
Book Review

Barbara Jane Davy (ed.), *Paganism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies* (3 vols.; London: Routledge, 2009), 1056 pp., \$810.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-415-43831-5.

A disclaimer, first: I feel a sort of avuncular relationship with these three volumes, for they were preceded by Graham Harvey's and my one-volume *The Paganism Reader*, published by Routledge in 2004. In that book we attempted to sample some of the best-known literary sources for contemporary Pagan revivals, from ancient Norse or Roman texts through Victorian and Edwardian literary paganism to science-fiction author Robert Heinlein. But where Professor Harvey and I sought to sample texts that were fundamental or inspirational to the contemporary Pagan revival, Davy, an independent Canadian scholar living in Ottawa, has collected representative writing from the first two decades of the young sub-field of Pagan studies, with publication dates ranging from 1984–2006. (As part of the book's scholarly apparatus, she includes a useful chronological table of the original publication dates of all the articles and essays.) There was scholarship on contemporary Paganism before 1984, albeit of a fragmentary sort. That year, however, marked the publication of an article by Aidan Kelly, a Pagan leader then residing in California who had received a PhD from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, applying principles of textual criticism to a core Wiccan document, the *Book of Shadows*. At the time, the only venue for publication was a small-circulation 'zine', ambitiously called *Iron Mountain: A Journal of Magical Religion*, though the article provided the core of Kelly's later book-length studies of Wiccan origins (1991, 2007). Hence Kelly's 'Inventing Witchcraft: The Gardnerian Paper Trail' marks the emergence of practitioner scholarship—such as is found in all other fields of religious studies—and thus provides an adequate starting point for this three-volume collection.

Pagan studies is growing and changing. Of one entry Davy writes, 'Like many scholars whose early work is collected here, Australian David Waldron would write his essay included here differently now' (I: p. 7). As editor she is well placed to observe changing trends in both the academic examination of contemporary Paganism(s) and in the ways that Pagan intellectuals recast their views—for instance, how the Druid writer John Michael Greer exemplifies Waldron's analysis of a trend of Pagans '[situating] their claims in larger cultural narratives about nature and the feminine' (I: p. 8).

The three volumes are arranged thematically: I. *History and Development*, II. *Ecology*, and III. *Gender and Feminism*. Introducing the second volume, Davy writes,

Paganism is often defined as nature religion. What practitioners and scholars mean by this varies. For some, nature religion is obviously and necessarily environmentalist, because they understand nature religion as this-worldly earth-based religion. Catherine Albanese (1990) describes it as

religion in which nature is the sacred symbolic centre. For Pagans who used the term to describe their religion before Albanese employed it in her study, calling their religion 'nature religion' often meant simply that they find divinity in the natural world, either as Goddess, in various gods and goddesses, or in spirits of place, or simply through the sanctity pervading nature (II: p. 1).

Thus, the volume on ecology is related to the gender and feminist issues explored in more depth in volume III. As Davy observed, for some contemporary Pagans, 'feminism has been central from the beginning; for others, gender issues became important only later... [G]ender issues emerged through the study of history, [practitioners'] experience in ritual and at festivals, and interaction with other practitioners' (III: p. 1). The pieces collected in the third volume probably represent contemporary Paganism's most radical challenge to the major religions' ideas of the self, the body, sexuality, and embodied divinity. On the level of practice, as Wouter J. Hanegraff points out in his contribution, 'From the Devil's Gateway to the Goddess Within', those Pagans calling themselves witches perform a Romantic inversion of traditional views, rehabilitating "'a religion of nature" as antidote to human alienation' (III: p. 64). And on another level, Goddess scholar Kristy Coleman seeks to discover why the divine feminine provokes both profound resistance in the academy and astonishment among her own university students as she recounts the development of 'an alternative symbolic system'.

Because the Goddess's characteristics and values are vastly different from those of 'God', or the Phallus, replacing Him with Her would, theoretically, result in more than a mere inversion; it sets into place a new structure for defining reality. The transformation of this strategic, central signified would, at least theoretically, cause a chain reaction that would modify the value and meaning of all other signifiers (III: p. 213).

This three-volume series encompasses much current scholarly appraisal of these new structures for defining reality, and in so doing, demonstrates why Pagan studies has quickly taken a place at the academic table—at least in terms of books published, conferences held, and program-unit status within the American Academy of Religion, although not in terms of professorial positions.

One area somewhat under-emphasized in this collection is quantitative study, which also began in the 1980s but has been much expanded in recent years, for example in Douglas Ezzy and Helen Berger's (2007) multi-national study. Davy does include Regina Oboler's study of Pagan attitudes towards environmental issues, 'Nature Religion as a Cultural System? Sources of Environmental Action and Rhetoric in a Contemporary Pagan Community', one of a very few quantitative research-based studies in the sociology of contemporary Paganism—but much more quantitative work remains to be done. (Professor Berger is pursuing other longitudinal studies.) Another area only briefly treated in this collection is Pagan revival in non-English-speaking countries. In nations of the former Soviet Union, for example, a variety of highly nationalistic and at times xenophobic new Pagan groups have arisen. One essay by Adrian Ivakhiv, 'Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religious Right?' does treat of this issue, however, but it

needs to be emphasized that an over-reliance on the British and North American manifestations of contemporary Paganism may not prepare one for its very different faces in other countries.

References

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Kelly, Aidan A. 1991. *Crafting the Art of Magic: A History of Modern Witchcraft, 1939–1964* (St. Paul: Llewellyn).

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