[*The Pomegranate* 8.1 (2006) 118-126] ISSN 1528-0268 (Print)
ISSN 1743-1735 (Online)

Book Reviews

V. Vale and John Sulak, *Modern Pagans: An Investigation of Contemporary Pagan Practices* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications), 212 pp., $19.95 (paper).

The introduction to Vale and Sulak's collection of interviews, *Modern Pagans*, begins this way: "Paganism is the perfect religion for anarchists. It also suits feminists, environmentalists, futurists, artists, surrealists—all who dream of social change, live for creativity, not for the profit motive, and hate dogma and authoritarianism." It is this inherent bias on the part of the editors—the decision made that American Pagans are the fringe of the fringe—that weakens a useful anthology of primary source interviews with modern-day practitioners. To be fair, *Modern Pagans* is a popular publication aimed at a countercultural audience; a quick skim through the past RE/Search catalog reveals titles on punk rock, performance art, William Burroughs, and BDSM; and *Modern Pagans* is intended to present Paganism as either an extreme fringe religion or *the* religion for people with fringe interests. The constant barrage of photos of the most outrageous, extreme, and artsy Pagan practices and people almost becomes tiring. Attempts to seek refuge in the text and interviews result in eyestrain; the formatting of the book itself, with changing fonts mid-text and MTV-style photo inserts and overlaps, is a frequent distraction from the often eloquent discussions of the informants.

That said, if one takes *Modern Pagans* as a regional study—specifically, of Californian contemporary Pagans—it is an interesting, if barely organized, collection of ethnographic field notes. It includes West Coast Pagans from the movement's early days in the 1960s and 1970s (Starhawk, the Zells, Margot Adler, Isaac Bonewits, Don Frew and Anna Korn, and Diana Paxson are featured), as well as the newest and youngest adherents. Some questions do emerge as to why people like self-admitted Tibetan Buddhist Diane Di Prima and "post-denominational" Christian priest Matthew Fox get shoehorned into *Modern Pagans*, while long-influential Pagan activists like Selena Fox and Andreas Corben Arthen get relegated to the mini-interviews in the back of the book. The questions are answered when it becomes clear that any Pagan with a traceable lineage to the 1960s San Francisco countercultural past receives top billing, and this is when the focus slips into occasional celebrity worship.

When one is able to overlook the slant given by the editors, however, one can enjoy and keep on record some fascinating discussions with erudite, innovative, and radically spiritual people. Pagans generally love to talk about their beliefs, ritual practices, and interests; many of those interviewed also share stories of their religiously inspired social activism, art, and literature. It is in these moments, when interviewers back away and those featured are left to speak for themselves, that *Modern Pagans* becomes a feast of identity issues, celebrations, community emergences, and social history that a scholar of Paganism can sample and sift through; I found many of the interviews

intriguing and helpful counterpoints and counterparts to the Twin Cities community that I have been researching, for example.

Modern Pagans is additionally a useful contribution to Pagan studies as an introduction to and presentation of alternative and marginalized religious practices in the United States. Many of those featured discuss the spiritual and meaningful implications of body modification, BDSM, sacred sexuality, and sacramental drug use. Vale and Sulak's admitted focus on the super-marginal Pagans does result in a beginning discussion of countercultural phenomenon, which is necessary, even if it is simply to mark the boundaries of a movement that is mainstreaming as time goes on. The question does emerge when solely looking at Pagans who trouble the boundaries of the movement: Where does even the most marginal Pagan draw a boundary at what it means to be Pagan? Every community has the right, ability, and obligation to draw boundaries of identity, however permeable; the theme of *Modern Pagans* appears to be that, no matter how radical one is, Paganism welcomes them. Is this true? That is a question ripe for exploration by many of the contributors to *Modern Pagans*, but it appears not to have occurred—or not to be of interest—to the compilers of the book.

A more efficient format would aid the reading of the book immensely—some of the contributors are left to ramble for too long. But the collection is a good one to keep on the Pagan studies reference shelf, if for no other reason than it presents a snapshot of a regional West Coast Pagan community at the end of the twentieth century, when the movement was still fresh enough to be idealistic but long-lived enough for practitioners to be reflective on their history. The "Where are they now?" tone of many of the interviews with influential elders is particularly interesting; hopefully, the younger contributors to this book will occupy a similar historical space after a generation. Hopefully as well, a publication more focused and a lot less sensational in its tone than *Modern Pagans* will be where they are featured.

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Jordan Paper, *The Deities are Many: A Polytheistic Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), xiv + 155 pp., $49.50 (cloth), $14.95 (paper).

Polytheism has generally been a label for other people's alleged religious beliefs and practices. The -ism that it purports to label is often a construct of the monotheistic insistence on belief in 'one true God' over against a host of imaginable errors. Because there are many cultures in which people engage with a host of beings that might be classed as deities (leaving aside the question of what that word might mean), the term 'polytheism' can be used as a more or less technical term for a class or style of religion. However, it remains difficult to speak of 'polytheism' without being influenced by prevalent comparisons with 'monotheism', and a scholarly, critical use of both terms is complicated. Does either term involve more than a question of numbers? Do putative polytheists conceive of and communicate about their polytheism in ways that can usefully be compared to monotheist's beliefs and discourses? If there are polytheists, do they really have an -ism? The fact that these questions imply a necessary contrast between monotheism and polytheism may simply demonstrate how misleading the terms and the comparisons are. Is there really any reason why a head count of deities

should lead to a particular complex of subsistence, economics, performance, ethics, environmentalism and so on? Is it empirically true that all polytheists are alike in any way? Since there are a variety of ways of being a monotheist (Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Sikh, Yoruba traditionalist, Zoroastrian…), is any comparison fair, reasonable, necessary or possible? Perhaps monotheism is not an -ism either. These are some of the tangled thoughts that attracted me to read Jordan Paper's 'polytheistic theology'.

Paper hopes that his book will encourage a tolerant and nonpejorative understanding among Western people (i.e. those brought up in a monotheistic milieu) and assist comparative religionists in their attempt to understand this style of religious behaviour. He thinks especially of 'beginning researchers' who seem baffled by how 'the numinous are actually multiple'. Since his core definition of polytheism is that ancestors, the Earth, deities, 'and so on', 'can be numinous simultaneously, without contradiction and without conflict' (p. 5), tackling this bafflement is a central concern of his book. His credentials for writing are that during the three decades in which he has engaged in scientific studies of various religious cultures he has become deeply involved with comparative approaches to relevant religions, he has also been 'slowly imbued with polytheistic understandings and practices', and he feels able to communicate all this to others coming from a monotheistic background. Unlike Paper's previous writings, this book incorporates explicitly personal narratives and experiences in which he asserts or illustrates points by reference to his own religiosity. That is, this is avowedly a confessional and personal polytheistic theology. It also offers a systematic polytheistic theology (a polytheology or a theoilogy perhaps).

The system Paper offers is, like the systematic theologies of Christianity, revealed by the book's structure and, hence, by its contents page. Following the introduction, five chapters introduce a variety of numinous beings: Mother Earth and Father Sky, 'nature' (animal, plant and mineral spirits), ancestors, 'divine ghosts', and culture heroes and tricksters. Two further chapters tackle aspects of the question 'one or many?', i.e. monotheistic and polytheistic perceptions of the alternative tradition, and the possibility of fusions and syntheses. There is something of a system here, but it is not consistently or adequately systematic. Some chapters say more about how particular polytheists engage with particular numinous beings in ritual or in empowering stories, others do not. Particular cultures are not discussed for more than a few pages at a time and, although there are frequent references to personal relationships among indigenous and other cultures, there is far more 'timeless abstraction' than sustained engagement. It is hardly ever clear whether the understandings and practices that Paper presents are current practices or not. Some clearly cannot be, and the failure to distinguish suggests that 'anything goes' into this eclectic mix.

The fact that Paper clearly labels this as a personal view of polytheism does not resolve the confusion caused by seeming to write about other peoples' and other cultures' polytheisms. This is an unsystematic theology. Far too often it is presented as a series of anecdotes collating a remarkable array of data. Perhaps it is personally satisfying. Perhaps it is sufficient as a wide view of how someone brought up under monotheism might construct a polytheism. Perhaps this might help the putative 'beginning researcher' to consider how to engage with possibilities presented by other polytheists constructing their worldviews and practices.

My lasting problem with this book is, perhaps, parallel with Paper's brief problematizing of Michael York's *Pagan Theology*. It is not what Paper says about

York's book that interests me, it is simply the fact that Paper does not think that what York presents is a 'polytheistic theology'. He argues that this remains an 'uncharted void in comparative religion' (p. 2). Now, I am neither a theologian nor a comparativist, but my suspicion is that what Paper sets out to do—beyond presenting his own personal theology—requires a different approach. As a polytheist I do not think that a 'systematic theology' of any polytheism would look much like that of any monotheism. As a scholar of Judaism I am well aware that the systems of particular religions are best presented in terms that are distinctive and often particular to those religions. (The more a Jewish theology looks like a Christian one, the more I doubt that it is particularly Jewish.) Thus, I find the over-reliance on Christian and especially Protestant notions and approaches here disappointing. The book probably works well as a confessional document and may help (other-than-polytheistic) students engage with polytheists and their alleged -ism, but I suspect that it will be less useful if taken as a model for how they ought to conduct their research and their writing. Perhaps all I mean by this is that I personally do not greatly value theology in academia. I do agree with Paper about York's book: I do not think it is really a 'theology' but I conclude that it is a better book for that, and the subtitle is a better indicator of its value. Paper's book is theological, but it is neither systematic nor polytheistic enough.

Finally, by way of a confessional statement, I find Paper's readable book interesting on a personal level. I can envisage Pagan scholars writing similar books—but, personally and with prejudice, I would be disappointed if the study of Paganism took that turn. Nonetheless, my suggestion for the writing of such a book is that it should be modelled on more typically polytheistic styles of discourse, should be about centrally polytheistic concerns and should be able to advance polytheology (or *theoilogy*) in ways comparable to the contribution made by other people's systematic theologies to their religions. My suspicion, for what it's worth, is that such a book would be a collection of stories or an ecology of community—just so long as either of these was earthy (in several senses). The question, then, is how would we use such a book academically? Would it serve other researchers as anything but data about the author? Would it promote understanding or would it primarily demonstrate that polytheists live in an other-than-modern world and, thus, involve a contest with modernity? And would that provoke us to think again about monotheists, remembering that few of them are systematic theologians either?

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I Still Worship Zeus, directed by Jamil Said (Washington, DC: Jamil Said Productions, 2004).

This 2004 documentary film by underground filmmaker Jamil Said, who released a critically praised, John Waters-esque short film comedy called *Byromania* in 2002, is both an aesthetically pleasing work of cinema and a very informative study of Dodecatheon, "Religion of the Twelve Gods," a Pagan-revival religious movement in modern-day Greece. The film is organized around a series of brief interviews with members of the movement, interlaced with footage of Dodecatheon rituals and public events, as well as brief but evocative glimpses of historic ruins and the lovely Greek

countryside. The interviewees explain their reasons for joining Dodecatheon and their ritual activities, as well as their feelings and ideas about the Greek gods. The wide range of opinions and experiences recounted by the Dodecatheon members are testimony to the flexible, non-dogmatic quality of Pagan thinking and practice that many researchers have found to be characteristic of many forms of modern Paganism from Iceland to Australia.

A number of adherents mention dreams of particular gods that led them to explore ancient Greek traditions and to eventually join Dodecatheon. Some members speak of the Greek gods as real, living beings, others as psychological forces in the manner of Jungian archetypes. All interviewed seem agreed in regarding the gods as compelling expressions of important values and perspectives developed in the Golden Age of ancient Greece that were suppressed and nearly lost following the Christianization of Greece and are still suppressed under the virtual monopoly on religious life exercised by the Greek Orthodox Church. A concern for connecting to and preserving Greek ethnic heritage is paramount in this religious group and firmly places them in the camp of ethnic-oriented forms of modern Paganism such as Ásatrú rather than more eclectic and de-ethnicized forms of Paganism such as Wicca. The common Pagan aspect of nature-worship is also represented in this group, whose affection for the Greek land is intermingled with their love for the monuments of ancient Greek civilization.

The film features lengthy interviews with certain key figures, above all the leader and founder of Dodecatheon, Panagiotis Marinis. Dr. Marinis insists that Dodecatheon is continuing authentic Hellenic traditions from ancient times and speaks of his own family as an example of Greeks who have carried on these traditions over the centuries despite Christian persecution and discrimination. The filmmaker does not challenge or investigate this assertion of continuity and authenticity, which has been a point of contention and controversy in many Pagan groups. Further investigation is needed to clarify what is meant by Dr. Marinis in making these claims. Other Dodecatheon members interviewed do not make the same assertions of authenticity and continuity, but express enthusiasm at being involved in activities that pay a very modern tribute to the religious traditions of the Pagan Greek past.

Two other figures interviewed at length are a chiropractor named Socrates and a British expatriate, James O'Dell, who is the one non-Greek national featured in the film.

Socrates takes us on a tour of a country estate on which he is attempting to reconstruct buildings and structures in classical Greek style to complement the ruins and artifacts he has found there. He complains, as do others involved in similar enterprises in the film, of the obstacles placed on him by international treaties protecting Greek heritage sites and by government resistance to Pagan activities that go beyond merely admiring classical Greek heritage to attempting to actually participate in it as a living cultural phenomenon.

James O'Dell explains that he has become dedicated to the god Apollo and to the god's sacred site of Delphi over twelve years of living in Greece. He attempts to carry on the ancient tradition of the Oracle of Delphi by providing a fortune-telling or divination service at the Delphi site in which he meditates on questions and problems brought by seekers, and offers answers and solutions out of the altered state of consciousness he claims to enter during his Delphi meditation. It is not clear if O'Dell is providing these mystical revelations as a fee-for-service business, but this seems to be

the case. The film does not pass judgment on O'Dell anymore than it does on anybody else involved with Dodecatheon. Though this deliberate neutrality is obviously central to the method of the film, a more critical perspective might have allowed a deeper exploration of certain issues. A more skeptical view of modern Hellenic Paganism is, however, provided by interviews with a number of academics and Orthodox church officials who scorn the Dodecatheon group's attempts to revive pre-Christian Greek religion.

The members of Dodecatheon in turn protest the overwhelming power and intolerant attitude of the Greek Orthodox church in modern Greek society, which can make life very difficult for adherents of minority religions such as the members of Dodecatheon or other Pagan groups such as the Supreme Council of Gentile Hellenes, the Apollonian Society, or the Greek Society of Attic Friends, who must fear discrimination and even death threats for their non-Orthodox activities. This is one of the reasons that very few interviewees give their full names in the film and raises important questions about the state of religious liberty, or lack thereof, in Greece today, despite the guarantees given in the Greek constitution and various international treaties and human rights agreements to which Greece is a party.

There are some minor technical problems in the film with inaccurate or misspelled subtitles, and at certain points background music seems inappropriate, even jarring, though the drum, lyre, and flute music heard in certain Hellenic Pagan rituals portrayed in the film is quite enchanting. On balance, Jamil Said is to be praised for a very intriguing cinematic study of a modern religious movement that should open many eyes, including, it is to be hoped, government and church authorities in Greece itself, to the existence of a modern form of the Pagan Greek religious tradition that is generally assumed to be no more than a dead mythology.

Information about the film, including ordering instructions, is available on the Internet at http://www.istillworshipzeus.com.

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Leslie Brown, Gordon MacLellan, Tom Mason and Chris Vis, eds., *StarMatter: Towards a New Perspective* (London: StillWell, 2005), xi + 97 pp., £9.95 (paper).

'Our very substance, the atoms of our bones and sinews, were created in the fusion furnace heart of a star. When the ageing star eventually blew apart in a supernova explosion, the elements of its death became the building bricks of our Solar System, and ultimately of ourselves. This is poetry, religion, mysticism and art wrapped up in incontrovertible scientific fact.' William Blake (1757–1827) would have surely agreed with this sentiment, and with the aims behind *StarMatter*, a book developed out of a holistic science project which attempts to bridge the historical gap between science and art. Holding to a deep vision whereby human beings are one strand within the web of nature, it seeks ways of exploring and celebrating the world with the aim of transforming and widening perception. Blake thought that true innocence was a state of wisdom gained through experience; he also sought to reconcile science with art and the human spirit. Today science and the arts are seen as separate areas of life and this is reflected in mainstream education. Although most schools teach art, creative writing

and music, only rarely are there courses on imagination, visualization, perceptual and spatial skills, inventiveness, intuition and creativity as separate subjects. The imagination moves consciousness into another space, much as William Blake saw the entire world in the imagination. Western cultures encourage separation from the natural world; nature and the earth have been devalued and this is reflected in how we see science. Psychologically we still live in the Newtonian era whereby the material universe is seen as a mechanism that functions by laws of nature. It is unscientific to say that nature has any qualities such as joy, love or intelligence. William Blake, and his contemporary, poet and scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), called to question this way of thinking.

It is in this spirit that *StarMatter* seeks to bring back the subjective experience to the scientific endeavour through developing the imagination. Taking a non-anthropocentric approach, it is a practical workbook for educating young people; it has developed out of a need to 're-sensitize ourselves to both our interdependence with and impact on the world we live in'. It is 'only by giving our children insight into what they are and with whom they share this planet, that we can achieve a vital and long-term transformation of our relationship with the Earth'. In chapters covering the evolution of ideas about the project, personal reflections, questions of sustainability, Deep Time, evolution, the role of the arts in education, practical methods, workshop materials, drama, puppetry and flashes of inspiration, this book collects concepts, facts, ideas and suggestions for developing awareness and appreciation of the planet and the cosmos. There are moments of pure magic, such as ideas for imaginary newspaper headlines for an evolutionary timeline: 'Primeval soup thickens: life imminent!', 'A Nucleus gives my life shape', says microbe; 'Feet will never catch on', says fish; 'It'll miss!' (dinosaur on meteorite); and 'Flowers are decadent' (coniferous plants).

StarMatter emphasizes a holistic approach, something that is not always encouraged in the complexity of specialization. An overly specialist approach can meant that experts, even within the same discipline, are unable to communicate with each other and so the bigger vision is lost. This book demonstrates that science is not only about objective facts but creative activity, which the authors claim is exemplified by the work of Leonardo Da Vinci (1452–1519). Da Vinci argued that painting was a science: 'If you disparage painting, which alone imitates all the visible works of nature, you disparage a most subtle science which by philosophical reasoning examines all kinds of forms; on land and in the air, plants, animals, grass and flowers, which are all bathed in shadow and light. Doubtless this science is the true daughter of nature.' Da Vinci explored painting techniques, hydraulic engineering, comparative anatomy and all kinds of machines through his art, and it is this spirit of imaginative enquiry that is promoted in *StarMatter*.

This approach is also echoed in Goethe's scientific work. Counting Goethe as one of his influences, contemporary physicist Henri Bortoft argues in his book *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe's Way of Science* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1996) that mainstream science enables the discovery of the causal order in nature and that it is an expression of a style of thinking that has its own validity, but it does not have access to an ultimate reality. Bortoft suggests a complementary holistic approach. The essence of the holistic way of thinking involves a restructuring of consciousness from the specialized analytical mode to a holistic mode. This creates a shift from a discursive verbal-intellectual mind with an emphasis on distinction and separation to a relationship gained through intuition. The holistic mode of consciousness is non-

linear, simultaneous and concerned with relationships rather than discrete elements that are related; it can only be experienced on its own terms, and it involves seeing a phenomenon in depth. The key to this process is the imagination. Bortoft says that the imagination, as an organ of perception, can be developed—not in a passive way, as in watching television, but in an active manner by getting it to work (Bortoft, 'Imagination Becomes an Organ of Perception', conversation with Claus Otto Scharmer 14 July 1999 at http://www.dialogonleadership.org/Bortoft-1999.html).

The analytical and holistic modes of consciousness can both be true, not because truth is relative, but because they reveal nature in different ways. Bortoft suggests that a science of the wholeness of nature is a vision much needed today in view of the limitations of the dominance of the analytical mode in mainstream science. In the renewal of contact with nature it is not enough to dwell in sentimentality and aesthetically grafting such awareness to a scientific infrastructure which largely denies nature. We need a new science of nature. This is where *StarMatter* provides an important link: it gives practical suggestions developed from a scientific outreach project, the process by which a professional scientist uses their story-telling skills to personalize the teaching experience for the learner. The skills required are a 'huge infectious enthusiasm for the topic' and 'the ability to spin a good yarn'. This process, according to Tom Mason and Chris Vis, works on the basis that humans are innately curious, and have the ability to think in the abstract:

> For example, if we want to demonstrate the complexity and continuity of the web of life on Earth, what better way to start than in a quarry full of fossils?... Careful inspection will yield fossils that add up to an ancient community, maybe a fossil coral reef. Everyone has seen modern reefs and their creatures on television or film, so they already have visual images in their memory.
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> Now, the mentor needs to fill in the gaps and join the dots: painting word pictures of the sedentary corals, their lifestyles dependent on their algal symbionts; their predators and the multitude of other organisms that shared their time and space. The mentor's arms will describe fighter pilot arcs as they talk of the water depth, patrolled by spiny sharks. Blank note pages can be filled with sketches and drawings, images can be made in the mud and sand of the quarry floor. Use whatever comes to hand to emphasize dynamically the three-dimensional reality of these long dead animals.

For the beginning child scientist and adult learner alike, Mason and Vis say,

> the realization that the tiny organic fragments that they have found for themselves are shells and skeletons of long dead animals is truly mind-expanding. It is a humbling experience for anyone, as the synapses click and the brain makes the connections. The leap of imagination, the amazing human ability to visualize and conceptualize the what, where and when of this organism; this is what makes scientists tick.

Another example of the power of the imagination is given by Gordon MacLellan, a shaman and trained zoologist working under the name of Creeping Toad. Gordon runs environmental arts projects, one of which is called 'A Life of Stone' and is described in the book. He explains that by weaving tales 'we woke rocks in our imaginations'. A collective adventure story resulted in:

> a bizarre mix of human fairy tale—beautiful princesses, villains, noble (if boulder-lumpy) kings and heroic friends—and geology. The settings, characters, reactions and solutions were geological ones; defeat sandstone villains by tricking them to stand in pouring rain while they erode, rescue the princess with a volcanic bomb erupting from the heart of a volcano, defeat a villainous lump of coal by heating it up.

Given the laudable aims of this project, it seems churlish to be too critical; however, the downside of *StarMatter* is the organization of the book: it needs some editing. As it stands there is too much repetition and so the message often gets lost, which is a great shame. And some of the cosmological and physiological explanations involved in explicating our relationships with the wider web of nature are limited. Nevertheless, the book will have achieved its purpose if it encourages those involved in teaching science to reconsider their approach. This work is of value to those who consider nature to be sacred, and it may instigate other such work in developing the field of holistic science. *StarMatter* attempts to bridge some of the gaps in a shared vision, well expressed by Thomas Berry in a poem titled 'It Takes a Universe':

> The child awakens to a universe.
> The mind of the child to a world of meaning.
> Imagination to a world of beauty.
> Emotions to a world of intimacy.
> It takes a universe to make a child
> Both in outer form and inner spirit.
> It takes a universe to educate a child.
> A universe to fulfill a child.

William Blake would indeed have approved.

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