INSIDE THE SIEVE:
A scholarly study of Neopaganism in the 90s

Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft
James R. Lewis, editor
State University of New York Press (SUNY), 1996

Reviewed by Kate Slater

Do you remember the cartoon of island natives spotting a boat and yelling, "Here come the anthropologists, quick, hide the television set!" Well, this is one of those books. It's an edited collection of essays about Neopaganism and Wicca, and it's not without its problems. Neopagans have experienced three waves of scholars: first sociologists, then anthropologists, and now, at last, religious scholarship (where the study of Neopaganism probably belongs), and this book contains essays and studies from all three disciplines. The authors are both pagan and non-pagan, but they are not always identified as such. In fact, the book contains little background material about the authors, or for that matter, the editor, James R. Lewis, who is only introduced by a spot of the back cover. Several authors are well-known pagans, and one, Dennis Carpenter, offers his qualifications. Sian Reid says that a version of her paper has been presented to the American Academy of Religion, and it is possible that some other studies were made as parts of their authors' thesis research — but in which discipline is unclear.

Had adequate background been included, this book might have been stronger. Did Lewis ask his authors for bios and was he turned down? More important, do we read these papers more objectively without knowing for sure whether the authors are presently living inside or outside the Neopagan sieve? I was less comfortable with the fact that the authors' countries of origin are not mentioned. Viewpoints can be coloured very differently from

country to country, and this can have a fairly significant influence on the information presented.

Lewis has collected a volume of 17 papers by 15 authors, running the gamut from a seventies religious tract on the Goddess to two papers that put the scholars into the sieve and analyze their methods and ethics. Of these 17 papers, only Jeffrey Kaplan's competent history of Norse Neopagan traditions, and James R. Lewis' account of Fundamentalist paranoia in fiction, fall outside the Wiccan/Neopagan circle.

So, what insights can we glean from these papers?

Of the fifteen authors only one totally avoids using the words Wiccan or Witch, but only four clearly self-define as some variant of Neopagan now or previously: Dennis Carpenter, Judy Harrow, James Baker, and Otter and Morning Glory Zell. So if this is a cross section of opinion, it may be OK to say the W-word, but not necessarily OK to be one. Apparently it is not OK to print the words "Horned God" in North America. Perhaps one doesn't even whisper them in a scholar's ear. About five of the papers mention male divinity, Gods or a God of the Hunt. Only the British paper suggests horns.

From the papers discussing theology, Neopagans are described as almost completely immanentist, Goddess primary and ecologically conscious, but otherwise diverse. Far more important, among the authors that discuss Craft history, almost everyone has decided that modern, religionist, white witchcraft in its current form began circa 1940 with Gerald Gardner building on the theories of Murray, Frazer and Leland. They've all accepted Aidan Kelly's explanation. Period. No further discussion.

We like to think that identifying as a Pagan is "coming home" rather than fulfilling the traditional Pauline model of conversion as a drastic change in response to outside influences. In "Embracing Jesus and the Goddess: Towards a Reconceptualization of Conversion to Syncretistic Religion," Christel Johanna Manning lists four subtler modern definitions of "conversion" and acknowledges that dual Pagan/Other still escapes the semantic net. To describe links between other religions and Paganism, Manning proposes the term combination — the blending of two or more

religions into a new syncretic worldview. Anyone doing ministerial interfaith work had better read this, since Manning seriously challenges our stance that we are not a religion of converts. Neo-Pagans trying to understand the complexity of belonging to more than one Tradition may also find this article interesting.

Kaplan's article on "The Reconstruction of the Asatru and Odinist Traditions" ends in 1993, missing the rejuvenation of the Ring of Troth but

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otherwise seems to be the kind of history that would be helpful for many of our other Neo-Pagan branches.

Carpenter also has a strong paper on contemporary Pagan thought, and James Baker's paper, "White Witches: Historic Fact and Romantic Fantasy" is excellent history. Baker honestly discusses his early hopes that there really was a pre-Gardnerian Craft of the type we now know and his impatient dismissal of the lingering traces of the old cunning folk. I found his paper closer to my own feelings than any other.

In "The British Occult Subculture: Beyond Good and Evil," Susan Greenwood investigates the attitudes of Neo-Pagans and magicians to the concept of evil, concluding that although we talk a good line about accepting the dark, Neo-Pagans, even chaos magicians, tend to externalize it

and drive it out. Her portrait of a Wicca which is comprised almost entirely of British Traditional and feminist, largely separatist, witches is ominous.

A most interesting paper is Dennis Carpenter's second, "Practitioners of Paganism and Wiccan Spirituality in Contemporary Society: A Review of the Literature." In this, he reviews the scholars as much as their conclusions. What happens when we tell a scholar about ourselves? For one thing, we may not be as anonymous as we think. I tweaked Carpenter's list of studies by substituting Rabinovitch's thesis for the Midwestern tarot readers and then averaged the numbers of people surveyed. The average of ten studies

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was 217 persons in each. If the two highest and two lowest populations are deleted, the average number in a study is 118 persons.

This is a problem for at least two reasons. First, I think the confidentiality guideline on what Wiccans can safely say about each other runs something like this: if a description of someone narrows that person's identity to within 100 persons, it may be fairly easy for a determined researcher to identify the person. So, if I say that I know a transit driver in my city who is Wiccan, it's a vague enough statement. If I say I know a woman transit driver . . . this cut it to maybe one in forty. Too close. In this volume there is a painful example of this. One researcher made identifications much too closely and another writer then quotes them in a different paper. Always assume that the researcher you are talking to is hot; that his research (your life story) is amazing stuff, and that it will be quoted in textbooks and other strange places for the next thirty years. It could happen.

Another problem with research on such small populations is that questionnaires self-select for the mavericks. I've had the chance to answer four or five study questionnaires. Mostly they wanted to know how I got to

be weird and which box described my net family income, so I threw them out. But lets say I'm Elvira from Moose Jaw and I believe in space aliens and I just love answering questionnaires: how much can one person bend the profile of Neo-Paganism?

Study populations are also the researcher's dilemma: one example of this is Shelley Rabinovitch's 1991 thesis research on Canadian Pagans, the basis for her paper, "Spells of Transformation, Categorizing Modern Neo-Pagan Witches." If the title of this paper had clearly said "Canadian", she might not have been savaged by a California reviewer over the limited scope of her information. Rabinovitch was faithful to her data, as scholars are supposed to be. In 1991, Canadian witches were clustered in a couple of places and scattered in ones and sixes elsewhere. Rabinovich traveled 6000 miles to interview this scattered populace. If they failed to tell her what Californians take for granted, it wasn't her fault. I do believe that the self-selection biased her interview population, producing the extremely high incidence of persons reporting difficult or abused childhoods. My guess is that these rates are perhaps double what they would have been if the interviews had been absolutely random. But even half the rate she found would be stunningly high.

What happens when you lie to the scholar? Probably no one will believe you did so afterward. In 1980 one researcher is supposed to have been systematically hoaxed by a group of witches who didn't like her previous writing about Paganism. She is quoted in three papers in this book. What happens when the scholar lies to you? In 1978 a Wisconsin anthropologist did this quite shamefully, presenting herself as a seeker, recording the personal histories of witches she met in this way, and publishing her research with their Craft names attached. She is an authority quoted in two papers.

We are a religion shaped by many books. We like to tell scholars our dreams: the way we wish it could be. And, if they come back years later to visit us again, as Margot Adler did, we hope that what was published of our dreams has passed the vision to others, and now the reality has come closer to the dream. Books that describe us eventually shape us. Many authors were quoted or referenced in the papers in this book. Which authors are most significant? I made a preliminary count and weighted the references

with 1 for a mention and 2 for a more significant citation. In order the key references were: Adler and Starhawk (15 each), followed by Tanya Luhrmann (11) and Aidan Kelly (8)*. If we disagree with some of these authors, we should observe carefully what they have said about us, because their opinion is molding what the scholarly world thinks. If we disagree with them, perhaps we should say how and why, for the record, soon.

This is a book for the serious library. I may not agree with all of it, but I recommend it highly.

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*Our two-bits worth concerning Aidan Kelly:

Ten years ago we were uncomfortable with the (then popular) belief that the traditions of Wicca went all the way back to the Neolithic. Nowadays we're equally uncomfortable with the (currently popular) notion that Gardner made up simply everything. A scholarly rebuttal of Crafting the Art of Magic *is becoming seriously overdue. Already the air is far too full of derisive remarks about those Gardnerians who claim that they have evidence proving Aidan wrong, but the evidence (alas) is secret.*

The Pom Editors