

INTRODUCTION

It is the night of the Winter solstice. In San Francisco, there are bonfires everywhere: strung along the beaches, blazing on Twin Peaks, on all the high places. In the parks and on rooftops, small groups gather around cauldrons. There are no mass meetings, only circles. . . . They have all they need to make magic: their voices, their breath, each other.

Through the long night, they chant each other's names. They sing hymns to the newborn sun, to the eternally revolving Goddess. They pour libations and give thanks—especially the very old ones, who remember when it was different:

“I am thankful that in this city, no one goes hungry.”

“I am thankful that in this city, no one is left to die alone.”

“I give thanks that I can walk the dark streets without fearing violence.”

“I give thanks that the air is clean, that life has returned to the waters of the bay, that we are at peace.”

—Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*

IN THESE WORDS STARHAWK, a popular spokesperson for the Neo-Pagan movement, offers us a profoundly moving vision of the future: It is a future without violence or deprivation, in which the blight of industrial pollution has been removed and mutual care has come to play a central role in human relationships. It is also a future in which humankind has returned to the Old Religion, conceived of as heartfelt worship of the Goddess and respect for the Earth as her principal embodiment.

In contemporary Neo-Pagan gatherings, the sympathetic observer can sense that modern witches magically create tiny islands in which this optimistic vision may live, even if for but the brief span of the ritual. Believing themselves in league with greater

spiritual forces striving to restore natural balance to the Earth, most feel little need to promote their views in public arenas. And, rarely building up such visible institutions as organized churches, they go unnoticed by the outside world. Instead, Neo-Pagans meet together in a variety of informal settings—forests, fields, and suburban living rooms—to quietly craft their world.

Neo-Paganism is a growing phenomenon, but how large of a movement are we really talking about? Using several different indicators, Aidan Kelly, a scholarly insider, estimates three hundred thousand serious participants. This estimate does not include the many sympathizers and fellow travelers who are involved around the fringes of the movement, nor does it include the many feminist spirituality groups and men's movement groups who draw inspiration from contemporary New-Paganism.

How has a movement of this size thus far eluded sustained scholarly scrutiny? Over the past several decades, mainstream academics have periodically generated articles on various aspects of Neo-Paganism, but this sporadic research has not been significant enough to constitute the basis of a recognized subfield of study. The lack of meaningful research can be understood as a function of academic prejudice. Scholars who study the occult have continually had to deal with the disdain of their colleagues. Irving Zaretsky, in a major work on non-mainstream religious movements published over two decades ago, noted that, "Not a few social scientists consider the untraditional and unconventional aspects of human social life . . . to be ill suited for serious scholarly endeavor."¹ Such attitudes have pushed research on the occult to the margin, and have left us without an adequate framework to grasp the meaning of modern Witchcraft.

Where did Neo-Paganism originate? Modern Witchcraft has several different starting places. None, however, have been as influential as Gerald Gardner's blending of liturgical elements from ceremonial magic with the speculative scholarship of Margaret Murray—a creation that came into being as an active new religion in England around the time of the second world war. Claiming roots in ancient British Paganism, Gardner's brand of Witchcraft gained a broad following, both in Europe and America. And, while few contemporary Wiccan groups are orthodox Gardnerians, the influence of Gardner is omnipresent in the Neo-Pagan subculture.

Like its more visible sister the New Age, the Neo-Pagan movement is populated by significant numbers of baby-boomers—people who two decades earlier were participating in the phenom-

enon known as the counterculture. As the counterculture faded away in the early seventies, many former “hippies” found themselves embarking on a spiritual quest—one that, in many cases, departed from the Judeo-Christian mainstream. Thus one of the possible ways of dating the beginnings of contemporary Neo-Paganism as a significant movement is from the period of the rather sudden appearance of large numbers of unconventional spiritual seekers in the decade following the sixties.

Contemporary Neo-Paganism is diverse and decentralized. Beliefs differ widely, yet it is nevertheless possible to delineate certain common themes. Modern witches believe in the efficacy of magic as a non-ordinary means of impacting events in the everyday world. Also, as mentioned above, the Divine is viewed as being primarily female (the Goddess), and is simultaneously monistic and polytheistic. The Earth is respected as the Goddess’s principal embodiment, a belief entailing ecological consciousness and responsibility. Unlike most other traditions, Neo-Pagans do *not* view release from the physical world as the goal of the religious life. Rather than a burden, life in the body is viewed as good, and physical pleasure is a blessing that should be sought rather than avoided. However, even these ideas and values, while generally accepted, would not meet with universal agreement (a wide variety of views are tolerated, reflecting the movement’s extreme anti-authoritarianism, which sometimes borders on anarchism).

What draws people to become involved in modern Witchcraft? While answers to this question are diverse, it should be clear from the above discussion that many aspects of contemporary Neo-Paganism are intrinsically attractive. Most serious participants would say that they were *born* pagans rather than converted—that the movement made immediate sense to them, and that they felt at home from the very beginning of their involvement. From an outside observer’s perspective, it is clear that—however sincere their current practice—many participants initially become involved out of a revolt against some other aspect of their environment. In some cases they revolted against traditional Christianity; in others they revolted against the impersonal worldview of modern secularism. The very term “Witchcraft” has something scandalous about it, as if to become a witch is to embrace the *shadow* self (though it would be more accurate to say that they embrace the *amina*) of contemporary society.

As a religious vision, contemporary Neo-Paganism draws heavily upon what historian of religion Mircea Eliade referred to as the

Myth of the Eternal Return. According to Eliade, the passion of the religious mind is to seek rapport with sacred power. This can be accomplished spatially by drawing close to spots where the Divine has manifested, or temporally by recreating—in ritual—the world as it was “in the beginning,” when gods and goddesses walked upon the earth. In most strands of Neo-Paganism, the world of the Beginning was the pre-Christian world, which contemporary Neo-Pagans tend to romanticize as a kind of paradise, uncomplicated by pollution, instruments of mass destruction, political oppression, etc. This attractive vision of earlier time periods is evoked in ritual, as well as in other day-to-day activities of practicing Neo-Pagans. Starhawk’s vision of the future cited above draws on the power of this romanticized view of the past.

With respect to interpretations of the movement, many participants feel that they have been misportrayed by the handful of academic researchers who have studied them, but in the past few Neo-Pagans were prepared to meet mainstream scholars on their own turf. This situation has, however, radically changed. At the time of this writing, there are many Neo-Pagans who have completed (or who are completing) graduate degrees in religious studies or in other, relevant disciplines. The extent to which insiders have undertaken mainstream academic training was unknown to this editor at the inception of the present project. After becoming aware of the changed situation, it was decided that a significant portion of the current volume should contain the reflections of thoughtful participants. The result is a highly diverse collection of documents, ranging from poetic theology to the observations of detached outsiders. Most readers will, I believe, find this diversity of perspectives stimulating in formulating their own views of the Neo-Pagan movement.



Part one of the present volume consists of three chapters which explore the contemporary Neo-Pagan worldview, particularly as that worldview relates to the Goddess, the central locus of Wiccan sacralty. Part two tackles the dimension of Neo-Pagan praxis as it manifests in magic and ritual. Unlike other religious movements which emphasize doctrine and belief, witches tend to stress liturgy and specific kinds of magical practices.

Part three contains two chapters that examine certain phases of the movement historically, both in terms of its empirical history and its mythological history, as well as a chapter that looks at magical religion as a response to modernity. In striking contrast to

the many misportrayals of Neo-Paganism as being without morality, part four examines this movement's complex ethical dimension.

Part five examines the unusual topic of Neo-Paganism's intersections with Christianity, both as these two traditions conflict with each other, as well as how they overlap. Finally, part six concludes with a pair of bibliographical chapters that survey and critique earlier studies on the movement.

NOTE

1. Zaretsky, Irving I. and Mark P. Leone, eds., *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1974.