

WICCAN COVENS:
HOW TO START AND
ORGANIZE YOUR OWN

by Judy Harrow
Citadel Press, 1999
285 pages. \$12.95 paper

Reviewed by Fritz Muntean

A shorter version of this review is about to appear in an upcoming issue of Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions. This magazine is highly recommended to our readers, who are invited to visit its website at <www.novareligio.com>.

The last twenty years have seen a noticeable drift away from the coven as the primary organizational unit of modern Witchcraft. A wide-spread desire for acceptance and respectability, combined with a populist call to political action, has led to the current preeminence of large organizations (Wiccan ‘Churches’ and Witchcraft ‘Collectives’). At the same time, the proliferation of popular ‘how-to’ books about the Craft has convinced many beginners that solitary practice is the norm rather than the exception. By challenging many of the assumptions on which these trends are based, and by providing support and direction to coveners and coven leaders, *Wiccan Covens* may serve to reverse these trends. Harrow’s observations on the dynamics of coven organization are based not only on decades of experience, but also on her extensive readings in the sociology of group workings. Considerable progress has been made in this field since the late 70s, and Harrow’s readers are provided

with extensive references to state-of-the-art literature.

Harrow encourages her readers to regard Wicca as more of a religious order than a church. Covens, she says, “are not tiny congregations; they are more like non-resident monasteries”, and a seminary “is not the same thing as a Sunday School” (83). Although the practice of holding separate events for beginners and experienced practitioners is believed by many to be hopelessly elitist, experience and reflection have convinced Harrow otherwise. Beginner’s circles, she believes, are limited to beginning-level activities by the inexperience of the participants, so she recommends that outer- and inner-court activities be separated in order to provide more experienced practitioners with a suitable environment in which to perform their own deeper and more contemplative work.

Harrow makes a firm break with the 20 year-old tradition of militant egalitarianism in Wiccan organization. She states that many groups which begin as non-hierarchical collectives have been observed to develop emergent leadership, whereas lineage-based covens with clearly designated leaders often move toward more collective decision making as they mature. The egalitarian collective may be an ideal toward which many aspire, but it appears to be one that requires more maturity than most beginners can provide (25). What’s worse, a premature leap at the ideal state of non-hierarchy may serve to mask the development of covert leadership—with its covert norms, unstated rules, and other unfortunate characteristics—“if anything made more painful by the concealing mask of consensus process” (264).

According to Harrow, the primary value of hierarchical organization in covens is its



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acknowledgment and support of elders. Wiccan elders are those who have been doing the work longer than others, have earned the respect of the community in the process, and whose presence makes it both easier and safer for beginners to work through the process of initiation (133). All recently received wisdom to the contrary, Harrow promotes the traditional model of one coven leader of each gender, on the grounds that it “allows Wiccan students to observe the full range of human functioning in the clergy role” (215). The Priestess as Goddess and the Priest as God may be “a simplistic view, a caricature of human function”, but as long as we understand that the masculine and feminine energies which Wiccans represent as God and Goddess do not reside exclusively in one gender or another, it does make the Deities of Wicca easier to understand — especially for the beginner (214).

Readers are cautioned against involvement with those needy and insecure people who view magic as a means to achieve power and control. In contrast to the considerable emphasis on self-initiation and self-empowerment in those segment of modern Witchcraft which are most influ-

enced by the Human Potential Movement, Harrow clearly recommends Erik Erickson’s model of maturity (the willingness to move beyond self-absorption by contributing to the human future through teaching or mentoring) over Maslow’s emphasis, in his hierarchy of human needs, on self-esteem and self-actualization (193). Coven leaders are also warned that people whose personal lives and careers are constantly in crisis, or those who are mentally unstable in an obvious way, are notorious for interfering with the focus of a group. While in their early stages of development, covens often function as growth and support groups, but the kind of support which covens can provide must not be confused with therapy. Dealing with the in-depth psychological problems of individual group members “is far beyond the competence of most coven leaders” (111).

Wiccan Covens does not exactly wage a frontal assault on the non-hierarchical, consensus-based ideal promoted by Starhawk and her followers, but it criticizes many of the assumptions on which these views are based and seems to have been at least partially written as a correc-

tive to the Reclaiming model of coven organization.

Unfortunately, a certain amount of slippage is occasionally apparent between Harrow's professional sophistication and the interpersonal demands of the Wiccan community in which she practices. At one point, she admits that grandiose titles such as a 'Witch Queen' or 'Magus' are overblown. 'Grandparent' "would be both warmer and more accurate". But she still maintains that (apparent evidence to the contrary) the underlying principles of this practice are psychologically sound (257). On several occasions, she informs her readers that the inability to distinguish between myth and truth—as well as the belief that symbols and metaphors are objective facts—are among the more corrosive symptoms of fundamentalism (251). Newcomers, she recommends, should be advised that Wiccans were not the target of the Inquisition, and that nine million women did not die as a result. In spite of this, Harrow continues to refer to the brutal persecution, repression, and destruction of "Earth-based traditions of Europe" (223) and "Pagan worshippers" (260). It would appear that she is reluctant to make a complete break with the currently discredited, though still popular, belief that modern Witchcraft is descended from a tradition which was actively and violently suppressed in the past.

These minor flaws notwithstanding, this book is highly recommended for both practitioners and students of Witchcraft. Its overall professionalism qualifies it as a singular event among writings by leaders of the movement, and it may prove to be a watershed in the evolution of the Wiccan coven.

READERS' FORUM

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From the comments made by Ms Allen, I am inclined to agree with Starhawk and ask from whom did Ms Allen get her research information? It would not appear that she thoroughly researched the goddess movement, witches, pagan theology, or its participants but relied on the understanding and beliefs of outsiders.

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ELEANOR PEREZ WRITES:

I read the letters in your issue #16 from Starhawk and Michael York with great interest. I find myself in an awkward position: as a long-time fan of Starhawk, I'm disturbed to find myself agreeing with Prof York and wondering what Starhawk can possibly be thinking.

Can it be that Starhawk has become this isolated—and her position so sectarian? Is she not aware that, with one notable exception, the scholarly writers whom Charlotte Allen quotes are, themselves, well-known feminists or devoted Goddess-worshipping Pagans? Some of them, like Ronald Hutton, have more time in the Craft than even Starhawk herself.

Ms Allen must have interviewed a large number of Wiccans for this article—I'm a fairly minor player, and she interviewed me. [*Ed note: Allen and her editor exchanged 34 e-letters with us here at The Pom.*] Did Starhawk believe that she was the only one being interviewed? Or is she unaware that the Neolithic Utopian Matriarchate paradigm, with which she identifies so strongly, carries about the same weight among most of the thoughtful Goddess devotees of today as "God created the world in six calendar days" and "Jesus was born of a woman who never had sexual intercourse" does among thoughtful Christians.

I would hate to believe, as Prof York