

Constance Wise, *Hidden Circles in the Web: Feminist Wicca, Occult Knowledge, and Process Thought* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2008), 152 pp., \$65 (hardcover), \$26.95 (paperback).

Systematic philosophising and theorising is something of a rarity in academic works dealing with contemporary Pagan traditions. There has been a tendency to focus either on the experiential, performative and the personally transformative dimensions of modern Paganisms – frequently encompassing magical praxis, mythopoetics and ritual – or else the studies are broadly anthropological, historical, and/or sociological in character, dealing in the production of detailed descriptions, interpretations, or surveys. The task of elaborating, interrogating and systematising Pagan beliefs, practices, and truth-claims, in a manner that might plausibly be recognised as philosophical or theological in orientation, is largely, if not wholly, absent from the landscape of Pagan Studies. It is, therefore, with some pleasure that one greets Constance Wise's addition to the small genre of works that do adopt a philosophical posture.

I must admit at the outset to a sympathetic attitude towards Wise's project. Wise is concerned with bringing philosophical resources to bare on feminist spirituality, specifically Feminist Wicca, and this is an initially difficult task. In their relatively short history, feminist religions and spiritualities have frequently been critical of the commitments and methods of philosophy and theology – disciplines that they have understood to exemplify masculinist and patriarchal norms and values. Wise, though, is at pains to forge links between her understanding of Wicca and a school of philosophy that is well-noted for its complex theoretical framework and difficult specialist language, namely, the process philosophy of A. N. Whitehead. She notes, perhaps somewhat defensively in her introduction, that this is not an activity that all spiritual feminists need to engage in. However, in order to be taken seriously as a religion, it is necessary that some feminists are prepared to deliver theories to underpin their practices. Inevitably, this requires systematic thinking and a prioritisation of the cognitive aspect of religion. Elsewhere, she adds that there is a real danger amongst some spiritual feminisms of simply inverting pervasive dualisms, thus privileging intuition, the body and art, while denigrating reason, mind and science. This, she warns, should be guarded against.

The book is divided into five well-demarked sections: an Introduction, wherein Wise lays out her aims and rationale; Chapter One, where she contextualises and leads the reader into both Feminist Wicca and process thought; Chapter Two, where she draws together Feminist Wiccan and process accounts of history and anthropology; Chapter Three, which contends with the disciplines of epistemology and ethics;

and Chapter Four, where she expands her analysis to embrace cosmology and discourse on the nature of Goddess (thealogy). It is clear that Wise thinks that process thought is well equipped to underpin Feminist Wicca, particularly in so far as it “provides a sound philosophical explanation for occult knowledge in the ritual sense.” However, she does not adopt or apply process philosophy in a wholesale manner. Wise is a critical reader of the process philosophers and is suspicious of those elements that do not seem to cohere with the values of Feminist Wicca. This is clearly an appropriate attitude for any Pagans attracted to process philosophy. Beneath the initially attractive language of relationality, transformation, and creativity, there are certain concepts that may be unpalatable to Pagan sensibilities and understandings of deity. Wise, for example, sees little reason to view the “creative advance” of Whitehead’s process thought as necessarily morally positive. At best, one should view the creative advance as morally ambiguous. Here Wise allies herself with Bernard Loomer, perhaps the most pantheistic of the process philosophers, a figure with whom all Pagan process thinkers should acquaint themselves. Likewise, Wise is critical of the notions of God’s providence and the two natures of the divine in process philosophy, rejecting them as either “unhelpful” and “unnecessary” or “alien to Feminist Wicca.”

To what degree does Wise succeed in her attempt to adapt and apply process philosophy to Feminist Wicca? In Chapter Two, her process reading of the controversies surrounding ancient matriarchies usefully explains the mythic importance of matriarchies in the life and future of spiritual feminism. Her engagement with process anthropology, though, is more impressive, developing an anti-essentialist account of gender identity that is, on first blush, a powerful resource for spiritual feminists and Wiccans. I harbour some concerns here as to whether the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘femaleness’ can be retained in a way that is meaningful for all spiritual feminists, particularly the femaleness of Goddess or Nature, but Wise makes a good case with some persuasive examples.

In Chapter Three, further Whiteheadian concepts are deployed as Wise reflects on non-rational, embodied and occult forms of knowledge. Feminist Wicca, she claims, provides a valuable “way to cycle among the [process] modes of perception, to craft a fuller picture of relationships and connections.” The discussion of epistemology is well-handled and illuminating, again providing useful conceptual tools for spiritual feminists searching for some theoretical purchase on their beliefs and practices. The section on ethics is a little more tenuous. The movement from a process ontology of relationality to a developed ethical position remains problematic, both in general philosophical terms and with regard to a convergence with Feminist Wiccan values. Fortunately, Wise recognises these difficulties and doesn’t attempt to cover them over. The champi-

oning of ever greater complexity and intensity in process philosophy, for example, is, for Wise (and others), questionable, speaking far more to aesthetics than ethics. Arguably the best that Wise can deliver here is that “a deeper awareness of the relationships of our lives does lead to better moral decisions.”

The final chapter sees Wise introducing Whitehead’s notion of “cosmic epochs” and revisiting and worrying once again about the goodness of the “creative advance.” She also tackles the compatibility of the process view of progressive time with the Pagan emphasis on cyclical time. There is plenty of room here for further reflection, for example through such concepts as non-identical repetition and spiralling time, which encompass the cyclical and the progressive. Sadly, compared to the other sections, this feels overly rushed. Wise concludes by developing the process theologian William Dean’s account of deity as a sacred convention. In this account, a deity is not reducible to a social construct, but instead has an ontological reality derived from countless past human and non-human events and interactions. This proposal usefully makes sense of what many spiritual feminists may mean when they claim, in Starhawk’s words, that “the Goddess is immanent, but she needs human help to realize her fullest beauty.” The Goddess as a convention may not sit well with some theological realists, but it serves Wise’s position well and is an idea to be taken seriously and discussed by feminist theologians.

Overall, this is an accessible and lucid attempt to align process thought with Feminist Wicca. There is inevitably a simplification of certain process philosophical concepts, but nothing of significance seems to have been distorted or lost. Crucially, Wise provides a textbook case of how to read process philosophy through the hermeneutical lens of a particular Pagan tradition. Quite a lot of Christian metaphysical baggage accompanies Whiteheadian process philosophy, and contemporary Pagans need to be able to recognise those elements and judge whether they are compatible with their own worldviews. Wise, for the most part, proves to be remarkably good at this. My only unaddressed concern would be with the explicit hierarchy of consciousness to be found in process philosophy. Wise does not see this as problematic in the same sense as the Christian Great Chain of Being. It is my suspicion, though, that it can be similarly invidious, and it may also be another means of deploying the same onto-theological hierarchy. That said, this is a minor point of difference. *Hidden Circles in the Web* is a valuable reference for any spiritual feminists or Pagans interested in exploring process philosophy, moreover it should be examined by any process philosophers interested in the non-Christian religious applications of process thought.

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