

## Book Reviews

Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), x + 318 pp., £52.50 (cloth), £15.99 (paper), £15.99 (ebook).

*Enchanted Feminism* introduces the reader to “Reclaiming,” a community of feminist Witches founded in 1979 by women interested in reclaiming the spirit of ancient Goddess worship to counteract the negative effects of patriarchal Abrahamic religions. From its roots as a small working collective of twenty or so people in the San Francisco Bay area, Reclaiming today refers simultaneously to a tradition grounded in feminist American Witchcraft and anarchist politics, a community of practitioners that extends far beyond its founders, and an international religious movement that has grown throughout the United States, Canada, and parts of Western Europe.

A fascinating glimpse into the working dynamic of a contemporary Pagan movement, *Enchanted Feminism* delivers a significant challenge to the insider/outsider dichotomy, a description of rituals celebrating women’s bodies as “mirror images of the divine,” an analysis of initiation that is both sensitive and scholarly, and a provocative assessment of Reclaiming as a form of Christian (Protestant) Reformation. Although not without problems, *Enchanted Feminism* deserves a respected place among studies of contemporary religious phenomena and is sure to raise interesting questions for feminist theology.

The introduction alone is worth the price of the book. Writing as both a Protestant theologian and an initiated Witch in the Reclaiming tradition, Salomonsen confounds such facile distinctions as insider/outsider, demanding a far more nuanced approach to the subject and a sophisticated appreciation of the complexity of her roles as both scholar and informant.

Of particular importance is the section “A method of compassion,” in which Salomonsen gives a compelling analysis of the difficulty of juggling a position that is neither wholly outside nor wholly inside a tradition. She is, at times, refreshingly honest in appraisal of her own biases:

To accept those symbols as sacred that to my taste were vulgar, to play with pagan names as if they were real names for divine reality, to let go of criticism and be open to the ecstasy of ritual, to meditate on certain symbols “until they revealed their esoteric knowledge,” and to grant exception to the belief that this really was *impossible* – when taken altogether – this is what has been difficult, challenging, and rewarding. (21)

Rather than cloaking her analysis in the all-too-familiar pretense of scholarly objectivity, Salomonsen tackles the ethical dilemma of how to be responsible to multiple and often conflicting sets of demands: the demands of scholarship for critical thought

and analytic rigor; the demands of her informants for fairness, accuracy, and respect; and the demands of being true to her own experiences. In all of this, Jone Salomonsen does an altogether commendable job, finding a reflexive voice that speaks honestly of her experiences and difficulties without being self-indulgent or confessional.

The text itself begins with a broad description and overview of the Reclaiming community: its founding and early history, initial classes and major rituals, organization and structure, group demographics and internal politics, and a glimpse into its more recent dissolution and reorganization in 1997 as the Reclaiming Wheel. Readers who are only somewhat familiar with Reclaiming will find this information especially useful.

Reclaiming's basic principles remain the same: no overall central authority, no implementation of dogmas or required beliefs, no formal hierarchy of priests and priestesses, no formal membership, no church that can be joined, and no congregational building for worship and community gatherings. Members remain committed to "an anarchist political agenda of equality, diversity, and local autonomy with a feminist liberation agenda of empowering women" (34).

Not a "regular church," Reclaiming is more a network of like-minded people related through common activities for common goals in an evolving and living religious tradition. Salomonsen describes Reclaiming as largely white, middle-class, and well educated. But she is quick to point out that this actually hides a great deal of diversity and complexity and writes about the tensions and conflicts that arise within even a small collection of diverse people. In spite of its commitment to anarchist and feminist politics with its valuing of "power-from-within" rather than "power-over," Salomonsen documents conflicts, power games, and an undercurrent of tension between anarchy and aspects of Reclaiming's theology.

One of the most interesting discussions in this regard is the presence of covert hierarchy within a community devoted to anarchy. Salomonsen describes a structure of "circles within circles," with varying levels of "inner" versus "outer" circles. Status and space were often interconnected, with some portions of the household or the meeting place designated as "public" and others designated as "private" and reserved for the inner circles. Therefore the status of a guest or visitor could be immediately marked by what area she was allowed to enter.

Although it is passionately committed to the ideals of leftist anarchist politics, Salomonsen notes that Reclaiming was a "community of ordinary people who gossiped, hurt each other...and sometimes ended up as enemies" (60). Unfortunately, even in the most "regular" of churches, one could find not only a similar diversity of opinion and approach to religious doctrine and practice, but also a similar tendency toward conflicts, gossip, hierarchies, and power games that belie the founding principles of the church.

Reclaiming is no exception.

While establishing the larger context of Reclaiming from 1979 to around 2000, Salomonsen's primary focus is clearly the group of Witches with whom she interacted during the ten-year period of her study (1984-94). Although she occasionally causes some confusion by making statements that seem to apply to "all" Witches, nevertheless I think her remarks are largely intended to apply more narrowly to the Reclaiming community of Witches she encountered during her fieldwork.

Reclaiming's early history is intertwined with the fascinating story of one of its chief founders and shapers, Miriam Simos, who is better known throughout the Pagan

community as Starhawk: her religious background in Judaism, her experience and training in different forms of Witchcraft, her anarchist and feminist politics, and her spiritual and philosophical vision. After Reclaiming's reorganization, Starhawk refused a position of leadership in the new Wheel, but continues teaching in its "Witchcamps."

*Enchanted Feminism* locates Starhawk at the theological center of one of contemporary Paganism's most flourishing movements, delivering a comprehensive analysis of her extensive body of writings and teachings. Salomonsen provides a nuanced examination of Starhawk's theology, including her critique of dualistic and hierarchical thinking (82-84), the construction of patriarchal consciousness as "disease" (79-82), and the return of the Goddess as "medicine" (84-89).

Salomonsen takes Starhawk to task for a moralistic and simplistic reading of history in which Pagans are "good" and Christians are "bad" and for maintaining a literal and deterministic connection between the worship of Goddess and the social and political status of women (88-89; 95-96, n. 11). Salomonsen also tackles the issue of essentialism, which frequently plagues Goddess religions and causes many feminist theologians to view Goddess spirituality warily (247, n. 20).

Following the French feminist Luce Irigaray, Salomonsen charts a course between gender as socially constructed and biologically determined. "The sexed body...is neither a fixed biological essence nor a historical entity, but an embodied situation and the point of intersection between the biological and the social" (216-17). She finds this "the best framework to understand the sexual politics underpinning 'cosmic' feminism and the path of the Goddess; it recognizes the primacy of the bodily, material roots of subjectivity and of the enveloped, embodied character of the spiritual self" (217-18). Seeing the human body, one sees simultaneously a culturally gendered and determined being, and also the body of the Goddess, "manifesting as one of the two ontological principles (female and male), or as an interesting combination of the two" (218).

Unlike many feminist theologians, Salomonsen carefully avoids reducing the Goddess to either a pantheistic principle or a merely psychological concept, instead daring feminists to get involved with the "hermeneutics of paradox" in which Goddess is simultaneously both "internal and external to the human subject." In "Interpreting divine indexicality" (145-48), she charts Reclaiming's complex multidimensional meanings of Goddess. Using Starhawk's distinction between the "horizontal magic of everyday life and the vertical magic of ritual" as a dual axis on which to unify supernatural and natural, sacred and profane, emotion and thought, Salomonsen bridges the hermeneutical paradox between Goddess as "deity and simultaneously other-than-deity."

Salomonsen also draws upon Starhawk's extensive body of writings and teachings, as well as her own fieldwork experiences, as a foundation for comparative analysis of Reclaiming with Christian Reformation. After informing us that her focus is not the "true genesis of Wicca," Salomonsen nevertheless presents what has now become the standard scholarly debunking of the ancient origins of Witchcraft in the "golden age of the Goddess," a time when religion was Goddess centered and society was woman centered, peaceful, and egalitarian. This "paradise" was destroyed by hordes of patriarchal invaders, and what became Witchcraft had to go underground to survive. Using Starhawk's version of the myth, she detects a pattern of "Paradise, Fall, Persecution, and Regeneration," which she uses to begin her fascinating construction of parallels between (Reclaiming) Witchcraft and Christianity.

It is worth keeping in mind that Salomonsen interprets (Reclaiming) Witchcraft as a modern Christian Reformation. She therefore has a vested interest in rejecting its claims to an ancient pre-Christian origin, while simultaneously rejecting Witchcraft as an entirely new religion.

Salomonsen does indeed make the case that there are fascinating parallels between Reclaiming and Christian counter-cultural movements and that parts of Reclaiming's theology maintain a kind of continuity with the Abrahamic traditions. But she fails to make the stronger case: that Witchcraft (read narrowly here as *Reclaiming* Witchcraft) is actually Christian Reformation. The problem lies not in faulty comparison to Christian themes, but in failing to grant proper consideration to the importance of orality, pre-Christian folk traditions, and borrowings from Eastern traditions, many of which are alluded to but glossed over in the text.

Even if one ultimately rejects the premise that Reclaiming is a form of Christian Reformation, the comparative analysis of Reclaiming with Christian heresies and radical utopian traditions is nevertheless a fascinating read. Salomonsen first distinguishes between what she calls "utopian Witches" and "generic Witches" within the Reclaiming community.

Assuming for the moment that this distinction is accurate, we learn that utopian Witches participate in Reclaiming because it conforms to their political worldview and supports their ideas of transforming society. For this reason, they are likely to express ideas of radical social change by living in communes or participating in other alternative social structures. Generic Witches, on the other hand, feel called to Reclaiming because the practice of Witchcraft satisfies them spiritually. Salomonsen notes that they "inevitably also have some utopian tendencies" (109), although they do not necessarily live what might be called an alternate lifestyle.

Although utopian Witches understand themselves as "consciously having broken all bonds with Jewish and Christian religions" (97), Salomonsen convincingly makes the case that their lifestyles have parallels with utopian communities of the "counter-cultural Christian Church," particularly the late medieval heresy known as the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the later Renaissance Diggers. In some cases, Reclaiming Witches are themselves aware of these Christian heretical groups, found them inspiring, and deliberately chose to model their communities after them.

The text raises several questions about utopian communities. While Salomonsen traces utopian movements as social practice only as far back as Christian medieval millenarian movements, I wondered if her construction of utopian Reclaiming Witches as a new form of Christian counter-culture would change had non-Western religious practice been more carefully considered. Perhaps utopian communities, no matter the source of religious inspiration, share similar characteristics.

Here generic Witches seem to interest her less than their more political cousins, who perhaps better suit her points about Christian counter-culture movements. On the other hand, generic Witches are more likely to maintain a spiritual or ideological continuity with their former religious paths – in some cases forging dual identities, for instance "Catholic Witch." Salomonsen also notices that Witches who were raised as Catholics or Jews are more likely to maintain some sort of spiritual continuity than those who were raised as Protestants. She is tentative about why this might be the case, mentioning "ethnic identity" or "carrying on western religiosity" as reasons for such continuity (111). More to the point may be the roles of ritual praxis, allegory, and the oral "folk" religious traditions and practices found especially in Catholic and

Eastern Orthodox traditions, as well as the ongoing interpretation that informs Jewish traditions.

Embodied ritual praxis and the dynamic traditions of folklore and folk belief that endure in people's lives through ritual may indeed prove to be productive links not only between modern Pagans and their Christian forebears, but also between Christians and their Pagan predecessors, and even between Western and Eastern traditions.

In fact, the Japanese philosopher Kukai has surprising relevance to understanding ritual in such non-Asian contexts as contemporary new religious movements in the West. Of particular interest in understanding ritual as pedagogy is *sokushin jobutsu* "attaining enlightenment with this very body." Kukai emphasizes direct religious experience through cultivation of one's total being—the bodymind—not simply through the intellect. I look forward to the time when a scholar of Japanese Buddhism undertakes a similar comparison of a contemporary Pagan movement such as Reclaiming to point out the parallels between, say, *sokushin jobutsu* and the union of Witch with Goddess through ritual praxis.

Not a member of Reclaiming, I cannot speak to the accuracy of *Enchanted Feminism's* description of initiation. But it is fascinating to observe Salomonsen, trained as a Protestant theologian, awoken to the importance of embodied ritual praxis. Not only does she perform a commendable job presenting ritual theory through the lens of some of its leading scholars (Grimes, Rappaport, Driver, Bell, Turner, et al.), but her reflection on her own ritual experiences charts an insightful glimpse into a process of discovery that ultimately leads Salomonsen to write:

What was the revitalizing power of feminist Witchcraft that I was not able to catch with my symbolic analysis? It had something to do with the transformative potentials of ritual and the way in which the self was ritualized, respected and integrated into the community...now I wanted to study Witchcraft as a lived religion and ritualized practice, not merely texts and textual symbols (246, n. 8).

Leaving behind both intellectual and religious traditions that regard texts and beliefs as primary and rites as secondary, Salomonsen enthusiastically comes to agree with Ron Grimes and Roy Rappaport that ritual is a "legitimate means of knowing" on its own terms and that "ritual is not simply an alternative way to express certain things, but that certain things can be expressed only in ritual" (161).

With so much to commend it, *Enchanted Feminism* nevertheless hits a few jarring notes: "Even though no genetic lineage back to ancient paganism can be established for these modern pagans, and their religious authenticity may be said to be *fake...*" (6); "Although occult, conservative and *sociologically rather deviant...*" (6); about the "myth of the golden age of the Goddess" Salomonsen writes, "in fact, it is *not really a myth*, but a *genealogical account*" (67); "This black and white *fairy tale* of Europe's cultural history can perhaps be *interpreted as a legend but not as history*" (76); "All of a sudden, there was no social heritage to a living religion, *only* folklore, folk customs, literature, and ceremonial fraternities" (89) (*italics mine*).

These statements all have to do with larger problems and inconsistencies in our scholarship: a continual conflation of myth and history with its attendant tendency to read the allegorical as literal (here only sometimes attributable to Starhawk), a dismissal of the importance of orality and praxis as "only folklore," and a lack of

understanding of the continually constructed and dynamic notion of tradition.

I find myself increasingly impatient with scholarly debates over how *old* The Old Religion is and how *authentic* Witches' practices are. An understanding of religion as a creative activity and a lived process – or in Salomonsen's own words, "a lived religion and ritualized practice" – rather than a collection of inherited texts, makes the search for ultimate origins nonsensical or irrelevant.

To be fair, Salomonsen tells us that historicity is important to Reclaiming Witches themselves. "Claims of historicity are very important to Witches since the past is a major resource on which the Wiccan identity is built" (68). Overlooking for the moment her conflation of Witchcraft with Wicca, which blurs the distinction between Reclaiming and Gardnerian Witchcraft, we might ask two questions: "Why is historicity important?" and "How does this differ from other religious groups?"

Historicity is important because that is the way we as a society routinely argue religious authority. The newer the religion, the more likely it is to have strong narratives about its ancient historical past. No one wants to say that her religion began last Tuesday at 3 pm, especially if it did. We need our religions to be old because we assume that age gives their insights and truths more weight and authority. This observation applies not only to Wicca or Witchcraft, but also to new religious movements as diverse as Goddess Spirituality and the Mormons.

In other words, Witches, like many other religious groups, tend to have myths or narratives about ancient origins to lend themselves credibility and authority.

A religious myth is a sacred story, something that illustrates important insights and truths for the people sharing the myth. It is multivalent, many faceted, and powerfully expressive of the ways in which the mythmakers see themselves and their world. By those standards, the "ancient origins of Witchcraft in the golden age of the Goddess" is a perfect example of a religious myth and deserves to be treated respectfully as such.

It is particularly untenable for us, as scholars, to continue to make the mistake of conflating myth with history and then to selectively criticize certain religions as having myths that are not historical. The conflation of myth with history is a serious category mistake, similar to mistaking poetry for prose. They do different things, and we read them in different ways. A literalist and historical reading of what is essentially a multifaceted allegory misses its meaning for the people who have the myth.

As scholars, we are generally and often hypocritically inconsistent in our critique of historicity. Witchcraft and other new religious movements are mostly fair game. Judaism, mainstream forms of Christianity, and Islam tend to be off limits, as do Hinduism and Buddhism. They either disappear into the background unchallenged as "the default religion," or we assume that their mythic-historical authority need not be questioned because of the apparent age of their sacred texts.

And on the occasion that those sacred texts are critiqued for historical validity, scholars tend to maintain a respectful attitude. We do not typically refer to Christian religious myth and sacred scripture as a "black and white fairy tale" masquerading as history. The foundational myth of Reclaiming and/or Wicca we can safely dismiss as a fake, presumably unlike those *real* religions whose major characters are born of virgins, walk on water, miraculously rise from the dead, or have lotus blossoms spring from their footsteps at birth.

Despite these flaws, Jone Salomonsen's *Enchanted Feminism* makes tremendous strides in understanding religions as living entities that both endure and change in the

lives of their practitioners through ritual praxis. Its methodology of compassion and reflexive acknowledgement of the intimate dance of scholar and subject provides a worthy model for scholarly analyses and comparisons of contemporary Paganisms with other world religions.

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Philip Heselton, *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration* (Milverton, Somerset: Capall Bann, 2003), 438 pp., £16.95 (paper).

Philip Heselton is an outstanding researcher. In two books on the origins of Wicca, first *Wiccan Roots* (Capall Bann, 2000) and then *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration*, he has dug deeper than anyone before him into the life and associates of Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964), the chief figure of twentieth-century Wicca. Whereas Gardner's previous biographer, Jack Bracelin (evidently a 'blind' for the true author, the Sufi mystic Idries Shah), used Gardner's own recollections as his only source, Heselton has done his best to locate independent evidence of Gardner's doings: newspaper clippings, personal journals, correspondence, tombstones, the records of various esoteric societies, and even 25 inch : 1 mile governmental Ordnance Survey maps from the 1930s, maps of such a detailed scale that they showed individual private homes. No historian of Wicca's beginnings has conducted such patient and detailed research into primary sources.

Unfortunately, when it comes to interpreting his data, Heselton has one handicap. He wants to believe literally Gardner's version of how Wicca began. The "Bracelin" biography tells the story about how Gardner, retired from his careers as tea planter and civil servant in the Far East, moved to the south coast of England and there, under cover of the Rosicrucian Players in Christchurch, discovered a surviving coven of witches who, through centuries of persecution, carried on the ancient traditions of what he first labeled "Wica" (with one "c"). According to the story, he was initiated in 1939 at a house owned by the prosperous widow Dorothy Clutterbuck, but not until the early 1950s was given permission by his coven to write his first nonfiction book, *Witchcraft Today* (1954), following an earlier novel, *High Magic's Aid* (1949), whose magico-religious practices little resemble what came to be known as Wicca.

That, then, is the origin myth of Wicca: the discovery of the hidden remnant of the Old Religion, the novel, the "permitted" nonfiction book, and subsequently during the 1950s, with the help of Doreen Valiente and other newcomers, a flood of publicity and a steady, exponential growth in the new Pagan religion of Wicca. But what if the evidence supports a different interpretation?

Let me propose an enthymeme: A man who has found the spiritual path that he has long been seeking, when he discovers that "that which I had thought burnt out hundreds of years ago still survived," to quote the Bracelin biography, is not likely to then seek initiation into multiple other esoteric groups. Yet, according to Heselton, that precisely is what Gardner was doing during the 1940s. In 1946, Gardner is listed as a member of the Ancient Druid Order, a group whose membership overlapped with the Crotona Fellowship, the Rosicrucian group in whose theatrical productions Gardner allegedly discovered the surviving witches. At this time, under the leadership of George Watson Macgregor-Reid, the Druid order has become more self-consciously a non-Christian