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“Living a Magical Life”: Sacred Consumption and Spiritual Experience in the Italian Neo-Pagan Community

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In this paper, I report ethnographic findings from the Italian neo-pagan community. Specifically, I explore the consumption of ceremonial objects and magical ingredients employed in the context of rituals intended to create a sacred space where communication between the human and Divine is made possible. As they engage with alternative spirituality and magical practice, members of the pagan community expose themselves to esoteric writings, selected bodies of scientific knowledge (e.g., history, anthropology) and inspiring images from popular culture (e.g., Buffy, Harry Potter) that shape both material culture and spiritual experiences.

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SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY

“Roll Your Own” Religion: Consumer Culture and the Spiritual Vernacular

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Consumer researchers have long questioned the traditional separation between sacred and secular that typifies other thought in the social sciences (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). In this symposium, we will build on this work in several ways.

The most salient difference will derive from the focus of place: all the sites here are European, while previous study in the stream has been in America. Our three sites—Italy, Ireland, and England—not only represent a geographic departure consistent with the theme of the conference, but also represent fundamentally different circumstances for studying the approach to spiritual experience. All three countries have historically been what James Twitchell called “single-supplier” societies in his recent book, *Shopping for God* (2007), where the church is closely intertwined with, if not indistinguishable from, the state. Consequently, these countries, especially Ireland and Italy, have traditionally allowed considerably less of the religious pluralism that Twitchell argues had led to a market-based approach to spiritual practice in America, where consumer choice and church competition are the order of the day.

Nevertheless, in all three cases, we will demonstrate a clear trend toward what Twitchell has also called “vernacular religion”—in which consumers either produce ritual objects themselves, re-purpose traditional religious props, or shop “off the shelf” from other religious traditions—to use for their own inventive, often empowering, spiritual practices. In this way, we will also be building further on the work by previous scholars in consumer behavior, who have focused primarily on the “sacralization of the secular”—where consumers imagine or treat everyday objects in a manner that echoes, but does not attempt to constitute, a religious practice (e. g., Muniz and Schau 2005).

In other work, consumer researchers have examined the commercialization of religious spaces and objects within the American experience, but framed by an existing official church (e. g., Belk and O’Guinn 1989). Again, the geographic setting makes a difference: all three of the sites examined here are places with long religious histories, reaching back hundreds of years into the pre-Christian era—yet the cultural memory of the pagan past is still manifest in practice and the places themselves are fundamentally hybridized, thus arguably more open to consumer reinvention. At the same time, these three settings are no less open to the influences of globalization than any American site; consequently, the consumers and the places both often invoke or reflect contemporary media. As a result, a layering of past knowledge and practice with presently accepted doctrine, as well as with new tropes and needs, is present at these sites in a more transparent and conscious way. Thus, our symposium will also marry the approach to religious practice with Thompson and Tian’s recent work on the cultural memory of place (2008).

We will add an important methodological layer to that originally proposed by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry (1989): we not only tack between the field and the sociological literature for insights and analysis, we also consult the sacred texts and myths invoked by the practices under study, as well as the actual religious histories of the sites—and incorporate the layering provided by contemporary texts from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to *Harry Potter*.

Finally, our work demonstrates poignantly that humans are still spiritual seekers, even in a consumer society that so many

critics say leads to apathy and meaninglessness. Far from abandoning the thirst for meaningful existence, our subjects show an irrepressibly hopeful and creative search for the sacred.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Bidding Brigid: Objects of Petition and the Euhemerized Goddess”

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Often referred to as “Mary of the Gael,” St. Brigid holds pre-eminent and emblematic status among Irish Catholics. Though her reputation is not confined to Ireland (there are 40 dedicated sites in Brittany, as well as 10 pre-Reformation dedications in England, the most prominent at Glastonbury), it was probably due to her popularity in this strongly Catholic country that Brigid was spared in the Vatican’s recent purge of the saintly pantheon.

Brigid, like most who were thus swept away, lived in the transition period when the pre-Christian was being assimilated into Christian orthodoxy. St. Brigid is said to have died in 524AD; the Church’s first life of this saint was written soon thereafter, in the 7th century. Yet even this early biography includes attributes of a Celtic, pre-Christian goddess of the same name. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that the Christian St. Brigid is in fact an euhemerization and thus an artefact of an astute and far-sighted sixth century Papal stratagem, in which pagan sites and objects were reinvested with a Christian connotation, instead of being destroyed and replaced. Attributes of the tutelary Celtic goddess appear to have been appropriated and grafted on to her saintly virginized namesake. And while the persona of the Celtic goddess has obviously been obscured in this process, there are sufficient similarities and parallels between both to posit a composite of what constitutes a Celtic goddess. Thus, an examination of surviving Brigidine festivals and lore suggests that the cult of St. Brigid represents a perfect exemplar of this pagan-Christian syncretism. For instance, the pre-Christian Brigid was a goddess of fertility and growth and the guardian of livestock; St. Brigid’s feast day is celebrated on February 1st, the first day of Spring. Miracles attributed to Brigid are characterized by lavish abundance and fecundity. Her life story depicts her very much as a transitional, hybridized figure. For example, she has a noble (married) father and a slave (unmarried) mother; she is born at sunrise, a transition between night and day; on the threshold of her mother’s home—in Irish folklore a symbol of the penumbra between inner and outer worlds. Later in life, Brigid becomes an abbess—thus she attains the hierarchical status of a male bishop. A superordinate female member of the Celtic pantheon, the pagan Brigid was creator of both natural land formations and the great megalithic structures of the British Isles. In keeping with the Celtic predilection for triads, she was also a poet, healer and artisan.

Today, popular devotion to the Christian St. Brigid resonates with her pre-Christian ancestry. At St. Brigid’s Holy Well in County Clare, Irish consumers marshal an array of objects and possessions to both reflect and shape religious and mythological beliefs. The well itself is situated at the back of a stone grotto. Shelves along the entrance to the grotto are bedecked with a dizzying assortment of objects left by pilgrims: romantic religious artifacts such as rosaries, Italianate holy pictures and statuary

together with an array of what appears to be tawdry everyday household bric a brac: pins, buttons, combs, biros, walking sticks, eyeglasses, rags, and scarves. Pilgrims leave these objects after traveling to the well to drink its waters on designated holy days—and often attach explanatory written messages to the objects they leave behind.

The aim of this paper is to examine how the pagan-Christian syncretism discussed above is refracted through this array of possessions and texts left by devotees. A key theme to emerge in this analysis is the performative roles of these goods. Unlike their counterparts in Latin Catholic countries, the objects left here do not appear to function as votive offerings, brought to a saint or Madonna in thanksgiving for favours received. Instead, pilgrims at this well, come to St. Brigid *seeking* a favour, physical or spiritual, and the good left behind appears to function more as a material metaphor enabling the supplicant to visualize in a concrete manner what they wish the saint to accomplish on their behalf. Thus, the old way of life, the illness, is ‘deposited’ in the rags, walking stick or eyeglasses. Obviously, this works best if the possession holds some cathetic relationship with the disease. This theme of cathexis, detachment or unfastening was further underscored by the nature of many of the possessions deposited on the shelves: buttons, pins, nails.

A second performative role was evidenced in the way many of the items—biros, combs, pins—were deliberately bent or broken. Local lore has it that this is to underscore the fact that these items are no longer intended for use in this world. For these believers, the efficacy of the material in the non-material sphere does not appear to be an issue, a fact that challenges the modernist notion of agency and embodiment as coextensive. Indeed on a wider tableau, the mindset of those who deposit possessions at the well suggests a need to re-conjugate the relationship between agency, embodiment and self. The dominance of empiricism and positivism has had ramifications for consumer behaviour that extend beyond choice of requisite methodologies; on a metaphysical level it has also perpetuated the elision of agency, empowerment and bodily incarnation. It is hoped that this paper may contribute to an exploration of alternate boundaries between embodied and disembodied agency and a metaphysic that can accommodate a world where possessions can simultaneously contribute to making a site sacred, solicit saintly intervention, and carry a semantic payload for both human and otherworldly audiences. In this regard, Brigid’s euhemerized status gives the debate an added theoretical twist.

Reflexive observations will also feature, among them a discussion of the need to revisit the notion of sociality in consumer research. A fresher, more accommodating metaphysical stance might permit a more inclusive appreciation of the role of disembodied beings, saintly and not so saintly, as significant others for the consumer behaviour of their earthly, embodied, counterparts.

“‘Living a Magical Life’: Sacred Consumption and Spiritual Experience in the Italian Neo-Pagan Community”

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Neo-paganism is “an umbrella term for various religions, or spiritual movements, whose practitioners are inspired by the indigenous, pre-Christian, traditions of Europe ... to evolve satisfying and respectful ways of celebrating human relationships with the wider, other-than-human world” (Clifton and Harvey 2004: 1). In the 1950s, early British exponents of the movement claimed to be initiates of a nature-based witchcraft religion that had secretly survived Christian prosecutions (Gardner 1954; 1959). In the US, neo-pagan traditions have been assimilated since the 1970s to the women’s spirituality movement as feminist exponents (e.g.,

Budapest 1976; Starhawk 1982) popularized the emancipating idea of a Goddess immanent in nature (as opposed to a transcendent male God detached from creation), adopting at the same time the witch as a symbol of independent female power oppressed by patriarchy (Hutton 1999).

In Italy, the neo-pagan movement is still in an embryonic phase as only in the 1990s Internet enabled the constitution of the first pagan groups and associations. Most Italian neo-pagans were raised by Catholic families and adopted neo-paganism as a religion in later phases of their lives. As Italy is predominantly a Catholic country, Wiccan and other neo-pagans are often confused with devil worshippers and face considerable level of stigma, ridicule and social ostracism. My study is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork within the neo-pagan community in the areas of Northern Italy and Sicily. Data collection consisted of formal and informal interviews and participant observation of neo-pagan gatherings, festivals, rituals, social events, workshops and online forums in 2006-2007.

Neo-pagans are avid consumers of goods such as ritual costumes; jewelry (e.g., pentacles, Goddess figurines); ritual tools like ceremonial knives, cups, incense burners, candles, incenses; Goddesses and Gods statues; CDs of neo-pagan music; and books. Many of these items are employed in the context of rituals to create a sacred space where communication between the human and Divine is made possible. To this aim, neo-pagans learn esoteric knowledge on the inherent properties of material objects for spiritual and magical purposes. The idea that objects and elements of the physical world are mystically connected to spiritual realms and entities is age-old. In the Renaissance, Cornelius Agrippa’s *Philosophia Occulta* (1533) reported extended tables of correspondences between spiritual entities and herbs, metals, stones, animals and other natural phenomena. Variations of these correspondence tables are widely available through countless books and websites, and are currently employed as reference tools for magical activities. Ritual practice among the neo-pagan community is also shaped by selective readings of scientific disciplines, including history, archeology, religious studies, psychology, folklore, anthropology and even physics. As a spiritual movement, neo-paganism has been disproportionately influenced by folklore and anthropology, and works such as Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1922), Margaret Murray’s *The Witch Cult of Western Europe* (1921) and Marija Gimbutas’ *The Language of the Goddess* (1989) feature prominently in the bookshelves of many neo-pagans. While the ideas reported by some of these scholars are now discredited among academic circles (see Hutton 2000), they act as “scientific” fundament for widely circulated counter-cultural mythologies that foster a sense of shared past and shape sacred consumption practices.

In this respect, another major source of influence consists of mass-mediated representations of magic, including fantasy books (e.g., Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Mists of Avalon*, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*) and popular movies or TV shows (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Charmed*). By selectively leveraging esoteric knowledge and resonant science, history and popular culture, members of the neo-pagan community ideologically shape subcultural practices and consumption. During a ritual, incense recipes may derive from a medieval grimoire; hand-made ceremonial dresses may be inspired by the Lord of the Rings; a magic wand may be crafted after *Harry Potter*’s, and earrings and other ceremonial jewelry may reproduce Celtic patterns found in archeology books. The same sources also shape transcendent experiences. Eclectic neo-pagans may see Divinities in popular culture characters. Buffy may thus be invoked as a Goddess of fire and passion, while the sinister pantheon of H.P. Lovecraft’s *Chtulhu Mythos* may be adopted for more gothic

rituals. During meditations or dreams, neo-pagans may remember past lives when they were Avalon priests, Siberian shamans or Tuscan witches. Such vivid images, at least to a certain extent, may be influenced by their readings in history, anthropology and fiction.

This paper contributes to literature on sacred consumption. While magico-religious metaphors have been widely employed in consumer behavior, most studies have been concerned with the sacralization of the secular rather than the use of consumption goods to seek transcendent experiences. In particular, this paper explores the interplay of science and fantasy in the shaping of counter-cultural mythologies and consumption practices. As they engage with alternative spirituality and magical activities, members of the pagan community expose themselves to selected body of scientific knowledge and inspiring images from popular culture that shape their experience of the spiritual otherworld. Consumer researchers have highlighted the role of mass-mediated culture and selective readings of history in shaping of consumer ideologies and fantasies (Belk and Costa 1998; Thompson 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008). These same sources may also affect spiritual experiences.

"Spiritual Tourism: Mystical Merchandise and Sacred Shopping in Glastonbury"

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Linda Scott, University of Oxford, UK

Set in the heart of England's countryside, Glastonbury town has become the main centre in England for what Bowman (2004, 273) describes as "spiritual tourism". Dominated by Glastonbury Tor, a distorted coneshaped hill with a ruined 14th century church tower on top, the area, that is also known as the Isle of Avalon, "generates and guards a powerful magic" (Roberts 1977). The history of the area stretches far back into the mists of time with many contested stories that change according to the spiritual orientation of the teller. It is generally agreed that the ancient Isle of Avalon was a site of prehistoric worship and mystical tradition that, arguably, can be traced as far back as the Atlantean era of 10,000 BC (Mann 2004) when the Atlanteans are said to have used the Tor as a natural temple after their own temples had been destroyed by the sea.

The area's key spiritual attractions are brought together in the concept of Glastonbury Zodiac which is claimed to have been created by a race of prehistoric astronomers (Malthood 1935). They are accredited with shaping patterns of mythical and astrological significance around the natural contours of the landscape (Roberts 1971). Estimated to be 10 miles in diameter and 30 miles in circumference, the sites that make up the Zodiac harness the Isle's potent celestial and terrestrial energies and are closely lined to the Arthurian legends that surround the Isle of Avalon and that have spiritual significance for both Pagans and Christians alike. King Arthur was allegedly taken there to heal after his last battle and his body is claimed by Christians to be buried in Glastonbury Abbey (Bowman 2004). The Chalice Well at Glastonbury is supposed to be where Joseph of Arimathea hid the Holy Grail after the crucifixion. The arrival of St Joseph brought Christianity to Glastonbury and is still celebrated in the Holy Thorn Ceremony that takes place there each December (Bowman 2006).

Yet, the Chalice Well's history, going back over 2000 years, predates a Christian era. It is thought to have been built by the Druids who came to the area in 600 BC and who founded a Druidic university in the area. They believed in the healing properties of the water and the well's powers as an entrance to the other world. Because the water is reddish in colour it has also been claimed by modern Neopagans as symbolizing the menstrual blood of the Goddess and a representation of the divine feminine. The story of the sorceress, Morgen Le Fay, an important icon in Goddess

culture, has its origins in Arthurian legend. Known as "Lady" or "Priestess" of Avalon, she was half-human and half-faerie. Morgen attempted to bring about the downfall of Camelot and was continually thwarted by King Arthur. In recent times she has been brought to the fore through Marion Zimmer Bradley's classic novel, *The Mists of Avalon*, that was made into a film in 2001, and which retells the story of Camelot from a goddess perspective, recasting Morgen as a gifted woman demonized by patriarchal legend (Jones 2006). Her eight sister Morgens, representing the changing cycles of nature, have also become an integral part of Goddess worship.

The many contested spiritual overlays that co-exist in Glastonbury are perhaps best exemplified by Glastonbury's high street with its astonishing array of small shops that are devoted to mystical merchandise. These New Age shops—e.g. Speaking Tree Bookshop, The Celtic Thread, The Goddess and the Green Man, The Psychic Piglet, Yin Yang, Gothic Image—sell esoteric ranges of mystical symbols, jewellery, books, tarot cards, clothing, furniture, soft furnishings and arts and crafts. Together they present a veritable spiritual bricolage that is manifested through what we have termed "sacred shopping", a shopping that reflects the rich mosaic of myth and legend that surrounds the region and enables a "pic n' mix" approach to a personalised spirituality. In the heart of this shopping lies the Goddess Temple where effigies of the Nine Morgens depict the creative power of nature and the divine feminine. In a strange juxtaposition, just around the corner stands Glastonbury Abbey, built in 37 AD, and reported to be the first Christian Church in Britain. Indeed, both Christian and Goddess communities continue to stake their claims to Glastonbury's spiritual heritage in annual processions through the town (Bowman 2004).

Drawing on a vernacular religious approach that emphasizes the role of material culture, in our presentation we will argue that Glastonbury's spiritual shopping plays an important role in carving out sacred space for New Age religious beliefs, and helps legitimize their claims in the face of more traditional Christian appropriations of sites in and around Glastonbury.

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A beautifully crafted and deeply spiritual guidebook, *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying* teaches that death, like birth, is a doorway-- another stage in the cycle of life. She also works with the Sacred Dying Foundation in educating funeral professionals and hospice workers about Pagan beliefs and practices about death and dying. Her magical practice is inspired by feminism and a concern for the health of our planet, and is informed by Celtic, Hindu and Tibetan practices, the sacred art of tantra, and the magic of enchantment. Neo-Paganism and Wicca are earth-centric paths, and the idea of the body being returned as directly as possible to nature is commonly expressed in discussions about death. View Neo-Paganism Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. I summarise the status quaestionis of research on Paganism in the Netherlands in chapter two, whereby it is concluded that this research is scanty. Subsequently, the systematic analysis of seven interviews with Dutch solitary and eclectic Pagans is presented in chapter three, discussing the notion of "freedom" and using the categories "nature," "energy," "(nature) spirits" and "deity" as subdivisions for understanding the concept "other-than-human persons" in the context of contemporary Paganism in the Netherlands. These categories have emerged from the data. Spiritual Growth, Spiritual Quotes, Metaphysical Quotes, Enlightenment Quotes, Spiritual Reality, Was Ist Reiki, Guter Rat, A Course In Miracles, E Mc2. Wild Quotes, Wild Women Quotes, Peace Quotes, Quotes Quotes, Wild Child Quotes, Quotes Kids, Night Quotes, Movie Quotes, Beau Message. Art Merchandise Shop. ...that soul connection...hits you in the heart, breaks all guards and walls, travels miles and borders, gives you ocean deep feelings and now what?!...I don't have an answer, it's beyond my knowing, beyond my control and understanding. I will leave it, I will try to forget it, not mine, not my time to accept and not my will to reject...hopeless #LoveMeLoveMeNot #UntoldLoveStory© #HalynaChevpilo.