

MODERN DRUIDRY

An Interview with Professor Kimberly Kirner



WRSP: Your new book is devoted to modern religious Druidry, a tradition that some readers may not be familiar with. Could you give us a quick overview of what Druidry is? What relationship does it have to the ancient druids of the Iron Age?

Prof. Kirner: Druidry is differently defined by various practitioners of it because there is no central authority who defines what Druidry is. However, I think an overview of modern Druidry that captures commonalities shared by many (if not most) Druids is that it is a contemporary nature-centered relational religion that takes inspiration from a wide range of sources, but often particularly includes mythology and folklore from Ireland and Wales. Modern Druidry doesn't have much of a relationship to the ancient druids of the Iron Age. Because they did not have written history, there is more that we don't know about them than things we do know. This has been extensively discussed by Ronald Hutton in his book *Blood and Mistletoe*. Modern Druids often report feeling strongly tied to this distant past spiritually, but at most, we are responding to this past through imagination and inspiration because there is so much we don't and can't know.

WRSP: Your main focus has been on modern religious Druidry as it exists in the United States, but how does that differ from the tradition as it has been practised in parts of Western Europe, or indeed elsewhere in the world?

Prof Kirner: All over the world, Druidry typically becomes localized. That is, it is built into the culture and training programs of most of the major Druid orders to encourage Druids to localize their Druidry in their immediate environment – to personalize it to meet one's own needs and cultural background, but also – which is important for a nature-centered religion – to localize it in geographic place and integrate it with local ecological knowledge and sustainability concerns. I think some of the biggest ways that Druidry in the United States differs from how it is practiced elsewhere, such as in Western Europe, is that in the United States, it has to grapple with our unique religious, cultural, and political landscape. In particular, while Druidry is open to people of all races and ethnicities, it is predominantly practiced by white people in the United States. In a nation that has a history of slavery and genocide of indigenous peoples, given Druids' common value of justice, this presents a challenge for Druids to grapple with as they try to balance maintaining relationships with ancestors with maintaining relationships to place – and sorting out how to

act out the values of Druidry in the world. Sustainability is a challenge in all contemporary economic contexts, but I would argue the heavy emphasis on individualism and consumption in the United States also makes it particularly challenging to enact Druid values for environmental sustainability.

WRSP: In the book you discuss how you embraced Druidry after discovering it while teaching a course on new religious movements; quite an unusual situation. Where did this interest in new and culturally alternative religions come from to begin with?

Prof. Kirner: I've been interested in religions of all kinds since I was a young child. As I talk openly about in the book, I am predisposed to mystical experiences and was raised to be open to these types of experiences. I've always found religion deeply fulfilling and interesting on a personal level, and as early as elementary school, I would attend friends' religious services because I was fascinated by diversity in ritual and belief, and interested in how it shaped people's lives. That fascination continued throughout my life. On a personal level, I wasn't searching for a religion for myself when I encountered Druidry for the first time, but I loved ritual and a sense of spiritual community (especially interesting discussions – love to have those!) and I knew from studying ethnoecology that I was more aligned with an animist worldview than anything else, which wasn't very visible or accessible in the United States. Mostly, I had learned about animist religions through studying indigenous religions and cultures, which were not open to me as an outsider. When I stumbled on Druidry while preparing a lecture, I was pleasantly surprised to find a reflection of many of my own spiritual experiences, values, and worldview. I didn't then set out to study Druidry as an anthropologist, but rather initiated into Druidry in my personal life. It would be another seven years before I did any research or work in Pagan Studies as an anthropologist.

WRSP: You frame your study of Druidry as an autoethnography, so I was wondering what you felt the particular advantages of this approach were, especially within the study of new and culturally alternative religions?

Prof. Kirner: I think the biggest advantage of autoethnography in the study of any religion is the depth of understanding other practitioners' experiences. Having shared many experiences (and yet always mindful of the diversity of experience, belief, and practice within any tradition), the researcher can offer a depth that is more difficult to achieve when one is an outsider, even in conventional ethnography with being in the field for an extended time. With regard to the study of culturally alternative religions, that depth can translate to evocative story-telling that helps readers relate to new, uncommon, or stigmatized religious cultures. Additionally, there is an added benefit of trust among community members with the researcher, as well as the researcher having fewer assumptions they are bringing from another worldview. (Of course, there are also disadvantages, most notably that autoethnography is not generalizable on its own, but I do think it is quite advantageous as a methodology when paired with other methods, such as interviews or mixed methods surveys.)

WRSP: What has the response to your work been, both from other academics and from Druids themselves?

Prof. Kirner: So far, it has been relatively limited, but all positive. My book has been praised for both its style and its substance, which makes me very pleased. It was not only a professional work, but a work from my heart, so it felt very vulnerable to release it to others. I am thankful that people have enjoyed it and found it useful.

WRSP: What subjects related to modern Druidry, and to modern Paganism more broadly, do you feel are in particular need of further research?

Prof. Kirner: I think there is some excellent work being done on the intersection of Paganisms and politics. I would love to see more work on Druidry and issues in environmental sustainability. There are various popular works on Druid magic, but I have not seen many studies on it, nor comparisons to other Paganisms. Finally, one movement I am particularly interested in that I hope to work on in the future through autoethnographic and ethnographic research is in Pagan and Polytheist monasticism, including the new monastic pathway associated with the Ancient Order of Druids in America.

WRSP: What do you feel are the advantages of studying religion from an anthropological perspective? What does it offer that the likes of sociology do not?

Prof. Kirner: That is difficult to say, because there is some level of overlap when we get to ethnography as a method. While ethnography is historically in the domain of anthropologists, it is now shared with other social sciences and there are some excellent ethnographies out of sociology as well. But in general, sociology's focus on generalizability of results (often leading to quantitative methods), distance between researcher and participants, and an emphasis on institutional processes has advantages for things like policy-making but can sometimes make it difficult to help people learn about cultural diversity. People learn to relate to people unlike themselves through stories that generate empathy. Anthropology is uniquely good at developing rich stories that draw people empathetically into others' lives because ethnography builds depth that is difficult to achieve without time and trust. In my long-term work with cattle ranchers in the Eastern Sierra, for example, I did not achieve that kind of depth until my third year in the field, after about a total of 6-9 months over the course of those years that I lived there and worked alongside them. It takes time for people outside your own community to feel truly comfortable enough to open up, to be honest, to let you into their lives beyond the superficial. Anthropology is particularly good at achieving that, and through those stories, generating meaningful windows into not only the experiences, beliefs, values, and practices of cultures, but also insights into the processes that shape the development of both the individual and culture.

WRSP: Have you got any other projects on the horizon that we should be keeping an eye out for? Are there any other religious traditions that you would be interested in conducting research on?

Prof. Kirner: My next two projects are both books, and both in the works for me to close out a full draft in the next couple of years. One is a co-authored work with cultural anthropologist and ethnoecologist E. N. Anderson on religion and knowledge systems. The other will be an experimental ethnography on the perception, cognition, and memory of place in the Eastern Sierra region in California. Both of those projects are in the write-up stage, so simultaneously I am envisioning both a short-term and a long-term project for future manuscripts.

The short-term project is on material culture and meaning-making in the oddities collector community, which offers an interesting insight into the ways in which collecting objects can intersect with religiosity and spirituality, as well as pose opportunities to consider and enact ethics and values. The long-term project is another autoethnographic one, which is more like a combination of life and professional project on polytheist and animist monasticism. I anticipate this will take me another five to ten years of increasing engagement in developing my own lay monastic Druidic practice and fully embedding it in my life, which I

hope to also explore through community in the Ancient Order of Druids in America's new monastic pathway. I also plan to conduct interviews and studies of the homes and places of practice of other self-identified lay monastics who practice polytheism or animism.

Professor Kirner, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Professor Kirner is a professor of anthropology at California State University, Northridge. She received her PhD from the University of California Riverside in 2007 and is the author of *American Druidry: Crafting the Wild Soul* (2024) and co-editor of *Doing Ethnographic Research: Activities and Exercises* (2020).

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