

Chapter 35

To Be #Celts Today: Features of a Neopagan Cult in the Social Media

Francesco Amatruda
University of Salerno, Italy

ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to define the characters of the online neo-Celtic Italian society, especially their religious beliefs, through the observation of their activities on blogs and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media became, in fact, the main diffusion channel for these religions, replacing forums and other kinds of online communities as virtual places where people are allowed to interact with others who share their own spirituality. Within neo-paganism, some groups belonging to this religion started, during the last decade, identifying themselves with a more specific name, that is neo-Celtic instead of neo-pagan, that clearly defines the group as a part of pre-Christian cultural heritage. In this chapter, the author will attempt to define the characteristics of these neo-pagan groups focussing on their self-constructed identity and their relationship with the larger society.

INTRODUCTION

The fascination of ancient Nordic culture today imposes itself on the masses in many different ways. It can be noted that in videoludic, cinematographic and literary productions the interest in the world of the Celts and ancient Nordic civilizations increases over time. In this context are inserted successful television series such as *Vikings* and the very recent *Barbarians*, which narrate in a fictional way the heroic deeds of warriors of an ancient world who impose themselves as models of honor and courage in every part of the world; a world populated by people who admire the warrior ethic, determination and greatness displayed by these Nordic heroes. Among the users of these productions inspired by the ancient world of northern Europe we also find people eager to imitate the heroes of these narratives, or who try to forge their appearance, lifestyle, even spirituality, on models from the ancient Celtic and Norse worlds. Among those who are fascinated by the Celtic and Norse world we find not only fans of

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specific entertainment products, but also people who have decided to start a spiritual journey modelled on the religiosity of the peoples of ancient northern and central Europe, i.e. practitioners of neopagan religions. The aim of this work is to provide some information about some Italian neopagan communities that use social media as the main communication channels and meeting points. By analyzing the characteristics of some groups chosen as a field of study, the author will indicate which are the main characteristics of these groups and how the members build their identity with reference to their religious life. This analysis will be conducted by collecting data from some social pages selected by the author based on the productivity of the material, the activity of the members, the frequency of the interjections and the relevance with the objectives of the research. The collected data will be processed purely offline in a qualitative survey aimed at identifying political, psychological and cultural inclinations of the members of these groups in order to provide elements on which to make an analysis of the identity of the users and the group itself and to recognize the mechanics behind the process of self-determination of the individual in this given cultural context.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, with the spread of social media, the distances between individuals have narrowed and new methods have emerged to aggregate and to live group experiences. Social media has been one of the most important resources for the entire world community during this period of pandemic which has caused the inability of individuals to physically come together regardless of the reason that motivated these meetings. An interesting detail, in this regard, was the attitude of the various religious groups on the occasions of particular festivals or sacred periods that without the restrictions in force would have represented opportunities for meeting. The rituals that before the pandemic usually took place in the presence of the religious community have moved online, an example is the live videos broadcast on the various social networks by the priests who officiated these rites and which were followed by the practitioners of the cult. Although the current period has corroborated the tendency to live part of one's spiritual life on social networks, the phenomenon is not new.

The presence of religion on the internet is a known and attested phenomenon, as well as much discussed in recent decades. The history of studies on religious phenomena on the web is retraced by Giulia Evolvi, (2021) who traces in detail the evolution of the problems and research themes by describing the methods applied in the various works and some examples on some cases of study. Evolvi, and not only in the article previously mentioned, takes up the image already used by Højsgaard and Warburg in a volume edited by them in 2005 as a "wave" to frame what the different themes and methodologies relating to research have been in recent years on religion on the net and recognizes four. Giulia Evolvi recognizes that in the fourth wave the focus of the research produced has shifted towards problems such as identity, ethnicity and authority, and in a 2017 article by Campbell and Lövheim the authors underline that in this phase research is no longer conducted only online but also face to face with the cases examined. The author of this paper, for reasons related to the pandemic, decided to carry out a more classic analysis than the most recent ones on the neopagan communities on the net with which he came into contact, focusing his interest on the theme of identity, of his construction, negotiation and self-affirmation by reading the posts and analyzing the images and videos shown in the virtual spaces. Starting therefore from the definition of cyber-religion offered by Højsgaard (2005, p. 62) and passing through Lövheim and Linderman (2005), we can define the boundaries of what to mean as religion in

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