gender imbalance and the silencing of LGBTQ+ identities within their religious upbringing. They practised a variation of spiritual traditions including Buddhism, and then felt a profound sense of resonance when they encountered Irish Celtic shamanism:

"Then I came across shamanism, and that felt like an umbrella, it brought together many of the things that had been innate in my life: my love of nature, my connection to everything around me. It gave me a real sense of cohesion, a framework that matched where I was naturally being led in my beliefs. That's when I started wondering more about the indigenous practices of these islands, of the Celtic islands. And that's when the Irish Celtic shamanic way really started to resonate deeply with me."

This reflection reveals the process of spiritual reclamation shaped by both a disillusionment with institutional religion and a search for a more holistic worldview. Their departure from Catholicism was rooted in both a theological disagreement and a moral discomfort around issues such as gender and sexuality. Irish Celtic Shamanism provided an alternative, grounded in nature and personal resonance.

Their experience resonates with what Anaczyk and Vencalek (2014) term the 'Coming Home Experience', a recurring motif in neo-Pagan conversion narratives. This phenomenon challenges the traditional narratives surrounding religious conversion which can be normally understood as a rapid change in religious beliefs. The Coming Home Experience highlights that many neo-Pagans do not describe their journey in terms of the adoption of new ideas but rather, they express their rediscovery of a vocabulary and a community that expresses values and intuitions they had long held. This resonates Adler's (1979) foundational insight that Pagans often feel they are finding a label for their pre-existing spirituality. For participant 5, their engagement with Irish Celtic shamanism did not mark a break with their inner sense of self but instead provided a framework through which long- held beliefs about nature, energy and spiritual interconnectedness could be now legitimised.

According to 'The Pluralism Project' by Harvard University (2020), many people have been drawn to Paganism because it affirms the sacredness of their sexuality, and their gender expression. In the 1960s, feminism provided an important impetus for the growth of Paganism as more women began to search for a religious expression that felt more empowering than their inherited traditions. Similarly, LGBTQ+ people have also found empowering religious practices in Paganism. The Pluralism Project discuss that in contrast to many other religions, LGBTQ+ and queer people can hold potions of leadership and be open about their sexual orientation and gender expression. Participant three discussed their feelings surrounding feminist and LGBTQ+ spaces within neo-Paganism:

"The spaces where I feel safest and most aligned are more progressive, feminist- driven, often female-led and queer- inclusive."

However, they also stressed that one should not assume that all neo-Pagan communities are progressive and we cannot assume because people self-identify as neo-Pagan, that they all necessarily share the same values stressing the diversity of political identities that can exist underneath the neo-Pagan umbrella.

Colonial Memory and Neo-Paganism

Participants 1, 2 and 3 each discussed the colonisation of Ireland and how this affected their relationship with England, their view of language and of the land. Participant 2 shared a compelling narrative surrounding their relationship with England and English people and how their involvement with OBOD healed this historical wound for them. They discussed that they had to attend an OBOD event many years ago, and with the organisation being based in England, the event was at Glastonbury. They explained:

"When I went to the gathering, I was terrified. I was really conscious of my Irish accent because I had experienced anti-Irish sentiment before… We walked up the steps of the town hall in Glastonbury and there were two people holding staffs. They said, "You're very welcome." One of them heard my accent and said, "Oh, you're Irish! My parents are Irish, my grandparents too!" People were lovely. So many came up to tell me their own Irish connections… I grew up hating the English. That was the story I was raised with, "this is what they did." And they did do it. But someone recently said to me, "I feel so guilty." And I said, "get over it! You didn't do anything!"

The participant's account shows how this spiritual engagement with OBOD assisted in a healing a historical wound and acted as a space for cross-cultural understanding. For Participant 2, they moved from inherited post-colonial resentment to feelings of reconciliation and healing. It is clear in these spaces, colonial traumas are acknowledged however, they do not dictate the present.

Participant 1 discussed the effects of utilising the English language, instead of Irish:

"A big part of it [belief system] is language, or should I say the language that was forced on us. Our native words used to have very different meanings, different emotional weight. English, I think, is a very harsh judgemental language… language matters. It literally creates reality."

There is an undertone of resentment within the participants narrative regarding the loss of their mother tongue. They acknowledge that the Irish language had more emotional and cultural nuances that the English language could not replicate. Participant 1's description of the English language as harsh and judgemental suggests that there remains a wound surrounding the loss and suppression of the Irish language that has not yet been healed. For Participant 2, on the other hand, they expressed how Pagan ritual and Druidry, "brought me back to my own language and healed that wound between the two countries." Participant 2 outlined:

"It's magical. It's beautiful Druidry is so connected to the Irish language. For example, we were always oriented toward the sun. You follow the sun. There's a phrase in Irish: cas an aghaidh ar an ngréin, turn your face to the sun. So, in our ceremonies, we stand in a circle, and we begin facing east. In Irish, the word for "behind me" is thiar dom, which literally means "to the west of me." There are so many clues in the Irish language that point toward the natural world."

The Irish language being utilised in Pagan ritual was a common finding from Butler's (2015: 209) ethnographic research. Many Pagans in her study continued to use the Irish language to authentically connect with deities and the landscape. For Participant 2, the use of the Irish language strengthened their relationship with the world around them.

For Participant 3, they felt as though there was stark differences between the English and Irish language and how this in turn, affects one's relationship with the land. Participant 3 highlights:

"In Ireland, for instance, our seasonal festivals, like Samhain and Bealtaine, are deeply tied to ancestral memory and a kind of peasant, rural relationship with the land. It's about survival and community. Whereas in England, the seasonal language is often more focused on abundance, crops, harvests, the sowing cycle. It's a vocabulary of plenty… We've historically been a pastoralists. Also we have been poor throughout a lot of our indigenous history. So a lot of our mythology, a lot of our language around the seasons is asking for blessings for the time that's coming. The indigenous spirituality is shaped by the rhythms of tending animals and living closely with the land. Even the way we talk about the seasons, there's a sense of asking for blessings for the time to come."

Participant 3 articulates that Irish neo-Paganism is shaped by Ireland's historical experience, particularly in contrast to English Pagan traditions. In expressing that festivals like Samhain and Bealtaine are tied to ancestral memory and rural survival rather than agricultural abundance, Participant 3 is highlighting that in reality, Irish neo-Paganism is rooted in hardship and and resilience. It draws attention to Ireland's history where the land is not viewed as a site of plenty but rather one of respect and dependence. The participant also outlined that the ways in which the Irish and the English refer to the land is different and complex with Ireland having a more specific, and grounded relationship:

"In contrast, due to the Industrial Revolution and the displacement of communities, many people in England lost their connection to specific landscape. They talk about "the Land" with a capital L, this abstract concept, whereas here, we speak about particular fields, place names, family names tied to a mountain or a well. They try to create a relationship with the land- but its not the same."

This again reinforces the idea that neo-Paganism in Ireland is particularly specific to Ireland's context and history. Especially in terms of the neo-Pagan relationship to the land, as highlighted by Participant 3, Irish Neo-Pagans tend to form a rather emotional and personal relationship with the land (Butler, 2024: 205). Through places such as fields, wells and mountains, which are tied to family names and oral histories, neo-Pagans believe they can connect to ancestral memory; this is far away from an abstract notion of "The Land."

Upon discussing identity, Participant 3 discussed the complex entanglement of an Irish identity and the legacy of colonialism. The participant reflected that concepts of "Irishness" are developed though a colonial framework, due to the English language and Anglo-Irish cultural narratives. This concept is explored by Kiberd (1996:1) who writes "through many centuries, Ireland was pressed into a service as a foil to set off English virtues, as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy- land in which to meet fairies and monsters." The Irish Literary Revival of the late 19th and 20th centuries, led by the likes of W.B Yeats, attempted to reclaim Irish culture by a strong revival in folklore and mythology. The movement was indeed essential in reclaiming an Irish culture; however, one must recognise that at times, 'Irishness' was being reimagined and mythologised to directly oppose British colonial narratives. In many ways, the ideas and concepts found within neo-Pagansim continues and retains this cultural work.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the diverse and multilayered nature of Irish neo-Paganism. Participants narratives have shown that while they each are situated under the neo-Pagan Umbrella, their paths are characterised by individual agency and a hybridity of multiple identities. Whether the neo-Pagan walks the path alone or within organised structures, they shape their beliefs in responses to personal feelings and external influences, in this case many participants move away due to their disillusionment with Catholicism. However, their transitions into neo-Paganism were not merely rejections of their former Catholic religion, rather they underwent a 'rediscovery' of long-held values that deeply resonated with neo-Paganism.

Chapter 6 Nature as Sacred

Each of the participants within this study expressed a deep sense of connection to the natural world, often articulated through a belief in the sacredness of nature. This sense of reverence was often frequently rooted in an animistic worldview. Participants spoke of nature not as an object of use, but as a subject deserving of respect, care, and communication. This chapter explores how the participants conceptualised nature as sacred and how this sacredness was express through relational, reciprocal, and spiritual interactions with the more-than human world. Firstly, I will demonstrate how the animistic worldview was most prevalent in the participant's narratives. Thereafter, I will analyse how these perspectives either align or diverge from Taylor's concept of DGR.

An Animistic Worldview

Throughout all of the interviews, an animistic worldview was apparent, as participants often described their belief in the ensoulment of the natural world. For example, Participant 1 believed that "everything in nature has a soul… I strongly believe that" with Participant 2 expressing how "every creature is ensouled… even the ones I don't like." The participant's noted that non-human entities were just as important in the world as humans. Participant 4 said that "my life isn't more valuable than that if an earwig, a whale or a tree." From the outset, it was evident that the participants held uncontested views surrounding the ensoulment of nature thus, contributing to their view of nature as sacred.

Participant 5 remarked, "nature speaks to me, it always has… it's a reciprocal relationship." This indicates a perception of a mutual exchange rather than a one-sided human projection; the non-human entities are viewed as active participants within the relationship that can have communicative abilities, rather than existing as passive objects. Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "its [nature] is definitely a living being, it's in relationship with other things, and it's something I can be in relationship with too." This expression again confirmed the deeply animistic worldview in which the sacredness of nature is inseparable from personhood and relationality.

In line with Bird-David's (1999: 78) definition of animism that moves away from outdated primitive and superstitious notions, promoted by the likes of E.B Tylor; she describes a relational epistemology. It is strongly evident that the participants believed that they were in a continuous exchange with non-human entities. The participants did not view this as merely symbolic or metaphorical but rather as real social relationships that are marked by reciprocity and mutual care. The expressions made by participants differs entirely from Western

epistemologies whereby it would be difficult to make sense of people's "talking with" things rather than "talking to" or observing them. Western epistemological frameworks often maintain a clear separation between the knower and the known while the animist's position acknowledges relational engagement perceiving knowing as emerging through interactive processes.

Speaking for Nature

When discussing the ensoulment of non-human entities, Participant 2 expressed the belief that humans have a duty to speak for those who do not have a voice, and referred to the book 'Coming Back to Life' by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown (2014). The participant shared a ritual that can be found within the book called 'The Council of all Beings'. Within this ritual, the participants are encouraged to speak on behalf of another life-form such as rivers, trees, and animals. Participant 2 explained that this is particularly powerful for expressing their belief in the sacredness of nature through empathy and humility towards all beings.

They explained that, "all the stakeholders are there including someone speaking on behalf of the trees the river, the soil, birds, and cattle. Everyone sits in a circle, no one is above anyone else. I found that incredibly powerful. Those voices need to be heard. There is no hierarchy. And now, in some countries, rivers have been granted the same legal rights as humans." It is clear that Participant 2 perceives non-human entities are moral subjects deserving of representation and respect. In other studies (Taylor, 2005: 22) similar sentiments are shared, at times people report being possessed by and speaking for the spirits of the non-human entities. For Participant 2, the act of speaking for nature is not merely a symbolic act but a moral and spiritual responsibility because of their profound connection with nature grounded in their belief that all beings are ensouled and worthy of having a voice in order to express their needs.

Participant 2 expressed the strong conviction that humans have a moral duty to speak on behalf of non-human beings who cannot represent themselves. The belief, stemming from both environmental concern and the belief in the ensoulment of the natural world, shadows the perspective of Christopher Stone (1972). Albeit Stone argued form a legal- philosophical angle, both views campaign for non-human entities to be spoken on behalf of, given that cannot represent themselves. The perspective conveyed by Participant 2 tells us that this duty arises not only from an ethical framework and caring for the environment, but rather from their spiritual belief in the ensoulment and intrinsic value of all beings.

Expressions of Dark Green Religion

Dark Green Religion manifests in a range of different expressions which are broadly categorised as Spiritual or Naturalistic and Animistic or Gaian. Within these categories, Spiritual Animism was the most often expressed worldview by the participants within the study which was characterised by their belief that nature was imbued by *spiritual intelligences* (Taylor, 2005: 15). There were also elements of Naturalistic Animism and Gaian Spirituality and Naturalism throughout the participants responses within the same narrative or belief system further highlighting Taylor's emphasis on the flexibility of the boundaries between each of the four types of DGR. This section of the chapter will utilise the data from the study to illustrate the expression of the four types of DGR throughout the participants narratives about their neo-Pagan beliefs.

Spiritual Animism was the most prevalent expression among the participants. Taylor (ibid) defines Spiritual Animism as there being a supernaturalistic dimension to their animistic belief system. Participant 1 explained that "in Celtic spirituality, animism is really important, the belief that everything in nature has a soul. I strongly believe that. Whether it's a tree, a rock, or a stream, these things speak to me, and I speak to them." This is a clear example of Spiritual Animism, the participant does not view nature as solely interconnected but rather, ensouled and capable of direct communication with the human person.

Participant 5 also echoed attributes of their belief system that pointed towards spiritual animism. They described nature as a trusted presence in which they could turn to in times of emotional difficulty explaining:

"if I have a question or a worry or I am feeling confused about something, I go out to nature… if I feel low, I go outside in winter and I see this beautiful, delicate little snowdrop pushing up through the cold dark earth into spring, I know its telling me to keep going."

This interaction reveals a profound reliance on nature not only as a source of inspiration or beauty but as a companion in emotional reflection. Rather than praying to a deity which is common practice in Western religions, the participant turned towards nature as an active respondent; open to receiving signs, gestures, and reassurance.

Naturalistic animism involves skepticism or disbelief that a spiritual world runs parallel to the earth and animates non-human natural entities (Taylor, 2005: 22). Participant 3 briefly

expressed this typology when they were asked if they believed they could be in communication with trees:

"Yes, but I'm always a little bit wary of projecting human voices onto other things. When someone says, the tree told me this," I always wonder, how much of that is the tree, and how much is your own projection? It is possible to be in communion with things. I absolutely believe in being in communion with nature. I don't want to dismiss anyone's experience, it can be a poetic reality for people, but I personally take that kind of interpretation with a pinch of salt."

As one can observe, Participant 3 offered a more reserved interpretation of human's communication with nature. Taylor (ibid) outlines that naturalistic animists nevertheless still display a kinship with and ethical concern for non-human life. They remain open to understanding that one may be in communion with non-human life forms, suggesting that such interactions are symbolic and metaphorical, rather than spiritual. In this view, nature remains deeply morally significant and relational, however not imbued by spiritual intelligences.

While Participant 3 expressed the Naturalistic Animism typology most explicitly, the majority of participants articulated a more spiritual view of nature. Participant 1 described the earth not simply as a collection of sacred beings but as a singular living and spiritually significant entity. This belief aligns with Gaian Spirituality, which perceives the earth to have consciousness (Taylor, 2005: 16). For example, when discussing morality within Paganism, the participant rejected rigid dualisms such as good versus evil or god versus Satan, explaining that "there is no absolute division; it's the universe… Mother Nature but I don't mean that in a gendered or symbolic way, I mean the whole of the universe."

The expression used reflects a worldview in which morality is not received from external commandments or theological binaries but rather an intuitive and immanent relationship with the Earth itself. This view of the Earth as a divine sentient whole, which is capable of guiding moral understanding epitomises Taylor's definition of Gaian Spirituality. For Participant 1, 'Mother Nature' is an active presence, not a symbolic construct as they believe that the universe is intelligent and spiritually alive.

Participant 1 clarified that they did not call Earth 'Mother Earth' in a gendered sense. This thought was also echoed by Participant 3 in a more critical perspective view of such metaphors:

"But here's the thing, and this is also something I wrestle with in modern Paganism, sometimes I see women equating themselves with the earth, and while that can feel empowering, it's

actually a patriarchal concept. Because if you equate yourself with the land, and the land is something to be owned or dominated, then both you and the earth are placed under dominion."

The critique of the terminology of the 'Mother Earth' metaphor reflects concerns that are addressed within ecofeminist thought. Participant 3 observes that identifying women with the Earth can result in both, the Earth, and women, being placed under dominion. This viewpoint echoes Val Plumwood's (1993) thoughts in her book 'Feminism and the Mastery of Nature'. Plumwood (1993:20) argues that the linking of women and nature can reinforce dualistic and patriarchal structures, underpinning both the domination of Earth and subordination of women. Participant 3 also reflects the same concern and strives to move beyond these essentialist associations that risk encouraging patriarchal frameworks, rather than discouraging and dismantling them.

The fourth and final typology that Taylor expresses is Gaian Naturalism which focuses on a science-based reverence for nature and is skeptical of supernatural metaphysics. Naturalistic Gaian worldviews do not involve beliefs that the world or universe is divine (Taylor, 2005: 23). None of the participants articulated a fully naturalistic Gaian worldview in the strict sense that one is skeptical of supernatural metaphysics, however some responses reflected elements of Gaian naturalism. For example, some participants described nature using scientific and ecological language without using spiritual language in those specific cases. However, those expressions were often embedded in a broader animistic or spiritual framework showing that the participant's worldview was not strictly naturalistic but rather a fluid integration of both scientific and spiritual points of view.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to investigate the ways in which the participants of the study viewed nature as sacred using the framework of Dark Green Religion. I can indeed confirm that a deep care for nature and the belief in its sacredness is central to the neo-Pagan epistemology. Supernatural worldviews were more common amongst the participants with many expressing animistic beliefs that attributed consciousness and agency to natural entities. These perspectives reflect a relational and reciprocal understanding of nature, aligning with Taylor's theory and displaying the interconnectedness ecological care and spiritual beliefs. The following chapter examines the ways in which these beliefs transform into ethical commitments and ecological action.

Chapter 7 Environmental Stewardship and Ecological Activism

This chapter delves into the ecological experiences of the participants, presenting the ways they demonstrate ecological thought and how this is related to their belief in sacredness of nature. Drawing upon the data, I will explore how the participant's neo-Pagan identities and beliefs inform their ethical engagement with the natural world. I will begin by presenting how each participant felt a duty to care for the environment to some extent in their everyday lifestyle choices ranging in shifts in consumption habits to discussions on dietary obligations. However, as one will observe from this presentation of results, the level of duty of care varied from participant to participant. Thereafter, I will present the ways in which the participants engage in ecological activism, revealing that this occurs both ritualistically and through physical activism.

Everyday Ecology

Across the participants, ecological awareness was expressed in diverse but consistent ways. Each of the participants expressed their deep care and appreciation for all of nature and this encouraged them to care for environment. The participants framed their environmental concern as an intuitive outcome of their spiritual path, rather than an external obligation; ecological care was not a separate category of ethical action but rather, an embedded, everyday extension of their reverence for nature. Participant 5 strongly reflected this in their statement, "it's taken as a given that if you walk the path of Shamanism, you care for the earth. You cannot be a modern Shaman, Druid, or anything under the Wiccan or Pagan umbrella and not take care of the earth." Similarly, Participant 3 made it clear that there is a strong overlap between ecological thought and neo-Pagansim, they informed, "I have a meadow in my garden… I grow food in my garden and try to live in a way that's conscious of the land. Theres an overlap in those [ecological and neo-Pagan] communities. In group [neo-Pagan] spaces, I've noticed a lot of people are very environmentally active, whether it's activism, community gardening, or conservation work. There's definitely a strong overlap."

These findings reinforce a growing body of research that positions environmental care not as a secondary concern within neo-Paganism, but as integral to its framework. The participants continuously framed their ecological practices as expressions of their belief. These examples echo Sommerlad-Roger's (2013: 244) quantitative findings on neo-Pagan ecological engagement, offering qualitative depth to her conclusion that environmental behaviours among Pagans are widespread and spiritually motivated.

Participant 1 shared an honest reflection on their journey about environmental concerns and how this shifted as they ventured into neo-Paganism:

"That perspective [Catholicism] made this world feel temporary, like it didn't matter as much. So, I'll be honest when I was younger, I didn't care as deeply. I'd have thrown rubbish out of my car window without thinking twice. But Paganism changed that. If you believe your energy stays here, within the land, within the cycle, you realise you don't want to pollute your own resting place. You care more, because it's all connected, and it's not disposable."

Participant 1's reflection illustrates how neo-Paganism instigated a shift in one's everyday behaviour; a shift in once dismissed actions into moral and spiritual concerns. The personal transformation reflects an internalised value where caring for the environment is not externally forced but rather, felt deeply within, involving their relationship with the land. What was once seen as inconsequential behaviour, littering, is then reinterpreted through the neo-Pagan framework, as a violation of the sacred. The transition from a monotheistic worldview, where earthly life is transient, to one that views the land as a permanent resting place; this is a clear shift from obligation to reverence. This care of the earth is no longer externally mandated but internally and spiritually motivated.

The transformation echos the longstanding critiques of the dominant monotheistic traditions, that have often been accursed of reinforcing anthropocentric worldviews (White, 1967). Participant 1's reflection is an apt example of the role of Western ecological degradation influenced religious beliefs.

Vegetarianism and Veganism

Upon discussing lifestyle choices, both Participant 2 and 3 reflected on vegetarianism regarding neo-Pagan's ecological contributions. Participant 3 outlined that "there is more vegetarianism and veganism in these [neo-Pagan] spaces than there would be in other ones." Participant 2, on the other hand highlighted, "you don't have to be a vegan or a vegetarian to be a Druid. You may choose to be, but those decisions are entirely up to you. And I think that's why we have such high membership because it's not about dogma. People aren't looking for that anymore." Following this, Participant 2 discussed their feelings surrounding vegetarianism while discussing their thoughts on animism, believing that the animistic worldview challenged the vegetarian and vegan debate because "if everything is ensouled then its not just about meat or honey, plants are ensouled too… We experience loss all the time, and when we die, we become food for something else." The reflections reveal the flexible and nuanced ethical beliefs that

characterises the neo-Pagan approach to ecological living. Participant 3 identites a broad cultural trend towards plant-based diets in these communities, suggesting they are common and expected. However, Participant 2's response complicates this narrative through their resistance of prescriptive moralism in favour of individual autonomy. Their assertion that dietary decisions are personal and non-dogmatic shows the broader rejection of rigid ethical codes in neo-Paganism.

This complexity is not unique to this study and has also been observed in other strands of neo-Pagansim. For example, in Horton's (2014) study of Heathenry, as some members did not believe in vegetarianism due to their beliefs surrounding tradition, identity and patriarchal attitudes believing that certain eco-friendly habits were viewed as too feminine or political. Although this does not exactly reflect the point made by Participant 2, it does indeed align with the diversity in neo-Pagan environmental ethics. Both are examples of the ways in which neo-Pagan communities intertwine particular ecological values alongside group and cultural norms. Participant 2 displays deep fluidity, showing the intention of living with sincerity as opposed to strict dogma. It is evident that spiritual identity does not always translate into an independent single mode of ecological expression within neo-Pagan communities.

Participant 4 offered a thoughtful reflection on the variability of ecological commitment within neo-Pagan circles. They outlined the ambivalence that exists in regard to the extent to which fellow practitioners integrate environmental values into their lives:

"Not everyone who's pagan or involved in these rituals is an environmentalist. There's a huge number of people, I'd have to say, who don't walk the talk. They'll say, "I love Mother Earth," but they don't do anything, they just go out and buy stuff like everyone else. But I suppose, at least in theory, they recognise the need to respect the planet, they just don't take that step to actually do something concrete. Still, that's better than not caring at all."

This reflection portrays the tension between belief and practice that can arise in neo-Pagan communities. While Participant 4 is clearly rather critical of the disconnect between values and ecological action, they offer a forgiving stance, suggesting that even symbolic reverence for the Earth carries ethical weight. Their comments imply an aspirational ethic within neo-Paganism, an ideal of ecological responsibility that may not always be physically fulfilled but nevertheless shapes participants worldview and intentions. Participant 4's perspective is also shared by Halstead (2023) as he observes that ecological commitment within neo-Paganism

exists along a broad spectrum. Halstead goes further to argue that there is a need for neo-Pagans to engage more with pressing environmental issues and believes that in order for neo-Paganism to be considered a religion, there must be unification of beliefs. However, this step may erode neo-Paganism championed diversity and flexibility.

Trying our Best

Building on this perspective, participants proposed a 'do what you can' ethos when discussing ecological and environmental action, forming a shared moral sensibility grounded in conscious care for the environment. Participant 2 reflected that "none of us live in an environmentally neutral way. Whether you drive a car, an electric car, or use public transport, every action has an environmental cost… we can't avoid impact, but we can be conscious of it." Rather than striving for environmental perfection, they valued awareness and intention, in Participant 2's case, they explained that the point was not to avoid participation in modern life, but rather to engage with it consciously and ethically whilst being aware that no choice is without cost. Closely echoing the findings of Furney (2004: 114) who found that Pagans tended to value sustainable living not through the rejection of modern life, but rather through engaging with it consciously and through the practice of an ethic of awareness.

Participant 3 also shared this outlook believing, "I think most people do their best… I know people who give it everything [full ecological lifestyle] for a while but it's really hard to sustain that and still participate in the world as it is." This perspective suggests the idea that neo-Pagan ethical standards are not driven by rigid ideals, but rather by an adaptive and reflective approach to ecological matters. In a similar manner, Participant 4, used language that suggested that whilst all neo-Pagans should contribute to the world in an ecological way, at the very least their spirituality encourages practitioners to have "more awareness and a more conscious approach to nature."

Both participant's reflections highlight the complexity of sustaining ecological action in the context of contemporary demands, further supporting the idea that neo-Pagan environmental ethics in the case of this study, are best understood as practical, realistic and empathetic in their orientation, as opposed to a hardline, environmentalist perspective. One must keep in mind it is this versatility that appears to be drawing so many people to neo-Pagan paths as explained by Participant 2 consistently throughout their interview. Taken together, the perspectives reveal a pragmatic community where ecological responsibility is shaped by ethical intent and realities of modern life. Ecological action is not framed as a test of moral purity as the participants

alluded to an ongoing process of negotiation and mindfulness. This tells us that neo-Pagan environmentalism may serve as model, beyond its own communities, for cultivating a sustainable and non-dogmatic ecological ethic in an increasingly politically complex world.

Embodied Activism: Protest and Ritual

The participants shared the ways in which they performed their ecological concern as well as the lifestyle choices discussed above. Participants discussed activism in two forms (1) through activist groups and (2) through Pagan ritual. I will first outline the participant's views of physical activism though environmental activist groups and then I will present the ways the participants engaged in ritual with an ecological intention.

Activism through Protest

When asked about their ecological activism aside from tailored lifestyle choices, none of the participants were currently involved in specific activist groups that protested for environmental concerns. Participant 1 expressed that, "we don't have a large ecological activist base in Northern Ireland," whilst for Participant 2, they felt "too busy [with OBOD] to be an activist." For Participant 3, they shared that people they knew were indeed activists, but they themselves were not. Participant 5 highlighted that looking after the Earth was an integral part of their spiritual practice, however, other people may take it a step further and become more visibly active.

Although not active in public protests, Participant 2 expressed that Druidry nonetheless offers a framework for ecological advocacy, "being a Druid gives you the language and confidence to express that [ecological activism]… if you say, "as a Druid, this is my spiritual path, and I am here to speak for the natural world" people have to listen. It legitimises your voice." This highlights that for some, a spiritual or religious identity can act as a motivator and a platform for environmental concern, if one were to be involved with public activist groups. Participant 2's reflection reveals how a Druidic identity can function as a personal motivator and a moral authority in public discourse. Through invoking Druidry as a framework for ecological advocacy, they suggest that religious affiliation, particularly, nature religions, can legitimise environmental concern in ways that secular language cannot. This aligns with broader arguments made in the field of religion and ecology (e.g Taylor, 2010) that suggest that spiritual worldviews empower individuals to frame ecological care as a moral imperative. Druidry, in Participant 2's view, provides vocabulary and a sense of purpose to position the practitioner as a spokesperson for the more-than human world.

Participant 4 expressed the greatest involvement in activist groups although not presently involved, they had been in the past. They narrated their journey with activist groups and their eventual decision to withdraw from them:

"I'm not very political. I don't really like the political elements of it [activism] … If you talk to most people, from either end of the spectrum and ask, "Would you like to make the world a better place for future generations?" they'd probably all say yes. The disagreement is about how to do that, and that's where the conflict and division comes in. I think most people do want to move humanity forward in a positive way, but there's no consensus on the path. So, in a way, taking environmentalism down a political route can actually alienate people."

The insight provided by Participant 4 portrays a tension surrounding environmental activism performed by neo-Pagans: whilst there is a shared ethical concern for the Earth and for future generations, the alignment of that concern with confrontational political frameworks can make the neo-Pagan recoil from this ideology. As one can observe, Participant 4's withdrawal from this type of formal activism, was not a rejection of environmental responsibility, but rather a reframing of how that care should be expressed. For them, it is clear that caring for the Earth called for unity and connection rather than conflict or division. Their words suggest a desire for a common ground that transcends political division reflecting another broad pattern in Pagan communities where ecological ethics are enacted though personal or ritual means rather than institutionalised or highly politicised channels.

This preference for more individualised, culturally embedded forms of activism mirrors the subtle and often localised strategies observed within neo-Paganism. Reflecting upon the grassroots actions such as the 1999 protest to protect the Latoon Fairy Bush in County Clare in Ireland; this was not led by NGOs but by a local a storyteller- Eddie Lenihan. This tells us that neo-Pagan values can inspire direct ecological action outside of mainstream activist spaces. In Participant 4's case, it was more important to be aligned with authentic cultural and spiritual belief, than a strong political affiliation or movement.

This rejection of political associations by Participant 4 can be explained by neo-Pagans general rejection of structured hierarchy's. Bloch (1998: 287) describes neo-Pagan communities as rooted in a cultural system of individualism, where meaning and authority are inspired by personal experience rather than an institutional organisation. As has already been established throughout the study thus far, each of the participants shared their appreciation of the lack of rigid dogma within neo-Paganism. Instead of focusing on rigid political identities or formal

groups, neo-Pagans may forge their environmental activism through ritual practices that affirm ecological values in a decentralised manner. As Bloch (1998: 289) notes, this "fluid social movement" model allows for a form of belonging without a formal membership requirement or certain political visibility. This supports the notion made by Cruse (2021) in her assumptions surrounding the lack of neo-Pagan engagement in environmental activist groups. For Participant 4, environmental care was not abandoned but engaged with outside of political ideology. Their retreat from formal activism was not because of apathy but it was stemming from a desire to express ecological concern in a way that aligned with their spirituality. This preference for spiritually grounded, less confrontational forms of engagement leads to the following discussion on the ways in which the participants expressed their ability to participate in environmental activism though ritual.

Activism through Ritual

For Participants 2, 3 and 4, 'The Wheel of the Year,' is central to their ritualistic practices; the spiritual calendar that aligns with seasonal and agricultural cycles. They believed that their observation of the Wheel of the Year also demonstrated a clear ecological intention. Participant 4 explained, "there are eight basic festivals, scattered roughly every six weeks throughout the year… they are grounded in nature." Participant 2 explained how when they celebrated the Spring Equinox, they planted seeds with intentions and when asked if their rituals reflected an ecological intent, they responded: "It is absolutely the intention [to be ecological] … the ritual on planting seeds- seeds for peace. The seeds are symbolic, to invite whatever change is needed… at summer solstice, the longest day, everything is vibrant… everything spirals into growth… it is about going with that immense power and recognising that everything changes."

Both reflections reveal how the Wheel of the Year serves as a framework for ecological consciousness. For Participant 4, the festivals grounding in nature emphasises the integration of ritual with the land's season rhythms, a worldview where time is experienced through natural cycles. Participant 2, going further, believed in the power of their rituals not solely as symbolic acts, but also as obtaining the ability to have meaningful contributions to ecological and social transformation. Through the act of planting seeds during the spring Equinox with the intention of fostering peace, they engaged in not only an ecological ritual, but a practice with a political undertone. Both participants show that neo-Pagan ritual becomes a form of environmental engagement.

Participant 3 provided a reflection that detailed how ritual practice serves as a form of ecological and social activism. They described how awareness of environmental concerns is often ritualised through "magical activism" stating:

"[ecological] awareness shows up in rituals specifically focused on magical activism, rituals done with the intention of protecting the earth or responding to environmental concerns. That comes back to the basic principles of magic: the belief that we're co-creators of our world, that we have the ability to bring about change and help create a better world. That intention often supports political or grassroots action."

This kind of subtle engagement aligns with Cruses (2021) observation that invisibility does not mean absence, as activism occurs outside of institutional activism. For Participant 3, ritual is a legitimate way of advocating for ecological wellbeing without the requirement of being involved in a particular group. This also mirrors Robert's (2011: 247) research in the Reclaiming Witchcraft Tradition where the community believed that healing of the earth could occur through a water ritual. Participant 3 further explained:

"That includes ecological harm, but also social and human harm. One of the things I really value about pagan ceremonies is that they often hold space for healing, for acknowledging the world's pain. People will speak prayers or intentions for things that are happening, whether it's the ash dieback and the dying trees, or Palestine, or the women who suffered in the mother and baby homes."

This indicates that the neo-Pagan collective concern goes beyond ecological matters, extending to human suffering. Their perspective demonstrates how ritual functions as an ethical response to collective trauma. The ritual space becomes a site of intentional witnessing and remembrance as a means of expressing solidarity with both human and non-human suffering. Through mentioning Palestine, Participant 3 signals an embodied recognition of global injustice as spiritually relevant. This is particularly significant in the Irish context, through evoking Palestine, Participant 3 could be drawing upon the well-established sense of solidarity within Irish culture, where many have historically identified with anti-colonial struggles (Browne, 2024).

Similarity, the mentioning of the women who suffered in the Mother and Baby Homes reflect how the ritual space can become a form of historical acknowledgment; offering an alternative to the silences often found in official narratives on this injustice. Here, we observe that ritual

serves, in a communal way, a space for holding grief and healing. This shows how the space works as a framework allowing neo-Pagans to make sense of moral complexities.

Participant 2 and 4 informed me of the group called 'The Warrior' Call: Pagans Against Fracking'. This was set up in 2013 by members of OBOD to protest against fracking that was occurring in Britain. The group orchestrated a global ritual of neo-Pagans with 300 individuals gathering in Glastonbury and 1,500 taking part remotely through meditation and ritual, creating a worldwide network of spiritual activism; Phill Carr-Gomm (2013) calls it the "biggest magician operation" ever undertaken. The ceremony incorporated Druidic traditions, featuring elemental dragons and invocations of deities like Gwynn ap Nudd and Brighid, along with the use of sacred waters from Avalon's White and Red Springs.

The participants aimed to cast a protective sphere over the Earth, aiming to defend it from the harm caused by fracking and ecological exploitation. A central feature of the event was the creation and distribution of a magical sigil; the 'Warriors Call Sigil'. This was designed to be a symbol of resistance and spiritual defence, the participants meditated on the sigil, placed it in their homes and carried it with them for protection. The ritual is an apt example of the shared belief in the strength of communal magical activism within the neo-Pagan community. The ritual shows how spiritual practice acts as a coordinated intervention on behalf of the earth. This ritual is a further example of how neo-Pagan ritual, although not always viable in mainstream, activism, can operate as a form of ecological resistance.

For those outside of the neo-Pagan community, such rituals may appear symbolic at best, or difficult to take seriously. However, for practitioners, these acts are deeply meaningful and rooted in genuine belief. The power of ritual is not just a symbolic resonance but there is also a genuine belief in its power in the face of ecological crisis.

Conclusion

Overall, the picture that emerges from this study is that ecological activism among Irish neo-Pagans is expressed through a spectrum of practices from conscious lifestyle choices to spiritually charged ritual action. Whilst the participants were not actively involved in official environmental organisations or formal protest movements; their ecological concerns were consistently woven into their lives through their belief system and rituals. Whether though planting seeds during the Spring Equinox with ethical intent or invoking protection through magical sigils, participants enacted a form of activism that was intentional and grounded in a sacred relationship with nature. The practices discussed throughout the study mirror the

findings of other studies (Pike, 2001. Roberts, 2011) reinforcing that whilst neo-Pagan activism may resist the traditional activist framework but contribute meaningfully to environmental consciousness and care. This supports Taylor's (2005) hypothesis that the belief in the sacredness of nature encourages ecological concern and commitment, in this case the commitment was not in an overt or conventional activist form. Nonetheless, caring for the Earth and the natural world was not a separate political or ethical obligation; it was imperative. The neo-Pagan rituals embodied a worldview that nature is not only ensouled but deserving of reverence and protection. In the next chapter, the focus shifts from activist expression to beliefs, portraying how the participants understand the relationship between humans and nature and how the belief systems in place challenge the anthropocentric views found in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Chapter 8 Human- Nature Relationships

This chapter presents the participants' understanding of the position of human beings within the wider ecological order. Rather than positioning themselves as separate from, or superior to the natural world, the participants consistently described a relational and reciprocal framework; one in which humans are embedded in a web of interdependence with non-human life. I will begin by outlining how participants describe their interconnectedness with nature and how this results in a deep rejection of anthropocentrism. The chapter also explores participants' critique of institutional religion, in particular Catholicism, which they viewed as lacking a meaningful ecological consciousness and failing to encourage environmental responsibility. These critiques are then followed by a final section examining the participants' emotional and ethical responses to ecological harm, showing how their grief, anger and care emerge from their perception of human-nature relationships.

The Belief in Interconnectedness

All of the participants expressed a belief in the interconnectedness of humans and nature, believing that both are equal; this view was expressed through their animistic beliefs and worldview. Participant 2 explained, "theres no hierarchy for us. We are part of this web. We don't see humans as above nature," emphasising a philosophy based on mutuality and deep ecological kingship with the other-than-human world. This is inline with the central belief system found in many other Pagan communities; that humans are not central to the earths eco-system and rather they are one type of 'people' amongst many other living things (Rountree, 2012: 308).

Participant 3 clearly echoed this understanding, remarking, "my view would be very much human in nature… actually also human as nature… I always try to remember my body is as much a part of the earth as everything else. I absolutely see that interconnectedness." It is evident that as well as the participant showing an intellectual understanding of the ecological embeddedness, it was deeply felt in their bodily awareness. This fulfils the the theory proposed by Ezzy (2009) who argues that neo-Paganism allows practitioners to engage in a sense of kinship with nature that is both imaginative and experimental. Through ritual engagement and sensory attunement to the natural world, practitioners often come to feel that their identities are entangled with the landscape itself. In this view, interconnectedness is not metaphorical, it is

felt and enacted through a relational ontology that collapses the binary between self and environment as the participant felt at one with nature.

Rejection of Anthropocentrism

Through this belief in the interconnectedness of humans and nature, all participants instinctively rejected the idea of human dominion over nature. This rejection is a common in neo-Paganism because of the baseline belief that nature is sacred and deserving of reverence and care. Participant 5 highlighted, "For me, we're all in this together. We're part of the same system. I mean, how could a puny human seriously think they have dominion over the sea, or the weather? We don't have to look very far to recognise our limits, the floods, the storms… nature makes it pretty clear who's in charge." This reflection demonstrates a core asset of neo-Pagan thought: nature is not subordinate to humans, but a force with its own power (Hengst-Ehrhart and Schraml, 2013: 255). This challenges dominant Western paradigms of control over the environment instead affirming a relationship based on interdependence between both human and nature.

Each participant acknowledged that Christianity does very little to display its concern for the natural world and the environment. They believed that this is deeply seeded in Christian thought and theology. Participant 1 narrated that before they had found their journey into neo-Pagansim, their birth religion, Catholicism, did not encourage reflection on their environmental behaviours. Participant 3 viewed Christianity's take on environmentalism not as an intentional disregard but rather as an almost automatic outcome of Christian doctrine which they felt prioritises human dominion over nature rather than coexistence between the two. In fact, the participant even contemplated the difference in approaches between the Catholic and Protestant Churches in Ireland:

"I don't even mean that it's anti-nature. It's more that it's missing it. It just doesn't really know about it. Like, if you go to a Church of Ireland [Protestant] harvest festival, the church is decorated, there's a celebration of the season. There's a sense of drawing in the harvest. There's no real equivalent in Catholicism here…One thing I'd love to see over the next few years is the Catholic Church in Ireland becoming more ecologically minded. If you go to Church of Ireland services, for example, there's often a bit more of that. I think it's because of the different histories."

As aforementioned, each of participants came from a Catholic background and they decided to move away from their family religion for a plethora of reasons, including a general dissatisfaction with how the Church deals with societal and environmental issues. A central simultaneous finding was that of the critique of the Catholic Church in its lack of care for the environment.

Participant 1 and 4 shared a direct and simple sentiment that the Catholic Church simply does not prioritise its care towards the environment. Participant 1 stated: "I was raised Catholic, and in that worldview, humans were always seen as the only sacred beings… they teach you to focus on the next world." The critique reflects a disappointment with the religion's detachment from ecological realities. In a similar manner, Participant 4 articulated, "I grew up as a Roman Catholic, which doesn't really have a particularly strong connection to nature. I suppose the concept that God created the world doesn't seem to be much accountability or stewardship required in that, and in fact, it's quite transcendent in that you're just going to go off to heaven, and you don't have to really worry about the world after." The reflection reveals a theological disconnect between creation and accountability. Transcendence, as it is framed within the Catholic doctrine diminishes a sense of responsibility for the earth through the prioritisation of the after life. This is in direct contrast to the beliefs found within neo-Paganism where spiritual meaning is located within the natural world.

One can observe that the narratives upheld by the participants very much encapsulates what was argued by Lynn White (1967) in his critique of the Catholic doctrine regarding its dismissal for the natural world. White's argument appears to very much resonate with the participants as they express their deep sorrow and anguish with the ways in which the Catholic Church approaches environmentalism. In light of White's argument, one can understand why in predominantly Catholic countries, like Ireland, people may grow dissatisfied with intuitional religions stewardship failures and turn towards a neo-Pagan path. Participant 3, 4 and 5 confirmed this, when they informed that their love of nature came before their choice of spiritual path, which may have influenced their decision in walking a neo-Pagan path.

Upon discussing the Catholic Churches' lack of environmental concern, Participant 5 contemplated, "I've often wondered about that Bible quote, that man has dominion over the Earth. I honestly wonder if it's been misquoted, mistranslated, or maybe even added in later," showing their general bewilderment at the current presentation and interpretation of the

Creation narrative. So much so, that they consider the hermeneutical possibility that the text has been distorted over time, raising questions about whether the concept of dominion is truly central to original Christian teachings or a later theological imposition. This reflection highlights a critical engagement with scripture that seeks to disentangle religious authority from environmental disregard. Like Participant 5, scholars such as Ruether (1992) questions whether these interpretations reflect the essence of Christian theology or a distortion shaped by historical power structures. Ruether heavily critiques the 'dominion' narrative found in Genesis, which she believes has been interpreted to justify the exploitation of nature. Ruether proposes that there is a need for a creation of a new theology in which views humans as partners within the creation narrative, rather than masters above it.

Environmental Grief

The participant's views consistently affirmed a belief in interconnectedness, reciprocity, and mutual care, all values that naturally led to a rejection of anthropocentric thought. Rooted in a deep respect for the natural world, many expressed feelings of grief and discomfort at the ways in which nature is mistreated, particularly as a result of dominant human-centred attitudes both in Ireland and globally. As Participant 4 reflected:

"I feel a sadness; a mourning that people would feel when they see a beautiful bit of forest being chopped down. That is happening near me, in my local town, its mostly going to be social housing. Its hundreds and hundreds if trees and mostly broadleaf. All the trees are being hacked. Every time I drive past it, I think, of course there is a need for housing, but why couldn't it be on a brownfield site? I think a lot of people who are identify as Pagans would probably be of the same mind. They would be displeased or even horrified to see such a thing."

Participant 4's experience clearly reflects environmental grief; this occurs when someone experiences a sense of loss from experiencing or learning about environmental destruction. As explored by Magliocco (2023: 419), the narratives told by neo-Pagans paint a picture of an emerging cosmology of environmental justice wherein relationships with other-than-humans play a role in the rebalancing of human-nature relationships. Magliocco (ibid, 436) believes that these narratives should be understood within a broader cultural framework as responses to environmental crisis. They function not only as expressions of grief, but also as mechanisms for promoting sustainable practices through the re-enchantment of nature.

The ontologies of neo-Paganism, being fundamentally animistic rather than naturalistic, diverge greatly from the Western paradigms of how nature is viewed and therefore demand a relational and reverent approach towards the environment. While I acknowledge Magliocco's argument that such ontologies may inspire ecological mindfulness beyond Pagan circles, I do not believe that this is their primary intention, at least not within the context of this study. The neo-Pagan participants appear to express a genuine emotional and spiritual concern for the state of the environment, rather than intentionally trying to influence outsiders to a adopt a more nature-reverent stance.

It is also worth noting that whilst the participants felt environmental grief, Participant 3 demonstrated a particularly reflexive awareness of their positionality within systems of environmental harm:

"We are embedded in systems that are so destructive. I know I'm part of the natural world, but I also know that our society and culture are often very destructive to the planet. And that's painful to witness…. I think in the face of all of that, the ability to perform ceremonies, prayers, and come together with others, it somehow lessens the pain of witnessing all that destruction."

This reflection highlights both an emotional effect of ecological awareness and how ritual practices serve as a coping mechanism and a form of active engagement with ecological suffering. Macy (2014:119) describes this process as part of the work that reconnects, where grief for the earth is not denied but rather acknowledged and transformed though communal and spiritual action. The participants view of ritual reinforces the theme of the transformative power of ritual in neo-Paganism in the face of ecological despair. The participant does not choose to retreat from the grief caused by environmental degradation; neo-Pagan ritual instead offers a space where the pain is acknowledged and shared into action.

Conclusion

It is evident that the participants consistently rejected the anthropocentric worldview in favour for a relational, animistic cosmology that recognised the interconnectedness and value of all life forms. In this perspective, human beings are not above or separate from nature and are embedded within a wider ecological web. This worldview demonstrates that the participant's spiritual beliefs inform their ethical stance and emotional responses to the environmental destruction around them. The participants critique of Catholicism is centred on

its detachment from nature and legacy of their dominion- based theology. The participants articulated a deep frustration with how the church engages with the environment and this in itself was a means to step away from the institutional religion. There was a definite sense of emotional weight of carrying this ecological awareness as the participants expressed grief, sorrow and anger when reflecting upon environmental harm. Overall, the chapter shows how Irish neo-Pagan worldviews challenge the concept of human exceptionalism and support Taylors (2005) claim of when nature is perceived as sacred, it promotes ecological commitment. Not only do members of nature religions tend to critique theological paradigms; they also foster ecologically attuned ways of being.

Chapter 9 The Relationship between Science-Religion in the Neo-Pagan Perspective

This chapter explores the extent to which the participant's beliefs and practices align or diverge from scientific perspective. I will begin by examining participant's overall attitude towards science and how they perceive their spiritual beliefs as compatible with scientific principles. The chapter then presents the key findings explaining these perspectives, including the influence of Druidic traditions as early forms of scientific knowledge and the use of mythology as a form of 'transrational' understanding.

The Blending of Religion and Science

All of the participants in study accepted that their religious beliefs of neo-Paganism were compatible with science. The participants accepted the reality of ecological problems and expressed a willingness to act on scientific warnings. Although not heavily researched, Besta et al. (2023) also reported that neo-Pagans in his study obtained pro-environment intentions, and such findings imply a positive view toward scientific issues like environmental protection. None of the participants expressed a distrust in science, and rather they portrayed science in a positive light. For instance, Participant 1 reported that:

"They [neo-Paganism and science] run quite parallel. My parents passed on beliefs that science and faith were separate and should not be mixed… Paganism opens up the possibility of blending the two… Paganism says its OK to explore, to study, to experiment, if it is for the greater good. But being raised in a strict Catholic home, I was told not to do those things. I was told it was bold."

Deeply contrary to the view found in the Judeo-Christian tradition where religion and science are not in harmony. The participant acknowledged that within their home religion of Catholicism, it was "bold" to show a blended approach between their religion, and science. Participant 1 did not experience scientific exploration in their upbringing, and neo-Paganism provided them with a new framework that affirmed this inquiry rather than discourage it. This transition highlights how neo-Paganism offers a reconciliatory space where scientific exploration is permitted, and guilt need not be felt in doing so. For Participant 1, they recognised that their religious beliefs and science could now be combined.

Plantinga (2009) suggested that secularism was a central driver in the religion- science debate, posing that scientific thought and secularism were linked. However, none of the participants within this study identified or described themselves as secular further distancing the neo-Pagan

worldview from the expected traditional dichotomy of religion versus science. Participants saw themselves as as spiritual beings who both embrace empirical knowledge and maintain an active spiritual life. Participant 3 also confirmed this dynamic when asked if science and their belief system were compatible, "100 percent. Yes, for me. I think the scientific method and the way it explains the natural world is perfectly aligned with my beliefs." This described blending is facilitated by a worldview that refuses rigid dualism; a common element in DGR, as religious and moral sentiments are embedded in narratives that cohere with science (Taylor, 2010: 14).

It is clear that neo- Pagan worldviews typically affirm scientific understandings, particularly those grounded in ecological processes. This integration is deeply rooted in the neo-Pagan rejection of dualistic thinking. Neo-Pagansim, being rooted in the anti-dualistic tradition, resists the separation of mind and body and human and nature, and therefore, extending to religion and science. Instead, it affirms a holistic cosmology, one in which multiple forms of knowing both rational and intuitive are welcomed.

Historical Lens: The Scientists of Celtic Ireland

As we have established, neo-Paganism bases, or attempts to base, many of its beliefs, practices, and worldviews on that of the Celtic world of Ancient Ireland. Participants 2, 4 and 5 all discussed the ways in which the Druids were the scientists of the past; they were the Celtic Priests; however, their role went beyond this. They fulfilled roles as judges, teachers, advisors to the king, peacemakers, and philosophers whilst being the only members of Celtic society that could communicate directly with the gods (Bonwick, 1984: 11). When Participant 2 was asked whether they believed their religious beliefs were compatible with science they responded, "Absolutely. Druids were the scientists of the past. They studied astronomy and star lore. They didn't write it down, but we can piece together some of what they knew. I'm a member of the Scientific and Medical Network, and every year they hold a Mystics and Scientists conference." As well as the response revealing a belief in the reconciliation between spiritual beliefs and science; the historical narrative surrounding the ancient Druids of Ireland was actively employed to validate the neo-Pagan worldview.

Through the casting of Druids as the early scientists and the intellectual elites of Celtic society, Participant 2 draws upon a mythic-historical integration that lends epistemological legitimacy to their spiritual beliefs and worldview. The narrative of the Druid as a proto-scientist reflects the broader tendency within neo-Paganism to reclaim and reinterpret ancestral knowledge; an element central to neo-Pagan in terms of feeling connected to their indigenous heritage, as both

spiritually and intellectually credible. Similarly, Participant 4 believed that science and druidry are hand in hand and that alchemy, a practice in Druidism is aligned with science. For them, alchemy was not merely symbolic, but a valid attempt to understand transformation and the natural properties of the world.

Participant 5 also reflected that, "we need to bring back that spirit of scientific curiosity and open exploration, asking what is possible?" We observe again, an anti-dualistic paradigm, one that attempts to revive a spirit of wonder, one the participant felt modern science had lost. Their statement hints towards a less mechanistic scientific outlook. The described perspective indeed challenges the Enlightenment-era belief that encourages the notion of religion and science as opponents. This mirrors with DGR, where sacredness is located in the natural world and ancient teachings are not disregarded. In this way, neo-Pagans affirm their compatibility with science through a historical narrative in authorising their religious beliefs and scientific worldview.

The Transrational

Participants 2, 3 and 4 discussed the legitimacy of transrational scientific thought and how this ideology is naturally embedded within neo-Paganism, particularly through mythology.

Participant 3 put eloquently:

"I'm also very aware that things like the four elements… concepts from two-and-a-half thousand years ago. They come from a time before we had modern science. But I see those as poetic tools, they're ways of connecting with the world symbolically. I've heard the term "transrational" used before, and I like it. It means stepping into a way of understanding that doesn't have to be literally or scientifically true to still hold meaning."

From this perspective, it is evident that Participant 3 believed in the co-existence of a spiritual and a scientific worldview where mythology is not disregarded as irrational. In DGR, it is common that whilst belief systems are compatible with science, there is an acceptance that science can only explain so far and they are often grounded in mystical and intuitive knowledge. Transnational belief, in this context, refers to the capacity to hold scientific and symbolic knowledge simultaneously, without requiring either to validate the other.

Participant 2 discussed mythology as an interpretive framework rooted in observations of the world and natural phenomena. They shared the Welsh mythological story of 'Merlin and the Two Dragons' and discussed their interpretation of it as an allegorical explanation of geological instability: "the red dragon presented copper, whilst the white dragon represented water and

the ground was unstable because of the elements." In the same way, the participant drew from Irish mythology, suggesting that figures such as Cu Chulainn and Lugh Lamhfhada may have originated from celestial events like comets or meteor showers. These stories, in the participant's worldview, serve as early human attempts to interpret the mysterious world around them. Through the use of mythology, Participant 2 exemplified a transrational model of thought through the embrace of science while acknowledging the richness of mythology as both an ecological and cosmological language.

Participant 4 also challenged the rigid separation between scientific and spiritual worldviews, stating that, "the sharp divide between scientific, artistic and religious thinking hasn't always existed." The Participant noted that recent developments in physics, particularly theories about the cosmos and quantum phenomenon seem to be mirroring spiritual insights, suggesting that, "science and spirituality seem to be starting to dovetail, at least to some extent." This highlights a willingness among the participant to see scientific discovery not as a threat to their belief system and instead, as a partner in deepening their understanding of the world. This is also in line with Aburrow's (2008:63) findings where Pagans in her study believed that science could prove elements of their belief system in the future.

Conclusion

Fitting neatly into the conceptual framework, the findings in this chapter illuminate the key elements of DGR; The participants indeed believed in the blending of both religion and science; a mixture that did not interfere with their spirituality in a negative way but rather enhanced it. There was a shared respect for science and this existed alongside an openness to mystical and intuitive knowledge. Participants often turned to mythology, not as irrational stories, but as meaningful frameworks that conveyed ecological and cosmological truths in transrational ways.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

Within this research, I set out to examine the ecological practices and beliefs of Irish neo-Pagans: their belief in the sacredness of nature and how this informs their relationship with ecology, activism and science. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews with five neo-Pagan participants based in Ireland, this thesis highlighted key information on a range of themes that have not yet been explored in scholarship: the neo-Pagan identity, the view of nature as sacred, environmental ethics, human-nature relationships, and the neo-Pagan perspective of religion and science. The findings sought to offer an in-depth picture of how certain belief systems, in particular nature religions, shape lived ecological experiences whilst challenging dominant anthropocentric paradigms.

The research was guided by the central question: *How do neo-Pagan communities in Ireland promote ecological values through their belief in the sacredness of nature?* Bron Taylor's theory of Dark Green Religion (2010) provided a conceptual lens for the study which allowed for the analysation and understanding of the participant's worldviews, rituals, and environmental ethics; revealing that their religious identity was not simply a matter of belief alone but also embodied by their ecological engagement.

The findings confirmed that indeed, the participants believed in the sacredness of nature and this, in turn meant that they deeply cared for nature and seen humans and nature as interconnected. However, their ecological activism was not expressed in an overt or public form. Rather, this environmentalism took place through the use of ritual and lifestyle adjustments; the participants believed that all of the rituals they performed reflected an environmental ethic, for example, the Wheel of the Year. Regarding environmental lifestyle choices the participants expressed the sentiment of one 'trying their best', a notion that insinuated that as long as people engaged with the world around them consciously and ethically, it was positive; whilst maintaining an ethos of one cannot avoid participation in everyday life due to environmental causes.

Each of the participants expressed a deep care for nature, they did not believe this had to be manifested publicly or through environmental activist groups. Rather, their form of activism was private and inward, reflecting their personal relationship with nature. This finding alone contributes vitally to the broader environmental discourse; that activism can take many forms, and spiritual worldviews may inspire ecological responsibility in ways not easily captured by conventional metrics of environmentalism. For example, in the neo-Pagan

worldview activism though ritual is completely justified, however may be misunderstood by those outside of the community.

The participant's rejection of anthropocentrism was strong and was often accompanied by strong critiques of the the Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly Catholicism in the Irish context. Participants consistently placed emphasis on the value of interconnectedness, animism, and relationality, reflecting a worldview where nature is an active community and deserving of reverence and care. The study also confirmed that Irish neo-Pagans did not find religion and science to be in conflict with each other, believing scientific understandings to be compatible and even complimentary to their religious worldview. Drawing upon transrational thought, mythology and interpretation of natural phenomena, the participants expressed a worldview that embraced multiple ways of knowing. These insights affirm Bron Taylor's (2010) thesis, that communities who hold the belief in the sacredness of nature- Dark Green Religion, participate in meaningful ecological practices. The findings suggest that Irish neo-Paganism is an apt framework for Taylor's hypothesis and confirm many aspects of his investigation.

An interesting finding was the strong feelings from participants regarding Ireland's complex colonial history and relationship with Britain. It was clear that this element of Irish history deeply formed their personal and religious identity, and they expressed a consciousness of such. It is clear that Irish neo-Paganism as opposed to British Paganism, has a more complex relationship with their national identity which, in turn, affects the religious practice. The findings suggested that Irish neo-Paganism may play an important role in the continuation and retention of Ireland's cultural revival.

Despite the data collected successfully addressing the research question, this study is limited by its small sample size and geographical scope. Four of the five participants were based in the Republic of Ireland, with only one participant from Northern Ireland, meaning certain regional perspectives may be underrepresented. The methodology relied solely on semi-structured interviews; the inclusion of participant observation of rituals or seasonal festivals would have enriched the data by offering firsthand insight into embodied practices. In future research, I would incorporate such ethnographic methods to present a more holistic view of the Irish neo-Pagan community. However, given the time and budget constraints of this study, semi-structured interviews provided a valuable and realistic foundation for exploring the research topic.

Through the recognition of these slight constraints, this not only strengthens the transparency of this research study, but it also highlights several key areas where future studies could expand understanding further. Given the situation in Ireland, where six counties are in the North remain under British jurisdiction, further research could explore the role of neo-Paganism across the historically divided religious and political communities of Northern Ireland. The thirty-year ethno-nationalist conflict known as the Troubles involved Catholic Nationalists wanting a United Ireland and Protestant Unionists wanting to remain part of Britain. The Troubles officially ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, however much of Northern Irish society remains segregated with divided communities and schools, meaning some people do not easily come in contact with people from the 'other side' until they are an adult. This in turn allows for the build up of much prejudice and discrimination about the 'other' and this is felt throughout all areas of Northern Irish society and culture. As well as this, many people in Northern Ireland struggle with their identity and find it difficult to navigate where they belong or which culture they belong to, either Irish or British. As discussed within this research, Participant 2 believed that being a Druid healed their relationship with the British, although this was not the central focus of this study, this is certainly an aspect to be followed up.

A deeper investigation is needed into how neo-Paganism is practiced and understood within Northern Ireland, particularly addressing specific culture and identity formation. Such research could illuminate the ways in which neo-Pagan communities, rooted in shared reverence for nature and indigenous traditions, may offer an alternative model and potentially unifying framework for healing sectarian divisions. Exploring how nature-based belief systems foster common ground between individuals from different religious heritages could significantly contribute to peacebuilding, identity reconstruction, and post-conflict reconciliation in the region, especially as interest in neo-Paganism rises throughout Western societies.

Overall, this research can conclude in confirming that a belief in the sacredness of nature indeed affirms neo-Pagan's ecological values, grounding their lifestyle choices and ritual practices in a deep sense of reverence for the Earth. From this, Irish Neo-Paganism offers a meaningful example of how religious and spiritual beliefs can encourage ecological consciousness and inspire new and improved ways of living with the natural world.

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Annex 1- Email Template

Dear,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Fiona Rea, I am originally from Belfast and I am currently completing my masters in Religious Studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. I came across your works in the 'Pagan Ireland' magazine.

I am conducting research on contemporary Irish neo-Paganism for my thesis. My study is titled: 'Nature as Sacred: An Examination of Ecological Practices in Contemporary Irish Neo-Paganism'. The study aims to explore the relationship between neo-Pagan beliefs and ecological awareness, with a focus on how nature is conceptualised as sacred.

I am reaching out to invite you to participate in my research. This would involve a semi-structured interview at a time convenient for you (because I am in Groningen the interview would be online). The interview would take approximately 30-40 minutes and would focus on your experiences, perspectives, and practices related to neo-Paganism, and ecology. Your participation would be completely voluntary, and all responses will be anonymised.

I would really look forward to having a conversation with you and hearing your insights. My hope is that this research will help shine a light on the important role that those within Pagan communities play in Ireland, particularly in having a deep connection with nature. Neo-Pagan communities contribute greatly to ecological awareness and environmental care, yet they remain understudied in academic discussions. I hope that by highlighting these practices, this study can offer a fuller understanding of how these spiritual traditions actively support environmental sustainability.

If you are interested, I would be happy to provide more details and answer any questions you may have. Please let me know if you would be willing to take part or if you would like to discuss this further.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best wishes,

Fiona Rea

f.j.rea@student.rug.nl

University of Groningen – Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society.

Annex 2

Nature As Sacred: An Examination of Ecological Practices in Contemporary Irish Paganism

Researcher: Fiona Rea, University of Groningen.

Purpose of the Study: This study explores how contemporary Pagans conceptualise nature as sacred and how this influences their ecological practices and activism. It aims to examine the relationship between spiritual beliefs and ecological awareness within Pagan communities in Ireland.

Research Question: How do pagan communities in Ireland promote ecological values through their belief in the sacredness of nature?

Participation Details:

- Participation involves a semi-structured online interview via Zoom, lasting approximately 30–40 minutes.
- The interview will focus on your experiences, perspectives, and practices related to Paganism and ecology.
- Participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without providing a reason.

Data Collection and Privacy:

- The interview will be audio-recorded using the application 'Otter' for research purposes.
- All personal data will be kept confidential and anonymised, unless you choose otherwise.
- Your responses will be used solely for academic research and will be included in my thesis and potential publications.
- Data will be stored securely and deleted after the project is completed, in accordance with ethical research guidelines (General Data Protection Regulation).

Your Rights:

- You can decline to answer any question during the interview.

• You can request to withdraw your data if you change your mind.

• You have the right to request further details about how your data is being used.

Consent Statement

Please check one of the following:

☐ I agree to participate in this study, understand the purpose, and consent to the recording and use of my responses as described.

☐ I do not agree to participate in this study.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

If you encounter any difficulties completing this form, please email me to confirm whether you agree to participate in the study after reviewing the participation details. f.j.rea@student.rug.nl

Annex 3

Interview Guide

Research Question: How do neo-pagan communities in Ireland promote ecological values through their belief in the sacredness of nature?

Sub questions:
- How do Irish neo-Pagan groups interpret the relationship between **humans and nature**, and how does this inform their **environmental ethics?**
- In what ways do these communities integrate **ecological principles**, such as sustainability and conservation into their religious practices? (i.e do the religious rituals aim at the protection and protraction of the environment or promotion of ecological awareness?)
- How does this promotion of ecological practices challenge or enrich the **science and religion debate** on environmental issues?
- How do these religious practices present an alternative to the **anthropocentric** views commonly found in the Judeo-Christian perspective?

General Objective: Investigate the relationship between the ecological practices of Irish neo-Pagan communities and their belief in the sacredness of nature, evaluating how these practices relate to the discourse on the science and religion debate, specifically regarding ecology.

Specific Objectives:

1. Document and analyse the ways Irish neo-Pagans express their belief in the **sacredness of nature** through ritual, symbols, and beliefs.

2. Examine the ethical and religious framework that explains the Irish neo-Pagan approach to **human-nature relationships**.

3. Assess the **ecological contributions** of Irish neo-Pagan communities to environmental activism and discourse.

4. Assess the extent to which neo-Pagan practices diverge or align with **scientific perspectives on ecology.**

Topic	**Possible Questions**	**Possible Follow-up Questions**
Introduction/ Opening Questions- Practice and Background	How would you describe your religious/ spiritual practice?	How long have you been practising? Are you part of a larger group or tradition (eg- OBOD, a coven) or is it an independent practice?
1 The Sacredness of Nature in Neo-Pagan Beliefs	How would you describe the relationship between _____ (participant's practice) and nature?/ How is nature viewed in _____? (Participants practice)	Are there particular beliefs, deities or spiritual concepts that shape/ inform your understanding/ perception of nature? If yes, what are they?
2 Rituals, Symbols and Practices	What kinds of rituals or ceremonies do you perform as part of your practice? Do these rituals/ festivals reflect an ecological awareness? (For example, protecting the environment or promoting sustainability?)	How do they emphasise a connection to nature? If environmental protection is not the primary focus on the ritual, how do these practices contribute to environmental protection in an indirect or unintended way?
3 Environmental Ethics and Ecological Activism	Are you/ your community involved in any environmental initiatives or conservation efforts? (If yes,) Is this choice influenced by being a _____? (participant's practice)	In what ways, if any, does your spiritual practice intersect with environmental activism?
4 Human-Nature Relationships/ Anthropocentrism	How do you view the relationship between humans and the natural world? *Some religious traditions emphasise human dominion over nature, while others focus on an 'interconnectedness' between the two.* Where would you say your beliefs align in this spectrum?	Are there ethical guidelines or principles within_____ (participant's tradition) that shape this view? How does your practice, if at all, influence your daily decisions regarding the environment? Do you think neo-Pagan perspectives offer a distinct or alternative way of thinking about ecological responsibility?
5 Neo-Paganism and Science/ Religion Debate	*Scientific perspectives on ecology often focus on topics like biodiversity, conservation, climate change, and how ecosystems function. Some of these ideas may connect with spiritual or ethical beliefs about nature.* In what ways, if any, do your beliefs align or differ from scientific understandings of ecology?	*Some people see religion and science as conflicting, while others believe they can complement each other.* Have you ever encountered situations where neo-Paganism was questioned or misunderstood in relation to science? If so, could you share your experiences? How do you see neo-Pagan perspectives contributing to discussions on environmental sustainability?
Final Reflections *Gratitude + Any Questions.*	Do you think there are any misconceptions about how neo-pagans engage with environmental issues? Is there anything else you would like to share about how your practice relates to nature and ecology?	

Annex 4 Transcriptions

Code
1.Spiritual Identity / Path
1.1 Personal vs. Collective Paths
1.2 Labels and Language
1.3 Transformative Journeys
1.4 Queer or Political Identity
2. Sacredness of Nature
2.1 Animism / Ensoulment
2.2 Interconnection and Reciprocity
2.3 Nature as Divine
2.4 Sacred Places
3.Rituals and Practices
3.1 Wheel of the Year
3.2 Symbolism and Myth in Ritual
3.3 Private vs. Public
3.5 Rituals of Grief / Healing / Protest
4. Environmental Ethics and Ecological Activism
4.1 Ethical Lifestyle Choices
4.2 Ritual as Activism
4.4 Spiritually Motivated Activism
5. Human–Nature Relationships / Anthropocentrism
5.1 Rejection of Human Dominion
5.2 Human as Nature / Embeddedness
5.3 Grief and Guilt
5.4 Embodied Connection to Land
6. Neo-Paganism and the Science / Religion Debate
6.1 Science and Spirituality as Compatible
6.2 Symbolic vs. Empirical Truth
6.3 Respect for Scientific Method
6.4 Critique of Scientific Dogma
7. Colonialism, Irish Identity, and Language
7.1 Reclaiming Irishness
7.2 Relationship with Catholicism
7.3 Irish Language and Place
7.4 Critique of Anglo-centric Paganism

Annex 4

Participant 1

Zoom | 20 March 2025 20:00

Fiona

Participant 1, how are you? It's nice to see you.

Just before we start, you have read what the study entails, and you agree to be a participant in the study?

Participant 1

Yes, I agree.

Fiona

Okay, and do you agree for this to be recorded by the application Otter, and also by me recording it on Zoom?

Participant 1

Yes. Full consent.

Fiona

Great. So, I'm going to read you out some questions, and we'll start with a simple one. But please feel free to diverge from what I ask. You don't have to say everything in one go; we can always come back to things at the end. If you want me to repeat anything, just let me know.

Participant 1

I'm a bit nervous. I think some of my answers might be quite abstract.

Fiona

That's absolutely fine.

Participant 1

I'll try my best not to be vague.

Fiona

No worries at all.

Are you happy to start?

Participant 1

Yes.

Fiona

Okay, so to begin, could you describe your religious or spiritual practice, if that's what you would call it? You can explain what term you use and how long you have been practicing. Just a general introduction.

Participant 1

Yeah. I would say that I identify more as agnostic than religious. I don't like the idea of belonging to one organised or structured group. But I do consider myself deeply spiritual.

Not being religious does not mean I don't have a strong spirituality, it just means I don't associate with any of the major world religions. I do a lot of personal research, and I explore things privately. I wouldn't say I belong to any one group. I kind of take bits from everything. But ultimately, I think my spirituality runs deeper than any formal religion.

Fiona

So, would you say the term spirituality better fits your belief system than religion?

Participant 1

In my mind, though I could be wrong, religion is when a group of people practice spirituality together.

Spirituality, to me, is the practice itself. It's the ritual. It's the being. Religion is more like the umbrella term for the congregation or the collective expression of spirituality.

Fiona

Okay, so then would you consider your practice to be independent?

Participant 1

No, though it shares some characteristics with religion. It involves meeting with like, minded people sometimes.

But there's no one authoritative figure setting the rules. I was raised Catholic, which was very structured and very fixed, there was one way of doing things, and that was it.

Now, what I do is much freer and more open. There are overlaps with religion, but I think, because of my upbringing, there's maybe some trauma associated with the word religion, especially given all the trauma that religion has caused in this country.

So, I guess I just feel more at ease being on my own journey rather than being told what that journey should be.

Fiona

I understand. Okay, and within that, since we're using the term spirituality, would you say it's a nature spirituality? A pagan spirituality? Are there any terms that would best describe your practice?

Participant 1

I love the word pagan, but I think it's misinterpreted in modern society.

Maybe it's because I was raised Catholic, but the word pagan is often associated with heathen, a biblical term used to describe non-christians, and it has a really negative connotation.

So, when I say pagan around my parents or elders, they often think I mean heathen. But for me, pagan refers to anything that predates the major Abrahamic religions.

I could be a Celtic pagan, or an Egyptian pagan, or something else. I see pagan as an umbrella term for pre, Abrahamic belief systems, but I know my interpretation of it is different from how modern society tends to see it.

Fiona

Okay, so would you say that your spiritual practice is something you've established yourself?

Participant 1

I wouldn't say I've established it, I'd say I'm reconnecting. I really believe that this is something already within me. I'm not inventing it; it's coming from somewhere deeper.

It's like something ancient, something ancestral. I don't think I'm creating anything new; I'm finding my place within something that's already been written. These ideas go back thousands of years. So, I haven't established it, but I've found my place in it.

Fiona

Okay, that's lovely. So, I'd like to ask you about the idea of the sacredness of nature, something that comes up in many belief systems. How would you describe the relationship between your spiritual practice and nature? How do you perceive nature?

Participant 1

A lot of my lets call them pagan beliefs, come from Celtic traditions, and particularly from the people who lived here before Christianity arrived. So, in Celtic spirituality, animism is really important, the belief that everything in nature has a soul. I strongly believe that. Whether it's a tree, a rock, or a stream, these things speak to me, and I speak to them. That did take some getting used to, because I was raised Catholic, and in that worldview, humans were always seen as the only sacred beings.

Fiona

Yes, definitely.

Participant 1

There's an amazing Celtic story about Oisín and Patrick. Oisín wants to go to heaven, but he asks if his dogs can come too. Patrick says that in his faith, animals don't go to heaven. That story really stuck with me. I like to believe we're all equal, whether you're a tree or a human being. Every living organism has a right to be here. It's all interconnected and overlapping. So, for me, that belief comes from my own personal sense of morality.

Fiona

Would you say that belief is shaped by any specific deities, stories, or spiritual concepts? Or is it more of an internal, intuitive thing?

Participant 1

I don't worship any specific deities. I love exploring them, reading about them, like, today is Brigid's Day, and that's very significant. If I were to go down the path of connecting with deities, it wouldn't be about worship. I see them more as archetypes. I've studied different religions, and I've noticed that they all seem to have similar archetypes.

A lot of pagan people I know say, "In Christianity you worship the god; in paganism, you walk with them." I really like that idea. But again, I wouldn't say I base my practice on devotion to any particular deity. I enjoy learning about them, maybe nod to them occasionally, but my practice is more internal.

Fiona

Would you say it's more mythology for you?

Participant 1

It's kind of blurred. To worship a deity feels a bit too similar to the Christianity I was raised with, something that didn't quite work for me. I love the idea of the deities, but I wouldn't base my practice around them. It's more about feeling. People ask me, "How do you know there's something beyond us?"And I just say, I know because I feel it. I hear it. I don't need to prove anything to anyone.The universe speaks in many different languages. Sometimes it's a breeze, sometimes it's something else. But I feel it, 100%. It comes from inside. But I do see the power of deities and deity worship, deity reverence. It's just not something I personally engage with deeply. I suppose I do feel it, like mythology, you're right. But yeah… I wouldn't really say that out loud usually. I do have some reverence there; I just don't actively practice it.

Fiona

So maybe it doesn't speak to you in the same way it might for others?

Participant 1

No. Though some of my practices might involve referencing things, for example, at Ostara I might paint eggs or do something small with my mum. So, I do acknowledge them, but I don't live in fear of, or expectation from, any deity. That's probably the best way to describe it.

A lot of pagans might pray to an individual deity. I don't really do that. For me, it's more of a lifestyle. There's no set structure or fixed dogma. It's fluid, it changes.

Fiona

So, the next section is about rituals, symbols, and practices. Could you briefly tell me about the rituals or ceremonies you perform, and do any of these reflect an ecological awareness or relationship with nature?

Participant 1

Yes, so, I feel really lucky to live during a time of globalisation, where I can learn from lots of different traditions. For example, you and I have burned seeds together, that practice is originally Native American. But we're doing it with respect, not as appropriation.

I'm very mindful about where I get things like sage from, it has to be sourced from Native people who actually see that plant as sacred. I make sure I'm supporting Indigenous communities. My upbringing didn't teach me that sage or those rituals were sacred, so I'm stepping into someone else's sacredness, and I try to do that with awareness.

Fiona

Okay, yes…

Participant 1

Even burning seeds is simple, but powerful. I do it a few times a week. And you need to be mindful of where you are, if you're burning something in a forest, you need to consider forest fire risks. But the main thing is respect for the source and being aware: this isn't ours. It's a gift we've been given access to by another culture. This goes even deeper. Like, take California wildfires. People don't always realise that Native Americans used to burn their landscapes in cycles, it was part of the natural order. Then we replaced native plants with palm trees and flammable vegetation. It's not just random climate change, it's consequence. I think when you push nature too far, it pushes back harder. So, in every spiritual practice, I try to leave as little trace as possible. That's the main point of that.

Fiona

And just briefly, how do you feel about trees? That's open, ended, but would you say they hold spiritual meaning for you?

Participant 1

Absolutely. Trees are a symbol of wisdom and strength. They've been here so much longer than us. You know that saying, "If trees could talk," well, I believe they can. I speak to them, and they communicate back. They ground me.

Fiona

So, what do you feel they bring to your spiritual life?

Participant 1

Comfort, sometimes even anxiety or pain, because I see what happens to them. We don't treat them well.

Also, I'm a visual artist. I could stare at a tree for hours. They're beautiful, there's just so much to them. On a basic level, they filter the air we breathe. They're literally the lungs of the planet in my eyes.

Fiona

Yes, of course.

Participant 1

I also love learning about the Celtic meanings of different trees, what each one symbolises. Every tree has a different function, a different energy. I have a great reverence for trees, I adore them. Trees are everything.

Fiona

So, moving from that, would you say you or people in your community are involved in environmental initiatives or conservation efforts?

Participant 1

Yes… and no. It depends on the context.

Take Lough Neagh, for example. At first, I was very passionate about it, very involved. But then I got disheartened and had to let go of it for now. I was interviewed recently by another student doing her thesis, and she asked me if I knew about the pollution in Lough Neagh. I was like, "Yes, I've been talking about it for two years!"

She thought it had only started in the last year. That was frustrating. I've been deep in this work, and sometimes it feels like people are only just noticing.

Fiona

Yes, I can imagine that's hard.

Participant 1

Here's another example for you in Northern Ireland! They're trying to frack through one of our most ancient sites, Beaghmore stone circles. This site is older than the pyramids. And now there's a US company trying to cut through it to access gold. Can you imagine someone trying to dig through the pyramids? So yes, spirituality motivates me to care about these things. But the world often doesn't respond in kind. And that disconnect, between the sacredness I feel and the way things are treated, is heartbreaking.

Fiona

Quick question, if we call this "Irish Neo-Paganism" as a broad umbrella term, do you think that if this form of religion or spirituality were more widely respected, seen as more firm or legitimate, like other organised religions, then things like cutting through ancient sites like Beaghmore stone circles might not happen?

Participant 1

No, I don't think so. I think Egyptology, for example, is globally recognised. Every school learns about it. There's so much evidence to support it. But for us, as Celts, as pagans, everything we had was destroyed. We were never educated, never allowed to write things down. Even the idea of Celticism or Irish Paganism is filtered through a Christian lens. The oldest pagan text I can think of is the Book of Kells, which is Christian. Before that, maybe The Book of Invasions, but even that puts the first story into a Christian framework, Noah's granddaughter coming to Ireland.

Fiona

Yeah, it's all very Christian-centric.

Participant 1

Paganism here is just seen as "what was there when there was nothing," but there was never "nothing." There was a huge, amazing civilisation. I don't see the Celts as just Irish. I see them as a nomadic, diverse, beautiful tapestry of people.

Fiona

Going back to Lough Neagh briefly, they held a wake for the lough, right?

Participant 1

Yeah, they did.

Fiona

Can you tell me a bit about that? Do you think the people participating were coming from a Pagan or ecological perspective? Especially since the wake was originally a pre, Participant 1tian, Pagan tradition.

Participant 1

Honestly, in that situation, I'd disagree, I don't think it was Pagan.

Fiona

Okay, not Pagan- centred?

Participant 1

No. I think it was the Ballyronan Blue Tits group that organised it. They're local to me. Personally, as a visual artist, I saw it more as a piece of performance art. If anything, it leaned more into a Christian framework. Christianity is commonly used in performance art because it's publicly acceptable. People have reverence for Christian ritual forms, so a wake is immediately recognisable.

Fiona

So, the visual language used, it was more Catholic or Christian, coded.

Participant 1

Yes, absolutely. And that shows just how strong Christianity still is here. I wish it had been Pagan, but I don't think it was. That doesn't make it any less important, though. It was still fantastic.

Fiona

Of course, just different from what I assumed.

Participant 1

It's like tattooing. Many men get a cross as their first tattoo because it's publicly accepted, it won't offend their parents, it's not "scary." Pagan symbols don't yet have that same level of acceptance. So yeah, to me, that funeral was more about saying, "We're good people" in a recognisable, acceptable way, not a Pagan expression.

Fiona

Do you think that group, were they ecological activists?

Participant 1

As far as I know, no, not really. It was mostly locals. Sadly, in Northern Ireland, we don't have a large ecological activist base in Northern Ireland. That group, the Ballyronan Blue Tits, was set up during lockdown. It's like the Sunrise Social group I helped create, mainly about mental health and getting people outdoors. I don't think it went much deeper than that, spiritually or ecologically. But I could be wrong!

Fiona

Okay, so maybe not so spiritually motivated?

Participant 1

I think it was more about creating a powerful, relatable image. Everyone in this country knows what a wake looks like. That symbolism resonates. And as an artist, I use Christian imagery in my own work too, because it's what we were raised with. It's familiar. People understand it. That's the power of Christianity here.

Fiona

So how would you view the relationship between humans and the natural world?

Participant 1

I think society likes us to believe that humans are consumers, we're capitalists. We're told to grow, to constantly expand. But in my opinion, that's not human nature. Everything, education, healthcare, careers, tells us we must get bigger, make more, and we end up in this rat race, constantly chasing… nothing.

Fiona

Yeah.

Participant 1

But I don't think that's our natural state. That's what society tricks us into believing is real.

Fiona

Right. In some religious traditions, there's the idea of human dominion over nature, humans are above nature. Others emphasise interconnectedness and equality. Where would you say your beliefs lie?

Participant 1

I'd say I'm deeply in the "working together" camp.

I remember reading about agriculture. Ireland is obviously an agricultural country, "agriculture" literally means to "aggravate the land," to extract something from it. Then I learned about permaculture, which is the opposite. It's about working with the land to create permanent abundance.

But here's the thing, there's no money in it. Like with the lightbulb, Tesla created the first one, and it still works. But then Edison added a breaking mechanism so it would stop working. Why? So, we'd have to buy more. That's capitalism. It's the same with agriculture, just pump it out, make profit.

Fiona

Yes, capitalism.

Participant 1

But with permaculture, there's a way to live in harmony with the land. I'd love to live off my own land and not harm anything in the process. But modern society doesn't allow me to do that.

Fiona

Is that motivation guided by your spirituality?

Participant 1

Yeah, definitely. I think naturism and paganism really value growing your own food. And not just for the physical nourishment, there's spiritual nourishment too. Mental health nourishment. It's all connected. It's all one.

It's hard to separate out what's spiritual, what's emotional, what's physical, it's all one. That's why I love Celtic art. All the lines intersect and pass and return. It's so fluid. Just like belief.

Fiona

Yeah, it's all intertwined.

Participant 1

Exactly. And Celtic art might look simply but try drawing it. It follows natural patterns. Those ancient artists didn't have tools; we have iPads now! They used the stars above them. It's like Art Nouveau, but 1,000 years earlier. Art Nouveau is about revering nature, and I think Celtic art did that long before.

Fiona

That's a lovely perspective. Do you think that this Neo- Pagan way of viewing the world has helped shape your relationship with nature? If you hadn't been exposed to it, would you still feel the same?

Participant 1

I think Paganism asks you to look.

In life, we rarely stop and look at the trees. But Paganism kind of demands it.

Fiona

That's a lovely way to put it.

Participant 1

I'm in a Pagan group on facebook, about 10,000 members. Every day, someone new will post, "I'm just coming out of a Participant 1tian background, what do I need to do to be Pagan?" And the most common reply is stop overthinking it. Go out, sit by a stream, watch the sky. With my Christian background, I had to unlearn a lot. looking for a lot of answers. It's a lot more of a grey area than that. Paganism is not about finding the answer. It's about asking better questions. Paganism demands you; you have to listen.

Fiona

Just being.

Participant 1

Yeah. And listening. Paganism asks you to forget what you've been told and go ask nature instead. Find your own answers, look for the correlations between nature and yourself.

Fiona

And really listen.

Participant 1

That's what I see every single day in that group, its people asking for guidance. And I think the main idea I've taken from celticism, and paganism is finding your own answers. Go out, explore for yourself. It not only makes you notice nature more, but it also encourages you to be freer, to become part of it, and to see the connection between your inner world and the outer world. It's all one.

Fiona

Yeah. Okay, thank you. So now, just briefly, this is our fifth and final theme. Scientific perspectives on ecology often focus on things like biodiversity, conservation, climate change, and how ecosystems function. Some of these ideas can overlap with spiritual or ethical beliefs about nature. So, people might care about climate change not only for scientific reasons, but for spiritual ones too. Given that, where do your beliefs align, or differ, from the scientific perspective?

Participant 1

I think they run quite parallel. Growing up, especially with the beliefs my parents passed on, science and faith were seen as separate, they shouldn't be mixed. But paganism, for me, opens up the possibility of blending the two. We live in a modern world, we have technology, and we can now prove things that used to just be theories. But my parents, for example, would've said things like, "Oh, that's a test from God." That's the kind of belief that still exists around here, conservative, literalist views.

Fiona

Sure.

Participant 1

Paganism says it's okay to explore. It's okay to question, to study nature, to experiment if it's for the greater good. But being raised in a strict Catholic background, I was told not to do those things, that it was bold.

Fiona

Don't question.

Participant 1

Exactly. And my mum is quite close with a local group of Jehovah's Witnesses, who are also against many spiritual beliefs. I remember finding a pamphlet about space in the house, and it described space as a test from God. I just thought no. I mean, I've never been to space, but still…

Fiona

Right.

Participant 1

Leaving a structured, conservative faith gave me the freedom to explore my own beliefs, and that, in turn, helped me to accept science and see it as something positive. Of course, there are issues, there's greenwashing and corporate manipulation, things being sold as ecological, but they are not. but I do believe the science itself is valuable. It all ties back to what you said earlier, we've turned everything into a market. Even nature.

Fiona

Everything is marketable now.

Participant 1

Even nature. Exactly.

Fiona

So just briefly, would you say paganism, broadly speaking, allows science and religion to coexist in harmony?

Participant 1

Absolutely, 100%. And going back to my earlier comment about the term "heathen," some of my family members assume that being pagan means I've rejected Christianity. But that's

not true. I have friends who worship Christianity as part of their spiritual practice. I even know people who identify as both Christian and pagan.

Fiona

So, paganism allows you to be in harmony with science, and also potentially with other religions too. Is that because of its flexibility?

Participant 1

I think it's because paganism doesn't focus on fixed dualities like good versus evil, or God versus Satan. There's no absolute division; it's just the universe. And if good and bad do exist, you know them inside yourself. Paganism empowers the individual to recognise what's right and wrong from within, rather than being told what to believe.

Fiona

So, it's more guided by your intuition?

Participant 1

Exactly. There's a divine presence within you, and also outside of you. And those two are in conversation with each other.

Fiona

And what would you say that external divine is? Just the world around you?

Participant 1

That's a good question. It's something I think about a lot. I think the best way to describe it, in less abstract terms, is "Mother Nature." But I don't mean that in a gendered or symbolic way, I mean the whole of nature, the entire universe. There are patterns and rules written into every living thing, into DNA, into ecosystems, and those rules are consistent. Something wrote those rules. Maybe it was nature itself, or maybe bacteria, who knows. But something larger at play.

Fiona

Okay.

Participant 1

I just don't want "Mother Nature" to be misinterpreted as this lady of the field. I mean it on a much larger, cosmic scale, the full scope of nature and existence.

Fiona

I think that was a really nice way to put it.

Participant 1

It's hard to explain because I'm still figuring it out. It's an ongoing journey.

And maybe if you asked me again in a year, I'd have different opinions. But that's the beauty of this, it's a journey. It's not an organisation, it's not about right and wrong. It's something that keeps moving, like a stream that never stops. It feeds my curiosity and gives me a reason to keep going in ways. I'm not doing this to antagonise anyone, I'm doing it to understand the human instinct to ask: why are we here?

Fiona

Yeah. And would you say it helps you answer that?

Participant 1

Yes. It gives me faith. I have no fear. Just like this spiritual journey never ends, I don't believe anything truly ends. I don't even fear death. That belief gives me so much freedom, like, I'm just here, part of something, and we keep going. This is just a little speck of dust in the universe.

Fiona

That's nice.

Participant 1

Yeah. It's hard to put into words sometimes.

Fiona

So that was the end of the final theme, the whole science and religion conversation. The last thing I want to ask is: do you think there are any misconceptions about Neo-Pagans and their engagement with environmental issues?

Participant 1

100%. A thousand percent.

Like I said earlier, words like "heathen" or even "pagan" are so misunderstood. It's actually painful. Some very extreme Christians in my family have said things to me that are really triggering, like, "The rituals you do are destroying the forests," or "You burn fires, you harm nature." And I'm just like, try to be less judgmental. We don't "burn fire" recklessly. We light a sacred fire, we sit around it, we talk, we feed it with the correct fuel. It's intentional and respectful. Meanwhile, how many fires were lit to build your Jaguar? You know? It's all perspective. There's so much hypocrisy in those accusations, and the value of what we do is totally misconstrued by modern society. And yeah, paganism in Ireland is growing. There are so many new groups forming, and of course, the media will focus on the negatives. The positives never get reported. Even the word "ritual" has a negative connotation now, and

that's a shame. Because to me, ritual is a beautiful thing, it creates space, meaning, connection. But the language we use makes it sound dark or dangerous.

And that's a big part of it too, language. Or, I should say, the language that was forced on us. Our native words used to have different meanings, different emotional weight. English, I think, is a very harsh, judgmental language. Even the very words we use shape how people view paganism. Words like "abracadabra" actually come from mystical roots, they mean "what I speak, I create." That's a pagan concept. Language matters. It literally creates reality.

So yeah, a lot of what we do is misread as negative. I've had people screw up their face when I talk about my spiritual practice. Like, worshipping with nature? That freaks people out. But I don't blame individuals. I think it's deeper than that. It's about the culture, the language, the worldview we've inherited.

Fiona

Okay so it's about construction of language, I guess.

Soon a finishing note… we have key themes: sacredness of nature, rituals symbols and practises, ecological practises and environmental activism, human nature relationships and science religion debate. Would you like to contribute anything else to these themes?

Participant 1

One thing I forgot to mention earlier that I really wanted to bring up is about the second theme, spiritual symbols, and practices. I studied Fine Art for my bachelor's, and essentially, I got a degree in imagery. One of the first things I learned was that you can often spot which artists were raised Catholic.

Because Catholicism is so rooted in symbolic repetition, rituals, icons, imagery. As an artist, I've carried that with me into my spiritual life. And now, as a Neo-Pagan, I still hold a deep reverence for symbols in Paganism too. Paganism, like Catholicism, is full of rich symbology, and I see a strong link between the two traditions. Theres something really fascinating about the way Catholics repeat imagery, it becomes embedded. You'll see the same symbols in their artwork again and again. And I think I continue that instinct, even though I no longer identify as Catholic. That relationship with symbolism is still part of me, and it overlaps with the way I now honour and use symbols in Paganism. The archetypes are so similar too, it's all connected. I still continue the worship of symbols even though I am not a Catholic.

Fiona

Theres that connection there right, it remains.

That's really interesting, and I totally get what you mean. Are there any other finishing thoughts?

Participant 1

I think we've covered a lot, but if you feel I was too broad or want me to clarify anything, just ask. I'm happy to reword things or go deeper if you need.

Fiona

No, it's all great. I suppose my last question is this, do you think the way you view, interpret, and care for nature is directly influenced by your spiritual beliefs?

Participant 1

Here's a finishing thought that came to my mind as you asked that. As a Pagan, I worship nature as my god... I don't really like using the word "God," because it doesn't fully capture it, but yes, nature is my sacred. And I'd say one of the biggest differences I've experienced, having spent most of my life in a Catholic household in rural Northern Ireland, is that I was taught to focus on the next world. The idea was, "Just live your 70 or 80 years, be good, and then you'll go to heaven." That perspective made this world feel temporary, like it didn't matter as much. So, I'll be honest when I was younger, I didn't care as deeply. I'd have thrown rubbish out of my car window without thinking twice. But Paganism flips that. If you believe your energy stays here, within the land, within the cycle, you realise you don't want to pollute your own resting place. You care more, because it's all connected, and it's not disposable.

Fiona Right, because that belief system makes this world feel like a holding place, something you can disregard a bit.

Participant 1

Exactly. As long as you're "a little bit good," you're told you'll move on to somewhere better. So why worry about this place? But in Paganism, this place is sacred. It's not something to trash and leave behind. It's something you stay part of, always.

Fiona

So, you're saying that in some religious upbringings, there's not always a need to treat the Earth well, because it's seen as temporary. But within Paganism, you believe you're one with it?

Participant 1

Yes, this Earth is a visual representation of what's going on inside us. My upbringing was very much, "Do your best and then move on." But now, it feels much deeper. I honestly feel like I've reached a kind of enlightenment. I see it all as one big, interconnected thing, and I'm really grateful for that. If you'd known me at 17 or 18, you'd never have expected this. I was always searching for something, though. And maybe that "something" awoke when I began exploring different faiths.I don't even like calling it the "pagan path" because it's more than a path, it's a lifestyle. It's deeper than one organisation or one belief system.

Fiona

Yeah, I've just written that down. That's really interesting.

Participant 1

It's been so nice to talk about all this. Honestly. It means a lot to speak to someone who understands. Most people look at me like I've got my head in the clouds. I get that quite a bit. But religion, spirituality, it's fascinating. The research side of it too. It's all just class.

Fiona

Well, Participant 1, thank you so much. You have my extreme gratitude.

Participant 1

Thanks again for letting me take part.

And you were very professional felt very safe and easy to talk to. Thank you.

Fiona

Thank you very much. Bye. Bye.

Participant 1

Bye, thank you.

Participant 2

Zoom | Monday 24th March 13:00

Fiona

Hi Participant, thank you for sending the signed form. I know you've already given your consent, but just so I have it on the recording too, you're okay with this being recorded and used in the study?

Participant 2

Yes. Sure.

Fiona

Great, thank you. To begin with a general question, could you describe your religious or spiritual practice? What would you call it, and can you tell me a little bit about it?

Participant 2

Okay. I'm a Druid. Now, Druidry, we don't consider it a religion, certainly not in this part of the world. For me, it's a nature, based spiritual path. It's a nature, based spiritual path where we look to the landscape and the seasons as metaphors for our lives. It's really important to cultivate a rich inner world. We speak of having an "inner grove," and when that inner world is in sync with the outer landscape, then we experience harmony and balance in our lives.

We do this by marking the Wheel of the Year, every six weeks, there's a seasonal festival.

Just yesterday, we celebrated the spring equinox, which is all about seeds. During the ritual, everyone took a pot, added some soil, and planted a seed with an intention, something they're hoping to grow, whether that's inspiration, a project, or personal growth. This is traditionally the time for planting anyway. Even in Christian Ireland, Saint Patrick's Day was seen as the time to start sowing. Not that people planted on the day itself, because it was a holy day, but it marked that period of getting the early crops in. So yes, every six weeks we hold a ceremony to remind us of where we are on our own path.

It's dogma, free. The next festival coming up is Beltane, in May. Each ceremony reflects something happening in the landscape, and in ourselves.

I'm a member of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. In our order, there's no dogma, no one sacred text, no big book. Our Druidic ancestors didn't write anything down, so we actually don't know how they practiced. We infer from stories, from the landscape, from the Irish language. We've had around 30,000 members worldwide. You don't have to be of Celtic ancestry to join, if the values of the path resonate with you, that's enough. We have polytheists, monotheists, duotheists, atheists, animists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, you name it. People weave their own spiritual beliefs into their Druidic practice.

Fiona

If they feel called, right?

Participant 2

That's right.

Many members have left their religion of origin, some want nothing to do with it anymore, while others bring parts of it into their practice. Because we're not fundamentalist, that's fine. In stricter religions, you might be told you can't be a Druid if you're something else too, but that's not our approach. So Druidry is both a spiritual development path and a personal development path.There are three strands in our order: the Bardic, the Ovate, and the Druid grades. The Bardic grade is the foundation. It's about connecting with your landscape, the seasons, the elements, and finding your inspiration. The Welsh call it Awen and in Irish it's Imbas. It's about tapping into your creativity through that connection with nature. Creativity can take many forms: gardening, writing, poetry, it's all encouraged. Then, if you choose, you can progress to the Ovate grade. That's more of the shamanic strand. It's the poet, seer, the fáidh in Irish, the diviner, the one who navigates past, present, and future.

It involves working with herbs, deepening your connection to nature, going into the forest. It's a wide field. We don't formally train herbalists, but we introduce people to that path. Some members work with herbs metaphysically or esoterically; others work more physically, like I do as a trained herbalist. Some just work with the symbolic or divinatory power of herbs. Then we have the healing strand, the Druid grade, which is the more philosophical. That grade is about the pursuit of wisdom. It's the role of the teacher, the ritual holder, the ethicist. And personal responsibility is really important, because we don't have a sacred text or a rule book.

You're expected to act from your own internal moral compass, using your own ethical lens. You take responsibility for your actions. So, you don't have to be a vegan or a vegetarian to be a Druid. You may choose to be, but those decisions are entirely up to you. And I think that's why we have such high membership because it's not about dogma. People aren't looking for that anymore.

Fiona

It's not so fixed or institutionalised, you know?

Participant 2

Exactly. I always say, if you're looking for certainty, you're on the wrong bus. Our training is done by distance learning. Each course lasts a year, and every month you receive lessons. You take them at your own pace, and we have a mentorship system too. If an exercise feels right for you, great, do it. If not, leave it and come back to it later. But if you don't like anything in the course, well, again, you're probably on the wrong bus. You have to find what's meaningful for you. And of course, if you're in a place that doesn't have hawthorn trees, for example, you find a substitute that fits your context.

Fiona

Right, so it's adapted to where you are.

Participant 2

Exactly. You're encouraged to make sense of it based on your context. We're a non-hierarchical organisation. Theres Chosen Chief, who works alongside the Pendra

gon, who is the sword bearer, charged with protecting the intention of the Order, and a Scribe, who protects the writings. Beyond that, it's all flat. People volunteer their time. Service is important in Druidry, it gives you meaning. But how you serve is up to you. We encourage members to create little seed groups to hold their own ceremonies. Many are solitary practitioners. During COVID, we began holding ceremonies online, and now we encourage people to create virtual groves via Zoom, it's really taken off. We actually have a lot of members in the Netherlands!

Fiona

Ah yeah, nice!

Participant 2

Technologies helped it a lot. Because we don't know exactly what our ancestors did, some Druids like to be reconstructionists and insist on doing things "the right way." But I'm not interested in that, I'm not interested in the only right way. For me, Druidry is a living, growing spiritual path that's relevant to our world today. And especially with climate issues, it really speaks to people.

In fact, our membership rate doubled in 2020. I like to think it's because I took over, obviously! [laughs] But I think it was COVID, and the growing awareness around climate change. It's calling to people. Some of our members are activists. Others meditate for peace. It doesn't have to affect anyone else's spiritual beliefs. What's important is knowing that you can hold both. There are Druids who say, "You can't be a Christian and a Druid." But in our Order, absolutely, you can.

Fiona

Yeah, I really like that. It's attractive. People can feel drawn to it and make it work in their lives. Some beliefs are hard to let go of, and that's okay, if people want to hold onto what they were raised with.

Participant 2

Exactly. People ask me, "Do you believe in God?" And I say, it's not about belief. It's about what I know.

The real question is: does it work for you? Does it bring you joy? Does it nourish you? If you belong to a religion that terrifies the hell out of you, then something's wrong. Your relationship with divinity, however you understand that, whether it's the soul in the rocks and trees, or a man or woman in the sky, should nourish you. It should support you and give your life meaning, not frighten you. So many religions are fear, based. I remember, many Christian sects are very strict. Same with Islam. And fundamentalist groups like Orthodox Judaism, it's not the same as the more open branches. In our tradition, it's different. It's about your

relationship with the world. I love the animistic worldview, it sees everything as ensouled. Last year we had a speaker give a talk on animism. He explained that we are ensouled beings who eat other ensouled beings. Even bugs, parasites, everything is ensouled. When we eat, we are fed by these other beings.

Fiona

I love that idea.

Participant 2

It challenges the vegetarian/vegan debate too. If everything is ensouled, then it's not just about meat or honey, plants are ensouled too. In the natural world, every species survives by consuming another. We experience loss all the time, and when we die, we become food for something else.

Fiona

Yeah, it's a cycle.

Participant 2

Exactly. And I find that really reassuring.

What I do take issue with is how animals are treated in the meat and dairy industries. The issue isn't whether we eat animals, it's how they're treated, and whether our food is ethically sourced.

Were the animals treated well? Were the people producing the food paid fairly?

Fiona

And that's up to each person to decide, right?

Participant 2

Yes. None of us live in an environmentally neutral way. Whether you drive a car, an electric car, or use public transport, every action has an environmental cost.

Fiona

Right, and people have to figure out for themselves where they want to make those choices.

Participant 2

Exactly. We can't avoid impact, but we can be conscious of it. I spent some time in Africa.

Fiona

Was that what got you into this path?

Participant 2

Yes. I trained as a psychologist originally, but I was always interested in healing practices.

When I lived in Lesotho, I joined a healing group. Later, in Kenya, I became really interested in herbalism. I met a medicine woman from the U.S. and did sweat lodges with her. I also went through initiations with a healer in Tanzania. But over time, I grew frustrated, because it wasn't from my landscape.

Fiona

Yeah, I get that.

Participant 2

Then someone came over to do workshops with us, and I found a book: The Modern, Day Druidess by Cassandra Eason.

Fiona

Really?

Participant 2

Yes! It was so practical. It wasn't about needing to live in a certain way or place, it made Druidry accessible. Even a few potted plants could be a start.

At the back of the book, she mentioned training with OBOD. She was a solitary Druid, but she recommended their course. I looked it up and felt drawn to it.

At the time, I was also deciding whether to do a postgraduate psychology course in supervision, but I knew I couldn't do both.

Fiona

That's a big decision.

Participant 2

It was. But I chose OBOD's introductory course. I never ended up doing the psychology training. I fully committed to the Druid training, and it felt right.

The course covered myths and legends, mostly Welsh, but I realised I needed to revisit my own Irish mythology first. I had learned the stories in school from the nuns, but they were still part of my heritage.

Recently, I went into a school and asked the children if they knew some of the Irish myths…

Fiona

And?

Participant 2

Most of them hadn't heard of them. That's such a shame.

I became an agnostic when I was nine. But it was through the myths and legends that I found my way back, not just to spirituality, but to the Irish language as well.

I spent the last term of primary school in Connemara. The kids there didn't speak English, so I picked up good vernacular Irish, real Connemara Irish. By the way, I know you're from the North, but where exactly? Do you speak Irish?

Fiona

Sadly, no, I'm from Belfast. It's really coming back, though. My mum is learning it now. My granny speaks Irish, and my mum is picking it up.

My mum now texts me in Irish, and then makes me translate it, which is great. It's really coming back.

Participant 2

It's magical. It's beautiful. Druidry is so connected to the Irish language. For example, we were always oriented toward the sun. You follow the sun. There's a phrase in Irish: cas an aghaidh ar an ngréin, turn your face to the sun.

Fiona

Oh wow, that's so beautiful.

Participant 2

So, in our ceremonies, we stand in a circle, and we begin facing east. In Irish, the word for "behind me" is thiar dom, which literally means "to the west of me." There are so many clues in the Irish language that point toward the natural world. That's why I made sure my daughter got a good start. She was home, educated until she was 14, then started school. When my kids were younger, my Irish wasn't good enough to speak fluently with them, but now we send voice notes to each other in Irish.

Fiona

That is so lovely. And my granny, well, she still speaks Irish.

Participant 2

Is your granny still alive? Then go and speak with her, you have to. You'll find magic there.

And of course, it's growing in Belfast. Have they started putting up the road signs in Irish yet?

Fiona

It's progressing, yeah.

Participant 2

That's beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous. How old is your granny?

Fiona

She'll be 85 next month.

Participant 2

My mum's 88. She learned Irish in school, but her parents didn't speak it, because it was banned!

Fiona

That's a whole other study in itself.

Participant 2

It is! But Druidry brought me back to my own language, and it healed that wound between the two countries. I was in the Order for seven years before I finally went to a gathering. I'd set up a grove here, and for 22 years we've been celebrating the Wheel of the Year. But the druid camps always clashed with mine, so I couldn't go. When I finally went to the gathering, I was terrified. I was really conscious of my Irish accent because I'd experienced anti- Irish sentiment before. The comments, you know? We walked up the steps of the town hall in Glastonbury and there were two people holding staffs. They said, "You're very welcome." One of them heard my accent and said, "Oh, you're Irish! My parents are Irish, my grandparents too!" People were lovely. So many came up to tell me their own Irish connections.

Fiona

And they can feel proud of it.

Participant 2

Exactly. I grew up hating the English. That was the story I was raised with, "This is what they did." And they did do it. But someone recently said to me, "I feel so guilty." And I said, get over it! You didn't do it.

Fiona

Thank you so much, Participant. You've given me such a rich overview.

I think some of the themes might come up again later. So now I want to move on to the next section, sacredness in nature. I know we've touched on this already, but just to ask directly: would Druidry view nature as sacred?

Participant:

Now, the thing is, about Druidry, we're not looking at nature and saying, "Isn't nature nice?" We are part of it. Our sacredness is interwoven with everything else. I think it's about bringing that awareness forward. It's about sitting still, maybe under a tree, talking to it, feeling it, sensing it, breathing with it. We breathe out carbon dioxide; the tree breathes it in. It's about noticing the birds, the insects, and appreciating them. And it's funny, during ceremonies, someone might open the East, which is associated with air. What associated with the air? Birds. It'll be still, and then suddenly two buzzards fly by, or birds burst into song. Or when someone opens the South, connected with fire and the sun, then a spark jumps out of the fire and the fire that's been quiet suddenly flares up.

These are magical moments. Druidry is about magic, those gifts, it's not about casting spells, but manifesting presence. The Irish word for Druidry and magic is the same its draíocht. It's about finding magic in connection, and when you connect with nature, it often conspires with you. One lovely example, we were doing a full moon ceremony. It was wet and cloudy, but we were still out there. We're not fair, weather Druids. Someone spoke a few words, like "welcome moon" and just like that, the clouds opened.

People ask me, "How did you do that?" I don't command the weather, but it happens. I do celebrant work, weddings, ceremonies, and often the rain will stop just before we begin. I always say, "Thank you, rain. I appreciate all you do to nourish the land. Thank you for holding off just for this ceremony."

Fiona

That's amazing.

Participant 2

I like ants. People hate them, but when I find them somewhere inconvenient, I say, "Thank you for all you do, you're the cleaners, but this is my place." And they move. I've done it in Africa and here. They will move away.

I remember a friend's bathroom in Dar es Salaam; the wall was covered in ants. I asked them gently, "Please move. We need to use this space." And they did. It's not about spraying them. They never bite me. I respect them, and I ask them to move if I disturb them. It's all about sacredness that we are part of. When you have someone, you love deeply, a child, a parent, a partner, you don't think twice about putting them first. You just act. That's what it's like when you have a deep connection to your land, your place. You don't have to force kindness, it flows naturally.

Fiona

It just comes.

Participant 2

Exactly. It's not about being "a good person" or performing altruism. When the bond is strong, your care is instinctive. That's what the sacredness of Druidry is about. Everything is ensouled, the river, the rocks, every creature. Even the ones I don't like. I've been a beekeeper for 15 years, and wasps have destroyed my hives three times. I still don't know why cockroaches exist….

Fiona

But you're working on that one!

Participant 2

And it's the same with people. I don't like everyone I meet. It's not hatred, it's incompatibility.

I once met a psychologist, Gail Ferguson, who said, when people say, "I get a bad vibe from that person," it doesn't mean they're evil, it just means you're not compatible.

Fiona

That's a lovely way to look at it.

Participant 2

Right? It's like food. You don't like every food, but that's not personal. Same with people. Some trees you feel incredibly welcomed by, and others, there's just no vibe. Doesn't mean they're evil. Just not a fit. Same as a tree, it's not an evil tree, just an incompatibility.

Fiona

Exactly. Well, thank you, Participant. I wanted to talk about rituals and symbols. You've already mentioned some rituals, but I wanted to ask, do you think the rituals and festivals you take part in reflect ecological awareness? Even if it's not always intentional, do they indirectly connect to ecological values?

Participant 2

I think it absolutely is the intention.

For example, just yesterday we held a ritual around planting seeds, seeds for peace. But the seeds can be symbolic too: to help you finish your thesis, to let go of fear, to invite whatever change is needed.

Then we come into Beltane. Traditionally, it involves two fires, that would be traditional, and cattle would be driven between them for cleansing. You can see them as male and female

fires, or as one representing life force and the other inspiration. We walk between them to symbolically carry that energy into our lives.

At that time, Beltane, in the landscape, everything is exploding with growth. These creative forces, often described as male and female, are combining to germinate and create. It doesn't have to be human creation. It's about the energy of becoming, of utility. You're connecting with the vibrancy of life and being mindful of it.

Then we come into Samhain, one of the times when the veil is thinnest between this world and the other. It's a magical time. And after that, we rise with energy again, moving toward the summer solstice.

At the summer solstice, the longest day, everything is vibrant. I have a garden here, and as soon as I turn my back, everything spirals into growth, I love that.

It's about going with that immense power and recognising that everything changes. Things spiral all the time; "this too shall pass." That's very important.

There's an Irish expression: ní bhíonn tuile nach dtránn,"there is no flood that does not recede." So, when life feels overwhelming, it's important to remember that it will shift. At the solstice, the sun is at its highest point, its most powerful. And yet, that's also the beginning of its decline. That's the paradox. Life doesn't just keep ascending; it peaks, and then it returns. Things reach the pinnacle, there's a stopping point, it has to come back down.We celebrate the oak tree then, king of the trees. At that moment, it's in full power. The holly tree, on the other hand, begins to rise. It doesn't lose all its leaves, they turn yellow, but it remains present. As the oak wanes, the holly grows stronger. That's why we use holly at Christmas, along with shiny ivy, to reflect light and invite nature spirits indoors during the cold months. It's all about paying attention to those transitions. Then we move into a time of decline and eventual return. The year, like life, is circular, not linear. We surrender to that cycle. It's all about paying attention to that. Okay things decline. Nothing is static. Going with the flow. Theres something lovely about this actually.

Then comes Lughnasadh, which is about celebrating the early harvest. The wine has to go into the barrels. The first grains are cut, but the apples aren't ready yet, they come in September. So, there are two things happening: we celebrate, but we also wait. We learn patience. You've got all the ingredients, but they still need time, like wine in a cauldron. Also, with the cutting of the grain something has to die in order to be reborn. There's also death involved. To reap the harvest, something has to die. That's the cycle: life, death, rebirth. We give out bread and wine at our rituals. I remember a strong Christian, my cousin's partner, who came to me. He said, "I really like your death and resurrection theme." And it's true, it's a universal theme. In nature, for seeds to be planted, the plant that bore them must die. Corn must die to produce seeds for bread, and for saving to plant again next year. It's a cycle. But it's not about murdering. No, not at all. It's about continuity. Then we come to the harvest, at the autumn equinox. That's when we look inward during ceremony. What has nurtured your heart, your mind, your soul, your body? We express gratitude for all of that. The equinox is also about balance, equal night, and day. After that, the days either start getting longer or shorter.

I find September hard. I love the days getting longer. My father hated September too, he associated it with us going back to boarding school. He'd say, "ah now you're all going back

to school." And "Now the days are going to get shorter and shorter," and he didn't want to face that. Once I pass the equinox, I surrender. I love the dark winter. It's part of the rhythm. And then we come into Samhain. People often think Halloween is American, but it actually came from here. We sent it to America. The only thing that came back was the pumpkin! We carved turnips originally, much harder to carve, but I've started again. My hands are stronger now! And I'm better at it.

Fiona

So, we are grateful.

Participant 2

That's why we have ghosts because Samhain is the time of the ancestors. It's when the veil is really thin between this world and the other, and we welcome the ancestors in.

So, in the past… We dress in costume to disguise ourselves, so you wouldn't know: is this someone from our world or the otherworld? The witch represents the crone, the third aspect of the triple goddess. She's present in the landscape, bringing the bad weather: wind, rain, frost, and cold. She sweeps the leaves from the trees. We have a ceremony where she brings her cauldron, and we burn all that we no longer need. She's fierce, but also protective. It's also a time for mischief and giving. Traditionally, people would go "trick or treating," but back then you had to earn it. When I was growing up, we had to earn it, we didn't get sweets, we might have received a bit of money, but not much, and not always sweet things. It's an important time. The harvest is in. It's time to draw in around the fire. Divination games begin, and the bonfire, Tine Cnámh, or "bone fire" in Irish, is lit. That name comes from the bones of slaughtered animals being burned. Or they may have burned the bones of the ancestors, I am not sure. People would keep breeding animals, but the rest were slaughtered and salted to prepare for winter.

Then, you retreat inward. It gets darker and darker. Eventually, you reach the solstice, a time to mourn, to sit with restriction and stillness. You wait, and then the sun is reborn. Christmas happens at the solstice. Jesus is reborn the sun is reborn. Theres a roman festival where the sun returns, and that marks the beginning of the new cycle. It's about honouring the dark, not fearing it, because that's where the seeds germinate. Seeds need the cold and the frost. Without a harsh winter, bulbs like daffodils won't flower. That's how nature works. Then the warmth returns, and we move into Imbolc, around the goddess Brigid. It's the time of first shoots. We celebrate the snowdrop as hers, even though it's not native to Ireland, because it's the first flower we see, and it always makes us happy.

"Imbolc" can mean "in the belly," or it relates to ewes' milk. Lambs are born, and the ewes are full of milk. The days are growing longer. Life is returning. In Ireland, spring starts on February 1st. In North America, like Canada, they say spring begins in May! I didn't appreciate that until recently. I'm going to Canada in June. Their seasons are different; June through September is their real spring and summer.

Fiona

That's so interesting. I've got a lot of scribbles on my page! Could you give me an example, maybe from your own experience or someone else's, of a Druid involved in environmental initiatives? Do you think their actions are driven by their Druidry?

Participant 2

I feel a bit too busy to be an activist myself, but I do my work through ritual.

Before COVID, when fracking was becoming a big issue, some members formed a group called 'The Warrior's Call.' They created a sigil for people to work with in ritual. I remember they organised a global ritual around an equinox, maybe 2016 or earlier. Fracking was really taking off, and we were asked to hold ritual worldwide to resist it. We did a second ritual during the Spring Equinox, focusing on water. Some members do protest and march, some are part of Extinction Rebellion. Others hold online rituals for healing and peace. We started doing those rituals during the war in Ukraine, about three years ago now. So yes, some protest, others do ritual. Both are valid.

Fiona

So, it's like two forms of action, but they both matter.

Participant 2

Exactly. And they're not exclusive.

Fiona

Thanks. I just have one last topic. I don't want to take up your whole day. But it's about the relationship between humans and nature. You've spoken a lot about interconnectedness. In other traditions, there's often a sense of humans being above nature, controlling it. Where would you say your beliefs stand in relation to that?

Participant 2

Theres no hierarchy for us. We are part of this web. We don't see humans as above nature. It's interesting, some people say we shouldn't eat animals, but they eat plants. So, do they see animals as more important than plants?

Fiona

Could you explain that a bit more?

Participant 2

Sure. This is just my view, but I see all beings as equal.

When I talk about everything being "ensouled," I mean that a cow doesn't have more value than a vegetable patch? And it doesn't. If a cow has value so, do. And so do all the insects

that live on those trees. Some insects eat the tree. Some trees repel insects. Those insects become food for birds. It goes on and on, everything eats something else.

Take an oak tree, it supports around 600 species so its directly and indirectly. Moths and butterflies lay their eggs there. Caterpillars eat the leaves. Birds eat the caterpillars. Then the bird poo nourishes the soil. Squirrels eat the acorns. Bigger animals eat smaller ones. It's a full beautiful ecosystem. We're all part of it. There's no hierarchy. That idea of humans dominating or sitting at the top of a food chain doesn't sit well with me. But because we have language and technology, I believe we have a duty to speak for those who don't have a voice. There's a book by Joanna Macy and Molly Brown called Coming Back to Ourselves. I used it when I was teaching. There's a beautiful exercise in it about the Council of the Animals. In this exercise, you imagine a meeting, let's say there's a proposal to build a new park in a natural area. All the stakeholders are there, including someone speaking on behalf of the trees, the river, the soil, birds, cattle, everyone. Everyone sits in a circle. No one is above anyone else. I found that incredibly powerful. Those voices need to be heard. There is no hierarchy. And now, in some countries, rivers have been granted the same legal rights as humans.

Fiona

Wow, really?

Participant 2

Yes, it happened in New Zealand some years ago. I believe also in parts of Canada, and elsewhere too. You can look it up. That's where humans come in, we have to campaign for the protection of those places. It's not about hierarchy, it's about responsibility. It's like with your child, you're not more important than them. But you are responsible for them. Same with elderly parents.

Fiona

So, it's a kind of duty.

Participant 2

Exactly.

Fiona

And when a Druid stands up and speaks for animals or rivers, would you say that's rooted in their Druidic belief system?

Participant 2

I would assume so, yes. It is very very compatible. And being a Druid gives you the language and confidence to express that. You might not be taken seriously if have a more mainstream lifestyle, like you work in a bank and you just stand up and say, "I want to speak for the mice

that live there." People will think youre coo, coo. But if you say, "As a Druid, this is my spiritual path, and I am here to speak for the natural world," people have to listen. It legitimises your voice.

Fiona

It allows for that expression; it gives it space.

Participant 2

Yes. But that's here. We have members in the U.S., and in some states, it's different. They cannot say they are Druids.

One woman I know is a school counsellor. She told me she can't even use the phrase "Mother Nature" in her school.

Fiona

That's slightly frightening.

Participant 2

It is. We used to say oh my god, everything is so America, they are so 'woo-woo', into crystals and the light… haha… but only in a certain state. Women are now being watched, investigated, especially if they're married or of childbearing age. People of colour, queer people, neurodivergent people, anyone who doesn't fit the "norm," are being pushed out of their jobs.

Fiona

It's a scary place right now.

Participant 2

It is.

When I was growing up in 1960s Ireland, there was censorship. We were 97% Catholic. Protestants were a small minority. There were maybe a small cohort of Jews one or two Hindus, a Muslim doctor perhaps, but Paganism? That was totally underground. I taught in a seminary for 27 years. I've seen all sides. But we can never get complacent because things were free in America, now they are not.

Fiona

Because things can change. You have to stay on top of it.

Participant 2

Exactly.

Fiona

Thank you. Last topic! This is about Druidry and science.

Do you think there's a relationship between Druidry and science?

Participant 2

Absolutely. Druids were the scientists of the past. They studied astronomy and star lore. They didn't write it down, but we can piece together some of what they knew. I'm a member of the Scientific and Medical Network, and every year they hold a Mystics and Scientists conference. I started attending around ten years ago, first in person, now online. The first one I went to was about the nature of trees. That was 26 years ago!

You had tree, huggers, a healer from Hawaii, biochemists, climatologists, mathematicians, physicists, therapists, "woo, woo" healers, everyone. All talking the same language. Someone might talk about the spiritual connection they feel with a tree. And then a climatologist or biochemist would respond with the scientific explanation for that experience. One French engineer spent four months in the woods talking to trees. He shared how the trees spoke back to him. Others explained the science behind why that might happen. This organisation studies consciousness. There are scientists, some still "in the closet," who explore things like the multiverse and spiritual experience, but keep it private to protect their funding or careers. They're challenging the limits of scientific orthodoxy.

One scientist I admire is Rupert Sheldrake. He wrote a book called The Science Delusion, a play on Richard Dawkins' the God Delusion. Sheldrake is actually a Church of England Christian. In his book, he questions ten core assumptions of modern science. He argues that many things we're told are "scientific" actually aren't.

It's well worth reading. Anyone who had a different view within science was often silenced; there was this idea that only one viewpoint was valid. And in many ways, that still exists. But Rupert Sheldrake is a scientist who's challenged that. He wrote a book called How Dogs Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home. He studied the phenomenon where, for example, people would say, "Fido is always at the door at five o'clock." People assumed it was just habit. So, he changed things, he had the owner come home by different methods: walking, bus, bike, at different times. And still, the dog would be at the door.

He's also written about morphic resonance, asking how things like starling murmurations work, how don't the birds crash into each other? How do fish in shoals coordinate so perfectly? He suggests there's a field of connection, a resonance, that links us all. Carl Jung talked about the collective unconscious. That we're all individually tapped in but also connected to others. You get a feeling about someone, then you ring them, and they were just thinking about you. Sheldrake's done research on telepathy too. He'd arrange for someone to receive a phone call at an unknown time, and then they'd guess who it was. The results were significant.

Science tends to dismiss what it can't explain. Fundamentalists might say, "Well, we can't explain it, so let's forget about it." But a curious scientist says, "We know it works, we just don't know how."

For example, I use homeopathy. There's no physical trace of the original substance left, yet it still works. I've used it with animals; it's not just placebo. And placebo itself is powerful. About 20% of the effect of any treatment, even antibiotics, is attributed to placebo. And some placebos are more effective than others.

A good scientist stays open. Now, say I'm going out and I'm doing a wedding and it's raining in, I'm not saying I control the weather, but let me tell you something. When I'm about to do a wedding and the forecast is dreadful, I go out and talk to the sky. I say, "Thank you for all you do. Please just hold off for the ceremony." There was one Winter Solstice, it was absolutely lashing rain, gale, force winds. We were all in the kitchen, waiting to go out to the temple to do the ceremony.

A friend of mine came in and joked, "I thought you could control the weather!" I went out to the temple for something, and the sky was completely clear. I went back in and said, "Come outside." We did the ceremony, dry as anything. As we were walking back, my husband and our friend were talking. He said, "the rain will start in about 20 minutes, and it started in 22 minutes." I really don't know how that works… but it works. Another time, I was doing a wedding up at Glendalough. It was Samhain, and the rain was horizontal, we couldn't even set up the altar. I met the couple, Americans, and thought, "oh no they are going to go mad, you know?" Then, just two minutes before the ceremony started, it stopped. We got through the whole thing dry. And as we were walking back to the car, it started again, horizontal rain.

Now, you could say it's coincidence, or the power of suggestion. And maybe it is. But it happens too often for me to dismiss. These things aren't incompatible with science. Newtonian physics is very reductive; you need it to build bridges and cars. But it won't explain why birds burst into song when I call in the east during a ceremony. Each scientific paradigm works in its own area, but no single one can explain everything.

Fiona

So different paradigms have their own purpose?

Participant 2

Yes. But some scientists still say, "Whoa, no, we can't go there."

But look at Newtonian physics, then Einstein. He said imagination is vital, "Imagination is more important than knowledge."

Then we get quantum theory. Is light a particle or a wave? It depends. That doesn't make sense in traditional logic, but it's true.

Fiona

So, you think science and Druidry, or spirituality, can go hand in hand?

Participant 2

Absolutely. There's awe in not knowing, and awe in nature.

I studied science. I originally wanted to do medicine, but I didn't get the grades. So, I thought I'd do science, then go into medicine then I realised I didn't want to do that. I remember one microbiology lecturer. He looked like Jesus, beard, long hair, wore a denim suit, this was the '70s! He said science was trying to reduce life to one principle. If we could break everything down to its smallest element, then we could understand it. But science has developed, its evolving. It's becoming more compatible with spirituality. It doesn't have to negate God anymore.

Fiona

Because we're so used to that narrative: religion versus science.

Participant 2

Yes. For a long time, religion was seen as the enemy of science.

Think of Galileo, excommunicated. Copernicus too. One of them said the earth revolved around the sun, not the other way around. That went against the Church's teachings. They were punished for it. Galileo was only recently brought back into the fold. But honestly, he wouldn't want that. 400 years later you let me in, no no no! He said everything revolved around the sun. But because it conflicted with Church doctrine, it was condemned. Later, science became the enemy of religion. And now, we're realising they're just different lenses. Even in mythology, we see this. Take the Welsh tale about King Arthur. Uther Pendragon wanted to build a tower in Snowdonia, but it kept collapsing. Merlin said, "There are two dragons beneath it, a red and a white one. They need to be released." The red dragon represented copper; the white dragon represented water. The ground was unstable because of the elements. That was part of the mythology. Theres a great book, I think it's called When Gods Were Comets, it talks about these symbols.

In Irish mythology, you should know it being from Ulster. Take Cú Chulainn. He's described in battle rage, with strange phenomena around him. Some researchers now believe those descriptions were of comets in the sky. The same symbols appear in other mythologies, Japan, for instance. So perhaps what they were seeing were celestial events. And they passed those stories on.

Fiona

That's fascinating. I need to look that up!

Participant 2

It's wild, isn't it? I think the title is Gods Were Comets or something like that. In the old texts, myths were created around phenomena in the sky, stories to explain what might've been very frightening at the time. Even the god Lugh, Lugh Lámhfhada, the long, handed sun god, could that "long hand" have been the tail of a comet? And after that, it's believed he went into the pond in Eithneach. So yes, these stories were explanations for astronomical events.

Fiona

That's fascinating. That's going to be my next research deep, dive after this call!

Participant 2

I didn't give you any answers, just more questions!

Fiona

I just wanted to quickly follow up on something, you said that being a pagan healed your relationship with England. I have friends in Belfast who identify as Pagans or Druids, kind of in that general spiritual bubble, but they sometimes feel like frauds for connecting with Irish heritage while being Protestant.

Participant 2If you're Irish, you're connected to your bloody landscape, regardless of religion.

People say, "Are you Catholic?" I say, "No, I'm a Pagan." And the answer is: "Are you Catholic Pagan?"

They really need to get their act together.

Fiona

That's so true.

Participant 2

And it's not like they can't speak Irish! It's really sad, driving through the South, you see all these Irish place names that give the meaning of the land. Then you cross into the North, and it's all anglicised. There's a place I pass through on the way to Donegal called An Eidhneán,"the bright marsh." But you wouldn't know that just from the English name. My friend's a storyteller. He learned Irish in primary school, but his kids didn't, even though they're in the same school now. You have all these beautiful place names, and without the language, the meaning is lost. Then Unionists go on about the Red Hand, but that came from the Red Branch! Get your mythology sorted, look to the east, and come back to yourself. Stop fighting!

Fiona

Have you spent time in the North?

Participant 2

I have a friend from a Catholic background, and others living in Newtownards who are also Pagans. I've visited.

It was like, there I was, going around in a camper van with a guy from the Bogside. Beautiful landscapes.

I'd go northwest Donegal during the holidays.

Fiona

Especially on the Twelfth!

Participant 2

I have a friend from Raloo near Castlederg, originally Protestant, now Pagan. She used to live in Belfast and said they celebrate the Twelfth on the sixth in Ross.

I was actually up there for "Eleventh Night." She was worried, it was during COVID, and Arlene Foster had said not to do bonfires or parades. But we came across one, it was tractors with people wearing orange sashes, waving. And there I was, caught up in it! There was no paramilitary presence. It was just a loyalist area, wait, what county is Enniskillen in again?

Fiona

Fermanagh?

Participant 2

Right, Fermanagh. It was just so exciting.

But my friend is very cautious around all that, she was beaten up as a child.

Fiona

Oh my god. That's awful.

Participant 2

It is. Another friend of mine, from the South, was studying at Queen's University during the Troubles. You had pockets of safety, middle class.

Fiona

But also, hard knocks. Yeah, really hard times. But if I ever get the chance to write more on this or do research in this area, I'd love to reach out again.

Participant 2

Absolutely. It's just so sad when your friend says, "But I'm Protestant, I can't be Pagan." Of course you can. If you're born on the island of Ireland, you're Irish. Now, some say, "No, I'm British," and that's fine, it's political. But for the hardcore Unionists, it's like being the bastard son of the king, loyal to a crown that doesn't even acknowledge them. You're uniting against something, not for something. Why support the UK when it doesn't really care about you? There's so much healing that still needs to happen.

Fiona

It really does.

Participant 2

I have a friend who was a priest. He left the clergy and got involved in the pre, pre, talks, the ones even before the official peace process. He worked with Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, David Ervine, he's since been asked to mediate between ex, combatants on both sides. They've realised: we were perpetrators and victims. Now we have to talk. He's also worked in the former Yugoslavia, in the Middle East, between Israelis and Palestinians. Some of my friends are Israelis, peace activists, heartbroken by what's happening. And another friend is from Gaza. He's a refugee because of Hamas. It's all just heartbreaking.

Fiona

Yes. So much pain.

Participant 2

We're lucky to have the Good Friday Agreement, but it's fragile. It could be undone so easily.

Did you see kneecap?

Fiona

I saw Knee cap. I loved it. I love them. They're class.

Participant 2

That was a great film. I thought it was really interesting how much they were pushing, especially that teacher character.

Fiona

It was brilliant, really. And the North is changing. Belfast is changing, I really feel that.

Participant 2

I think it's wonderful that it's changing. We had a very close friend who came from a Catholic nationalist area, but he was living on a nice middle, class street, just a few doors up from an orange lodge, a very mixed area. He used to say that while we in the South moved on after Vatican II, the North stayed very conservative, because they were fighting. When you're fighting, you cling to what you know. It makes you more entrenched in your views. But it's lovely to see people starting to soften a bit now.

Paisley always said, "We're not giving in to the Pope." And I could understand that viewpoint in a way, the Catholic Church was such a stronghold. Why would anyone want to give that up?But we evolved. We introduced divorce, same, sex marriage, abortion. The North remained more conservative for a long time. Now it's great that people are beginning to let go of that entrenchment. That's how we move forward.

Fiona

Yes, but it has to be gentle. People are still so cautious.

Participant 2

Of course. And let's not forget, the original civil rights movement in the North, that whole shenanigans, it started over civil rights. And now? You have working, class Protestants living in poverty.

Fiona

There's problems with school. It's sad.

Participant 2

Exactly. And that's not because of Catholics. It's the same down South. People say, "You don't have a job because of migrants." No, come off it. You don't have a role in life because of women? No. That's patriarchy. And the truth is, patriarchy doesn't benefit men, it benefits from men. Only one man can be at the top. The rest just get squeezed. It's the same nowadays, people need to come together and see the humanity in each other. That's the curse: forgetting that we're all human.

Even during COVID, people got divided over things like vaccines. I'm pro-choice when it comes to vaccines. But in America, liberals insisted on them while conservatives rejected them. It became politicised. People thought, "If you don't want the jab, you must be right, wing." That's not how it works. Then you had people in Texas saying, "We have the right to our bodies, so we don't have to get vaccinated," while also opposing abortion rights. People got entrenched in ideas instead of saying, "I have a different viewpoint, but I respect yours."

Participant 2

That's what's happening in Northern Ireland too. The same pattern.

Fiona

Participant, I really, really enjoyed this conversation today. I've learned so much from you, and you've helped me immensely. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Participant, take care. Thank you so much.

Participant 2

Go on, éirí leat, may you rise, may you succeed.

Fiona

Thank you! Bye bye.

Participant 3

Zoom | 20th March 2025

Fiona

Hello, how are you? Thank you very much for meeting with me. Before we get started, just to double check, are you okay with me recording this on Zoom as well as Otter? I just want to have a backup in case something goes wrong.

Participant 3

Yes, that's totally fine.

Fiona

Great. And just to confirm you're happy to take part in the study, you're aware you'll remain anonymous, and if anything were ever to be published, I'd check with your first.

Participant 3

That's all fine.

Fiona

Thank you! I'd like this to be more of a conversation, so feel free to go off, topic. If anything feels too rigid or if there's something you want to add at the end, please do. We'll loosely follow five themes, and I'll give you a head- up before we move into each one.

To begin, could you describe your religious or spiritual practice, or maybe just "practice" is the better word?

Participant 3

Hmmm how would I describe… Can I ask a clarifying question? Do you mean how I would label it, or how I'd describe it to someone?

Fiona

Both. You could give me a label and then describe it. For example, is it part of a larger group or more independent?

Participant 3

My personal practice is most similar to the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. I've been a member for over 20 years. It's a light structure I can draw from, using the elements that resonate with me. To the outside …in practice, that might look like setting an intention while journaling or spending time outside. For example, today I was meditating, I was sitting barefoot, with my journal, acknowledging the spirit of time and place, maybe also the presence of a bigger spirit. Sometimes I give God names too and sometimes I don't.

Fiona

That makes sense, thank you. And how do you feel about the word “pagan”?

Participant 3

It’s the term I use most often, and I’ve grown more fond of it in recent years. I’m also a celebrant, and I recently spoke with a same-sex couple who are Irish pagans. We were talking about the word “pagan,” and how it's quite like the word “Queer” and for me, it carries a sense of radical freedom. There’s a kind of countercultural edge to it. Theres something radical about it.

Fiona

Like reclaiming something that once had a negative connotation?

Participant 3

Yes. Exactly.

Fiona

So, would you say your practice is both connected to a larger structure, like OBOD, but also rather personal?

Participant 3

Yes. I don’t really share what I’m doing with others. It’s something I do for myself, in the moment.

Fiona

That’s really nice. So, the first theme I want to talk about is the sacredness of nature within your belief system. How would you describe your belief system and nature, and your connection to nature?

Participant 3

The simplest way to explain it is to describe what I did today, sitting outdoors, I had a connection with the sun and the time of year. The seasons are particularly important to me, as is the spirit of place. So, it’s very much about the intersection of time and place. I don’t think of nature as something “out there” that we go and appreciate. To me, it’s just reality, it’s existence itself. Though when we talk about “planetary ecology,” that might be slightly different than just saying “nature.” Nature is simply what is.

Fiona

Yes, that makes sense. Do you believe, for example, that a tree has a soul? Would you say your beliefs are animistic? Do you believe, for example, that a tree is a being? Does it have a soul?

Participant 3

Yes, it's definitely a living being. It's alive, it's in relationship with other things, and it's something I can be in relationship with too.

Fiona

Yes.

Participant 3

My concept of "soul" fluctuates. I probably resonate most with the animist idea that everything is part of a kind of fluid interconnected soul, something messy and interconnected.

Fiona

Okay, yes, because the more you explore it, the more everything feels like it's part of something else.

Participant 3

Exactly.

Fiona

Do you think nature can be communicated with? Some people talk about learning the language of trees, do you see it that way?

Participant 3

Yes, but I'm always a little bit wary of projecting human voices onto other things. When someone says, "The tree told me this," I always wonder, how much of that is the tree, and how much is your own projection? It is possible to be in communion with things. I absolutely believe in being in communion with nature. I don't want to dismiss anyone's experience, it can be a poetic reality for people, but I personally take that kind of interpretation with a pinch of salt.

Fiona

That sounds like a grounded approach. Thank you. So next, I'd like to ask about rituals and symbols. Are there particular rituals or ceremonies you perform as part of your practice? If there are several, maybe you could tell me about your favourite or most recent one.

Participant 3

I have a little portable altar I use, so I can bring it outside easily.

Fiona

A mobile one, yes!

Participant 3

Yeah. In my head, I think of myself as a minimalist pagan. But then I look around and realise, oh, I've got an altar over there, and one here, and a few more things scattered around.

Fiona

That's always the way.

Participant 3 But yes, ritual is important to me. How do I put this…

Fiona

Take your time.

Participant 3

I really value the feeling of stepping into ritual. There's something about entering ritual space that gives me a structure, a way to set everything else aside so I can be fully present with my intention in that moment. When I open a ceremony, formally marking the time and space, it helps me enter that space more fully.

Fiona

Yes.

Participant 3

In that space, I'm not distracted, there's no phone, I'm not talking to anyone else. It lets me be truly present.

Fiona

That makes total sense. Quite mindful.

Participant 3

Yeah, I tend to enjoy ritual in general. I grew up in a rural Irish Roman Catholic setting, and I never rejected ceremony because of that.

Fiona

Yeah.

Participant 3

Some people feel it's too much, too many bells and whistles, but I've always been quite fond of the ritual aspect.

Fiona

It’s quite beautiful.

Participant 3

A good friend of mine, who’s also very involved in Druidry, once told me she never understood Transubstantiation until she became a Pagan.

Fiona

Ah, yeah!

Participant 3

And once she viewed it through the lens of someone who holds ritual as meaningful, it suddenly made sense to her.

Fiona

Of course. So, would you say that any of your rituals have a direct connection to nature?

Participant 3

Yes, so, all of my ritual practice begins with acknowledging the time and place I’m in. That’s essential for me. I also take part in ceremonies that follow the Wheel of the Year, equinoxes, solstices, fire festivals, and so on.

Fiona

Okay, yes.

Participant 3

Sometimes the ceremonies are shaped by a specific aspect of the landscape. Even when I’m doing weddings, I try to incorporate the couple’s connection to their home place. I’ll ask them to name a prominent feature of their landscape, like a mountain, bog, or river, so when I open the ceremony, I can invoke the natural elements of their home and the place we’re in.

Fiona

Thats really lovely. And building on that, would you say any of these rituals by you or others within your community reflect an ecological awareness? A kind of intention to care for or protect the environment through ritual?

Participant 3

Yes. Often, that awareness shows up in rituals specifically focused on magical activism, rituals done with the intention of protecting the earth or responding to environmental concerns. That comes back to the basic principles of magic: the belief that we’re co, creators of our world, that we have the ability to bring about change and help create a better world. That intention often supports political or grassroots action.

Fiona

That's really great. I was actually going to ask if you or anyone in your community are involved in environmental initiatives or conservation work.

Participant 3

People I know definitely are. Personally, I wouldn't say I would specifically be, I have a meadow in my garden. But I do what I can. I grow food in my garden and try to live in a way that's conscious of the land. Theres an overlap in those communities. But in group spaces, I've noticed a lot of people are very environmentally active, whether it's activism, community gardening, or conservation work. There's definitely a strong overlap.

Fiona

Yeah, I was just thinking, there's a definite overlap. Do you think that this choice to be more eco, friendly or ecological is influenced by the fact that they are, broadly speaking, Pagan?

Participant 3

I don't know which comes first.

Fiona

Yeah, that's what I wonder too. Is it that they're eco-friendly, so they're drawn to a nature-based religion? Or is it that they follow a nature religion, and that leads them to want to protect the environment?

Participant 3

I think probably a love of nature comes first.

Fiona

Nature comes first, okay.

Participant 3

Because I think that's a fairly universal experience. And then people start trying to find ways to relate to the natural world, and to themselves, in a more structured way. Although even as I say "structured," I know some people who would completely reject that idea. They wouldn't want any structure at all.

Fiona

Yes, of course. But still, we all need a way to express ourselves, in some form.

Fiona

Do you think that people involved in this kind of Pagan and/or ecological activism actually implement those values in other areas of life, like their transport choices, whether they're vegetarian, or how they use energy?

Participant 3

I think most people do their best.

Fiona

Do their best, yeah.

Participant 3

I know people who give it everything, for a while, but it's really hard to sustain that and still participate in the world as it is.

Fiona

Very difficult.

Participant 3

I do notice that, like, people might fly, but usually only to go to an event, you know?

Fiona

Okay, okay.

Participant 3

And there's definitely a lot more vegetarianism and veganism in these spaces than there would be in other ones.

Fiona

Yes, I've noticed that too.

Participant 3

I think the general feeling is that people do their best to be non-capitalist.

Fiona

Yeah, they're being mindful at least. Okay, that's interesting, thank you. So, the next thing is this idea of the relationship between humans and nature. In some religious traditions, like Christianity, for example, there's this emphasis on human dominion over nature. But in other religions, particularly nature, based ones like Paganism, there's more of an emphasis on interconnectedness. Where would you say your beliefs align in this?

Participant 3

Yeah, it would very much be human in nature. But also, human as nature. I always try to remember that my body is as much a part of the Earth as everything else.

Fiona

Yes.

Participant 3

And by the same token… I'm trying to find the right way to say this. I absolutely see that interconnectedness, but I also see the dominion narrative all around me. It's become so intense that sometimes it's hard to feel separate from it… not to feel caught up in it, or even part of it.

Fiona

Yes, to actually step outside of it and see it clearly, it's hard.

Participant 3

Exactly. Because we are embedded in systems that are so destructive. I know I'm part of the natural world, but I also know that our society and culture are often very destructive to the planet. And that's painful to witness.

Fiona

And hard not to wonder, can we actually help it? Apart from just doing our best?

Participant 3

Yes. And I think in the face of all of that, the ability to perform ceremonies, prayers, and come together with others, it somehow lessens the pain of witnessing all that destruction.

Fiona

It gives the feeling that we're not alone. Or at least that we're doing something.

Participant 3

Exactly. I've been going to a few Palestinian solidarity marches recently, and I've noticed that those gatherings are for me as much as for the cause. They help relieve the sense of isolation and pain at witnessing horror. Because I'm not alone. I see other people share the same values.

Fiona

And you come together in community to do something, that's meaningful. It's bittersweet, isn't it?

Participant 3

It really is. And actually, I think of marches and demonstrations as a kind of ceremony.

Fiona

Ah, that's lovely. Okay.

Participant 3

They follow the same format, you gather the people, you enter a different state of consciousness. When you're marching, you're no longer just an individual. You're part of a unity. You chant, and those chants are like ritual incantations.

Fiona

Wow.

Participant 3

You're coming together to make change in the world by raising your collective energy and sending it out. It's a spellcraft, just in a different form.

Fiona

Yeah, yeah. That's a great point. I really like that. I've never actually thought about it like that, the two being such a mirror of each other.

Participant 3

It's all part of the same act: coming together with other people to make change.

Fiona

That's really nice, thank you.

Participant 3

And by the same token, I view putting something in my calendar as an act of magic.

Fiona

Yeah, it's all around us.

Participant 3

Something I've conceptualised, something I want to happen. I connect with another person and say, "Shall we do this thing?" And then we put it in the calendar. And it becomes real.

Fiona

That's true. That's cool. So, still kind of stemming from that, I've used the word "Neo-Pagan" in my questions, but you know what I mean when I say that. Do you think this worldview offers an alternative way of thinking about ecological responsibility? Like, do you think if someone is Pagan, they maybe feel that responsibility more deeply than someone who isn't? More of a responsibility, I hope I am wording that correctly.

Participant 3

Yes, I do think so. But it also depends on where a person's focus is. There are some people and groups who are very focused on the tribal identity of a specific culture, which is valid, that's part of our collective ego, our need for identity and belonging. But then it depends how that's balanced with a sense of, "How am I relating to the wider world? What am I doing to make it better?"

Participant 3

I think it's sometimes a mistake to view Neo-Paganism as one unified set of values. There's as much of a left/right divide within Paganism as anywhere eelse, it's just less visible, because different labels are used to express it.

Fiona

That's interesting.

Participant 3

So, there can be a collectivist versus individualist dynamic, and just because people use the same kind of Neo-Pagan language doesn't necessarily mean they share the same values.

Fiona

Okay. And do you think there can be a danger in this kind of labelling?

Participant 3

Yeah. Especially in the States and parts of Europe, there are ethnocentric groups that can be quite right- wing, anti -immigrant, anti-gay, anti- women…

Fiona

Totally, anti-anything different to them.

Participant 3

Exactly. Especially if they're tapping into more war or warrior… pioneer imagery. Just because something is indigenous or ancient doesn't mean it's progressive.

Fiona

No, no, certainly not. And maybe just to branch off that a bit, because im quite interested. I find it quite frightening, and I know the link between Paganism and the right wing is strong in parts of Europe, do you think that's also the case in Ireland?

Participant 3

Much less so. I've come across a couple of individuals, usually just on the fringes. I know of a few people whose values don't align with mine on specific key points, often around gender or anti- authoritarianism, anti-government. Some people are just anti-anything the government says, and that can slip into an anti-immigrant stance too.

Fiona

Okay. Do you think they use Paganism to justify those views?

Participant 3

No Not really. Well hmmm… I think you can use any kind of language to justify that stuff. There are definitely a few people I've met who use phrases like "defending Ireland" or "Éire" in a way that feels very nationalist, but they're not in my immediate circle.

Fiona

Yeah, of course.

Participant 3

The spaces where I don't see that and the spaces where I feel safest and most aligned are more progressive, feminist, driven, often female, led, and queer, inclusive.

Fiona

That makes sense.

Of course. You need to feel safe, or what can you do?

Participant 3

Exactly. I've come across a few people who might be a bit transphobic, not many, but they're out there. But what gives me hope is knowing people in leadership who are explicitly inclusive. There's a woman in Wexford I'm friends with, she runs a priestess training program, and on her website, she explicitly says, "This *obviously* includes our trans sisters."

Fiona

Really? That's brilliant.

Participant 3

Yeah. And the fact that she says it makes it feel better.

Fiona

It does, it really does, its safe right?

Participant 3

But that needs to be said as there are still people in the broader Pagan community who wouldn't be transwelcoming.

Fiona

Okay, yeah. That's really interesting.

Participant 3

Yeah. I think we often need to break down the different kinds of values at play.

Fiona

We can't just assume that using the word "pagan" means it's a one-size- fits- all belief system.

Participant 3

Exactly. Just like "liberal" and "progressive" are not the same thing.

Fiona

Yes, exactly. That's really interesting, I've found it hard to find anything online that talks about the overlap between right, wing ideologies and Paganism. There's more available about mainland Europe, but nothing really that focuses on Ireland.

Participant 3

That's probably because the community here is so small. There are people who actively identify as Pagan, but within Ireland there's also this broader spiritual connection to landscape and place that doesn't necessarily require a label.

Fiona

No, exactly. Or sometimes it appears more as a kind of Celtic Christianity.

Participant 3

Yes, which is all very valid. I've tried to explain this to friends of mine in England. It's very different there, they have a large, visible Pagan community with well, established traditions.

But in Ireland, it's different. Like, I've taken my Catholic, identifying cousin to ceremonies, and she really enjoyed it. She didn't feel any separation with it.

Fiona

That's so true. My mum still goes to Mass, and yet she's very mystical too. Here, those two worlds can coexist. It's not as binary.

Participant 3

I think Irish culture as a whole is more nuanced. For better or worse, but it definitely is.

Fiona

Yeah, exactly. Like the wake, it's a pre- Christian, Pagan ritual at its roots.

Participant 3

Yes! This is a total aside, but a few years ago I was on a Druid celebrancy workshop. The man leading it is very well known in the broader Pagan community. He mentioned that the first time he ever saw a dead body was in his mid, 50s.

Fiona

What?! Meanwhile, we're tiny kids here, walking up to the open coffin.

Participant 3

Yeah, like giving Granny a hug, I nearly fell off my chair. A friend of mine who was there, who has an English accent but is Irish, identified, her parents are Irish, and she's spent a lot of time here, just turned and said, "It's different here."

Fiona

It is. I always think about the The Wake episode of Derry Girls.

Participant:

Someone described it as the most Irish pieces of television ever made. You've got the wedding and the funeral.

Fiona

Classic. The one time you'll see everyone you know in the same room.

I do want to come back to this whole Ireland, Britain distinction in a moment, because it came up again in another conversation today and I'd love your take on it. But just before I do, my final section is about the relationship between Paganism and science.

You know the way people often talk about religion or spirituality and science as totally separate or even in conflict, do you see your belief system aligning with scientific principles in any way?

Participant 3

100 percent. Yes, for me, definitely. I mean, there might be a kind of anti- marketing or anti-media, especially around how narratives get framed, but not toward the scientific method itself. I think the scientific method and the way it explains the natural world is perfectly aligned with my beliefs.

I'm also very aware that things like the four elements, for example, are concepts from two and a half thousand years ago. They come from a time before we had modern science. But I see those as poetic tools, they're ways of connecting with the world symbolically. I've heard the term "transrational" used before, and I like it. It means stepping into a way of understanding that doesn't have to be literally or scientifically true to still hold meaning.

Fiona

Yes, I like that. Thank you. Let me just check my notes and see if we've covered everything…

Participant 3

s that's been generated over the last 150 years or so, and much of that is based on… well, I don't want to say bad history, but sort of bad history.

Fiona

Okay, so is this the kind of reconstruction that takes place?

Participant 3

Kind of. A lot of modern Paganism is built on ideas that were written down at the end of the 19th century, based on the information they had at the time. And this connects to what I think you're going to ask next, about anti-colonialism. Because once you start poking into that, it gets really interesting to navigate.

Fiona

That's exactly what I wanted to touch on. Someone said to me earlier that their journey into Paganism, an Irish person, was actually a way to heal their relationship with England. They said when they went over, they realised, "Oh, we're all one in the same," and they didn't feel this anti-Irish narrative being pushed on them. But how does that look from your perspective, as someone who identifies as an Irish Pagan and in relation to England?

Participant 3

Yeah… that's definitely interesting. Let me try to unpack this a bit.

Fiona

Take your time if you need to gather your thoughts.

Participant 3

So, one part of it is that our relationship with Irishness is often filtered through an English lens, because we live in an Anglo-Irish world here in Ireland. So, the idea of Irishness that we have, in the English language, is already a colonial one. A lot of the narratives we've built up in the last 150 years around Irishness are sometimes Anglo , Irish creations , efforts to construct an Irish identity in relation to colonialism. Some of our indigenous identity has developed in response to trauma , the famine, the plantations. So, you end up with this really layered, entangled mess of history and cultural identity that's hard to unravel.

Fiona

Right, okay.

Participant 3

I love visiting England. I really do. I have so many English friends!

Fiona

Yeah?

Participant 3

I'm also very aware that, in my Irishness, some of the narratives we have around England are projections of them the coloniser and while that history is real, part of how we form our own identity is through opposition to that image.

Fiona

Yes, and it's important to be able to distinguish between the history and the people, right?

Participant 3

Exactly. And I think it's perfectly valid to hold multiple identities at once, and for all of them to be true.

Fiona

Absolutely. They can all coexist.

Participant 3

Yeah. I mean, I have multiple friends who identify as Irish and Polish, or Irish and British, so,

Fiona

Yes! That's so true, yeah.

Participant 3

And actually, sorry, I'm going to take a bit of a tangent here for a second.

Fiona

No, no, please do.

Participant 3

So, within the Pagan tradition, if you want to use that word, and specifically within the Druid order I'm a part of, there's this multi-year self-guided study program. It involves going through lessons, books, personal reflection… and at one point, maybe in the second grade, I can't remember exactly when, you start exploring your own past, your relationship with your land, your family history, and so on.

And I ended up going on a whole deep dive into my relationship with my Catholic heritage, and how actually , it's a welcome and valid part of me. I realised it's a gift I've received. That whole journey, including exploring mystical Christianity, just completely dissolved any sense of barriers I had between one and the other.

Fiona

That's beautiful.

Participant 3

So now when I hear people making sweeping statements like, "Catholics are this," I get a bit annoyed, because that's just not true.

Fiona

No, exactly. It's so much more complex than that.

Participant 3

Right. Like, what they're actually saying is, "The institution of the Catholic Church at this point in time, with this particular priest or this particular teaching, isn't good."

Fiona

Yeah, totally. That's very different from making a blanket statement.

Participant 3

And this also links back to the stuff around England. I think part of the weirdness around our relationship with England is that sometimes the way English people see us is filtered through their own historical relationship with their religion and Catholicism. There's a kind of othering of Catholic countries that's tied to class perceptions, to peasantry, poverty, and so on.

Fiona

Yes, and that makes so much sense.

Participant 3

And then what gets even ickier is when some of my English friends, who I really love, romanticize Irish culture. And I think, "What you're romanticizing is actually what a middle-class Englishman saw when he visited peasants for the first time."

Fiona

Wow. Yes. I never thought about it like that before.

Participant 3

So, there's all this complicated stuff to do with class, with language, with identity… and it's messy. There's no clear line.

Fiona

No, it's really not straightforward.

No, because "Irish" is a construct. It's not real in a scientific sense, you can't test it. It doesn't physically exist in the world. You're just a human being. So, your relationship with the world, your identity, you can choose to engage with that or not.

Fiona

Yes, you can choose to engage with it, or not engage at all.

Participant 3

Exactly. If that part of the story or that part of the language feels difficult or alienating, don't use it. Use what you can connect with. And I think that's one of the reasons why the postcolonial context in Ireland is so significant, it's deeply tied into our language, our place names, the stories we tell. If you explore Paganism in a different cultural context, that's not always part of the story.

Fiona

Yeah, it's slightly different elsewhere.

Participant 3

And sometimes even more complex. For example, in Australia, many Pagans there tend to be from a white European background and they're trying to connect with the landscape, but it's a landscape that was once inhabited and then depopulated of its Indigenous people by their ancestors.

Fiona

That's a complex one. It's a PhD topic in itself.

Participant 3

It really is. It's complicated everywhere. But I think the core of it is just about having a conscious relationship with the land, wherever you are.

Fiona

Yes, totally.

Participant 3

And sometimes that connection can be made without story, and other times, it requires a lot of stories.

Fiona

Definitely. And in Ireland, I think it's safe to say, we have a lot of stories.

Participant 3

We do. There was a book I read back in the '90s, written by an English university lecturer, and he made this observation, he said one of Ireland's challenges is that there's just so much history.

Fiona

It's everywhere. We live and breathe it

Participant 3

It is, it's right on the surface, all the time.

Fiona

We don't let it go. And maybe that's what makes us who we are, but yeah, it's constant.

Participant 3

Even earlier today, my mother mentioned the Famine.

Fiona

Really?

Participant 3

Yeah. She was saying how much she loves the sound of combine harvesters, just hearing them and knowing the crops are being brought in. And she said, “What if that’s because of the Famine?”

Fiona

That makes complete sense.

Participant 3

It’s actually not that long ago.

Fiona

No, we think it is, but it really isn’t. It’s closer than people realise.

Participant 3

Exactly. My grandparents’ grandparents lived through it.

Fiona

That’s so close. And now I’m wondering, thinking about my questions around landscape, ecology, and care for the world, maybe that deep sense of reverence and preservation also comes from that kind of inherited memory, like what your mum said. It’s really interesting to think about.

Participant 3

When we talk about connection to nature and the land: one of the things that inspired the revival, it’s very difficult to unpack slowly, the modern pagan movement came about in the 19th century and it was about trying to find a connection to the landscape during the Industrial Revolution and colonialism.

Things like the British Empire’s presence in India, and the ideas brought back from there. In that sense, modern Paganism is very much a child of colonialism.

Fiona

Yes, okay, that's really interesting. I haven't found a whole lot to read on that. Do you have any recommendations?

Participant 3

It's more like scattered pieces , thoughts, and conversations. If you look into the modern British movement, much of its history involves a kind of attempt to rediscover or reconstruction of British heritage. But it often only focused on the "safe" Protestant parts. It didn't really reach into the Jacobite Highlands or the Irish world , places that were more politically charged or complex.

Fiona

Yeah, I see what you mean.

Participant 3

Actually, what is his name…? Ronald Hutton!

Fiona

Oh yes.

Participant 3

His books are very wordy and in tiny font.

Fiona

Okay, but still worth the read?

Participant 3

Definitely. He's deeply embedded in the modern English Pagan movement and explores these themes quite thoroughly.

Fiona

I've found all the colonization stuff really fascinating. Also, just a quick question, what about community gatherings? Are they prominent.

Participant:

Yes. They can be. There used to be a bit more. Theres still community gatherings… Eigse Spiorad Cheilteach, 100 people or so be at that. I feel as though the internet has taken over the need for some of those spaces.

Fiona

Yes, I actually had a conversation about this earlier. The internet has changed community.

Participant 3

The information that people looked for now is now accessible though the internet.

Participant 3

Also, an interesting thing within Ireland , especially in the South , is St. Brigid' Day. Did you watch the show "What's Happened with Brigid's Day." Have you been watching it?

Fiona

Yeah I heard about that show on RTE!

Participant 3

This year was incredible. It was everywhere. It just felt… normal somehow. It was huge.

Fiona

Yeah, that's cool though, isn't it?

Participant 3

It is. But at the same time, there's still a need for community, and a specific sense of pagan connection. So I tend to go to certain services. Have you heard of the Kilkenny Grove?

Fiona Yes!

Participant 3

Exactly. When you're calling something in during ritual…

Participant 3

The OBOD are a fantastic community. But like anything else, it's not homogenous. It's expressed differently by everyone, and not everyone identifies as pagan. There are also lots of interesting conversations around gender, identity…queerness.

Fiona

Yeah, it's a spectrum.

Participant 3

Exactly , like any space, really.

Fiona

All sorts.

Participant 3

One thing I'd love to see over the next few years is the Catholic Church in Ireland becoming more ecologically minded. If you go to Church of Ireland services, for example, there's often a bit more of that. I think it's because of the different histories. In England, there wasn't such a huge rupture. The medieval Catholic Church basically continued on , it became the Church of England, and that then became the Church of Ireland here.

Fiona

Yes, that makes sense.

Participant 3

But in Ireland, we had a gap. There was a split of around 150 years where Roman Catholicism was basically underground or banned. What developed here was a form of Catholicism that was, in some ways, quite anti, nature and anti, body. It's very different from how Catholicism has been experienced in parts of Central Europe.

Fiona

Interesting

Participant 3

Yeah. So there's also this idea that the information people used to seek out privately is just everywhere now.

Fiona

Yeah. And there's so much more visibility.

Participant 3

So Catholicism in Central Europe is much more ecstatic, body , centered, and experiential. Whereas in Ireland, we've ended up with kind of a darker side to it.

Fiona

Okay, that's interesting.

Participant 3

I think the Church of Ireland actually has a lot of the pieces the Catholic Church here is missing.

Fiona

Especially cake.

Participant 3

Yeah, cake is the main thing.

Fiona

They do love a good cake and a good garden. That's what I always say. But in terms of the Catholic Church being anti-nature , what do you mean exactly?

Participant 3

I don't even mean that it's anti, nature. It's more that it's missing it. It just doesn't really know about it. Like, if you go to a Church of Ireland harvest festival, the church is decorated, there's a celebration of the season. There's a sense of drawing in the harvest. There's no real equivalent in Catholicism here.

Fiona

No, that kind of thing is just missing.

Participant 3

It's all locked into the liturgy, rather than connecting with what's really happening for people in their lives , especially around the land.

Fiona

It doesn't look outward.

Participant 3

Exactly. One of the things I'd massively change about Catholicism is the role of women. In paganism, it's often women who organize everything.

Fiona

Yeah, that's true.

Participant 3

Also, the community comes first, and the priesthood second. There are a lot of religious and spiritual groups that don't have hierarchies or institutional structures , they're community , focused. One of the big things that happened with the Reformation was that the Catholic Church lost its way. It became an institution , a corporation , rather than a community of people.

Fiona

Yeah.

Participant 3

One of the things Protestantism got right was the emphasis on individual authority and a direct relationship with the divine, rather than relying on an intermediary.

Fiona

So much of that is important.

Participant 3

Yeah. And if the Catholic Church could make that shift , if it could truly include nature and reimagine the role of women , it would be a massive change.

Fiona

It could really transform things.

Participant 3

But here's the thing, and this is also something I wrestle with in modern paganism, sometimes I see women equating themselves with the earth, and while that can feel empowering, it's actually a patriarchal concept. Because if you equate yourself with the land, and the land is something to be owned or dominated, then both you and the earth are placed under dominion.

Fiona

Yeah, true. Okay.

Participant 3

And if you're just romanticizing that idea , this kind of woman , as , earth concept , it doesn't quite sit right. You end up locking yourself into an identity that's been created for you, defining what a woman is supposed to mean.

Fiona

Yeah, interesting.

Participant 3

This is where my non , binary pagan friends have such valuable perspectives. There's a lot to be said for gendered mysteries, but also for deconstructing them. And that all ties into the

broader notion of landscape, land, and nature , because it's all shaped through language. When we ask what's "natural," what we value, what we protect, respect or treasure , we're using language to define those relationships.

Fiona

Yeah, and how we describe nature really shapes how we treat it.

Participant 3

Exactly. It comes back to a more ecological awareness, how are we causing harm, or good?

Fiona

Yes, and how we talk about it influences those actions too.

Participant 3

Yes, having language to talk about it. That includes ecological harm, but also social and human harm. One of the things I really value about pagan ceremonies is that they often hold space for healing, for acknowledging the world's pain. People will speak prayers or intentions for things that are happening , whether it's the ash dieback and the dying trees, or Palestine, or the women who suffered in the mother and baby homes. Whatever is alive and present in the room.

Fiona

That's really powerful , to be able to name those things and hold space for them with intention.

Participant 3

Yes, to say, "All that you are is welcome." That's the kind of sentiment that gets expressed.

Fiona

That's really beautiful. Well, my six themes , maybe twenty at this point , are very well covered. Thank you so much. We really did go around the world there, and I've learned a lot. But is there anything else you'd like to add?

Participant 3

Just one thing. Sometimes in Neo-paganism, especially when we're building mythologies, the stories we create aren't always right. One of the big differences between Irish paganism and something like English paganism is that here in Ireland, it's much more tied to our actual history and ancestral relationship with the land and language.

We've historically been a pastoralists. Also we have been poor throughout a lot of our indigenous history. So a lot of our mythology, a lot of our language around the seasons is asking for blessings for the time that's coming.

The indigenous spirituality, is shaped by the rhythms of tending animals and living closely with the land. Even the way we talk about the seasons, there's a sense of asking for blessings for the time to come.

Do you speak Irish?

Fiona

A bit, yeah…hello… I can bless myself.

Participant 3

There's a phrase in Irish, Go mbeirimid beo ar an am seo arís, which means, "May we be alive at this time again." It's about hoping to survive another cycle, and I think that says something important. Even within paganism, nothing is really free from the structures of our relationship with land and history.

In Ireland, for instance, our seasonal festivals , like Samhain and Bealtaine , are deeply tied to ancestral memory and a kind of peasant, rural relationship with the land. It's about survival, continuity, and community. Whereas in England, the seasonal language is often more focused on abundance , crops, harvests, the sowing cycle. It's a vocabulary of plenty.

Fiona

Yes, like there was a fulfillment there. A sense of having enough.

Participant 3

Exactly. They had more consistent resources, so they could frame things in that way. I think what I'm getting at is that the language we use to describe our connection to nature is shaped by the past, by the experience our ancestors had with the land. In Ireland, those experiences often involved hardship, being on the brink of famine, of colonization, or needing to emigrate. So our mythology and seasonal rituals reflect that deep, rooted anxiety and resilience.

In contrast, due to the Industrial Revolution and the displacement of communities, many people in England lost their connection to specific landscape. They talk about "the Land" with a capital L, this abstract concept, whereas here, we speak about particular fields, place names, family names tied to a mountain or a well. They try to create a relationship with the land, but its not the same.

There's a specific, grounded relationship in Ireland.

Fiona

That's such an interesting distinction. I hadn't thought of that before.

Participant 3

Yes, and it's just something to notice. Not to judge, but to be aware of. In Ireland, we have this layered relationship with the land: of place, of story, of hardship and memory. And in England, because of their history, industrialization, empire, movement, the relationship is more often filtered through broad movements, not specific place, based heritage.

Fiona

So that shapes how both cultures relate to the natural world today?

Participant 3

Exactly. Our connection to nature is inherited. It's shaped by stories of survival and migration, while in England it's often tied to broader national or industrial identities.

Fiona

Wow, I really hadn't considered that. That's opened up a whole new chapter of thought for me.

Participant 3

And it's different again in Scotland, and in every region. Paganism itself shifts depending on the cultural landscape it grows from.

Fiona

Yes, that's fascinating. I suppose one final question I have, since the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids is quite international, and obviously brings Ireland and England together in some ways, how do those cultural differences play out in the Order?

Participant 3

For the most part, it works fine. The ceremony format we use has evolved from a modern British druidic tradition, but here in Ireland we've adapted it, we've localised the language, incorporated Irish mythology, and translated parts into Irish. Some people in England are now actually drawing from what we've done here, which is a nice exchange. Where it becomes more complicated is in the teaching materials. They're mostly written by upper-middle-class, white English people. So sometimes the language can be quite romanticised, and there can be blind spots, particularly around colonialism and what it means to be indigenous. That's where things can feel a little disconnected for us here.

Fiona

Okay, yes, because it is different, isn't it?

Participant 3

Yes. There's often this tendency to romanticise indigenous people, whether Indigenous Americans or Indigenous Irish, as having these beautiful people with a beautiful connection to the land. But the reason they're perceived that way is often because they were colonized.

Fiona

Exactly. It's all so deeply interlinked.

Participant 3

Right. Once you gain that bit of awareness, you can start to have some compassion for them. A lot of it is just a blind spot. And we have blind spots too.

Fiona

Yes, they're not writing things with the intention of hurting Irish people, it's just a lack of awareness.

Participant 3

Exactly. And we can just as easily carry projections of others, around social class, religion, or nationality, that maybe doesnt happen in England.

Fiona

True. Maybe it's just a case of remembering we're all human, really.

Participant 3

Yes! I have a website I send my father, in-law at least once a year,"Are the Brits at it again?"

Fiona

Ha! That's brilliant.

Participant 3

So, is your study focused specifically on Irish Paganism?

Fiona

Yes, that's right.

Participant 3

That's a really interesting lens. People in other countries often have a very different relationship to land and landscape. Some, for example, have a romanticized view of Britain

as this sacred place, largely because of connections formed through international gatherings or events.

Fiona

That's so interesting.

Participant 3

In the Netherlands, for instance, land is often something to be mapped. But in Ireland, there's still this sense that the land is untameable in places. We have wild spaces you simply can't live on. That shapes our cultural mindset.

Fiona

Yes, that's so true. Whereas here, in the Netherlands, it's very different.

Participant 3

Exactly. So, the landscape itself gives us the language we use to describe it. And that language shapes our whole worldview.

Fiona

That makes so much sense. Land and language, they're totally intertwined. Well, I think that's us. You've been unbelievably helpful, Participant.

Participant 3

Thank you very much Fiona

Fiona

Thank you Participant, take care.

Participant 4

Zoom| 25th March 2025| 16:00

Fiona
Hi, how are you?

Participant
I'm just making a cup of coffee.

Fiona
Take your time.
How's it going?

Participant 4
Pretty busy. I've had a bit of a cold.

Fiona
It’s always when you're busy. That's when it happens, yeah?

Participant
Well, I launched sort of my book at Carlow, which is a hell of a long journey.

Fiona
Okay, yeah.

Participant 4
It went very well, but I was already feeling a bit funny when I came back. I was just like, wiped out. And that's the kettle boiling one second.

So, I've, I've had quite a few interviews as well to do and this and that, and then I did some gardening work with somebody, which you probably shouldn't have done.

Fiona
Okay, okay, so you've been busy.

Participant 4
Its not like I’ve lost a leg anything.

Fiona
It can take it out of you, can't it?

Participant 4
Yeah, It can. It can be exhausting, but I'm not used to doing a whole lot of promotion on social media. I mean, I do a bit like a video every week or two weeks. Now I've had to but more so sending a million emails.

Fiona
Yes, I can imagine that’s difficult.

Participant 4

Well, I find that very difficult. I have I try to spend some some time outside every day, even if it's shit weather.

Fiona
Yeah, you need to.

Participant 4
Zoom is amazing you know. My sister lives in Canada, so dead handy and the WhatsApp as well. But you can get very sucked in, it can become your world nearly. I'm very much against that. It goes against my whole philosophy of life, really.

Fiona
Totally, and you're sore, I think spending a lot of time on these things, you know, it makes your body, and your head hurt.

Participant 4
Yeah! I get sore, really unwell.

Fiona
Yeah, I find my eyes getting very sore. Well thank God for Zoom today.

Participant 4
Well, I'll be fine. Just when it's all day, that's when I start to feel a bit like my brain's scattered, and I just feel I've been… I don't know, a good analogy, but say you've been at the bottom of a well for the whole day, and suddenly you come up into, normal life, and you are shocked, wow…

Fiona
Yeah, you have to rub your eyes. Do you mind just before, we properly begin, I'm also going to record Zoom is that ok? Because it can be just my luck for things not to record.

Participant 4
That's fine.

Fiona
Thank you.
I've already gotten your form and everything, so thank you for doing that for me.

Participant 4
I forgot to tick the boxes, but I signed it.

Fiona

Yeah, that's absolutely grand. Thank you. I know your time is precious, but I will tell you briefly, we will talk about 5 topics, there will be a question or two in each.
We can go on different directions within those topics. I value your insight. You're going to be a lot more well versed on the topic, even if the question doesn't necessarily fit everything you might like to say.

Participant 4
Sure, yeah, well, fire away.

Fiona
That's brilliant. Thank you very much. So just kind of to begin. I might not be using the preferred terminology, so you can tell me, but how would you describe your spiritual or religious practice? You might prefer to use the term practice.

Participant 4
I suppose I describe myself primarily as a Druid, but I would say beyond that I'm, I would call myself also an agnostic and an animist. I suppose, I'm what you call a henotheist. There's a whole bunch of different gods you could pick as God or aspects of the One God, whatever you like. I don't particularly believe that the version I have chosen is, is the correct one? I like it.

Fiona
Yeah. Okay.

Participant 4
So, I would not say I'm not one one of these. This is the, you know, the one true path. This is the way the light and everything else is messed up and you're going to hell. I have an interest in other religions too, but spirituality that I have chosen to follow. I have been sort of actually studying Druidism since about 1995.

Fiona
Ah okay.

Participant 4
I had an interest in spirituality. I was looking at many different things, the Celtic stuff, a lot. But also, you know, I had look at everything going pretty much apart from Scientology. I lived in London, and I used to go to Cotton Court Road, and there'd be the Scientology headquarters there, where they try and rope you in for the psychological assessment.

Fiona
Oh, my goodness, yeah.

Participant 4
I was half tempted, but I never did. I see value in a lot of religions.

Fiona
That's really nice.

Participant 4
I have problems with a few of course, as well. But ultimately, I would recognize that all all religion is anthropomorphic. We've made it up. We've humanized whatever spirit or God, or deity is, in its reality. I don't think we are fully capable of fully understanding what it is. We can gain an understanding, we can experience it, we can have insights, but complete understanding. I think, is somewhat akin to like a goldfish trying to understand the world outside of its fishbowl.

Fiona
Regarding your Druidry, is this an independent practice or are you part of a larger community.

Participant 4
A bit of both, I belong to two orders.

Fiona
Okay.

Participant 4
I'm quite independent in my on my own practice …I did a lot of training with OBOD. It took me seven years to complete. But I would say, that although I do feel happy to be part of that order, there's a basic form and ritual, etc, that you learn there and then I've perhaps diverged from that, yeah, but that doesn't mean I can't still be part of it. I still do participate, maybe less than I used to, but I'm still part of it.

Fiona
Okay that's great. Thank you. The first kind of theme is, is talking about the belief in the sacredness of nature. Could you outline the relationship between your practice and how you view nature?

Participant 4

I had an interest in environmentalism before I became involved in Druidism. I mean, I grew up as a Roman Catholic, which doesn't really have a particularly strong connection to nature. I suppose the concept that God created the world doesn't seem to be much accountability or stewardship required in that, and in fact, it's quite transcendent in that you're just going to go off to heaven, and you don't have to really worry about the world after. Whereas, I suppose other religions, you could say the same, or perhaps Hinduism and Buddhism to some extent that you're concerned with beyond this material world. At the same time, there's various parts which are more so grounded in the natural world. I was very, very

impressed by Taoism, but that's very Chinese. And there's anything wrong with that, but it's not my everyday world. And to be honest, there's really almost no Taoists in Ireland, apart from Chinese people themselves in Ireland. So, it's not like you couldn't really even find a a Taoist temple, maybe you can find a Buddhist temple and a handful of Hindu temples, but such an obscure religion. You couldn't really practice it, except as a solo practitioner.
I found that there's a lot of commonalities in attitude with a Druidism, the whole world view, the holistic view.

Fiona
Okay. Yes. Thank you. The concept of the Way is very similar to the Dweller.

Participant 4

The Chinese elements are more grounded in a sphere of energy, as opposed to the actual physical , because you've got metal and fire, which are things , it's more transformative, I suppose. But then you've got this whole concept of Tao, where everything is connected, everything flows. That's very similar to what you find in both Druidism and Norse paganism, with the World Tree, Yggdrasil. You find that in some old religions as well, and maybe even slightly borrowed by Buddhism, with the Buddha sitting under this enormous tree. There's a deeper sort of hidden meaning in that , perhaps it's implying that through sitting against that tree for all this time, he connected with something deeper. Yes, and in a cosmic sense, I think that's possibly correct. So, I look at the world and I realize, for me, my life isn't more valuable than that of an earwig, a whale, or a tree. I'm just a manifestation of the divine unfolding in the physical universe. I have a consciousness, and some creatures may have slightly lower consciousness, but that doesn't mean they're any less valuable, or that they don't have a role or purpose in life equal to mine.

Fiona
What about a tree's consciousness? How would you view that?

Participant 4

Well, I think trees are more conscious than we're aware of. They can be very variable , some trees want to live 40 or 50 years, while others live thousands. They are actually able to communicate. They don't have eyes, but they do have senses. They're quite amazing , able to communicate with each other. People viewed animals similarly for a long time, and then they discovered that dolphins could communicate through sonar, that elephants can send subsonic signals over vast distances and meet each other at a chosen place. Gorillas and chimpanzees have been taught to sign and even use a typewriter, there was even one that could learn to drive. So, over time, I think there's been a reevaluation of what people may have believed a long time ago , that animals and plants are an important part of the world.

Fiona
Sure, sure.

Participant 4
Really, through rationalism a lot changed. I mean, of course, Descartes work is very

important, and I think logic is very valuable. But I think a world that's either fully logical or lacking in logic, I suppose would be a lesser world if we didn't have that. But logic on its own, it leaves you with a sort of, very, very dry on spiritual and unconnected world when everything compartmentalized.

Fiona
we need to strike a balance.

Participant 4
Yeah.

Fiona
Would you say that this consciousness that we we say that trees can have, for instance, is that what could make them be viewed as sacred? Do you think?
Participant 4
Well, partly, but they also have a very powerful role in the world.

Fiona
Yes.

Participant 4
From a human sense in that they're so useful.

Fiona
Yeah, of course.

Participant 4
But also, in the fact that they actually provide us with with the means to breathe, yeah, they can be immense. There's not that many sort of creatures that vastly huge compared to us.

Fiona
Yes.

Participant 4
And even, like, you know, an elephant compared to oak trees, like, tiny, absolutely incredible, immense trees. So, I think there's a lot of symbolism going back to the World Tree, which symbolic of these three realms, which is unique to to Ireland and Wales.

Fiona
Okay. Yeah.

Participant 4
And to some extent Scotland, that would have migrated from Ireland into Scotland.

Fiona
Okay.

Participant 4
The roots going down into the other world, the branches into the upper world. And we've got this middle realm where we live, which is like symbolized by the trunk.

Fiona
Yes, yeah.

Participant 4
And you know, you'll sometimes see like a serpent as part of that visualization. And then you've got various animals in the Norse model.
Nine different realms in their view.
But then you could have subdivided the Irish Cosmos into three and then again into three again.

Fiona
Okay.

Participant 4
So, it's quite a powerful metaphor, and in the past who had, you know, clans had very specific sacred trees. You find that in many ancient cultures.

Fiona
Yes, yeah. So, the tree has always kind of been this strong symbol.

Participant
The sycamore tree would have been sacred to ISIS.

Fiona
Yes.

Participant 4
Like if you look at Native American culture and the use of a totem, obviously.
You don't want to be cutting down too many of those. But no, they were doing on a weekly basis. It was sort of a once off. I've seen some when I went to Canada, and you know, some of them are hundreds of years old.

Fiona
Wow, yeah, fantastic.

Participant 4
A lot of them got destroyed unfortunately, but lots of them have been in museums.

Fiona
The next thing I will kind of talk about is some rituals. What type of rituals or ceremonies take place as part of your practice, and do you think that these rituals can reflect a type of ecological awareness, maybe not intentionally, but do they end up doing that?

Participant 4

Well, yeah, I tend to participate in what are, in modern terms, called the Wheel of the Year. Yes, separate festivals , it's a common modern pagan term. It varies from practice to practice. It's slightly different in shamanism, Wicca, heathenry, and Druidry. Even within Druidry, the way people celebrate can vary. There are eight basic festivals, scattered roughly every six weeks throughout the year, and the basis of this is really solo. You've also got the lunar festivals , 13 moons , and some people celebrate both the new and full moon.
So, it's grounded in nature from the very beginning. And if you spend your time in an agricultural environment or outdoors a lot, then just by virtue of being outside, you become attuned to the seasons, especially if it's something you do regularly, daily or several times a week. You notice shifts in the weather, shifts in animals , birds in particular, things like that.

Fiona
yeah. And you become more tuned in, I would imagine

Participant 4
These are deeply linked, not in an overt environmental sense, because ancient practitioners or just regular people in paganism, wouldn't of have had a sense of environmentalism in we know it.

Fiona
Yes.

Participant 4
Original Druidism died out about 800 CE in Ireland and there wasn't an environmental movement, then. I mean, talking about the last 300 years, when most of the damage has been done to the planet.

Fiona
Yeah.

Participant 4
I mean, there has been a lot of damage already, you know, but you've got this massive population growth that happened from the 1800s and it's just sort of gone up from that.

Participant 4

And along with that has come deforestation, desertification, loss of habitat, loss of species, and large, scale pollution. So, I think it's perhaps inevitable that seasonally aligned rituals and celebrations would end up becoming tied to the modern environmental movement. That's not to say everyone who's pagan or involved in these rituals is an environmentalist. There's a huge number of people, I'd have to say, who don't walk the talk. They'll say, "I love Mother Earth," but they don't do anything , they just go out and buy stuff like everyone else. But I suppose, at least in theory, they recognise the need to respect the planet , they just don't take that step to actually do something concrete. Still, that's better than not caring at all.

Fiona
Yeah, better than nothing?

Participant 4
I would hope that people who are involved in this on a regular basis would actually change their lifestyle to some degree and actually do something to make a difference.
Even if it's just a matter of giving to charities, because you don't have the time to go out and plant trees, If you have got lots of money you might donate to 'Greenpeace' or 'Friends of the Earth' at least.

Fiona
Sure. Yeah. That's what kind of leads me into my next kind of topic, which is surrounding environmental ethics.

Do you think there's any particular initiatives that Druids, in this case, would be particularly drawn to for example, Extinction Rebellion, Greenpeace? Is that a particular correlation? Have you noticed?

Participant 4
The only group that I know that has a sort of definite link with with Druidism, is extinction rebellion.
There are two Facebook groups specifically for druids who involved in extinction rebellion, and I belong to both those groups. I was involved in creating extinction rebellion in Kerry.

Fiona
Okay, cool, okay.

Participant 4
I no longer run that group. I had to. I had too many things going on… Like building the house. I mean, I retired from that. And someone else came over.
I thought, you know, there's so many issues that need addressed. I thought it was important to sort of get involved with that.

Participant 4

I'm not very political. I don't really like the political elements of it. I think this is just a human concern , and a good one. It's about our future, and the future of our children. If you talk to most people , from either end of the spectrum or somewhere in the middle , and ask, "Would you like to make the world a better place for future generations?" they'd probably all say yes. The disagreement is about how to do that , and that's where all the conflict and division comes in. I think most people do want to move humanity forward in a positive way, but there's no consensus on the path. So, in a way, taking environmentalism down a political route can actually alienate people.

Fiona
That's interesting. One thing I'm curious about that, Neo-paganism, druids, Wiccans, they generally tend to see nature as sacred.
Do you think it's that belief that can fuel their environmentalism?

Participant 4

Well, it would certainly encourage that. It's definitely not going to do the opposite , if anything, it promotes greater environmental awareness and a more conscious approach to how you treat nature. What I've seen is that it's neo-paganism, rather than original Paganism, that really emphasises this. Among the revived, surviving, or reimagined traditions , what you might call "dead" religions brought back to life , there tends to be a more holistic approach and a deeper appreciation of the natural world, with less desire to tear everything down and build a shopping centre.

Fiona
Yes

Participant 4
They feel , I suppose, almost a sadness a morning that people would feel when they see like a beautiful bit of forest that's been chopped down, actually, near me in local town, which is going to be or social housing. Oh, and like, hundreds, hundreds of trees, and mostly broadleaf really, not, not just quilt your conifers. All the trees, they've all been hacked. And I just it every time I drive past it, I'm just Thinking there is a need for housing, but why, couldn't, they couldn't have been done on a brownfield site where it's already… There is so much forestry in Ireland as it is.
I think a lot of people who are identify as pagans or Neo -pagans would probably be of the same mind. They would be displeased or even horrified to see such a thing, you know.

Fiona
Totally.

Participant 4
People say ah its just progress, its progress, but, you know, I would argue that it isn't really progress. If you're desecrating your country, you live on, yeah, short sighted definition.

Fiona

Thank you. Moving on to the fourth theme, although we've already touched on it a bit, I'd like to ask if there's anything else you'd like to add about the human-nature relationship. At the beginning, we discussed how certain religious traditions, like Catholicism, tend to emphasize human dominance over nature, this idea of control. In contrast, nature, based spiritualities often highlight interconnectedness with the natural world. Would you say your beliefs fall somewhere along that spectrum?

Participant 4
Well, I would be more leaning towards the interconnectedness.

Fiona
Yes.

Participant 4
When you think about some of the Creation mythology, you know, you could say that, you know, the biblical animal myth is sort of symbolic of our movement from sort of subconscious or barely conscious life into one of civilization and awareness. We developed technology. We began using agriculture, forming complex societies and cities. It's been a long process, but archaeology shows that people became quite sophisticated much earlier than we once thought. There was a point when we were cave dwellers, then shifted to being nomadic hunter, gatherers with some structure, and eventually transitioned into settled, agrarian, city-based civilizations.

But in that progression, something has been lost. We've elevated ourselves to a sort of divine this idea that we have some divine right to control everything. There's a term for it , an American term , I couldn't think of it at first… Manifest Destiny! That's it.

I don't believe in that concept. I think it's one that's been used to justify extreme harm across the world , to destroy other cultures, often ones much older and less attached to materialism and money. And now we're perhaps being forced to reassess our relationship with nature, because we've reached a crisis point , not only because of climate change, which is a bit of an oversimplification , but because of population growth and harmful practices, like using dangerous pesticides and plastics. These things didn't even exist a century ago. Bakelite, one of the first plastics, was only invented in the 1920s , and now plastic is omnipresent. It's likely we have plastic particles in our bodies, even in our brains.

Fiona
Scary thought.

Participant 4

People could have microplastics in their brains. Most people are polluted , they've got glyphosate in their systems from ingesting it through the water supply, because it's so widely sprayed. So, we're not only harming the actual fabric of the planet , but we're also harming ourselves. Plastic, for example, is having very severe effects on people's reproductive health

and hormonal balance. The repercussions go far beyond “Oh, it’s sad they chopped down a few trees,” or “a few birds were killed.” It’s much more serious than that.

Fiona
Yeah, yeah. There's a, there's a real lack of perspective, isn't there?

Participant 4

Yeah, and that’s largely because we run the world through economic models, rather than something more holistic or energetically balanced , something that goes beyond assigning everything a monetary value. It’s not surprising that things are this way , I’m not saying we should ban money or anything like that. But I do think we need a broader focus. If you’re running a company, sure , the ultimate goal is to make a profit and provide income for shareholders. The problem is, it can become so compartmentalized that people lose sight of the bigger picture. They often have no awareness of the terrible repercussions their actions might have , and even when they do, they might ignore it, or in some cases, deliberately suppress that information.

Fiona
Yeah

Participant 4
That information that's happened countless times in in history, a great case I often mention is DDT the pesticide.
Fiona
Okay?

Participant 4
Rachel Carson book Silent Spring is quite old now, but that's quite a seminal book her work. For which she was absolutely pilloried at the time and led of that kind of reassessment of pesticides. And thank goodness, apart from the actual deaths of people, including young children from DDT, she, she was the first person to really highlight this, this problem, and it's still a huge problem today. The companies involved just tried to discredit her, and they tried to pretend that it was all fine. There's no problem here. Nothing to see here.

Fiona
Frightening really.

Participant 4
Im sure these people were not deliberately evil in trying to kill anyone. They didn't intend to kill children. No, their thinking, our share price is going to drop and we're going to lose all our customers. So, they just tried to cover all this up. And I think that kind of behavior is not in the long-term interests of humanity. You can’t carry on like that in the long term.

Fiona

It’s quite frightening to think about.
Thank you for your perspective on that. And the next thing, it's actually our final theme. I would like to ask about your pagan beliefs and science. How would you say your spiritual beliefs align with or differ from scientific understandings of environmentalism?

Participant 4
Well, I think there's a sort of almost anomalous thing in Druidism. There is an alignment with science, in a way that alchemy would also be aligned with science. Whereas, if you look at some of the other paths, they will have little or no interest in science, and all must be anti-science, perhaps.

Fiona
Is that right?

Participant 4

There’s often a focus on alternatives, but in my study of Druidism, there’s a belief that druids of the past , while their knowledge was only a fraction of what we have now , served as both scientists and religious practitioners. If you look back to the pre, Renaissance period, and even during the Renaissance, the division between the arts and sciences wasn’t so rigid. Philosophers and scientists were often also painters or engaged in other creative practices.

That sharp divide between scientific, artistic, and religious thinking hasn’t always existed , but today, it feels much more pronounced than it once was. Interestingly, if you look at modern physics, it seems to be aligning more and more with spirituality. As we’ve discovered more about the cosmos and all its mysterious, bizarre phenomena, science and spirituality seem to be starting to dovetail , at least to some extent.

Fiona
Yeah, okay.

Participant 4

Maybe these two sides of thinking , science, and spirituality , aren’t necessarily enemies. Perhaps they can meet halfway. That’s the approach I try to take. I don’t reject science , far from it , but I also try to look at the world in a holistic way. I think there’s a real need for spirituality, for emotional life, and for a broader attitude that embraces many different disciplines, rather than relying on just one. The trouble is, some people who are scientific are also atheistic, and can become almost religious in their belief in science , to the point where it substitutes for religion. They end up excluding everything else from life, saying science is everything and everything else is rubbish. I wouldn’t be inclined to see the world that way. I think we need to approach life , and all human problems , from more than one angle.

Fiona
Of course.

Participant 4

By doing so, you probably get a more complete picture, and probably more complete solution to problems.

Fiona
Yeah, absolutely. But there tends to be a rejection of that approach a lot of the time, doesn't there?

Participant 4
So I am definitely not full on pro, science, but I'm certainly not anti-science its an important part in our world, and I think a lot of progression we've made has come through that. And in fact, a lot of solutions to our problems can come through science if they're used in a in a sensitive and holistic manner, instead of, you know, as a blunt instrument.

Fiona
Yes, sure. And may I just ask you, because now I am quite intrigued. It's not on my question sheet… But what kind of paths do you think could maybe have these more anti-scientific beliefs?

Participant 4
Well, it's hard to be specific, and I don't want to generalize.

Fiona
No, no, of course, of course.

Participant 4

I would say that in a lot of alternative or “hippie” circles , and even within some elements of paganism , there tends to be a fair amount of anti-science thinking, or at least a lean toward pseudo, science. Of course, I can really only speak about individuals rather than whole movements, but if I were to generalize, I’d say New Age spirituality often includes that kind of thinking. And honestly, it isn’t particularly helpful when it comes to solving problems or understanding the world in a fuller way. I think science and religion , or spirituality , are both ultimately trying to do the same thing: to understand the world, to understand life, the universe, the cosmos. They’re just coming at it from two very different directions to achieve the same end.

Fiona
And we need both.

Participant 4
Yes, I think we need to to use both and where the two can be unified or cooperate with each other, then I think that's beneficial. The other attitude isn't actually helpful in any way.

Fiona

No, no , and the more people take this kind of balanced approach, the more space there is for real conversation. That's where it has to start , to find some kind of dualistic solution, which is really interesting. But Participant, that was my final theme, and I think we managed to keep it to around 40 minutes, which is great. Just before we finish , do you have any final comments or any questions for me?

Participant 4
Not really I suppose. The one thing I would say is, from my experience, I think it's good to be as open minded as possible, and one should not be closed in their thinking. Be open to at least looking at different or new ideas. I'm not a great fan of dogmatism. I think it doesn't benefit anybody, really to become too entrenched in your ideas.

Fiona
No, no, to kind of keep this fluidity is nice, right?

Participant 4
Yeah, I think it's very easy for spiritual parts, or even people's own press becomes fossilized, yeah, rigidity and dogmatism,

Fiona
Well Participant, thank you very much. You've definitely given me a great insight and a lot of notes to go on further look things up now, so you may be giving me another bit of writing to do. That's all we want. That's a sign of a good conversation. But I really appreciate you taking the time. I know things are very busy for you and everything and and I certainly learned a lot from from listening to so thank you very, very much.

Participant 4
Yeah, I don't mind if you want to use you can do it anonymously. Or if you want to use my name, that's grand.

Fiona
That's good to know.
Thank you very much, but I appreciate the time, and it was nice to meet you.

Participant 4
Yeah, it was nice meeting you. Interesting questions!

Fiona
Thank you. I'm enjoying it very much.

Participant 4
Well good luck with the rest of your research.

Fiona

Participant, you take care. All right. Thank you very much. Thanks a million. Bye, bye.

Participant 5
Zoom 28th March 2025 | 10am

Fiona
Hi Participant, thank you very much for joining me. Its nice to meet you!

Participant 5

Thank you. Absolute pleasure! Its nice to meet you too.

Fiona
You have signed and sent me the consent form so thank you for that. Just to make sure you are okay for this to be recorded on both Otter and Zoom. The interview should take about 30 to 35 minutes, that's usually what they run. I'll go through five general topics, with a question or two in each, but we can absolutely diverge from them. It's very informal, and everything you share is really valuable. I'll probably scribble a few notes as you talk, just things to look up later, if that's okay?

Participant 5

Yes sure. Is the sound okay for you?

Fiona

Perfect, how about on your end?

Participant 5

Lovely, thank you.

Fiona
Great. So, just to get us started, would you describe your practice as religious or spiritual? And maybe talk a bit about how long you've been on this journey, or just your spirituality in general?

Participant 5
Yeah, so I was born a Catholic. I'm from Dublin, and I practiced the faith my parents brought me up with. I went to a convent school until I was about 16 or 17, and that's when I started questioning things. It felt very male, dominated, I wondered, where are the women? And also, my LGBTQ+ friends weren't included, which made me uncomfortable. So, I stepped away from that and began to explore. I'd read the Bible. I practiced Buddhist meditation and yoga. I really stepped away from everything, but I found myself yearning, seeking a spiritual connection. Through that exploration, I eventually settled into a yoga practice, though without the Hindu philosophy, shall we say. I continued meditation, but again, not rooted in Buddhist doctrine. I suppose up until my early 30s, I was approaching things from a mind, body, spirit perspective. Then I came across shamanism, and that felt like an umbrella, it brought together many of the things that had been innate in my life: my love of nature, my connection to everything around me. It gave me a real sense of cohesion, a framework that matched where I was naturally being led in my beliefs. That's when I started wondering more about the indigenous practices of these islands, of the Celtic islands. And that's when the Irish Celtic shamanic way really started to resonate deeply with me.

Fiona
Okay, that's lovely, that's such a nice journey. Really interesting. So now, I'd like to talk a bit about your belief in the sacredness of nature. Could you tell me more about your spirituality and your relationship with nature?

Participant 5

Yes. I'm actually quite conscious of the fact that the term "Celtic shaman" or "shamanism" is a bit of a misnomer. So, Celtic, yes, in that it relates to these islands. But actually, it goes even further back, pre, Celtic, really. And "shamanism" is a term that came from Siberia. Interestingly, the Siberians themselves didn't even use it, it was their neighbours who called them that. The term can mean "one who is on fire," "one who has died many times," or "one who knows." So it's incredibly ancient. Nowadays, it's become almost ubiquitous as a term to describe indigenous spirituality. A lot of people hear it and think of Native American traditions, the First Peoples of Canada, or Aboriginal Australians.

Fiona

Yes, that's where I initially associated it too.

Participant 5

Exactly, yeah.

It conjures up that sense that it is something very old, but also deeply connected with nature. Technically, the Druids would have been the shamans of these islands. Druidry today has a slightly different connotation, a very good one, but for me, it was the healing aspect of the shamanic way that really spoke to me. I mean, I was the child who played with the fairies. That was normal. Everyone did, until you go to school and suddenly realise, oh, maybe not everyone does this. Nature speaks to me always has. I often smile when I think about how many of us were taught how to pray, to God, Goddess, or whomever, and how to ask for what we need. But very few are taught how to receive an answer. In the shamanic worldview, nature speaks to us. It's a reciprocal relationship.

So if I have a question, a worry, or I'm feeling confused about something, and I'm out in nature, say I see two little birds fighting over a scrap of food, I'll think, yeah, maybe I need to go and apologise, and perhaps the other person will meet me there. Or if I'm feeling low and I go outside in winter and see this beautiful, delicate little snowdrop pushing up through the bold, dark earth, coming into spring, I'll think, yes, okay. Good job. Keep going. For me, I am of nature. I'm not in nature, I'm part of it. The earth, the sky, everything altogether. There are differen energy vibrations. For example, a stone would have a different vibration to me, to a flower, to a chair. Theres a consciousness, if you will in all living beings, in all beings.

Fiona

Okay. Yeah, part of everything. Now I will talk about rituals and ceremonies. Do you think that, even if it's indirect or unintentional, rituals that you might take part in as part of your practice reflect an ecological awareness?

Participant 5

Yes,. Ill give you an example, just last week, actually, we held a ceremony. Myself and my husband have a School of Irish Celtic Shamanism. We frequently are asked to offer ceremonies for diverse groups of people. This was held on the Spring Equinox, just last week,

an interesting time for us to be talking. This is when night and day are equal. We have this at spring and autumn as well. For the ceremony we were invited to offer for the society of shamanic practice. Its international. This was online because people are all over the world. We wondered what can we offer that would speak of balance? So we decided to offer, something called burla gui. The word burlá means bundle, and gui means prayer, so it's a prayer bundle. Whilst this is traditional to these lands, the Eastern tradition equivalent would be a Sand Mandela. We were creating an expression of spirit through nature. Through nature, we expressed what we wanted to release and what we wanted to call in. So, for example, in the ceremony, my husband went outside and spoke of letting go, the dark parts of the year. He gathered dark, coloured seaweed, soil, fallen leaves, all things that symbolised release, letting go. Meanwhile, I created the burlá gui for what we wanted to call in over the next six months to come. There was a dandelion in the middle, some yellow daffodils, oats around the centre, oats being traditional offerings for the fairies, some indigenous grains of these lands and lovely little bright pink primroses. You get the idea.

Fiona

Ah yes.

Participant 5

What was really special is that we were on two screens: husband was here at our home in Ireland, and I was over in Oxford doing some study. He was creating one half, and I was creating the other. There were over 100 people watching. My husband would hold up one of the items, say, the seaweed, and invite people to drop from their heads to their hearts, (hand action of head to heart) think about what they wanted to let go of, and then, with their breath, blow toward the screen, toward the object. He placed them in a circle. There were four items in total, representing four things to release, private to each person. Then I held up my items, the dandelion, primroses, oats, and again, participants used their breath to charge the objects with their intentions for the months ahead: what they wanted to call in or manifest. We arranged them, very spontaneously, usually in a circular or spiral shape. But honestly, it often feels like the items themselves, the primroses for instance, tell me where they want to go.It's not really a conscious thing.

Fiona

Yeah, you're not thinking, this is good or planning it out.

Participant 5

Exactly. We were simply offering the ceremony together for everyone. And when we finished, we had the two arrangements side by side. But then came another opportunity, because we were actually teaching people how to do this themselves. The next day, we got a lovely email from a woman. She said she and her children had gone out and created their own ceremony. Children love this sort of thing, They absolutely love it!

Fiona

Yeah, sometimes children don't get enough opportunities to engage like that.

Participant 5

Exactly. And this links closely to another practice, one that's not a million miles away from this ritual. It's called an earth painting. The idea is, if you have something going on in your life, a question or situation you're unsure about, you go out into nature. It could be a beach, a garden, a park, wherever calls to you. And then, you begin to intuitively collect things in alignment with your intention. So maybe you gather pebbles or pieces of driftwood to make a frame. It could be daisies, seaweed, whatever feels right. You create a frame, which might be square, rectangular, circular, whatever shape comes to you. Then, within that frame, you begin to intuitively place things. And through that process, you often find a way forward from your question. It's such a simple ritual, but so extraordinary. I remember one time, this is so funny. I was going through something with my extended family, a difficult situation. So I went out into nature and created an earth painting. The idea is to leave it there for three days. You come back each day to see if anything has changed, if it's been blown away, if something new has been added. In my case, I was in this beautiful, remote place, far away from everything. When I came back, the cat from the nearby house had come along… and had done a poo right in the middle of my earth painting!

Fiona

Oh no…

Participant 5

Yes! And you know how cats usually bury their poo? Well, this one had done exactly that, but right in the centre of my work. The people I was with were horrified. But I just laughed. I said, I totally get it, this situation? It's complete bullshit. That was my answer.

Fiona

Yeah! (Laughter) That was the message.

Participant 5

Exactly. Sometimes that's all you need, to be shown what's going on so clearly. And that's the thing with these rituals, your earth painting or your burlá gui, it's personal. It becomes a mirror for your inner life.

Participant 5

The answer was clear to me, I knew instantly what it meant. It was like, people should just let that go. That was the message. Now, someone else might have interpreted it differently…

Fiona

Oh my god, yeah. But it gave you exactly the answer you needed. Love it.

Participant 5

Exactly.

Fiona

I love that. Honestly, I love it. Thank you, that's a great example. Really helpful for me, so thank you. Alright, moving on to the third topic, which is about environmental activism. I wanted to ask whether you, or anyone you know who shares your beliefs, are involved in any environmental initiatives. That could be formal groups or something more personal, like everyday practices. And do you think this comes from your belief in the sacredness of nature? Even if it's not activism in the Greenpeace sense, maybe it's something implemented in daily life?

Participant 5

Well, it's taken as a given that if you walk the path of shamanism, you care for the Earth. You cannot be a modern shaman, or a druid, or anything under the Wiccan or pagan, and not take care of the Earth. If someone says, Oh yes, I'm a Wiccan, I'm a pagan, but they don't care for the Earth, then in my view, they're not really walking the path. It just makes complete sense, we care for Mother Earth, as the phrase goes. And that can show up in all sorts of ways. Of course, there are the obvious things, like recycling your waste, picking up litter on your walks. But it can also be tending to your garden, or caring for an allotment. I think the most important thing we can do, really, is teach the little ones, the children, the names of the trees, the plants. How can we expect them to care for the Earth if they don't know the earth? If they're not connected?

Fiona

Yeah, that kind of care can only come from knowing. Otherwise, it's easy to just think, what odds? or why bother?

Participant 5

Now, having said that, there are many people who take things a step further and get formally involved in environmental groups, like you mentioned, Greenpeace or similar. In our own local village here, for example, we have certain times of the year when teams of us go out and pick up litter from the beach. It's lovely, really. And for International Women's Day, there's an event called Trá na mBan, the Women's Beach. The women gather and go out to clean the beach together. I have lived in places where the community is really committed to caring for the environment. Some people there even keep bees in their gardens. So I suppose my answer is that looking after the Earth is interwoven with our spirituality. It's a natural part of it. But some people might take it a step further and become more visibly active. Like, for instance, a few years ago, many of us joined the schoolchildren for their climate walks on Fridays. We were very vocal in our support.

Fiona

Okay, that's really lovely, thank you. So now to the fourth topic. This is about the human-nature relationship. I just want to ask how you view that relationship. Of course, you've spoken about interconnectedness already. But in contrast, some religious traditions, Catholicism being the one we're probably most familiar with, teach that humans have dominion over nature, that we're meant to exert power over it. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that, and where your beliefs would fall on that spectrum, though I think you've already made it quite clear!

Participant 5

Yeah, I've often wondered about that Bible quote, that man has dominion over the Earth. I honestly wonder if it's been misquoted, mistranslated, or maybe even added in later. Because for me, we're all in this together. We're part of the same system. I mean, how could a puny human seriously think they have dominion over the sea, or the weather? We don't have to look very far to recognise our limits, the floods, the storms… nature makes it pretty clear who's in charge. And if you think about the timeline of the planet, humans are only a tiny blip, just a small part of the Earth's enormous journey. I see us as caretakers of the Earth, that's where I would be coming from. That's the role I believe we're meant to play. Yes, we have consciousness that's a little different. But there have been loads of scientific studies showing that plants have consciousness, animals do too, it's just different. Whether ours is "better" or "worse," who knows? I mean, do plants get depressed? I don't know!

Fiona

Yeah, we don't do.

Participant 5

Exactly. So no, I don't agree at all with the idea that humans have dominion. We're all intricately linked. And when we work together cohesively, there's harmony. Theres balance.

Fiona

That's what we need. Like that painting behind you, it represents balance too. And actually, that leads us nicely into our fifth and final topic. This one is about scientific perspectives, things like climate change and environmental care, which obviously matter deeply to people on a spiritual path like yours. So I'd love to ask: what do your shamanic beliefs say about topics like that? And do they align in any way with science? How do you feel about science in general?

Participant 5

Yes, well, I am a scientist! My undergrad training was in microbiology. I was a microbiologist originally. Later, I became a psychotherapist, which I've practiced for many years. And even in that work, I always brought in the body, energy, and spirit, not just the mind. Psychotherapy originally focused on the mind and emotions, but then the question became: how can we separate the body from our energy and our spiritual experience? We can't, it's all connected.

Let me think how best to answer your question… maybe ask again more specifically?

Fiona

Sure! So I was thinking about how scientific approaches to ecology often focus on things like conservation, biodiversity, and climate change. Many of these ideas actually overlap with spiritual values. So I was wondering: do you feel there's alignment between your beliefs and some aspects of science?

Participant 5

Yes, absolutely. There's a certain cohort within science that's very focused on evidence, based knowledge, on experimentation and data. And that has its place, of course. But if we take a step back and look at the broader view of science, especially the science of old, scientists used to be explorers, inventors. They'd have a hypothesis, and they'd go out into the world to test it, to learn from nature itself.

Participant 5

Or to see if the hypothesis didn't make sense. But I think in modern times, science has become seen as something very exacting, very narrow.

Fiona

Yeah, and quite rigid, maybe.

Participant 5

Exactly. But the broader sense of science is really all about exploration.

Fiona

Yeah, and I think that's been forgotten a bit.

Participant 5

It has. And I really believe there have been more than enough scientific experiments to support ideas like plant consciousness. I saw something the other day that really stayed with me, it was on Instagram, from a marine biologist. It was so beautiful. They came across a skate, you know those beautiful flat fish?

Fiona

Yes, I do.

Participant 5

This one had gotten badly caught in a net. It was tangled and clearly going to die. So the marine biologist got into his diving gear, went down, and started cutting the net to free it. What was amazing was that as he worked, other sea creatures started to appear, just hovering

nearby. There were other skates, dolphins, even a shark. It was like they were witnessing the event. Eventually, he managed to free the skate, though he barely escaped himself, and when he got back to the boat, something amazing happened. The dolphins swam up to the boat and brought him gifts. They had sea cucumbers and other little offerings in their beaks, as if in thanks. Then the shark came up close, and the man actually patted it. And the skates began to move together in what looked like a kind of dance. It was really something. And it wasn't CGI, it was clearly real. There was actual video footage. Then I saw another story, probably because the algorithm picked up my interest. This one was about a fisherman. A crow landed on the bonnet of his car and seemed to be trying to get his attention. The crow then flew onto his boat and guided him out to sea. Eventually, the crow led him to a group of other crows who were drowning, caught in the water, possibly from an oil spill. Their plumage was soaked. So, the fisherman rescued as many as he could. He brought them back to land and placed them up in trees to dry off. And the next day, a whole flock of crows came back and landed all around him, as if to say thank you.

Fiona

Wow.

Participant 5

Some people watching it were like, Oh, that's a bit mad. It's like that film The Birds. But no, it wasn't scary. There was a recognition. Help was needed. Help was asked for. Help was given. The gratitude was expressed. So, I think, if that event with the crow or the dolphins had been set up as a formal scientific experiment, people would ask, Really? What were the criteria? You know, the usual, Where's the control group?

Fiona

Right, you should be able to replicate it or have measurable variables.

Participant 5

Exactly. But I think we need to bring back that spirit of scientific curiosity and open exploration, asking what is possible? There was a famous experiment, for example, where they filled a concert hall with an orchestra, but instead of humans in the audience, they placed plants in the seats. They wanted to see how the plants responded. I'm not sure exactly what they were measuring, maybe breathing, oxygen intake, but either way, the plants did respond to the music.

Fiona

To the music? That's so cool!

Participant 5

Yes! That's a moment where science and nature come together, and even hint toward spirituality. But we also need to ask: Who are paying for certain scientific experiments?

Fiona

And what narrative are they supporting, right? Because I feel like spirituality often just gets dismissed in scientific circles…

Participant 5

Exactly. But what's exciting is that both science and formal religion are now starting to look at nature differently. And it's wonderful to see some established religions beginning to talk about caring for the Earth.

Fiona

Yeah, they're getting a bit greener, right?

Participant 5

Definitely. There's actually an organisation, I think it's based in England, that brings together science and spirituality. They host annual conferences. It wouldn't be hard to find more about it.

Fiona

Nature- based religions or spiritualities seem to bridge that gap… between religion and science. That's where things start to overlap. It can get complicated, though, because people who identify as spiritual sometimes reject the label "religion" altogether. They want it to be something entirely different. And that can make it tricky in terms of terminology.

But maybe "belief system" is the better term, something that holds space for things we can't always see or measure. That brings us to the final topic. The last thing I really wanted to ask, and I'll use the term "neo- pagan" just to keep it broad, is:

From your perspective, are there any misconceptions about how neo-pagans engage with environmental issues?

Participant 5

Well, I suppose the most embarrassing misconception is when people think of something like January 6th in the U.S. a couple of years ago, you know, the storming of the Capitol buildings. One of the people involved claimed to be a shaman. He was wearing that Viking, style hat. Now, there's no card, carrying shaman I know who would ever identify with what he was doing. If you look at the kind of people involved in that event, they're often the ones who want to push through oil pipelines and other destructive practices, so it's quite a contradiction in terms. That, to me, is not a true representation of shamanism. Like with anything, there are always going to be people who are drawn to the idea of shamanism, Druidry, or neo-paganism because it seems exciting or trendy, but they don't really walk the talk.

Fiona

So, they're intrigued by it, but don't fully understand it?

Participant 5

Exactly. There's a lovely analogy I like to use. Imagine someone is thirsty, thirsty for knowledge, for seeking, and they walk into a meadow. Beneath the surface, six feet down, is a pristine source of clear water. But instead of digging one deep hole, this person digs lots of shallow ones, three feet deep, all over the meadow. They never reach the water. That's like someone dabbling in a bit of Wicca, a bit of Druidry, a bit of shamanism, but never truly immersing themselves in any one path. Whereas, you could go into that meadow and say, Right, I'm going to dig here. I'm going to follow the path of Irish Celtic shamanism, and then you nourish and refresh yourself at that deep source. There are definitely people who just browse. They skim the surface. They know all the jargon, but there's no actual connection with nature, it doesn't come from the heart.

Fiona

Do you think it's become a bit trendy at the moment?

Participant 5

Yes, I do. There's a certain zeitgeist if you will. For so many years in Ireland, as you know, Church and State were interlinked. The vast majority of people were Catholic, because that was just the way things were.

Fiona

It was almost automatic.

Participant 5

Exactly. And then, when the Church scandals came to light, and it was important that they did, many people stepped away. And because the Church was no longer tied to the State, it became safer to step away. You might know, around census time, there's often a public call saying, Please don't put 'Catholic' if you only go to weddings or funerals.

Fiona

Yes, I've seen that, yeah.

Participant 5

And I remember a very nice man from Pagan Ireland saying something similar: Can all Pagans, Wiccans, Druids, Shamans, Neo-Pagans, can we all just put down 'Pagan'? Because if we do that, and we reach a number, say 1% of the population, then we become visible. But if it's scattered across lots of little categories, like 0.3% Wiccan, 0.4% Druid, there's no real recognition.

Fiona

Yeah, that's really interesting.

Participant 5

Because the term pagan literally means "one who is of the country."

Fiona

Yes, exactly.

Participant 5

Pagan, as in, one who lives in the country, who is part of the land.

Fiona

Yeah, yeah. That's really nice. Do you think people did that for the census?

Participant 5

I think it's meaningful. I certainly recommended to our students and graduates that they put "pagan" on the census, because then it would actually mean something. Whether or not people were born Catholic, if they don't practice anymore… A lovely priest I know once said something very insightful. He was asked how First Holy Communion was going for the young children, and he said, "Oh, the First Communion is no problem. My problem is with the second." In other words, families show up for the big day, the First Communion, grandparents, parents, everyone, all dressed up. And then the following Sunday? They don't come back. Nor the Sunday after that.

Fiona
Yeah, it's like a cultural Catholicism, right? I've noticed that too.

Participant 5

Yes, exactly. But what I've also noticed is a really heartwarming upsurge in alternative ceremony. My husband and I have offered ceremonies for families, students, and graduates. We're not priests or rabbis, but we've been invited to lead baby namings, Celtic communions, handfastings, wedding ceremonies… People are seeking connection. They want ritual and ceremony, but not necessarily through formal religion. And in a way, they're being true to themselves, their own calling, they're not trying to squeeze into something that doesn't resonate. And in these ceremonies, nature always plays a huge symbolic role.

Fiona

Yeah, I knew about the baby naming and handfasting, of course, but Celtic communion? That's amazing. I had no idea that existed.

Participant 5

It makes sense though, doesn't it? In a baby naming, the couple and their family welcome the child into the tribe, the community. And then at age seven, the age of reason, that child begins to understand more consciously: Okay, this is my family. These are the people who raise me. And they start to form their own identity and thinking. That's why communion traditionally happens at seven, though it's now often done at eight, interestingly. Same goes for confirmation.

Fiona

That makes total sense. I'd just never thought of it that way. That's so cool. Well, Participant, thank you so much. You've definitely answered all of my questions, and given me so much to work with. Now it's time to go and transcribe it… And also, thank you again for sending the details to the other circle facilitators and everything. You were so kind to reply so quickly and openly. Some people see an email like that and probably think, Ugh, another request. But you didn't, you responded with such warmth, and I won't forget that. Thank you so much.

Participant 5

Pass it on, because back in my time, people were helpful, you know? And we're all part of this great web of connection. Helping each other. The more people recognise that this is an important topic, the better.

Fiona

Yes, absolutely. And you've held onto that spirit, you didn't forget those who helped you along the way. But really, thank you, Participant. You've been so generous with your time. Thank you so much again. It was so lovely to meet you.

Participant 5

Best of luck with the rest of the project!

Fiona

Thanks, bye!

Participant 5

Bye, bye!

Annex 5

Central Code (Theme)	Sub-code	Quote (Highlighted Text)	P
1.0 Spiritual Identity			
	1.1 Personal and Collective Paths	I don't like the idea of belonging to one organised or structured group.	P1
		I do a lot of personal research, and I explore things privately. I wouldn't say I belong to any one group. I ki	P1
		A lot of pagan people I know say, "In Christianity you worship the god; in paganism, you walk with them." I really like that idea. But again, I wouldn't say I base my practice on devotion to any particular deity. I enjoy learning about them, maybe nod to them occasionally, but my practice is more internal.	P1
		Yes. I don't really share what I'm doing with others. It's something I do for myself, in the moment.	P3
		I'm quite independent in my on my own practice ... I did a lot of training with OBOD. It took me seven years to complete. But I would say, that although I do feel happy to be part of that order, there's a basic form and ritual, etc, that you learn there and then I've perhaps diverged from that, yeah, but that doesn't mean I can't still be part of it. I still do participate, maybe less than I used to, but I'm still part of it.	P4
	1.2 Labels and Language	I would say that I identify more as agnostic than religious. I consider myself deeply spiritual.Not being religious does not mean I don't have a strong spirituality,it just means I don't associate with any of the major world religions. But ultimately, I think my spirituality runs deeper than any formal religion.	P1
		Spirituality, to me, is the practice itself. It's the ritual. It's the being. Religion is more like the umbrella term for the congregation or the collective expression of spirituality.	P1
		I love the word pagan, but I think it's misinterpreted in modern society. Maybe it's because I was raised Catholic, but the word pagan is often associated with heathen,a biblical term used to describe non-christians, and it has a really negative connotation. So, when I say pagan around my parents or elders, they often think I mean heathen. But for me, pagan refers to anything that predates the major Abrahamic religions.	P1
		Okay. I'm a Druid. Now, Druidry,we don't consider it a religion, certainly not in this part of the world. For me, it's a nature-based spiritual path. It's a nature-based spiritual path where we look to the landscape and the seasons as metaphors for our lives. It's really important to cultivate a rich inner world. We speak of having an "inner grove," and when that inner world is in sync with the outer landscape, then we experience harmony and balance in our lives.	P2
		I'm part of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. In our order, there's no dogma, no one sacred text,no big book. Our Druidic ancestors didn't write anything down, so we actually don't know how they practiced. We infer from stories, from the landscape, from the Irish language.	P2
		What's important is knowing that you can hold both. There are Druids who say, "You can't be a Christian and a Druid." But in our Order,absolutely, you can.	P2
		My personal practice is most similar to the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids. I've been a member for over 20 years. It's a light structure I can draw from, using the elements that resonate with me.	P3
		I think it's sometimes a mistake to view Neo-Paganism as one unified set of values. There's as much of a left/right divide within Paganism as anywhere else,it's just less visible, because different labels are used to express it... So, there can be a collectivist versus individualist dynamic, and just because people use the same kind of Neo-Pagan language doesn't necessarily mean they share the same values.	P3
		I suppose I describe myself primarily as a Druid, but I would say beyond that I'm, I would call myself also an agnostic and an animist. I suppose, I'm what you call a henotheist. There's a whole bunch of different gods you could pick as God or aspects of the One God, whatever you like. I don't particularly believe that the version I have chosen is, is the correct one? I like it. I have been sort of actually studying Druidism since about 1995.	P4
		Yes. I'm actually quite conscious of the fact that the term "Celtic shaman" or "shamanism" is a bit of a misnomer. So,Celtic, yes, in that it relates to these islands. But actually, it goes even further back,pre-Celtic, really.	P5
		It conjures up that sense that it is something very old, but also deeply connected with nature. Technically, the Druids would have been the shamans of these islands. Druidry today has a slightly different connotation,a very good one,but for me, it was the healing aspect of the shamanic way that really spoke to me.	P5
		Like with anything, there are always going to be people who are drawn to the idea of shamanism, Druidry, or neo-paganism because it seems exciting or trendy,but they don't really walk the talk.	P5
	Cencus	And I remember a very nice man from Pagan Ireland saying something similar: Can all Pagans, Wiccans, Druids, Shamans, Neo-Pagans,can we all just put down 'Pagan'? Because if we do that, and we reach a number,say 1% of the population,then we become visible. But if it's scattered across lots of little categories, like 0.3% Wiccan, 0.4% Druid, there's no real recognition	P5
	1.3 Transformative Journeys	But there's no one authoritative figure setting the rules. I was raised Catholic, which was very structured and very fixed,there was one way of doing things, and that was it. Now, what I do is much freer and more open. There are overlaps with religion, but I think, because of my upbringing, there's maybe some trauma associated with the word religion, especially given all the trauma that religion has caused in this country. So, I guess I just feel more at ease being on my own journey rather than being told what that journey should be.	P1
		We have polytheists, monotheists, duotheists, atheists, animists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus,you name it. People weave their own spiritual beliefs into their Druidic practice.Many members have left their religion of origin,some want nothing to do with it anymore, while others bring parts of it into their practice. Because we're not fundamentalist, that's fine. In stricter religions, you might be told you can't be a Druid if you're something else too,but that's not our approach.	P2
		Yeah, I tend to enjoy ritual in general. I grew up in a rural Irish Roman Catholic setting, and I never rejected ceremony because of that.	P3
		Yeah, so I was born a Catholic. I'm from Dublin, and I practiced the faith my parents brought me up with. I went to a convent school until I was about 16 or 17, and that's when I started questioning things. It felt very male-dominated,I wondered, where are the women? And also, my LGBTQ+ friends weren't included, which made me uncomfortable. So, I stepped away from that and began to explore. I'd read the Bible. I practiced Buddhist meditation and yoga. I really stepped away from everything, but I found myself yearning,seeking a spiritual connection. Through that exploration, I eventually settled into a yoga practice,though without the Hindu philosophy, shall we say. I continued meditation, but again, not rooted in Buddhist doctrine. I suppose up until my early 30s, I was approaching things from a mind-body-spirit perspective. Then I came across shamanism, and that felt like an umbrella,it brought together many of the things that had been innate in my life: my love of nature, my connection to everything around me. It gave me a real sense of cohesion, a framework that matched where I was naturally being led in my beliefs. That's when I started wondering more about the indigenous practices of these islands,of the Celtic islands. And that's when the Irish Celtic shamanic way really started to resonate deeply with me.	P5

	1.4 Queer or Political Identity	It's the term I use most often, and I've grown more fond of it in recent years. I'm also a celebrant, and I recently spoke with a same-sex couple who are Irish pagans. We were talking about the word "pagan," and how its quite like the word "Queer" and for me, it carries a sense of radical freedom. There's a kind of countercultural edge to it. Theres something radical about it.	P3
		Especially if they're tapping into more war or warrior... pioneer imagery. Just because something is indigenous or ancient doesn't mean it's progressive.	P3
		The spaces where I don't see that and the spaces where I feel safest and most aligned are more progressive, feminist-driven, often female-led, and queer-inclusive.	P3
		And also, my LGBTQ+ friends weren't included, which made me uncomfortable.	P5
2.0 Sacredness of Nature			
	2.1 Animism/ Ensoulment	in Celtic spirituality, animism is really important,the belief that everything in nature has a soul. I strongly believe that. Whether it's a tree, a rock, or a stream,these things speak to me, and I speak to them. That did take some getting used to, because I was raised Catholic, and in that worldview, humans were always seen as the only sacred beings.	P1
		The universe speaks to me 100%	P1
		There's an amazing Celtic story about Oisin and Patrick. Oisin wants to go to heaven, but he asks if his dogs can come too. Patrick says that in his faith, animals don't go to heaven. That story really stuck with me. I like to believe we're all equal,whether you're a tree or a human being. Every living organism has a right to be here. It's all interconnected and overlapping. So, for me, that belief comes from my own personal sense of morality.	P1
		Trees are a symbol of wisdom and strength. They've been here so much longer than us. You know that saying, "If trees could talk",well, I believe they can. I speak to them, and they communicate back. They ground me.	P1
		Yeah. And listening. Paganism asks you to forget what you've been told and go ask nature instead. Find your own answers- look for the correlations between nature and yourself.	P1
		I love the animistic worldview,it sees everything as ensouled. Last year we had a speaker give a talk on animism. He explained that we are ensouled beings who eat other ensouled beings. It challenges the vegetarian/vegan debate too. If everything is ensouled, then it's not just about meat or honey,plants are ensouled too. Even bugs, parasites,everything is ensouled. When we eat, we are fed by these other beings.	P2
		It's about sitting still,maybe under a tree,talking to it, feeling it, sensing it, breathing with it. We breathe out carbon dioxide; the tree breathes it in. It's about noticing the birds, the insects, and appreciating them.	P2
		That's what the sacredness of Druidry is about. Everything is ensouled,the river, the rocks, every creature. Even the ones I don't like.	P2
		The simplest way to explain it is to describe what I did today,sitting outdoors, I had a connection with the sun and the time of year. The seasons are particularly important to me, as is the spirit of place. So it's very much about the intersection of time and place.	P3
		My concept of "soul" fluctuates. I probably resonate most with the animist idea that everything is part of a kind of fluid interconnected soul,something messy and interconnected.	P3
		Yes, but I'm always a little bit wary of projecting human voices onto other things. When someone says, "The tree told me this," I always wonder,how much of that is the tree, and how much is your own projection? It is possible to be in communion with things.	P3
		I absolutely believe in being in communion with nature. I don't want to dismiss anyone's experience,it can be a poetic reality for people,but I personally take that kind of interpretation with a pinch of salt.	P3

		So I look at the world and I realize, for me, my life isn't more valuable than that of an earwig, a whale, or a tree. I'm just a manifestation of the divine unfolding in the physical universe. I have a consciousness, and some creatures may have slightly lower consciousness, but that doesn't mean they're any less valuable, or that they don't have a role or purpose in life equal to mine.	P4
		Well, I think trees are more conscious than we're aware of. They can be very variable , some trees want to live 40 or 50 years, while others live thousands. They are actually able to communicate. They don't have eyes, but they do have senses. They're quite amazing , able to communicate with each other. People viewed animals similarly for a long time, and then they discovered that dolphins can communicate through sonar, that elephants can send subsonic signals over vast distances and meet each other at a chosen place. Gorillas and chimpanzees have been taught to sign and even use a typewriter , there was even one that could learn to drive. So, over time, I think there's been a reevaluation of what people may have believed a long time ago , that animals and plants are an important part of the world.	P4
		But also in the fact that they actually provide us with with the means to breathe, yeah, they can be immense. There's not that many sort of creatures that vastly huge compared to ourselves.	P4
		The roots going down into the other world, the branches into the upper world. And we've got this middle realm where we live, which is like symbolized by the trunk... it's quite a powerful metaphor, and in the past who had, you know, clans had very specific sacred trees. You find that in many ancient cultures.	P4
		So it's grounded in nature from the very beginning. And if you spend your time in an agricultural environment or outdoors a lot, then just by virtue of being outside, you become attuned to the seasons , especially if it's something you do regularly, daily or several times a week.	P4
		I mean, I was the child who played with the fairies. That was normal. Everyone did,until you go to school and suddenly realise, oh, maybe not everyone does this. Nature speaks to me always has. I often smile when I think about how many of us were taught how to pray,to God, Goddess, or whomever,and how to ask for what we need. But very few are taught how to receive an answer. In the shamanic worldview, nature speaks to us. It's a reciprocal relationship. So if I have a question, a worry, or I'm feeling confused about something, and I'm out in nature,say I see two little birds fighting over a scrap of food,I'll think, yeah, maybe I need to go and apologise, and perhaps the other person will meet me there. Or if I'm feeling low and I go outside in winter and see this beautiful, delicate little snowdrop pushing up through the bold, dark earth,coming into spring,I'll think, yes, okay. Good job. Keep going.	P5
	2.2 Interconnection and Reciprocity	Now, the thing is,about Druidry,we're not looking at nature and saying, "Isn't nature nice?" We are part of it. Our sacredness is interwoven with everything else. I think it's about bringing that awareness forward.	P2
		I don't think of nature as something "out there" that we go and appreciate. To me, it's just reality,it's existence itself. Though when we talk about "planetary ecology," that might be slightly different than just saying "nature." Nature is simply what is.	P3
		Yes, it's definitely a living being. It's alive, it's in relationship with other things, and it's something I can be in relationship with too.	P3
		Yeah, it would very much be human in nature. But also,human as nature. I always try to remember that my body is as much a part of the Earth as everything else.	P3
		For me, I am of nature. I'm not in nature,I'm part of it. The earth, the sky, everything altogether. There are differen energy vibrations. For example, a stone would have a different vibration to me, to a flower, to a chair. Theres a consciousness, if you will in all living beings, in all beings.	P5

	2.3 Nature as Divine	As a Pagan, I worship nature as my god... I don't really like using the word "God," because it doesn't fully capture it,but yes, nature is my sacred. And I'd say one of the biggest differences I've experienced, having spent most of my life in a Catholic household in rural Northern Ireland, is that I was taught to focus on the next world. The idea was, "Just live your 70 or 80 years, be good, and then you'll go to heaven."	P1
		Your relationship with divinity, however you understand that,whether it's the soul in the rocks and trees, or a man or woman in the sky,should nourish you. It should support you and give your life meaning, not frighten you.	P2
	Not sure where to put	Leaving a structured, conservative faith gave me the freedom to explore my own beliefs,and that, in turn, helped me to accept science and see it as something positive. Of course, there are issues,there's greenwashing and corporate manipulation, things being sold as ecological, but they are not. but I do believe the science itself is valuable. It all ties back to what you said earlier,we've turned everything into a market. Even nature.	P1
3.0 Rituals and Practices			
	3.1 Wheel of the Year	We do this by marking the Wheel of the Year,every six weeks, there's a seasonal festival	P2
		So yes, every six weeks we hold a ceremony to remind us where we are on our own path.	P2
		Yes, so, all of my ritual practice begins with acknowledging the time and place I'm in. That's essential for me. I also take part in ceremonies that follow the Wheel of the Year,equinoxes, solstices, fire festivals, and so on.	P3
		Well, yeah, I tend to participate in what are, in modern terms, called the Wheel of the Year. Yes, separate festivals , it's a common modern pagan term. It varies from practice to practice. It's slightly different in shamanism, Wicca, heathenry, and Druidry.	P4
	3.2 Ecological Intent in Ritual	I think it absolutely is the intention.	P2
		Yes. These are deeply linked, not in an overt environmental sense, because, ancient practitioners or just regular people in paganism, wouldn't of have had a sense of environmentalism in we know it. Original Druidism died out about 800 CE in Ireland and there wasn't an environmental movement, then. I mean, talking about the last 300 years, when most of the damage has been done to the planet.	P4
		The word burlá means bundle, and gui means prayer- so it's a prayer bundle. Whilst this is traditional to these lands, the Eastern tradition equivalent would be a Sand Mandela. We were creating an expression of spirit through nature. Through nature, we expressed what we wanted to release and what we wanted to call in. So, for example, in the ceremony, my husband went outside and spoke of letting go,the dark parts of the year. He gathered dark-coloured seaweed, soil, fallen leaves,all things that symbolised release, letting go. Meanwhile, I created the burlá gui for what we wanted to call in over the next six months to come. There was a dandelion in the middle, some yellow daffodils, oats around the centre,oats being traditional offerings for the fairies,some indigenous grains of these lands and lovely little bright pink primroses. You get the idea.	P5
		this links closely to another practice,one that's not a million miles away from this ritual. It's called an earth painting.	P5
	3.3 Private vs. Public Ritual	some of my practices might involve referencing things,for example, at Ostara I might paint eggs or do something small with my mum. So, I do acknowledge them, but I don't live in fear of, or expectation from, any deity. That's probably the best way to describe it.	P1
		I feel really lucky to live during a time of globalisation, where I can learn from lots of different traditions. For example, you and I have burned seeds together,that practice is originally Native American. But we're doing it with respect, not as appropriation.I'm very mindful about where I get things like sage from,it has to be sourced from Native people who actually see that plant as sacred. I make sure I'm supporting Indigenous communities. My upbringing didn't teach me that sage or those rituals were sacred,so I'm stepping into someone else's sacredness, and I try to do that with awareness.	P1

		I have a little portable altar I use, so I can bring it outside easily.I really value the feeling of stepping into ritual. There's something about entering ritual space that gives me a structure,a way to set everything else aside so I can be fully present with my intention in that moment. When I open a ceremony, formally marking the time and space, it helps me enter that space more fully.	P3
	3.4 Rituals of Grief/ Healing/ Protest		
4.0 Enviormental Ethics and Ecological Activism			
	4.1 Ethical Lifestyle Choices	Sadly, in Northern Ireland, we don't have a large ecological activist base in Northern Ireland.	P1
		That perspective made this world feel temporary,like it didn't matter as much. So, I'll be honest, when I was younger, I didn't care as deeply. I'd have thrown rubbish out of my car window without thinking twice. But Paganism flips that. If you believe your energy stays here,within the land, within the cycle,you realise you don't want to pollute your own resting place. You care more, because it's all connected, and it's not disposable.	P1
		Exactly. As long as you're "a little bit good," you're told you'll move on to somewhere better. So why worry about this place? But in Paganism, this place is sacred. It's not something to trash and leave behind. It's something you stay part of, always.	P1
		I suppose the concept that God created the world doesn't seem to be much accountability or stewardship required in that, and in fact, it's quite transcendent in that you're just going to go off to heaven, and you don't have to really worry about the world after.	P4
		I think naturism and paganism really value growing your own food. And not just for the physical nourishment,there's spiritual nourishment too. Mental health nourishment. It's all connected. Its all one.	P1
		So, you don't have to be a vegan or a vegetarian to be a Druid.You're expected to act from your own internal moral compass, using your own ethical lens. You take responsibility for your actions.	P2
		For me, Druidry is a living, growing spiritual path that's relevant to our world today. And especially with climate issues, it really speaks to people.	P2
		Yes. None of us live in an environmentally neutral way. Whether you drive a car, an electric car, or use public transport,every action has an environmental cost... We can't avoid impact, but we can be conscious of it.	P2
		People I know definitely are. Personally, I wouldn't say I would specifically be, I have a meadow in my garden. But I do what I can. I grow food in my garden and try to live in a way that's conscious of the land. Theres an overlap in those communities. But in group spaces, I've noticed a lot of people are very environmentally active, whether it's activism, community gardening, or conservation work. There's definitely a strong overlap.	P3
		I think most people do their best... I know people who give it everything for a while but its really hard to sustain that and still participate in the world as it is.	P3
		Theres more vegetarianism and veganism in these spaces than there would be in other ones.	P3
		I think the general feeling is that people do their best to be non-capitalist.	P3
		Yes, I do think so. But it also depends on where a person's focus is. There are some people and groups who are very focused on the tribal identity of a specific culture, which is valid,that's part of our collective ego, our need for identity and belonging. But then it depends how that's balanced with a sense of, "How am I relating to the wider world? What am I doing to make it better?"	P3
		Yes, having language to talk about it. That includes ecological harm, but also social and human harm. One of the things I really value about pagan ceremonies is that they often hold space for healing, for acknowledging the world's pain. People will speak prayers or intentions for things that are happening,whether it's the ash dieback and the dying trees, or Palestine, or the women who suffered in the mother and baby homes. Whatever is alive and present in the room.	

		That's not to say everyone who's pagan or involved in these rituals is an environmentalist. There's a huge number of people, I'd have to say, who don't walk the talk. They'll say, "I love Mother Earth," but they don't do anything , they just go out and buy stuff like everyone else. But I suppose, at least in theory, they recognise the need to respect the planet , they just don't take that step to actually do something concrete. Still, that's better than not caring at all.	P4
		I would hope that people who are involved in this on a regular basis would actually change their lifestyle to some degree and actually do something to make a difference. Even if it's just a matter of giving to charities, because you don't have the time to go out and plant trees, If you have got lots of money you might donate to 'Greenpeace' or 'Friends of the Earth' at least.	P4
		Well, it would certainly encourage that. It's definitely not going to do the opposite , if anything, it promotes greater environmental awareness and a more conscious approach to how you treat nature.	P4
		Among the revived, surviving, or reimagined traditions , what you might call "dead" religions brought back to life , there tends to be a more holistic approach and a deeper appreciation of the natural world, with less desire to tear everything down and build a shopping centre.	P4
		Well, it's taken as a given that if you walk the path of shamanism, you care for the Earth. You cannot be a modern shaman,or a druid, or anything under the Wiccan or pagan,and not take care of the Earth. If someone says, Oh yes, I'm a Wiccan, I'm a pagan, but they don't care for the Earth, then in my view, they're not really walking the path. It just makes complete sense,we care for Mother Earth, as the phrase goes. And that can show up in all sorts of ways. Of course, there are the obvious things,like recycling your waste, picking up litter on your walks. But it can also be tending to your garden, or caring for an allotment. I think the most important thing we can do, really, is teach the little ones,the children,the names of the trees, the plants. How can we expect them to care for the Earth if they don't know the earth? If they're not connected?	P5
	4.2 Ritual as Activism	Some of our members are activists. Others meditate for peace. It doesn't have to affect anyone else's spiritual beliefs.	P2
		In the order, I'm too busy to be an activist myself,but I do my work through ritual.	P2
		Yes. Often, that awareness shows up in rituals specifically focused on magical activism,rituals done with the intention of protecting the earth or responding to environmental concerns. That comes back to the basic principles of magic: the belief that we're co-creators of our world, that we have the ability to bring about change and help create a better world. That intention often supports political or grassroots action.	P3
		I think of marches and demonstrations as a kind of ceremony… They follow the same format,you gather the people, you enter a different state of consciousness. When you're marching, you're no longer just an individual. You're part of a unity. You chant, and those chants are like ritual incantations.	P3
		So I think it's perhaps inevitable that seasonally aligned rituals and celebrations would end up becoming tied to the modern environmental movement.	P4

	4.3 Spiritually motivated Activism (Green Peace etc.)	Before COVID, when fracking was becoming a big issue, some members formed a group called 'The Warrior's Call'. They created a sigil for people to work with in ritual. I remember they organised a global ritual around an equinox,maybe 2016 or earlier. Fracking was really taking off, and we were asked to hold ritual worldwide to resist it. We did a second ritual during the Spring Equinox, focusing on water. Some members do protest and march,some are part of Extinction Rebellion. Others hold online rituals for healing and peace. We started doing those rituals during the war in Ukraine, about three years ago now. So yes,some protest, others do ritual. Both are valid.	P2
		And being a Druid gives you the language and confidence to express that. You might not be taken seriously if have a more mainstream lifestyle, like you work in a bank and you just stand up and say, "I want to speak for the mice that live there." People will think youre coo-coo. But if you say, "As a Druid, this is my spiritual path, and I am here to speak for the natural world," people have to listen. It legitimises your voice.	P2
		I think probably a love of nature comes first.	P3
		The only group that I know that has a sort of definite link with with Druidism, is extinction rebellion. There are two Facebook groups specifically for druids who involved in extinction rebellion and I belong to both those groups. I was involved in creating extinction rebellion in Kerry.	P4
		I'm not very political. I don't really like the political elements of it. I think this is just a human concern , and a good one. It's about our future, and the future of our children. If you talk to most people , from either end of the spectrum or somewhere in the middle , and ask, "Would you like to make the world a better place for future generations?" they'd probably all say yes. The disagreement is about how to do that , and that's where all the conflict and division comes in. I think most people do want to move humanity forward in a positive way, but there's no consensus on the path. So, in a way, taking environmentalism down a political route can actually alienate people.	P4
		So I suppose my answer is that looking after the Earth is interwoven with our spirituality. It's a natural part of it. But some people might take it a step further and become more visibly active.	P5
5.0 Human - Nature Relationships/ Anthropocentrism			
	5.1 Rejection of Human Dominion	I think when you push nature too far, it pushes back harder. So, in every spiritual practice, I try to leave as little trace as possible. That's the main point of that.	P1
		I'd say I'm deeply in the "working together" camp.I remember reading about agriculture. Ireland is obviously an agricultural country, "agriculture" literally means to "aggravate the land," to extract something from it. Then I learned about permaculture, which is the opposite. It's about working with the land to create permanent abundance.	P1
		But with permaculture, there's a way to live in harmony with the land. I'd love to live off my own land and not harm anything in the process. But modern society doesn't allow me to do that.	P1
		Theres no hierarchy for us. We are part of this web. We don't see humans as above nature. It's interesting,some people say we shouldn't eat animals, but they eat plants. So do they see animals as more important than plants?	P2
		That's where humans come in,we have to campaign for the protection of those places. It's not about hierarchy, it's about responsibility.	P2

		Yeah, it would very much be human in nature. But also, human as nature. I always try to remember that my body is as much a part of the Earth as everything else. And by the same token... I'm trying to find the right way to say this. I absolutely see that interconnectedness, but I also see the dominion narrative all around me. It's become so intense that sometimes it's hard to feel separate from it... not to feel caught up in it, or even part of it. Exactly. Because we are embedded in systems that are so destructive. I know I'm part of the natural world, but I also know that our society and culture are often very destructive to the planet. And that's painful to witness.	P3
		Well, I would be more leaning towards the interconnectedness.	P4
		And now we're perhaps being forced to reassess our relationship with nature, because we've reached a crisis point , not only because of climate change, which is a bit of an oversimplification , but because of population growth and harmful practices, like using dangerous pesticides and plastics.	P4
		Yeah, and that's largely because we run the world through economic models, rather than something more holistic or energetically balanced , something that goes beyond assigning everything a monetary value. It's not surprising that things are this way , I'm not saying we should ban money or anything like that. But I do think we need a broader focus. If you're running a company, sure , the ultimate goal is to make a profit and provide income for shareholders. The problem is, it can become so compartmentalized that people lose sight of the bigger picture. They often have no awareness of the terrible repercussions their actions might have , and even when they do, they might ignore it, or in some cases, deliberately suppress that information.	P4
		Yeah, I've often wondered about that Bible quote,that man has dominion over the Earth. I honestly wonder if it's been misquoted, mistranslated, or maybe even added in later. Because for me, we're all in this together. We're part of the same system. I mean, how could a puny human seriously think they have dominion over the sea, or the weather? We don't have to look very far to recognise our limits,the floods, the storms... nature makes it pretty clear who's in charge.	P5
		And if you think about the timeline of the planet, humans are only a tiny blip,just a small part of the Earth's enormous journey. I see us as caretakers of the Earth- that's where I would be coming from. That's the role I believe we're meant to play. Yes, we have consciousness that's a little different. But there have been loads of scientific studies showing that plants have consciousness, animals do too,it's just different. Whether ours is "better" or "worse," who knows? I mean, do plants get depressed? I don't know!	P5
		Exactly. So no, I don't agree at all with the idea that humans have dominion. We're all intricately linked. And when we work together cohesively, there's harmony. Theres balance.	P5
	5.3 Grief and Guilt	Take Lough Neagh, for example. At first, I was very passionate about it, very involved. But then I got disheartened and had to let go of it for now. I was interviewed recently by another student doing her thesis, and she asked me if I knew about the pollution in Lough Neagh. I was like, "Yes,I've been talking about it for two years!" She thought it had only started in the last year. That was frustrating. I've been deep in this work, and sometimes it feels like people are only just noticing.	P1
		Here's another example for you in Northern Ireland! They're trying to frack through one of our most ancient sites,Beaghmore stone circles. This site is older than the pyramids. And now there's a US company trying to cut through it to access gold. Can you imagine someone trying to dig through the pyramids?	P1
		Exactly. Because we are embedded in systems that are so destructive. I know I'm part of the natural world, but I also know that our society and culture are often very destructive to the planet. And that's painful to witness.	P3

		Yes. And I think in the face of all of that, the ability to perform ceremonies, prayers, and come together with others,it somehow lessens the pain of witnessing all that destruction.	P3
		They feel - I suppose, almost a sadness a morning that people would feel when they see like a beautiful bit of forest that's been chopped down, actually, near me in local town, which is going to be or social housing. Oh, and like, hundreds, hundreds of trees, and mostly broadleaf really, not, not just quilt your conifers. All the trees- they've all been hacked. And I just it every time I drive past it, I'm just Thinking there is a need for housing, but why, couldn't, they couldn't have been done on a brownfield site where it's already... There is so much forestry in Ireland as it is. I think a lot of people who are identify as pagans or Neo pagans would probably be of the same mind. They would be displeased or even horrified to see such a thing, you know.	P4
		People say ah its just progress, it's progress, but, you know, I would argue that it isn't really progress. If you're desecrating your country, you live on, yeah, short sighted definition.	P4
		The repercussions go far beyond "Oh, it's sad they chopped down a few trees," or "a few birds were killed." It's much more serious than that.	P4
		And now we're perhaps being forced to reassess our relationship with nature, because we've reached a crisis point , not only because of climate change, which is a bit of an oversimplification , but because of population growth and harmful practices, like using dangerous pesticides and plastics.	P4
	Criticism of Catholism.		
		I had an interest in environmentalism before I became involved in Druidism. I mean, I grew up as a Roman Catholic, which doesn't really have a particularly strong connection to nature.	P4
6.0 Neo-Paganism and the Science/ Religion Debate			
		I think they run quite parallel. Growing up, especially with the beliefs my parents passed on, science and faith were seen as separate,they shouldn't be mixed. But paganism, for me, opens up the possibility of blending the two. We live in a modern world,we have technology, and we can now prove things that used to just be theories.	P1
	6.1 Science and Spirituality as Compatible	Paganism says it's okay to explore. It's okay to question, to study nature, to experiment if it's for the greater good. But being raised in a strict Catholic background, I was told not to do those things, that it was bold.	P1
		Absolutely. Druids were the scientists of the past. They studied astronomy and star lore. They didn't write it down, but we can piece together some of what they knew. I'm a member of the Scientific and Medical Network, and every year they hold a Mystics and Scientists conference.	P2
		But science has developed - its evolving. It's becoming more compatible with spirituality. It doesn't have to negate God anymore.	P2
		science became the enemy of religion. And now, we're realising they're just different lenses. Even in mythology, we see this. Take the Welsh tale about King Arthur. Uther Pendragon wanted to build a tower in Snowdonia, but it kept collapsing. Merlin said, "There are two dragons beneath it,a red and a white one. They need to be released." The red dragon represented copper; the white dragon represented water. The ground was unstable because of the elements. That was part of the mythology.	P2

		100 percent. Yes, for me, definitely. I mean, there might be a kind of anti-marketing or anti-media, especially around how narratives get framed,but not toward the scientific method itself. I think the scientific method and the way it explains the natural world is perfectly aligned with my beliefs. I'm also very aware that things like the four elements, for example, are concepts from two-and-a-half thousand years ago. They come from a time before we had modern science. But I see those as poetic tools,they're ways of connecting with the world symbolically. I've heard the term "transrational" used before, and I like it. It means stepping into a way of understanding that doesn't have to be literally or scientifically true to still hold meaning.	P3
		Well, I think there's a sort of almost anomalous thing in Druidism. There is an alignment with science, in a way that alchemy would also be aligned with science. Whereas, if you look at some of the other paths, they would have little or no interest in science, and all must be anti science, perhaps.	P4
		There's often a focus on alternatives, but in my study of Druidism, there's a belief that druids of the past , while their knowledge was only a fraction of what we have now , served as both scientists and religious practitioners.	P4
		hat sharp divide between scientific, artistic, and religious thinking hasn't always existed , but today, it feels much more pronounced than it once was. Interestingly, if you look at modern physics, it seems to be aligning more and more with spirituality. As we've discovered more about the cosmos and all its mysterious, bizarre phenomena, science and spirituality seem to be starting to dovetail , at least to some extent.	P4
		Maybe these two sides of thinking , science and spirituality , aren't necessarily enemies. Perhaps they can meet halfway.	P4
		hat's the approach I try to take. I don't reject science , far from it , but I also try to look at the world in a holistic way.	P4
		I think there's a real need for spirituality, for emotional life, and for a broader attitude that embraces many different disciplines, rather than relying on just one. The trouble is, some people who are scientific are also atheistic, and can become almost religious in their belief in science , to the point where it substitutes for religion. They end up excluding everything else from life, saying science is everything and everything else is rubbish. I wouldn't be inclined to see the world that way. I think we need to approach life , and all human problems , from more than one angle.	P4
		So I am definitely not full on pro- science, but I'm certainly not anti science its an important part in our world, and I think a lot of progression we've made has come through that. And in fact, a lot of solutions to our problems can come through science if they're used in a in a sensitive and holistic manner, instead of, you know, as a blunt instrument.	P4
		I would say that in a lot of alternative or "hippie" circles , and even within some elements of paganism , there tends to be a fair amount of anti-science thinking, or at least a lean toward pseudo-science. Of course, I can really only speak about individuals rather than whole movements, but if I were to generalize, I'd say New Age spirituality often includes that kind of thinking. And honestly, it isn't particularly helpful when it comes to solving problems or understanding the world in a fuller way. I think science and religion , or spirituality , are both ultimately trying to do the same thing: to understand the world, to understand life, the universe, the cosmos. They're just coming at it from two very different directions to achieve the same end.	P4

		Yes,well, I am a scientist! My undergrad training was in microbiology. I was a microbiologist originally. Later, I became a psychotherapist, which I've practiced for many years. And even in that work, I always brought in the body, energy, and spirit,not just the mind. Psychotherapy originally focused on the mind and emotions, but then the question became: how can we separate the body from our energy and our spiritual experience? We can't,it's all connected.	P5
		Yes, absolutely. There's a certain cohort within science that's very focused on evidence-based knowledge, on experimentation and data. And that has its place, of course. But if we take a step back and look at the broader view of science,especially the science of old,scientists used to be explorers, inventors. They'd have a hypothesis, and they'd go out into the world to test it, to learn from nature itself.	P5
		I think we need to bring back that spirit of scientific curiosity and open exploration,asking what is possible?	P5
		Exactly. But what's exciting is that both science and formal religion are now starting to look at nature differently. And it's wonderful to see some established religions beginning to talk about caring for the Earth.	
	6.2 Symbolic vs. Empirical Truth		
	6.3 Respect for Scientific Method		
	6.4 Critique of Scientific Dogma	Each scientific paradigm works in its own area,but no single one can explain everything. S(story about rain stopping for wedding)	P2
7.0 Colonialism, Irish Identity and Language			
	7.1 Reclaiming Irishness	I grew up hating the English. That was the story I was raised with, "This is what they did." And they did do it. But someone recently said to me, "I feel so guilty." And I said,get over it! You didn't do it.	P2
		When I finally went to the gathering, I was terrified. I was really conscious of my Irish accent,because I'd experienced anti-Irish sentiment before. The comments, you know?	P2
		Yes, which is all very valid. I've tried to explain this to friends of mine in England. It's very different there,they have a large, visible Pagan community with well-established traditions. But in Ireland, it's different. Like, I've taken my Catholic-identifying cousin to ceremonies, and she really enjoyed it. She didn't feel any separation with it... I think Irish culture as a whole is more nuanced. For better or worse, but it definitely is.	P3
		I love visiting England. I really do. I have so many English friends!	P3
		I'm also very aware that, in my Irishness, some of the narratives we have around England are projections of them the coloniser and while that history is real, part of how we form our own identity is through opposition to that image.	
		Just one thing. Sometimes in Neo-paganism, especially when we're building mythologies, the stories we create aren't always right. One of the big differences between Irish paganism and something like English paganism is that here in Ireland, it's much more tied to our actual history and ancestral relationship with the land and language. We've historically been a pastoralists. Also we have been poor throughout a lot of our indigenous history. So a lot of our mythology, a lot of our language around the seasons is asking for blessings for the time that's coming. The indigenous spirituality, is shaped by the rhythms of tending animals and living closely with the land. Even the way we talk about the seasons,there's a sense of asking for blessings for the time to come. Do you speak Irish?	P3
		In Ireland, for instance, our seasonal festivals,like Samhain and Bealtaine,are deeply tied to ancestral memory and a kind of peasant, rural relationship with the land. It's about survival, continuity, and community. Whereas in England, the seasonal language is often more focused on abundance,crops, harvests, the sowing cycle. It's a vocabulary of plenty.	P3

	7.2 Relationship with Irish Catholicism	Because Catholicism is so rooted in symbolic repetition,rituals, icons, imagery. As an artist, I've carried that with me into my spiritual life. And now, as a Neo-Pagan, I still hold a deep reverence for symbols in Paganism too. Paganism, like Catholicism, is full of rich symbology, and I see a strong link between the two traditions.	P1
		There's something really fascinating about the way Catholics repeat imagery,it becomes embedded. You'll see the same symbols in their artwork again and again. And I think I continue that instinct, even though I no longer identify as Catholic. That relationship with symbolism is still part of me, and it overlaps with the way I now honour and use symbols in Paganism. The archetypes are so similar too,it's all connected. I still continue the worship of symbols even though I am not a Catholic.	P1
		People say, "Are you Catholic?" I say, "No, I'm a Pagan." And the answer is: "Are you Catholic Pagan?"	P2
		So within the Pagan tradition,if you want to use that word,and specifically within the Druid order I'm a part of, there's this multi-year self-guided study program. It involves going through lessons, books, personal reflection... and at one point,maybe in the second grade, I can't remember exactly when,you start exploring your own past, your relationship with your land, your family history, and so on. And I ended up going on a whole deep dive into my relationship with my Catholic heritage, and how actually,it's a welcome and valid part of me. I realised it's a gift I've received. That whole journey, including exploring mystical Christianity, just completely dissolved any sense of barriers I had between one and the other.	P3
		For so many years in Ireland, as you know, Church and State were interlinked. The vast majority of people were Catholic,because that was just the way things were. when the Church scandals came to light,and it was important that they did,many people stepped away. And because the Church was no longer tied to the State, it became safer to step away.	P5
	7.3 Irish Language and Place	Druidry is so connected to the Irish language. For example, we were always oriented toward the sun. You follow the sun. There's a phrase in Irish: cas an aghaidh ar an ngréin,turn your face to the sun... There are so many clues in the Irish language that point toward the natural world. That's why I made sure my daughter got a good start. She was home-educated until she was 14, then started school.	P2
		When I lived in Lesotho, I joined a healing group. Later, in Kenya, I became really interested in herbalism. I met a medicine woman from the U.S. and did sweat lodges with her. I also went through initiations with a healer in Tanzania. But over time, I grew frustrated , because it wasn't from my landscape.	
		And that's a big part of it too,language. Or, I should say, the language that was forced on us. Our native words used to have different meanings, different emotional weight. English, I think, is a very harsh, judgmental language. Even the very words we use shape how people view paganism. Words like "abracadabra" actually come from mystical roots,they mean "what I speak, I create." That's a pagan concept. Language matters. It literally creates reality.	P1
		Druidry brought me back to my own language,and it healed that wound between the two countries.	P2
		There's a place I pass through on the way to Donegal called An Eidhneán,"the bright marsh." But you wouldn't know that just from the English name. My friend's a storyteller. He learned Irish in primary school, but his kids didn't, even though they're in the same school now. You have all these beautiful place names, and without the language, the meaning is lost. Then Unionists go on about the Red Hand, but that came from the Red Branch! Get your mythology sorted,look to the east, and come back to yourself. Stop fighting!	P2

		Exactly. They had more consistent resources, so they could frame things in that way. I think what I'm getting at is that the language we use to describe our connection to nature is shaped by the past,by the experience our ancestors had with the land. In Ireland, those experiences often involved hardship,being on the brink of famine, of colonization, or needing to emigrate. So our mythology and seasonal rituals reflect that deep-rooted anxiety and resilience. In contrast, due to the Industrial Revolution and the displacement of communities, many people in England lost their connection to specific landscape. They talk about "the Land" with a capital L,this abstract concept,whereas here, we speak about particular fields, place names, family names tied to a mountain or a well. They try to create a relationship with the land- but its not the same. There's a specific, grounded relationship in Ireland.	P3
		Yes,and it's just something to notice. Not to judge, but to be aware of. In Ireland, we have this layered relationship with the land: of place, of story, of hardship and memory. And in England, because of their history,industrialization, empire, movement,the relationship is more often filtered through broad movements, not specific place-based heritage.	P3
		Exactly. Our connection to nature is inherited. It's shaped by stories of survival and migration, while in England it's often tied to broader national or industrial identities.	P3
		Yes. There's often this tendency to romanticize indigenous people,whether Indigenous Americans or Indigenous Irish,as having these beautiful people with a beautiful connection to the land. But the reason they're perceived that way is often because they were colonized.	P3
		That's a really interesting lens. People in other countries often have a very different relationship to land and landscape. Some, for example, have a romanticized view of Britain as this sacred place, largely because of connections formed through international gatherings or events.	P3
		Exactly. So the landscape itself gives us the language we use to describe it. And that language shapes our whole worldview.	P3
	7.4 Critique of Anglo-centric Paganism	So, one part of it is that our relationship with Irishness is often filtered through an English lens,because we live in an Anglo-Irish world here in Ireland. So the idea of Irishness that we have, in the English language, is already a colonial one. A lot of the narratives we've built up in the last 150 years around Irishness are sometimes Anglo-Irish creations,efforts to construct an Irish identity in relation to colonialism. Some of our indigenous identity has developed in response to trauma,the famine, the plantations. So you end up with this really layered, entangled mess of history and cultural identity that's hard to unravel.	P3
		And this also links back to the stuff around England. I think part of the weirdness around our relationship with England is that sometimes the way English people see us is filtered through their own historical relationship with their religion and Catholicism. There's a kind of othering of Catholic countries that's tied to class perceptions, to peasantry, poverty, and so on.	P3
		And then what gets even ickier is when some of my English friends, who I really love, romanticize Irish culture. And I think, "What you're romanticizing is actually what a middle-class Englishman saw when he visited peasants for the first time."	P3
	7.5 Myth and Memory	Even the idea of Celticism or Irish Paganism is filtered through a Christian lens. The oldest pagan text I can think of is the Book of Kells, which is Christian. Before that, maybe The Book of Invasions, but even that puts the first story into a Participant 1tian framework,Noah's granddaughter coming to Ireland.	P1