



## Universalism and Celtic Traditions in the Human Search for Meaning

Bárbara Aline Ferreira Assunção

### Summary

**This study explores the interaction between human beings and the Universe, focusing on the impact of spiritual convictions and beliefs on human understanding of the world and the meaning of existence. The research highlights the influence of Celtic traditions and beliefs, analyzing their role in shaping human understanding. The study investigates the interaction of different worldviews and how they evolve, leading to a distance from national cultural roots and an identification with elements of other cultures. Specific objectives include analyzing the influence of Celtic traditions on contemporary understanding of the meaning of life and the universe, examining the relevance of these beliefs in the global context, and investigating the role of Druidry and Celtic deities in global spiritual culture. The research, justified by the need to understand the impact of spiritual beliefs on the human worldview, is conducted by a bibliographical review, covering authors who discuss Celtic traditions. Keywords: Human- Universe. Celts. Culture**

### Abstract

This study explores the interaction between human beings and the Universe, focusing on the impact of spiritual convictions and beliefs in the human understanding of the world and the meaning of existence. The research highlights the influence of Celtic traditions and beliefs, analyzing their role in shaping human understanding. The study investigates the interaction of different worldviews and how they evolve, leading to a distancing from national cultural roots and an identification with elements of other cultures. The specific objectives include analyzing the influence of Celtic traditions in the contemporary understanding of the meaning of life and the universe, examining the relevance of these beliefs in the global context, and investigating the role of Druidism and Celtic in the global spiritual culture. The research, justified by the need to understand the impact of spiritual beliefs on the human worldview, is conducted through a bibliographic review, covering authors who discuss Celtic traditions.

**Keywords:** Human- Universe. Celts. Culture.

### 1. Introduction

The present study explores the interaction between human beings and the Universe through their spiritual convictions and beliefs. This research focuses on the role of Celtic traditions and beliefs in shaping human understanding of the world and the meaning of existence itself.

In line with Peixoto's (2007) observations, spiritual beliefs influence the search for understanding human existence. Muzaffar (2004) reiterates the importance of spiritual guidance in human life, highlighting its role in giving meaning to earthly existence and promoting a connection with the global community.

This work examines how different worldviews interact, influence and evolve over time, leading to a distancing from national cultural roots in favor of an identification with elements and ideas that emanate from other cultures (Peixoto, 2007).

Vieira (2000) points out that cultural influence can cross borders, creating closer links with the global at the expense of the local. In this scenario, this research has the general objective of exploring the interaction between human beings and the Universe through spiritual convictions and beliefs, with an emphasis on the role of Celtic traditions and beliefs in shaping human understanding of the meaning of existence.

The specific objectives are: Analyze how Celtic traditions influence the contemporary understanding of the meaning of life and the universe; Examine the relevance of Celtic beliefs in the global context, transcending cultural and geographic borders; Investigate the role of Druidry and Celtic deities in global spiritual culture.

The research is justified by the need to understand the impact of spiritual beliefs on the formation of the human worldview, contributing to the understanding of how ancestral cultures continue to shape

give contemporary world views.

As a methodology, the study was conducted through a bibliographical review, covering works by authors such as Peixoto (2007), Vieira (2000), Sarmiento (1982), Blanc (2014, 2016), Léourier (2008), Ribas (2017), among others, that discuss Celtic traditions.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 The Celts

The Celts, originally from Central Europe, expanded across the continent, establishing a presence in regions such as Belgium, Italy, Spain, France, Great Britain and Ireland (Langer; Campos, 2010). Its expansion occurred between the 12th and 6th centuries BC, a period that witnessed the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula and the beginning of Castro culture.

Blanc (2014) notes that, despite their diversity, the Celts shared common elements such as language, trade, political institutions and religion, while maintaining distinct local traditions.

They were known as a warrior people, governed by kings and with deep respect for their clans, based on kinship ties. An example of this is found in Scotland, where each clan had a unique checkered pattern on their clothes, symbolizing their identity (Langer; Campos, 2010).

Léourier (2008) notes that the Celts spread throughout much of central and western Europe, and even Asia Minor, in several migratory waves, the most recent in the 5th century BC. They had steel weapons, superior to the bronze weapons of the local populations, which gave them an advantage in expansion and assimilation with the natives.

Celtic religiosity, characterized by polytheism and connection with nature, placed the Great Mother as a central figure in their beliefs (Ribas, 2017). The gods were seen in natural elements such as springs, earth, mists and trees.

Sainero (2009) highlights that, although they worshiped several gods, the best known included Lugos, Cernunnos, Esus, Sequana, Brigantia, Epona and Matrona. In this pantheism, deities manifested themselves in various aspects of nature, living in springs and hills, known as sidhe. Worship was focused on natural forces and cycles, with special reverence for Waters and the Sun (Langer; Campos, 2010).

Four main lunar festivities stood out in the Celtic calendar: Samhain (November 1), marking the end of summer and coinciding with Halloween; Imbolc (February 1), starting spring; Beltane (May 1), celebrating the God of Fire and the beginning of summer; and Lughnasad (1 August), the harvest festival (Ribas, 2017).

Blanc (2016) highlights that, as an animist culture, the Celts believed in the spiritual essence of animals, plants, rocks and weather phenomena. Druids played a vital role in rituals, performed in woods and clearings and on riverbanks. Each element was associated with a deity or elemental spirits, such as fairies.

Celtic mythologies, transcending the duality of good and evil, represented forces of nature. Oral tradition was predominant, and writing was avoided, giving it a magical power. It was believed that writing could allow druidic knowledge to fall into the wrong hands or be misinterpreted (Ribas, 2017).

### 2.2 Druidry

The Druids, holders of priestly power in Celtic society, played a fundamental role in uniting the Celtic tribes, both island and continental. Despite this spiritual union, they never formed a centralized state. The end of the era of the Druids, situated between the end of Antiquity and the beginning of Antiquity

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Lately, it remains a mystery, as Mendonça (2021) observes.

Donnard (2006) explains that the etymology of “druid” has Celtic origins, meaning “he who has the knowledge of the oak” or “the wise man of the oak”, indicating his role as a connoisseur of spirit trees and magic. In the Celtic religious structure, according to Irish literary tradition, there were three levels: druids, bards and vates. Druids, in addition to being advisors and holders of magical knowledge with abilities to manipulate nature, exercised religious and political influence. The bards, poets responsible for recording stories and myths in songs and poetry, and the vates, diviners, complemented this structure (Ribas, 2017).

Blanc (2016, p. 31) highlights that, in druidism, women, known as druids, had a respected role, dominating the power of words, stones and herbs. They performed diverse functions, such as singing to the dying, performing enchantments, prophecies, spells, assisting in births and performing cures.

Druids were guardians of knowledge, dedicating around twenty years to memorizing verses, poems, spells and laws. They acted as mediators between the Celtic tribes in conflict with each other. Léourier (2008) highlights that the Romans saw the Druids as the unifying link between rival Celtic tribes, realizing that their elimination would weaken Celtic resistance and destroy the essence of their culture.

With the invasion of external forces, part of Celtic knowledge and traditions were lost. Current knowledge about Celtic mythology comes mainly from sources in Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

### 2.3 Goddesses

The Celts celebrated a variety of goddesses and gods as embodiments of the mysteries and beauty of nature. They spoke languages belonging to the Indo-European linguistic family, which evolved into languages such as Irish, Scottish-Gaelic, Cornish, Welsh and Breton, still preserved today (Faro, 2020).

Celtic art, recognized for its symbolic richness, reflects the imagination of these people. Characterized by representations of sacred animals, deities, warriors and spiral patterns, it offers a glimpse into Celtic culture and spirituality (Langer, 2015).

A central archetypal element in Celtic myths is the female figure, represented by a goddess or queen who symbolizes the Earth and sovereignty, highlighting the Celts' respect and veneration for the feminine principle and its connection with nature and life (Faro, 2020).

In Celtic beliefs, goddesses are personifications of the forces of nature, reinforcing the idea that nature is the source of power in witchcraft and other spiritual practices. The symbolic journey of the female soul, in the Celtic context, is often interpreted as a path of self-discovery and reconnection with the Self, the core of being.

#### 2.3.1 *Danann and its Symbolic Legacy*

The myth of Danann, rooted in the Celtic tradition, constitutes a tool for understanding the imagination and spirituality of these people. As pointed out by scholars such as Faro (2020), many of the ancient myths, particularly those linked to deities, were not documented during the Christianization process, especially in the 12th century by Irish monks.

This period was marked by the transition of Gaelic myths from oral to written form, a context in which Christianity emerged as the dominant religion in Europe, considering mythologies associated with pagan deities heretical (Ribas, 2017).

The transition to Christianity, however, did not erase the Celtic ancestral spirit that continued in the popular imagination. Danann, represented as a wise woman, is described in myths as a resident of islands located north of the known world. Legend describes her dreaming of a place, adorned by rivers and mountains, and a land resplendent in emerald green. Convinced that such a place was her people's destiny, Danann guided them to the Emerald Isle, later identified as Ireland. Mythological narratives report that, under the influence of her people, the island's landscape was transformed through her magic, giving rise to new rivers, mountains and forests (Faro, 2020).

At the end of his life, according to Ribas (2017), Danann summoned his people, transmitting his last instructions and blessings to them. Upon his death, it is believed that his body merged with the earth, forming two mountains in the place of his breasts, symbolizing his wisdom and teachings.

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Peace prevailed on the island until the arrival of the sons of Mil, also known as Milesians, originating from the Tower of Bréogan in ancient Iberia. Subsequent confrontations were pacified when the druid Amergin, in a gesture of respect for the Earth's soul, recited a magical poem, allowing the Milesians to settle on the island. The people of Danann, accepting the end of their era, metamorphosed into fairies and enchanted beings, beginning to inhabit the underworld of hills, lakes and woods (Squire, 2003; Bellingham, 1997).

Furthermore, the myth of Danann transcends the historical and geographical context, representing a metaphor for the healing of the relationship with the maternal figure. According to Faro (2020), this myth teaches that many of the psychological complexes that emerge in childhood and later stages of life are linked to the relationship with maternal figures.

The journey to honor the origin of life, to understand the unconscious patterns perpetuated by generations and to gain awareness in breaking vicious cycles and creating virtuous cycles is highlighted as a path of healing and self-knowledge (Ribas, 2017).

### 2.3.2 Brigid

Brigid, a figure in Celtic mythology, is revered under different names in various regions, such as Brigit in Ireland, Bríd in Scotland, and Brigindu or Brigantia in Gaul (ancient France). Veneration of it, which has been prominent since the first century AD, encompasses both Celtic and Gallo-Roman peoples, highlighting its transregional influence (Faro, 2020).

In Ireland, especially in County Kildare, St. Bridget's Cathedral is a symbolic landmark, where a flame is maintained by the Order of the Brigidinian Sisters. Brigid is associated with spring and the rebirth of the earth, symbolizing renewal and fertility.

In Scotland, she is venerated as Bríde, the queen of spring, in contrast to Beira (or Cailleach), the queen of winter. This duality between Bríde/Brigid and Beira/Cailleach, as pointed out by Mackenzie (1917), reflects the representation of light and shadow, summer and winter, day and night in Celtic mythology.

Bríde/Brigid reigns during the hottest periods of the year, while Beira/Cailleach, representing the archetype of the wise crone, predominates in the colder seasons. Cailleach, in addition to symbolizing the end of cycles, is the incarnation of ancestral wisdom that is constantly renewed. She is both the queen of winter and the harbinger of the promise of spring, in a cyclical representation of death and rebirth (Ribas, 2017).

Brigid is described as a figure of radiant beauty and personification of nature, in contrast to Cailleach, who is portrayed as an elderly woman, alternating between severity and benevolence (Faro, 2020). The Irish oral narrative reports the birth of Brigid on February 1st, marking the prelude to spring, whose light and beauty were so intense that they created the illusion of two suns in the sky (Ribas, 2017).

Brigid is worshiped as the goddess of sacred fire and manifests herself in three main aspects: the goddess of the hearth fire, protector of homes and women; the goddess of forge fire, protector of warriors and blacksmiths; and the fire goddess of inspiration, patroness of druids and bards. Additionally, she is the guardian of sacred springs, sources of healing and fertility.

The fountain in Kildare is a sacred pilgrimage site, celebrated during the festival of Imbolc on February 1, marking the imminence of spring (Faro, 2020). In Celtic traditions, midwives invoked Brigid during childbirth, opening the main door of the house to symbolize the goddess's role in guiding the child's soul into the world.

With her powers and attributes, Brigid is linked to the elements of fire, water and earth, representing the Three Worlds of the Celtic worldview: sky, sea and earth. Her name, which evokes exaltation or elevation, highlights her status as a goddess of veneration (Ribas, 2017).

### 2.3.3 Macha as a Representation of Female Sovereignty

Macha emerges as a central figure in Celtic mythology, revered as an ancient goddess symbolizing sovereignty, feminine power and the life force of the Earth. It is associated with fertility and the vital cycle of life, death and rebirth, with the raven and the horse as sacred symbols, elements that reinforce its connection with nature and the spiritual (Faro, 2020).

Macha's best-known narrative involves Crunniuc, a tribal leader from Ulster, in the northern region of Ireland. After the loss of his wife, Crunniuc sees his life transformed by the arrival of an enigmatic and noble woman. This woman, who reveals herself as a member of the *Sídhe* - beings from a different dimension of mysticism known as the "Other World" - demands from Crunniuc respect for his privacy and honor for his true essence. Her presence brings order and harmony to Crunniuc's home, but also distrust and fear among the villagers, due to her unknown past and origin (Faro, 2020; Ribas, 2017).

The myth of Macha reflects a period of transition in Celtic culture, marked by the change of a matriarchal society to one dominated by patriarchal values. In this context, aspects related to the feminine began to be subjugated and devalued. The "Macha curse", as described in the legend, appears as a blunt response to this transition, teaching men the importance of recognizing and respecting feminine strength and the challenges faced by women, with regard to the birth and renewal of life (Ribas, 2017).



The myth of Macha carries a message about rejecting abusive relationships and the unacceptability of violence, reaffirming women's autonomy, their right to govern their own destinies, make decisions and act with strength and determination. This myth challenges patriarchal norms and structures, reinforcing the role of women as a sovereign and capable figure in their own narrative (Faro, 2020).

#### 2.3.4 Cerridwen's Cauldron of Transformation and Wisdom

Cerridwen is especially venerated in Wales as the holder of a magical cauldron. Known as the “Lady of the Cauldron” of Awen – a Welsh expression meaning divine inspiration – Cerridwen symbolizes wisdom, inspiration, bardic initiation and transformation.

The most famous legend associated with Cerridwen tells the story of her two sons: Creirwy, a young woman of extreme beauty, and Afagddu, a son of less graceful appearance. Aiming to compensate for Afagddu's lack of beauty, Cerridwen undertakes the creation of a magical potion, intended to grant wisdom and inspiration to the consumer. This potion, however, requires special ingredients and a meticulous cooking process lasting a year and a day (Faro, 2020).

In carrying out this task, Cerridwen is aided by a blind servant, Morda, and a young man named Gwion. An incident occurs when three drops of the potion reach Gwion, granting him extraordinary knowledge. Gwion, fearing Cerridwen's wrath, begins an escape, during which the cauldron ruptures, spilling its contents and contaminating a nearby lake.

Cerridwen, upon realizing what has happened, embarks on a relentless pursuit of Gwion, crossing different forms and landscapes. The hunt culminates with Cerridwen, transformed into a chicken, swallowing Gwion, who had disguised himself as a grain of wheat. Later, Cerridwen becomes pregnant and gives birth to the reborn Gwion, whom she decides not to punish, but rather to throw into the sea inside a leather bag (Faro, 2020).

The young man is found by Prince Elphin, who names him Taliesin, meaning “radiant countenance”. Taliesin, who later reveals himself as a prodigious poet and singer, is celebrated as the greatest bard in Wales, also taking on the role of Myrddin.

Cerridwen's cauldron is a symbol of her own womb, representing renewal and wisdom. The fact that Cerridwen is the Lady of Awen and yet does not anticipate Gwion's ingestion of the potion highlights the unpredictability of fate. The sea crossed by Taliesin symbolizes the passage from the spiritual to the material, a recurring theme in Celtic mythology (Barros, 1994).

#### 2.3.5 Morrigan

Morrigan, in Celtic mythology, is a figure that represents the archetype of the “Beautiful Death”, symbolizing honorable death, the one desired by warriors and heroes in legends, where sacrifice is made for noble causes. - the survival of a people, the conquest of sacred lands, or the achievement of feats that last through time (Ribas, 2017).

In addition to her links with death and war, Morrigan also manifests the archetype of the Lover, being portrayed as a beautiful and sensual female figure. The use of colors to represent her, such as red and black, is full of symbolism: red evoking passion, strength, power and sensuality; black suggesting mystery, occultism and the unknown. Together, these tones symbolize passion and death, reflecting values rooted in the human psyche (Faro, 2020).

One moment in mythology involving Morrigan is her interaction with Cuchulain, one of the greatest Celtic heroes. Morrigan, like a seductive lover, tries to win over Cuchulain. The latter, however, committed to his heroic journey, rejects the goddess's amorous advances. This rejection awakens Morrigan's wrath, who decides to face the hero in battle. After an intense fight that ends in a draw, Morrigan and Cuchulain they seal a tacit agreement, with the goddess helping to heal the hero's wounds. This incident marks the beginning of a relationship that mixes elements of adversity and friendship between the goddess and the hero.

Morrigan thus emerges as a deity who embodies both honorable death and overwhelming passion, which highlights the richness and multiplicity of gods in Celtic mythology, underlining the tapestry of symbolism and meaning that permeates this ancient tradition (Ribas, 2017).

#### 2.4 Celtic Women

In Celtic society, women occupied a prominent position and played active and influential roles, unlike many other cultures of the same time. Before Romanization, women



Celts enjoyed considerable rights, such as the ability to seek divorce and retain property after marriage, reflecting a high and independent social status (Ribas, 2017).

In addition to domestic responsibilities, Celtic women were involved in governmental and military aspects of their societies. One example is Boudica, the queen of the Iceni tribe, who emerged as a fierce leader after the death of her husband, Prasutagus. The brutality of the Romans against her and her daughters triggered a revolt, during which Boudica led attacks against Roman colonies such as Camolodunum, resulting in the deaths of around eighty thousand people (Langer; Campos, 2010).

Celtic warriors, known for their ferocity in battle, fought with little armor or almost naked, adorned with body paint, made with blue or white dyes, as a way of intimidating opponents. They also had the custom of displaying the heads of defeated enemies as a war trophy.

Despite initial victories, Boudica and her forces were eventually defeated by the Romans, who possessed strategic advantages and superior equipment. This defeat, however, does not diminish the historical importance and impact of their revolt (Ribas, 2017).

According to Robbins (2004), the art of war was an integral part of Celtic life, with women participating alongside men in combat. Irish women in particular were known to fight alongside men, especially against the Romans, reflecting the egalitarian structure and respect for female strength in Celtic society.

War, in Celtic culture, had a mystical and sacred aspect. There was a belief in life after death and the glorification of death in battle. War was seen as a necessary destruction that preceded rebirth, establishing an intimate connection between life, death, war and sexuality (Funari, 2010).

## Final considerations

This study of Celtic culture emphasizes the importance of these traditions in the human journey in search of meaning. The Celts, in antiquity, stood out for their religious and social practices, marked by respect for nature and adherence to polytheism, reflected in their daily activities, art and social organization.

Druids, emblematic figures of this culture, were recognized for their wisdom and mystical abilities, acting as counselors, healers and intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. His influence extended beyond the religious sphere, permeating the political and social spheres of the Celtic tribes.

Celtic deities were central to everyday life, celebrated through rituals and festivals that marked the cycle of seasons and significant moments in life. Celtic art, with its symbolism, offers a window into the spiritual and cultural universe of these people, reflecting their beliefs, values and historical narrative.

Currently, the Celtic influence is still noticeable, demonstrating the persistence of their traditions, myths and practices. These elements continue to shape modern societies, underlining that the human search for understanding and connection with the cosmos is a constant throughout history. Celtic culture, rich in myth and symbolism, provides perspective on this ongoing journey, serving as a reminder of humanity's connection to the natural world and the spiritual universe.

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