
Book Review

S. Zoreh Kermani, *Pagan Family Values: Childhood and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary American Paganism* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 250 pp., \$27 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-4798-9460-4.

How do invented traditions such as contemporary paganism get passed on to the next generation? This is one of the intriguing questions that is behind S. Zoreh Kermani's *Pagan Family Values*. The book is about the way in which pagan adults interact with children in the construction of the imagination, and experiences of childhood. From the contemporary pagan perspective, childhood is a phase in which the boundaries between human, natural, and spiritual realms are not yet drawn. Children are seen as being open and thus more sensitive to magical practice and the spiritual world. At the same time, growing up means becoming exposed to adult ways of experiencing, and hence a loss of spiritual sensitivity. Childhood, therefore, is a phase that is cherished by pagans. To try to stay attuned to this liminal phase, pagan adults actively construct what they perceive to be a magical childhood.

In the Introduction Kermani challenges Durkheim's idea of magic as a private act that is not able to establish a durable moral community (p. 5), suggesting that contemporary paganism challenges this assumption in the way children are raised and taught within a pagan milieu. Chapter 1 deals with the way in which contemporary pagans create histories of paganism. Their historical perspectives range from historicized views of paganism as a survival of pre-Christian nature spirituality, to a postmodern ironic acknowledgement of paganism as fully constructed make-believe.

Pagans wish to stimulate immaturity in adults and maturity in children. Chapter 2 shows that paganism is a legacy of the Romantic movement, in which childhood was seen as a phase of purity and innocence. The innocence of children is gradually eroded through their integration into an adult world. As one pagan remarked: 'There are a lot of distractions, the older you get; when we remove our distractions, we can move back to that childlike state' (p. 60). A pagan conversion can thus be described as 'recovering the wonder and spontaneity of the magical child within' (p. 63). The New Age popularized the idea of 'Indigo Children', a generation of 'chosen' children with a special spiritual talent, and pagans often look back at themselves as one of these children, or see their own children as 'chosen'.

The idealization of childhood leads pagan adults to find their own lost child within. Pagan adults remember their childhood in different ways. Some want to redeem a magical phase, something that they feel has been denied to them. The author distinguishes two kinds of childhood stories pagans tell (p. 74): one is a narrative about experienced intolerance, conflict, and the rejection of their spiritual sensitivity by

adults, and the other is about the search for a personal authentic religion. The narratives indicate how pagans long to be 'childlike' and magical as adults, and how they have an ambivalent relation with authority. Through ritual practice, pagan adults create the religious worlds of children, anticipating and stimulating the experiences of children but always reflecting their ideals of the spiritual childhood they lacked.

Pagans often have a problematic relation with American majority religions and societal institutions, which they see as heavily influenced by Christianity. Freedom of choice is an essential value for pagans, while at the same time they feel the need to create their own institutions in which this freedom is taught. The tension between choice and institutionalization is prominent in the formal inclusion of pagan children through rites of passage. The emphasis on religious choice in formal inclusion calls into question whether these rites of passage are really analogically similar to obligatory participation in many indigenous communities. But formal inclusion rituals strengthen ties between pagan adults, a way to enter the pagan childhood they never had.

Kermani discusses how an emphasis on freedom comes at the expense of the continuity of tradition (p. 184). Thus the tension between personal spirituality and collective morality is a central issue in contemporary paganism (p. 185). The author restates that religion in paganism is as much about memory as it is about forgetting, in the sense that new religious worlds are chosen and created whereas problematic religious pasts are rejected (p. 186). This reconstruction informs pagan parenting; the creation of a religious imaginary for children resolves adults' ambivalences towards their own childhood.

This book will be informative for pagan studies scholars, but it is also an important read for researchers who are interested in the transgenerational salience of alternative spirituality in general, a topic which should receive more research attention. One of the most striking things about the book is also that one gradually becomes aware of the sociological fact that childhood is always an adult construction, informed by their own life experiences. What makes this book interesting too, is the presentation of the data, in particular the data from an online survey, which show how eclectic, colorful, and seemingly free-floating contemporary pagan practice in the United States is. Pagans and their observers see paganism often as a ludic and ironic religion, a practice that encourages 'childlike' traits such as spontaneity and playfulness (p. 69). However, the biggest irony the author describes is the fact that adults want their children to live in a spiritual childhood world they themselves have created based on the nostalgia of a magical childhood they lost or never had (p. 86). Seeing the irony of one's own tradition is often a risky business and most religions do everything to mask this ambiguity. Some pagans, however, may be so reflexive and aware of their own playfulness that they fully acknowledge their active role in creating this childhood hyperreality. It may not be a religion that is easily transferred to new generations, because of its emphasis on freedom and personal choice.

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