Ireland and the Religions of the Internet: Liminality and Anima Mundi

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Abstract:
Ireland is considered by international adepts of new religious movements and Celtic Christians alike as a liminal space where the sacred is more easily accessible than elsewhere in the world. Many of those who claim Irish roots seek to redefine their religious identity in such a way that they may reconnect with their ancestors' homeland. Some travel to Ireland to take part in Celtic pilgrimages or other such activities, whose purpose is precisely to experience liminality and be reborn to a new identity. Others choose to reinvent Ireland as a liminal space on the internet. The proposed paper will explore the different approaches to this re–invented Ireland (cybercommunities, international internet "religions" based in Ireland etc.) and comment on the internet as a medium through which new religious or semi-religious communities may be created. It will argue that the nature of the medium leads to the necessary redefinition of conceptions of the other world, which can be accessed beyond the screen.

Keywords: online religions, Ireland, thin place, liminality, science and religion, re-enchantment of the world.

In Victor Turner's classic definition, « liminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos' » (V. Turner 1979, 37). The multifaceted experience of liminality that can be identified in Irish-related online religions or religions online [1] comes as a confirmation of this prophetic statement. Writing before the development of the Internet, Turner perceptively noted that technical innovations were the products of what he called the liminoid, « resembling without being identical with (the) liminal » (V. Turner 1979, 26). Indeed, unlike liminal phenomena, liminoid phenomena developed « along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central (…) institutions »; they were « plural, fragmentary and experimental in character » (V. Turner 1979, 116). The origin of the Internet in cybernetics and the American counter-culture makes the World Wide Web a liminoid artefact. As a portal to the virtual reality of sacred spaces in cyberspace it also generates liminal experiences of a kind that falls into the category of Turner's liminoidness : marginal, plural, fragmentary and experimental.

In his seminal analysis of a virtual pilgrimage to Ireland's Croagh Patrick, Mark McWilliams (McWilliams 2004) emphasizes the betwixt and betweenness (V. Turner 1967)

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[1] Religions online provide information about offline religions while online religions have no existence offline. Many are an offshoot of new religious movements. They can be practised online as well. This traditional distinction has tended to become blurred in recent years as many sites now combine the characteristics of both.

of the electronic emptiness of computer systems. He also carefully describes how the virtual traveller can be said to go through a true though unusual awe-inspiring religious experience as he travels the mythscape that has replaced the landscape of the real Croagh Patrick. Place dissolves into space, a simple click makes the sacred instantaneously accessible and the imagination of a disembodied pilgrim fills the void with presence. Critics of virtual pilgrimages deny the validity of such practices on account of the excessive individuation and abstraction of the sacred that they induce. Yet pilgrimages and other religious activities have appealed to an increasing number of cyberfaithful since the 1990s.

As seemed to be the case for the Croagh Patrick virtual pilgrimage, a significant proportion of the visitors to Irish-related online religious websites are members of the diaspora, many of them American. McWilliams argues that the Croagh Patrick site « continues the modern tendency of the (…) pilgrimage to reinforce Irish nationalist sentiments » (McWilliams 2004, 235). This paper will suggest another interpretation, based on the prevailing understanding of Ireland as a « thin » or liminal place, a threshold between this world and the otherworld, where spirits, gods and ancestors help seekers to recreate themselves in a virtual universe where anything is possible, including communing with deities or the collective unconscious, the *anima mundi* beyond the screen.

Sarah McMillen dismisses the very possibility of transporting the sacred into cyberspace. In her estimation, « the displacement of the sacred center and its replacement into cyberspace eliminates the 'place' dimensions and the natural limits and boundaries of body, place and ritual object » (McMillen 2011, 3). There is arguably no physical geography on the Internet, but this does not mean that there isn't a geography of sorts. Hypertext links chart paths across the seemingly limitless space of the global network and they lead to websites where a virtual sense of place is central to the reconstruction of manipulated reality. In the 1980s, Baudrillard negatively conceptualized hyperreality which, he believed, ultimately caused the destruction of reality. « It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality » (Baudrillard 1981, 10), he wrote. The image has murdered the real : « It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum » (Baudrillard 1981, 17). A more positive view of hyperreal virtual reality is based on the understanding of reality as a consensual social construct legitimized by an authority. After all, the « real » pilgrimage of Croagh Patrick was artificially revived by Archbishop Healy of Tuam at the turn of the 20th century. He arranged that special trains be chartered to bring pilgrims to the sacred place, had an oratory built and wrote a Life of Patrick, all of which were his contribution to the Catholic Church 's current efforts to revive penitential pilgrimages and reinforce its own power within Irish society. The Internet is a threshold to a different type of religious reality, one that is individualized but rests on the consensus that imagination and creativity may serve to unshackle fetters and to escape from stifling authorities into a world where like-minded people may recreate a deep and sincere sense of spirituality.

In this universe, the absence of boundaries or regulations and the complete dematerialization of reality are generally compensated for by a form of re-territorialization.

Different models of this trend may be identified in relevant websites. One consists in substituting texts and (often) interactive audio-visual contents for what O'Leary terms landscape memories. Physical features are then recreated textually (O'Leary 2004, 51) and visually. A second method involves explicitly connecting the website to a cultural and religious tradition either by referring to a specific set of beliefs or anchoring the virtual community of adepts in a given offline territory, or even by choosing domain address names and pseudos that have specific religious connotations. The third method consists in creating a virtual territory for a cybercommunity, a sort of magic island in which « the map precedes the territory », to quote Baudrillard again (Baudrillard 1981, 10). The last technique involves the creation of a sacred space either through an online ritual or by showing on the computer screen the image of a place reminiscent of religious practice, a church, a chapel or any form of altar. In « Sacred Space », the international online prayer site run by the Irish Jesuits, the very name of the site suggests that the homepage itself is a sacred cyberspace. As Cheryl Casey demonstrates, « the attribution of sacrality is a social construction, the place itself is neutral, but can be socially constructed as sacred ». It seems crucial however to enter « a specifically designated spatial zone » to gain access to a form of religious experience on the Internet (Casey 2006, 81).

If the numerous institutional Catholic websites –Irish or otherwise- reflect the claim of their Church to universality and therefore emphasize the global-spiritual rather than the local-cultural meaning of place (« Sacred Space » belongs to that category), an impressive proportion of non institutional international religious websites –most of them based outside Ireland- reclaim the Irish territory or the Irish culture as a key component of their spiritual bedrock. Their inspiration is varied, ranging from Celtic Christianity to various forms of neo-paganism, but they share the New Age approach to spirituality. Common features include the rejection of norms, of institutional religion and inherited dogmas; syncretism, creativity, the taste for myth and an immanent perception of the sacred or the divine.

The « Virtual Abbey of the Arts », home of the « Holy Disorder of Dancing Monks » provides an interesting example of such groups. It is based in Galway, but has a postal address in Houston Texas. Both its abbess and prior are Americans who have settled in Ireland. Both belong to the Catholic tradition, but they want to start a « monk revolution » aiming at an earth cherishing consciousness » and « transformative living » through « contemplative and expressive arts ».[2] They run live and online programmes, one of which centers on the liminal aspects of the Irish Celtic Christian heritage. It is a 4-week self-study retreat entitled « Celtic Spirituality : Thresholds, Thin Places, and Wandering for the Love of God ». Ireland itself is understood as a thin place, a land of myth and magic where the virtual pilgrim can easily have access to the sacred which has disappeared elsewhere. In the words of Sister John Miriam, « it is a place where it is possible to touch and be touched by God », a place where the seen and the unseen meet (Hines-Brigger 2015). Praises for the retreat insist on the relevance and potency of the virtualized Irish tradition for participants: « The theme of thresholds and transitions and wild edges are particularly poignant to me » writes one of them. Another

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[2] Abbey of the Arts's homepage: http://abbeyofthearts.com. Accessed 10 May 2015.

« loved the format of the retreat ». « The mix of visual art (your photos are gorgeous), reflection material (…), music by Richard (…) and movement with Betsey (…) really made this retreat come alive to me. It was a true 'multimedia experience!- just like life ».[3] Thanks to the form of territorialization chosen by the organizers of the retreat, the internet served as a portal to a spiritually nourishing metaphorical journey. « Thanks for offering a wonderfully nurturing, thought provoking, life-giving structure to my journey », one student comments.[4]

The notion that Ireland is a « thin place » is a constant feature in Irish-related online religions or religiosities. It embodies a form of physical accessibility to the sacred which, it is assumed, can be duplicated in cyberspace. Grounding virtual religiosities in virtualized Ireland is a way of injecting into an otherwise disparate mix the necessary dose of authenticity conferred by a place labelled as magic in popular tradition.

When new communities seek roots, it is crucial for them to choose a clearly identified avatar of mother earth in which to anchor their founding myths and reconstructed archaic traditions. Michel Maffesoli adequately summarizes this type of approach when he talks of the contemporary quest for « the invagination of meaning » (Maffesoli 2004, 40). Even the Irish based international Fellowship of Isis thus finds it quite natural to associate the Egyptian religion of Isis and Celtic neo-paganism. Lawrence Durdin Robertson, the founder of the movement, considered himself a druid at the same time as a priest of Isis. To him, the Great Goddess being universal, she could be venerated as Dana or Brigit. Since the base of the organization was Irish, it was crucial to anchor it in the native Celtic tradition. An Irish dimension was introduced so as to embody universal myths in the native Irish culture.

More striking still, the American based cybercommunity of The Summerlands recreates a fictitious Ireland set on a virtual island evocative of Thomas More's Utopia or the Irish Celts' pagan otherworld. The homepage features an archway through which an orientation table is visible. Visitors are invited to join the hosts in « an Otherworldly time and space, a safe haven for Druids, and Witches and Pagans ». There, on the other side of reality, they will « walk the dreamways through the dolmen » and « come into the arms of the Goddess and pass between the Paps of Anu as nature embraces her Lover ».[5] Clicking through the archway leads you to the crossroads where your journey begins. Through the sheer power of language the virtual traveller is invited to share an experience of liminality in a succession of liminal spaces. The website provides a very precise map of the cybercommunity's territory. The overall framework is significantly Irish as place names are often made to have an Irish ring, but contents are eclectic, anachronic and syncretistic. After « making connection with the Spirit »[6] at the Sanctuary of the Sacred Fire, members are invited to join a healing session and then « walk down the cliff side trail by the sea » or meet at various meeting places in a very friendly spirit. They can share a pint of virtual Guinness at the Old Seanchai's Pub and « swap

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[3] http://abbeyofhearts.com/programs/self-study-online-classes/celtic-spirituality-online-self-study-retreat/. Accessed 7 May 2015.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] http://www.summerlands.com/. Accessed 8 May 2015.
[6] http://www.summerlands.com/crossroads/Site%20Info/sancgbv tuar.htm. Accessed 8 May 2015

songs, stories, poems, satires, info and techniques » in the chat room of the Bard's Hall.[7] The invention of a virtual territory is indicative of the paradoxical importance of place for the community. Michel Maffesoli argues that the only common denominator between loosely connected postmodern neo-tribes as he calls them may be their perception of a « sense of place », which makes them adopt a territory as part of their cultural and religious identity. The possibility of social connection rests on the existence of this common territory, he says. In the extreme case of the Summerlands, we may suggest that even a virtual semi early Irish magic island, the product of an American 21st century neo-pagan druid's imagination, may bind together the members of his community.

Like many American druids, shamans or witches, Charles DeVane (or Searle Dubhain), the man who created the Summerlands claims Irish descent. It is also the case of Michael Ragan, who founded The Temple of Danann as far back as 1979. He did so after a « trip to his maternal homeland », in the course of which he had a sort of spiritual revelation. When he launched the Temple of Danann, his ambition was « to continue to reclaim the rich spiritual birthrights of our Irish ancestors ». « If you are one of the scattered children (…) we bid you welcome »,[8] he specified. In this case, the dolmen which featured on the homepage of Michael Ragan's site may be understood as the archway to the diaspora's true Irish roots, the world of ancestors which founds their identity. One of the most important neo-druidic international movements, Ar nDraíocht Féin (or ADF, a Druid fellowship) explicitly raises the issue of nationality. Ireland appears as the organization's anchorage point, hence the question: « What if I'm not Irish ? », that features in the FAQ section of the website. The answer puts into relief the totemic value of Ireland, but also Gaelic words and names rather than any national feeling:

> You don't have to be. Despite ADF's Irish name and their use of the Celtic term for clergy (« druids ») (the) members come from a wide variety of ancestries, including European, Asian, native American and African. (The) members honor Celtic, Germanic, Lithuanian, Polish, Greek and other European deities, ancestors and nature spirits. (…) In general neopagan druids have no time or sympathy for racist nonsense or cultural bigotry.[9]

As for the lack of authencity, it is not presented as a problem : « Spiritually, we believe that we are following the paths once trod by our namesakes and that no other name is nobler and suited to our modern intentions –and that makes us real as far as we are concerned ».[10] In the same way various sites offer online Celtic rituals that have nothing Celtic apart from their names. The names of old Irish deities such as Morrigan or Brigit are also often chosen to link up innovations with the Irish tradition: beliefs and rituals are thus made to look archaic whereas they are recent creations. Morrigan for instance is popular with witches, who claim

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[7] http://www.summerlands.com/crossroads/Site%20Info/barda.htm. Accessed 8 May 2015.
[8] http://www.danann.org. Accessed 9 February 2006. Like so many such sites, it proved ephemereal and is no longer active. The dolmen portal of the homepage is however still accessible.
[9] https://www.adf.org/about/basics/qa.html. Accessed 8 May 2015.
[10] *Ibid.*

the Celtic tradition as part of the witch belief system.[11] Brigit for her part is claimed by shamanic, Celtic Christian, neo-pagan, Christin feminist as well as transgressive Catholic websites. If we are to believe her early hagiographers, Brigit's « mother had one foot inside the threshold and the other outside the threshold » when the baby was born (O'Duinn 2005, 9). She has remained a threshold goddess and saint to the present day. According to those who worship her, future is possible if they seize her torch and lighten the dark path to a renewed earth based, feminine spirituality seeking rebirth. Such is for example the mission of « Ord Brighideach International », a virtual order of flamekeepers, which presents itself as « multidenominational and non-denominational ».[12]

However reinterpreted and manipulated, Irish archaic traditions clearly serve to legitimize fringe groups expressing the most undogmatic views unmediated by official priests. Religious identity is no longer inherited but chosen by the subject in a space freed of all constraints that has contributed to the «radical destruction of religion in its traditional understanding » (Derrida 1996, 46). Victor Turner noted that liminality « may be for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, of disorder into order, rather than the milieu of creative interhuman satisfactions and achievenemts » (V. Turner 1979, 43), hence the need for a form of legitimation. However, if liminality is « more destructive than the structural norm » Turner also sees it as more creative in the last resort (V. Turner 1979, 44). As a virtual temporal and spatial setting or mythscape, Celtic Ireland, the thin place by excellence, is perfectly suited to lead the cyberfaithful to creative religious experiences on the web. The Internet for its part arguably favours their passage into the unseen by provoking « altered states of mind in cyberspace » (Sant 2001).

In her analysis of religion and the Internet, Rosalind Hackett has examined the main features of the World Wide Web as « a new interface for mediating religious belief, ritual and ethical practice and for constituting community and selfhood » (Hackett 2006). She emphasizes the convenient sides of religious practice on the Internet that explain the very high proportion of American religious surfers (25% of the total population in 2004[13]). She notes that cyberspace « permits the customizing of experience to suit hectic modern, work-oriented lifestyles ». Indeed online rituals are accessible 24 hours a day seven days a week and both time and space may be transcended at will. Everything goes faster and is available for immediate consumption. Internet users can pick and choose, they have access to dozens of

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[11] For instance in the German website of « magieheim.at » mentioned by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, « Rituals Online : Transferring and Designing Rituals », in *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Interne*t, 2-1, 2006, p. 60.

[12] Ord Brighideach International website, FAQ :
http://www.ordbrighideach.org/raven/modules.php?name=FAQ&myfaq=yes&id_cat=2&categories=About+Ord +Brighideach . Accessed 20 April 2014.

[13] A survey published that same year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project has shown that 64% of wired Americans (…) used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes». The report is accessible online : http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2004/PIP_Faith_Online_2004.pdf.pdf. Accessed 9 May 2015.

different forms of spiritual healing or counselling. They can even buy initiation training that might take years to complete and require exhausting physical journeys offline. Freedom, autonomy, speed, permanent availability, anonymity and discretion are bound to appeal to contemporary viewers. No long term or permanent commitment is necessary as the medium itself constantly evolves, which may also be perceived as positive today.

Websites come and go. New ones are created and disappear in their turn. The website of the virtual pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick is no longer accessible. Nor is that of the Temple of Danann, or the very first Irish neopagan website, « Pagan Ireland », founded in 1995 by Bev Richardson, then a very active online witch guru. He and his wife now run an earth-based spiritual centre at Castle Pook (Co Cork) that includes a campsite, a hostel and restaurant. And their website warns visitors « If you can't live without hi-speed broadband and good phone coverage, don't come here ». [14] Many religious websites are personal webpages dependent on the personal good will or motivation of their hosts. The webpage of late Celtic reconstructionist Alexei Kondratiev's « Lorekeeper training Course » explains how difficult it is to persuade activists to compile material and run a site, particularly when it is a non-profit structure.[15] Internet users are therefore left to guide themselves through the labyrinth of cyberspace and drop anchor wherever they may find helpful -if transitory- guidelines for their personal quests. The machine is the central condition of permanence in a transient world, the mediator between the self and changing contents. Critics of online religions expose this « self-through-machine experience of the unbounded sacred » (McMillen 2011, 16). Sarah MacMillen sadly notes that « religion becomes another strain of consumption and narcissism » while the key sense of community has been destroyed.

There is evidence however that users feel otherwise and find companionship –however temporary in some cases- in cyberspace. In the online booklet entitled « Maya, Goddess Rites for Solo Use », the late Olivia Robertson, the co-founder of the Fellowship of Isis, wrote that « although apparently alone, the Devotee becomes more and more part of that rainbow network which brings Heaven on earth ».[16] The network can in fact be understood to create communities. A large number of new age religions such as FOI actually depend on the Internet for their survival and expansion. In such cases, physical distance is abolished and international real time group rituals become possible. But users often comment that a specific sense of community emerges from cyberspace encounters. Research carried out by Heidi Campbell has evidenced that the members of the Christian organizations she studied chose « to join online communities for fellowship, to realize 'the body of Christ' rather than just for information » (Hackett 2006, 68). Textual exchange in chatrooms and experience sharing in a virtual pilgrimage or ritual is also praised as a way of reinventing community. The World Wide Web is a world where the cyberfaithful are given access to a new identity and a new

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[14] Castle Pook website, http://www.castlepook.org/_y/Things_to_do.html. Accessed 9 May 2015.

[15] Alexei Kondratiev's Lorekeeper Course, http://www.llygedyngrove.com/LoreKeeper/. Accessed 15 May 2015

[16] Fellowship of Isis Liturgy – fellowship of isis Central website, https://sites.google.com/site/fellowshipofisisliturgy/maya-goddess-rites-for-solo-use. Accessed 12 May 2015.

form of social connection that are both entirely founded on the possibility to communicate and be informed. While raising the question of whether networks beyond the electronic barrier have replaced traditional communities, Lorne Dawson suggests that « virtual communities are only a subtype of the larger phenomenon of 'personalized communities' or networked individualism' » (Dawson 2004, 81).

Nowhere is this phenomenon more visible than in online rituals. Those offered on the Internet are extremely varied and their presentation assumes a whole range of shapes. This may go from the recording of an interactive public webcam encounter between a priest/ priestess/ druid and a participant to the recording of a ritual performed by an initiate or even a ritual transcript or a simple text describing the way each participant may devise the ritual on his own. In all cases however it is assumed that a community is involved and that the ritual ensures direct contact with deities. As O'Leary argues, these « may very well be a collective fiction », but « they nevertheless (provide) some spiritual sustenance and comfort to (their) followers » (O'Leary 2004, 54). Cheryl Casey goes further when she links up the seeming efficiency of the ritual with the nature of the medium itself. Indeed, « by offering virtual presence from inside a virtual realm, ritual as enacted symbol in cyberspace is all the more effective at pointing beyond itself to the divine and the sacred » Casey 2006, 76). The Internet is the ideal space to carry out religious rituals, she concludes, as « it returns (them) to (their) fundamental relationship with the unseen » and « revirtualizes » them (Casey 2006, 83-84).

This phenomenon is emphasized in Irish-related online religions by the choice of rituals that intensify the sense of a passage into an other world. When the Wiccan priestess who calls herself Sage Goddess carries out an online Beltaine ritual, she insists on the fact that Beltaine itself is a portal into another dimension and that it makes « spirit contact really easy ».[17] She lights a twig of sage, wafts some of the smoke across the network so that it may reach participants virtually and invokes the Great Goddess who is then believed to fill cyberspace with her beneficient presence. Online rituals in general share the characteristics of rites of passage as defined by Van Gennep: the initial or preliminary stage which separates the participant from his past life in the profane reality, the liminal stage during which contact is established with the sacred and post-liminal stage which allow the transformed initiate to reintegrate normality (Van Gennep (1909) 1981, 30). In the ADF video recording of a solo druid ritual[18], the worshipper, Ian Corrigan, first defines a sacred space, then takes nine deep breaths to break with real life, keeps silent for a few moments, gives nine knells on a bell and raises his hands. The initial stage is over. He then starts his invocation to the Earth mother, gods, goddesses and ancestors. The liminal element is stressed by the prayer to the Gatekeeper : « Let the gate to the Síd be open ». The ritual script specifies : « With the worlds gathered around you … you are seated at your Shrine in the center of the Worlds … here at the Crossroads of all that is, you can open a gate to the Otherworld ». A vision of the universe beyond the gates ensues and the blessing of the gods ensures rebirth and new beginnings.

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[17] http://www.spreecast.com/events/sacred-grit-beltane-fire-fest. Accessed 9 May 2015.
[18] ADF, video of the « simple shrine ritual (solitary druid liturgy) » (rite created in 2006) https://www.adf.org/rituals/videos/simple-shrine/index.html. Accessed 9 May 2015.

When the rite has come to an end the gods and the Lord of the Gates are thanked. The druid « makes a closing spiral » and says « Let all be as it was before, save for the magic I have made. Let the gates be closed » And the postliminal stage ends : « As the gate closes, the Vision of the Grove and the Worlds fades… You are seated in your seat, before the hallows of your shrine ». [19]

Rites of passage are transformative. So seem to be online rituals which may have effects on participants' identity. Cyberspace has been defined as a « third place », a social environment which is neither home nor the working place, and may foster a sense of place and belonging. Ray Oldenburg, who conceptualized the notion, argues that « a transformation must occur as one passes through the portals of a third place » (Oldenburg (1989) 1991, 25). Online religions are therefore served by the medium itself. Toni Sant refers to the « consensual hallucination of Internet users ». He goes as far as « to think of cybercommunication (in general) in terms of ritual » since a « ritual occurs when the virtuality of cyberspace becomes someone's reality » :

> Once online, I become something other than a person in front of a computer terminal. My body is still in front of the computer screen, but I am also actively engaged in a whole new world on the other side of the screen. I am in a liminal state between the real world and the virtual reality of cyberspace. And when I go offline, I find that I am affected by the online experience to some degree or other (Sant 2001, 2-3).

To Steve Jobs, the man who created MacIntosh computers, electronic ecstasy was comparable to the mystic ecstasy (or satori) resulting from LSD consumption. He said both allowed him to go beyond closed doors and enter a world of modified perceptions.[20] In his book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner emphasizes the fact that « digital culture grew directly out of the counterculture and LSD scene » and that it induced new forms of mysticism (F. Turner 2006, 165). It also developed as an offshoot of quantum physics and cybernetics which radically redefined the nature of reality and the place of human beings in the universe. Quantum physics established that we can't be certain that matter exists at the level of subatomic particles as these particles are in constant motion. Besides, particles seem to have no existence outside their connection with other particles. Nature can be defined as a complex network of interconnections between different components of the great whole. According to physicist David Bohm.

> All of this implies a thoroughgoing wholeness, in which mental and physical sides participate very closely in each other. Likewise, intellect, emotion, and the whole state of the body are in a similar flux of fundamental participation. Thus, there is no real division between mind and matter, psyche and soma. (…) Extending this view, we see that each human being similarly participates in an inseparable way in society and in the planet as a whole. What may be suggested further is that such participation goes on to a greater collective mind, and perhaps ultimately to some yet more comprehensive mind

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[19] ADF, script of the ritual of the simple shrine, https://www.adf.org/rituals/videos/simple-shrine/script-full.html. Accessed 9 May 2015.

[20] Biography of Steve Jobs, quoted by Philippe Breton 2000, 50.

in principle capable of going indefinitely beyond even the human species as a whole Bohm 1990, 284).

The religious implications of such an interpretation of quantum principles is all the more obvious as some serious physicists such as Bohm share the view that « there is only one energy that is the basis of all reality », and that « each (…) comes to reflect the other » or rather that « ultimately each is the other » (Bohm 1989, 5).

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan, the spiritual father of the Internet suggests the elaboration of a planetary religion that would take the form of a synthesis between science and religion. Today, the extension of quantum theories to the philosophical, psychological and spiritual fields lends credibility to the wildest pseudo religious theories. Quantum physics and alchemy are thus brought together by the Fellowship of Isis to justify the organization's interpretation of magic. What Quantum physics calls « the Field », « an invisible well-spring of infinite potential and possibility » becomes « Nature in her latent phase as the Cosmic mind, a limitless matrix that lies fertile and fallow until there is a creative urge to which she can respond ». [21] Charles DeVane's theories as presented in the Summerlands website also systematically rest on recent scientific theories, quantum physics prominently featuring as « pointing us towards a fresh look at the magical practices ». [22] In the same way, he has obtained results in his quest « for ultimate meaning in life » through « quantum leaps of the mind and spirit across the 'void'. Since the salmon is the totem of knowledge » in the Irish tradition, he calls « this leap the 'salmon leap' ».[23]

The fact that this type of information is available in cyberspace reinforces the idea that the Internet allows for spiritual leaps since it favours interconnections between particles of the great whole. Norbert Wiener, the founding father of cybernetics argued that human beings were « entirely defined by their capacity to communicate socially » (Wiener 1952, 183). According to him, being fully alive meant partaking in the communication process, receiving and transmitting information. Computers and the development of the World Wide Web made his utopian dream possible. Extended to the field of new religiosities, this understanding of humanity feeds the belief that « connecting through cyberspace is akin to connecting through the energy of 'nature' – at the heart of Pagan traditions » (Hackett 2006, 68). As Rosalind Hackett suggests, « surfing the web and traveling to other realms could easily be described as a shamanic experience » (Hackett 2006, 70). Some cyberfaithful go further and claim that a passage through cyberspace allows them to merge with cosmic consciousness or *anima mundi* and that the universe they reach is more real than the physical world.

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[21] Rev. Arisa Victor, « Magic », http://mirrorofisis.freeyellow.com/id183.html.
[22] « The Quantum cat's grin – Pathworking for the Modern Age », http://www.summerland.org.uk/?p=56.
[23] « The Many Speckled Rainment », http://www.summerlands.com/crossroads/library/traditional_role_of_druids.htm.

In the Fellowship of Isis' « oracle of the Goddess Dana, the deity thus says : « Naught is alien when all is known and loved. You are kin to all beings in the cosmos and all are kin to me ».[24] We might even go as far as to suggest that the primary target of rituals is to ensure that these creatures, whatever their nature, become indistinguishable from the individual who communes with them. His/her identity is abolished in the process but he/she acquires a transcendental dimension. He/she experiences fusion with the absolute, which induces the abolition of time and space. Such experiments, Olivia Robertson suggested, only seem strange to those who are unable to perceive the true reality of things. The only real strangeness is concealed in the everyday life of non-initiates. The territory which is unfamiliar and foreign to initiates is the common ordinary world, where conformity and uninspired or unenlightened perceptions reign supreme. Only through communion with cosmic consciousness, can an individual gain access to the True Life, which implies giving up his personal identity to be allowed to exist. In a passage of the rite of initiation, the priest invokes the goddess in the following manner: « Come to us, Holy Light, Divine Spirit (…). Without Thee, we are lifeless, devoid of true being. We exist in a transient world of appearances, entrapped in delusions ». And the oracle answers: « All spiritual and physical fires emanate from my Eternal Flame. This is beyond both time and space. My light is expressed individually through each creature, every atom : you are all One in Me ».[25] In this situation, the devotee no longer has an individualized life. His very existence relies on his connection to others since the overall target is to merge into what may be considered a kind of generic self as defined by Maffesoli (Maffesoli 2004, 129). When the initiate merges into cosmic consciousness through communion with the goddess in cyberspace, identity becomes plural and a new form of holism is born.

Recent experiments in neurobiology have evidenced that the brain reacts to the stimulation of meditation and prayer. In their controversial book entitled *Why God won't go away*, neurobiologists Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili claim that they « saw evidence of a neurological process that has evolved to allow us humans to transcend material existence and acknowledge and connect with a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves perceived of as an absolute universal reality that connects us to all that is » (Newberg and d'Aquili (2001) 2008, 9). Cyberreligious do seem to experience forms of religious ecstasy as they go through online rituals or practise a cult on the internet. In the liminal space beyond the screen, deities come alive and initiates are reborn to a new life that transcends the limitations of time and space. Celtic Ireland is often chosen as the magic bridge to this Otherworld. It connects ultra modernity and reconstructed archaic traditions, and paves the way towards a possible reconciliation between science and religion. The impact of internet religions on contemporary religious sensibilities cannot be underestimated. In our age of authority crisis they reflect the de-institutionalization of religion and the wish for its re-spiritualization. The impressive number of websites run by traditional religions (in particular catholicism) shows that this

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[24] FOI, « Oracle of the Goddess Dana », http://www.fellowshipofisis.com/oracles.html. Accessed 9 May 2015.

[25] FOI, « The College of Isis Manual », http://www.fellowshipofisis.com/originalcoimanual.html. Accessed 9 May 2015.

message has been understood by official religious authorities. We may be going through a transition era in which the internet will unexpectedly contribute to the re-enchantment of the world.

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