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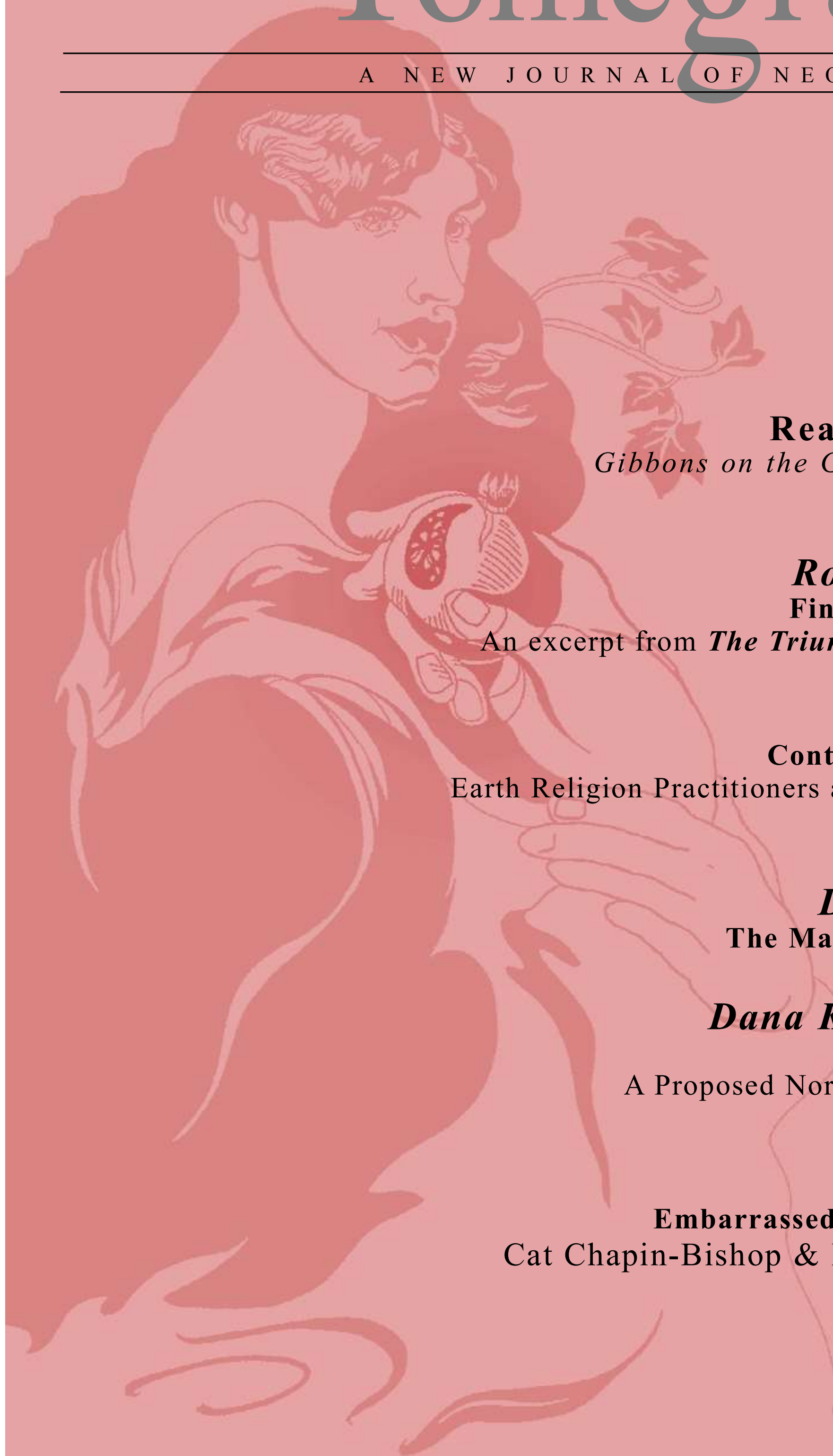
The Pomegranate

A NEW JOURNAL OF NEOPAGAN THOUGHT



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The Pomegranate

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The Pomegranate is the combined effort of a group of senior Pagans in the United States and Canada. Its purpose is to provide a scholarly venue for the forthright and critical examination of Neopagan beliefs and practices. We intend this Journal to be a forum for the exchange and discussion of the philosophy, ethics, and spiritual potential inherent within modern Paganism's many Paths. The consideration of new ideas, as well as the exploration of the roots of our current practices such as classical Paganism, western esoteric traditions and influences from other disciplines, will be included.

Notes from the Underground

We are delighted to offer our readers an excerpt from Ronald Hutton's new book, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft.* To readers familiar with his previous works, *Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* and *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain,* Dr Hutton needs no introduction, and new readers are sure to find his ideas provocative and entertaining. We are delighted to see such a book published by the prestigious Oxford University Press. In addition to whatever effect this work might have on the Neopagan community, it has already made its mark on academia. Professor Hutton writes:

> You probably haven't heard of the Dictionary of National Biography, which is a huge work in about fifty volumes, begun under Victoria and supposed to include potted lives of everybody who has contributed significantly to British history. It matters a lot to historians, but also to Establishment Brits. Every few decades it gets revised, and the latest revision is under way currently. A hundred top British historians were asked to submit names for possible inclusion. On an impulse I suggested Gerald Gardner and Alex Sanders. The official response was silence, the informal one a not unkindly comment that such people were of significance only to private groups. Last Friday I received a letter from the committee of Oxford dons who edit the work, informing me that following the publication of "*Triumph*" it was apparent that both men had made major contributions to national history, and so should be included. I was asked to write their entries, and shall. It is another step in the coming of age of Paganism in Britain.

Two other writers address the issue of who we are and (even more important) who we think we are. The husband-and-wife team of Cat Chapin-Bishop and Peter Bishop discuss, in an essay commissioned by *The Pom,* the embarrassing skeletons in the collective closet of even today's more 'out and about' Pagans. Jenny Blain, who has previously contributed several articles on the practice of *seidhr* among today's heathenfolk, has graciously allowed us to publish the paper she presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion last year. She follows a thread that has appeared in several of our previous issues by interviewing a wide variety of Neopagans about their actual belief systems, and exploring the ways in which these words and images relate to the respondents' everyday life experiences.

A fellow practitioner of the Northern Mysteries, Dana Kramer-Rolls, offers a paper originally presented at PantheaCon in San Francisco earlier this year, which is part textual scholarship and part theological discussion. Many scholars of folklore and related fields are now suggesting that with the demise of Frazer's theory of 'survivals' we may need to look beyond conventional Medieval sources—such as Snorri Sturluson—for the spiritual underpinnings of Neopagan beliefs and practices. In doing so, Dr Kramer-Rolls proposes a new model of Northern Cosmology, based on a metaphor of the Well of Wyrd and the World Tree. A shorter version of this article was published in *Idunna: A Journal of Northern Tradition* 42 (Winter 2000).

From another presentation at this year's PantheaCon, we are especially please to offer an excellent article on the Hindu goddess Kali. As Pagans, we often invoke Kali as a kind of generic third-world goddess, without paying too close attention to her complex and sometimes daunting iconography. David Nelson, a member of the Vedanta Society and a translator of sacred Hindu texts, provides us with a coherent and instructive view of Kali and her followers, past and present, East and West.

Persephone's hard-working minions.

The Pomegranate Readers' Forum

Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas. Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended.

KERR CUHULAIN WRITES:

To the Editors:

My thanks to Leah Samul for writing "Death Under Special Circumstances: An Exploration". As Samul pointed out in her article, Starhawk refused to recognise the many Pagans and Wiccans serving in police and military organisations because she did not want her Reclaiming Collective to be seen as "condoning a military mentality or police brutality". I'm a Wiccan police officer in Vancouver, BC, and I am personally offended that a person should stereotype me by assuming that I must be brutal simply because I am a law enforcement officer. I'm a peace officer, not a thug. My job involves managing the violence of others. Occassionally this requires the use of force.

Samul states in her article that she does not know how many Witches are on the police force. When I became fully public about my beliefs a little over a decade ago, there were only two other officers who had done the same. Yet at my public lectures I encountered many more who were not able, at that time and place, to be public themselves. I am happy to report that this situation has improved. I know of quite a few Pagan cops in both the US and Canada, and at least a dozen of these are now publicly Pagan.

Samul is right that police deserve a special category. Not only are we in a dangerous profession, but police work is also a high stress occupation. It isn't just the deadly force incidents that the cop in the street has to worry about. It's the constant strain of vigilance, never knowing if the vehicle you have just pulled over is the one that contains an armed and desperate person. Samul is also correct to point out that deadly force incidents are very traumatic. As a former Emergency Response Team officer and a current child abuse investigator, I can tell you that you never forget a traumatic incident, and you should take advantage of whatever help you can get—including that from your religious community—to come to terms with it and get on with your life.

Samul points out that "even a short ritual can greatly facilitate grounding the emotions and putting them to rest". I agree. She goes on to say that baths or showers should be part of the ritual. I agree with this too, but I would add a word of caution. I have heard too many counsellors tell stressed out field workers that all they need to do after a traumatic day is light candles and have a warm bath. Part of the reason that police departments have mandatory de-briefing sessions following incidents is to allow the participants to express their feelings to others, who understand the demands of the job. As Leah points out, you can't just take a week off and get on with life. Stress is cumulative, and a cop like me needs to take daily steps to deal with it, lest it cause all manner of problems and illness down the road. In this matter as well, the support of my religious community is always welcome.

Thanks again to you, Leah, for addressing this issue and recognising those of us out there who work to keep us all safe.

Kerr Cuhulain
Vancouver, BC

EDITORS' NOTE:

Kerr Cuhulain has been a police officer with the Vancouver Police Department for 23 years. During this time he has been assigned to the Emergency Response Team and the Gang Crime Unit. Kerr is currently a child abuse and neglect investigator. He writes about child abuse investigative issues for Law & Order *magazine and was a presenter at the International Conference on Children Exposed to Domestic Violence. Kerr has lectured across North America to educate law enforcement officers and the public about the Craft. He is a consultant to law enforcement agencies across North America on 'occult' matters, and was active for years publicly debunking urban legends about satanic conspiracies and abuse. Kerr has contributed greatly to the welfare and safety of all Pagans—'To Serve and Protect', in Kerr's case, has gone far beyond simply managing violence in the streets. Kerr Cuhulain is the author of* The Law Enforcement Guide to Wicca *(Horned Owl Publishing, 3rd edition 1997). His new book,* Wiccan Warrior *(Llewellyn, 2000), was released at the beginning of March.*

JENNY GIBBONS WRITES:

Dear Pomegranate,

I wanted to comment on Max Dashu's response to my article on the Great Hunt. At first glance, the data that Ms Dashu gathers appears to contradict the history of witchcraft that I presented. In fact, it doesn't—when it's taken in context. For the most part, her article elaborates information I summarized in a few sentences.

I mentioned that all European communities appear to have hunted witches in medieval and pre-Christian times. The medieval laws and cases that Dashu cites are exactly the sort of thing I was referring to. However, we cannot understand the significance of this evidence if we ignore its historical context.

The Christian trials and laws which Dashu details are exactly the same as their pagan predecessors. Because it does not discuss witch-hunting in the Roman Empire, her essay gives the false impression that witch-hunting arose with Christianity. It did not. Witchcraft was illegal in pagan Rome and Greece, and witches were persecuted. As a matter of fact, the largest witch-crazes we know of occurred in Rome in 184, 180-79, and 153 BCE. (*Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome,* by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark, p. 254). These enormous crazes were four times as lethal as the largest panics of the Great Hunt, killing an estimated 5,000 men and women in four years. The laws and persecutions that Dashu mentions are terrible—in an absolute sense. But they are not any different from what had happened in the past. We cannot understand Christianity's contribution to the persecution unless we understand what came before it.

A second, critical issue is the definition of 'witchcraft'. These laws prohibit 'witchcraft'. Yet if we do not understand what 'witchcraft' meant to the law-writers, we cannot understand what these laws were meant to prevent. Taken out of context, the laws give the erroneous impression that the authorities were busily hunting down wise-women and traditional healers. However, as I mentioned in my article, up until the 14th century most European societies defined a 'witch' as a person who harmed people with magick. Look closely at any medieval trial, and you will see that it centers on baneful magick and cursing. 'Witch' does not mean the same thing to us as it did to early Europeans. These laws are meant to prohibit magickal crimes. And so when we interpret medieval laws, we must be careful not to project our views of witchcraft onto early materials. The same flaw mars Dashu's discussion of the Inquisition's role in the Great Hunt. I mentioned that the Inquisition hunted

continued on page 55

Finding a Folklore

by Ronald Hutton
University of Bristol

This excerpt from Chapter 7 of Prof Hutton's new book The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft *has been edited slightly from the original, working around the personal background details of the various figures discussed in the text. Lacunae are clearly indicated by ellipses. Diligent readers are enthusiastically encouraged to buy the book in order to enjoy this material in greater depth.* Triumph of the Moon *is copyright 1999 by Oxford University Press and is published by arrangement with Oxford University Press, New York.*

In 1996 I published a history of seasonal festivities and rituals in Britain which opened by questioning the view of the subject most commonly propagated by folklorists for most of the 20th century.[1] I identified four main components to this. First, it characterized the only interesting calendar customs as rural, different in quality to the observances of towns and cities. Second, it regarded them as essentially timeless and immemorial, relics of a distant, often pagan, past, surviving like living fossils in the static world of English country people. Third, those people were themselves treated as inarticulate, having long lost or distorted any sense of the meaning of their customary behaviour, which could be recovered only by the research of scholarly outsiders. Fourth, this perception was infused with a wider sense of the countryside as a place of charm and of mystery, resistant to the changes of the modern epoch and representing to some extent an antidote to their more troubling aspects.

In the course of the book I repeatedly made the point that this construction of calendar customs has been rejected by folklorists since the 1970s, sometimes with savage criticism. I supported that process of revision, by presenting an alternative view of the ritual year as the object of continual evolution and redevelopment, involving both town and country, which adapted its rituals to the changing needs of the social groups concerned in them. In one part of the conclusion I suggested that further study was needed to answer the obvious question of why it was that so many English scholars between 1870 and 1970 were disposed to view the countryside as a timeless place in which immemorial practices were continued from a blind sense of tradition, and in particular practices that were held to be authentic traces of ancient pagan religion. The present chapter will attempt to provide such an answer.

Two other writers have already considered the problem, in different ways, during the past few years. One is a folklorist, Gillian Bennett, who has faced it head-on, by asking why her late Victorian and Edwardian predecessors were so obsessed with the notion of pagan survivals.[2] She found the answer in the example set by the flagship science of mid-Victorian England, the newly emerged one of geology. Integrated with the equally novel theory of evolution, this provided a view of the Earth's past as recorded in layer after layer of strata, the fossils of which provided evidence of the ascending scale of life-forms. Applied to the development of human culture, the geological model suggested that the minds of all humans worked in essentially the same way, but had developed at different rates, according to culture and class, along the same linear track. Folk customs, therefore, could represent cultural fossils, left over from the earlier stages of civilized societies, and a comparative study of them could provide a general theory of religious development for the human race. They could in fact act as the equivalent of textual evidence for pre-literate peoples.

This approach was pioneered in Britain in the 1870s and 1880s by Sir Edward Tylor, and popularized from 1890 onward by Sir James Frazer. It was especially taken up in the 1890s by the leading figures of the newly founded Folk-Lore Society, to whom it promised a way of rescuing the study of popular belief and observances from mere dilettantism and elevating it to the status of a real science. As Dr Bennett has also shown, this promise failed, as folklorists fell through the gap between the emerging disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, both of which found the comparative method and the notion of social fossils, deeply flawed by the 1920s.

Gillian Bennett has thus admirably laid out the intellectual framework which supported the concept of folk customs as pagan survivals, and only two additions to her work need to be made for present purposes. The first is to note that the framework concerned was also an outgrowth of German Romanticism, which in its quest for a unifying national identity generated a new interest in rural culture as a promising hunting-ground for a 'definitive' Germanity. This interest inspired the Prussian scholar Wilhelm Mannhardt to make the first systematic collection of contemporary peasant customs, between 1860 and 1880, and to develop from it the first full-blown version of the theory of survivals. As the agricultural customs which he recorded were inevitably concerned overwhelmingly with the produce of humans, livestock, and fields, he tended to overemphasize ancient European religions as concerned with fertility rites, and made a leap beyond the evidence to assert that they had been focused upon the concept of animating spirits of vegetation.[3] Mannhardt functioned as a forerunner to Tylor, and a major influence on Frazer.

> *Wilhelm Mannhardt ... tended to overemphasize ancient European religions as concerned with fertility rites, and made a leap beyond the evidence to assert that they had been focused upon the concept of animating spirits of vegetation.*

Dr Bennett's work also resoundingly begged the question of why the notion of pagan survivals continued to grow in popularity, and was sustained by folklorists, even after that framework had collapsed inside the academy. Here an important insight is provided by the other author to touch upon the subject in recent years; the classicist Mary Beard. Her subject was the most ambitious and celebrated of all the works that attempted to create a history of religion by using the comparative method, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which went through three successive and ever larger editions between 1890 and 1915. She suggested that to Sir James himself, the book had represented a journey through an underworld of belief, in which the familiar rituals of the British countryside were integrally linked with savage and foreign rites in an exciting and unsettling way.[4]

An addition which might be proposed to this picture is that Frazer's own golden bough was the light of human reason, guiding him and his readership through primeval chaos and

darkness. The hidden sub-text of both of the greatest British exponents of the comparative method, Tylor and Frazer, was to discredit religion in general, and Christianity in particular, in order to assist the progress of humanity towards a more perfect rationalism. …

> *… the theory of survivals itself … had been a tactic developed by 16th century Protestant polemicists to discredit Roman Catholic modes of worship … [and] to condemn forms of popular revelry … by suggesting that they were relics of heathendom.*

[Tylor] and his fellow rationalist Andrew Lang (like Frazer, a refugee from Scottish Presbyterianism) issued a joint declaration of intent to 'theologians all to expose'.[5] Tylor's evangelical roots were never displayed more clearly than in his adoption of the theory of survivals itself, for although its scholarly application may have taken shape in Germany, in its crude form it had been a tactic developed by 16th century Protestant polemicists to discredit Roman Catholic modes of worship. The device consisted of attempting to demonstrate that most of the ceremonies of the medieval Church had derived from pagan practices. It was extended by the same kind of writer to condemn forms of popular revelry which the reformers wished to suppress as immoral and disorderly, by suggesting that they were relics of heathendom.[6] Tylor was a puritan preacher, reclad as a Victorian liberal humanist.

The case of Frazer is more complex. On the one hand, there is no doubt that during his undergraduate years he became a confirmed atheist or agnostic, and that one of the purposes of *The Golden Bough* was to discredit Christianity.[7] The most important argument of the whole work was that ancient peoples had believed in a dying and reviving god, who represented the animating spirit of vegetation postulated by Mannheim and had been represented in human form by sacred kings, who were killed after a set term or when their power of mind or body failed. Frazer's implication was that the figure of Christ had been an outgrowth from this body of (to him erroneous and unnecessary) belief, and he may well have intended it to be the more effective in that it was never made blatantly. …

In fairness to both men, it must be pointed out that not only were their attitudes typical of the intellectual culture of their place and time, but that they took care to emphasize that humanity represented a single family, of which barbarism and savagery were the childhood. Tylor in particular urged the need to take seriously, and to study, the ways of tribal peoples, because by this process more advanced nations were learning something about themselves.[8] However patronizing, the language of these scholars was still a liberal and humanitarian one. By contrast, the opposed contemporary discourse which postulated the existence of a golden age of wisdom in the remote past, represented by a single state or people (such as Atlantis), had a more dangerous potential for racism and authoritarianism. …

The literary impact of *The Golden Bough,* the reviews given to it in popular newspapers,[9] and the use made of it by later folklorists (to be considered below), all testify that it inspired, in varying proportions, a prurient, sensuous, and romantic pleasure. Tylor and Frazer arguably did succeed in doing further damage to the status of Christianity, but fostered not so much an enhanced respect for rationalism and progress as a delight in the primitive and the unreasonable. It is time to commence a systematic analysis of why this was so.

The first and most obvious component in the phenomenon is the tremendous idealization of rural England which commenced at the end of the eighteenth century and reached an apogee between 1880 and 1930; indeed, it might be called a plateau, as it has not diminished significantly since. It has been well studied in recent years by Raymond Williams, Martin Wiener, Jan Marsh, W.J. Keith, Alun Howkins, and Gillian Bennett.[10] The shift of emotion involved can be attributed to a single and simple process; that in 1810 about 80 per cent of English people lived in the countryside, and by 1910 about 80 per cent lived in towns. The balance tipped neatly around 1850, and to observers in the late 19th century the speed and scale of this unprecedented change promised a 20th century England consisting of one smoking conurbation from coast to coast.

The new mass urban and industrialized lifestyle was condemned not just because it was frighteningly novel and because its setting was perceived as being ugly, but because it was supposed to be physically and mentally unhealthy. The countryside became credited with all the virtues which were the obverse of those vices. It was not simply regarded as being more beautiful and healthy, but as being stable, dependable, rooted, and timeless. Its working people became credited with a superior wisdom, founded upon generations of living in close contact with nature and inheriting a cumulative hidden knowledge. This organic, immemorial lore was viewed as both a comforting force of resistance to the dramatic and unsettling changes of the 19th century and as a potential force for redemption. It was a remarkable revolution in perception, for hitherto rustics had usually been portrayed by leaders of literary taste as the principal reservoir of ignorance, blind superstition, brutal manners, and political reaction, within which towns formed islands of liberalism, education, progress, and refinement. Suddenly the urban centres had turned into monsters, destroying the world about them and spreading ill health, pollution, ugliness, and social instability. The shrinking and depopulating countryside—especially the soft arable and downland landscape of southern England—had become the epitome of continuity, community and social harmony.

By the second half of the 19th century, mere contact with the open country could be represented as an act of grace. Between 1878 and 1880 a Londoner called Richard Jeffries turned out five popular books on the delights of rusticity. One of them, *The Amateur Poacher,* concluded with the appeal to 'get out of these indoor narrow modern days, where twelve hours have somehow become shortened, into the sunlight and pure wind. A something the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still.' Yes indeed: as illustrated earlier, many writer of the time called that 'something' Pan, while others spoke of Mother Nature or Mother Earth. Most who worked in the genre did not personify it, but still wrote of the rural landscape with the same fervent sense of an animating spirit. As Jan March has put it: 'Love of Nature helped many late Victorians to dispense with God gradually, as it were, without losing their sense of immanent divinity. Others, who continued to believe, found in Nature and Nature poetry an expression of quasi-religious feeling that fed their spiritual needs'.[11] …

It is important not to overstate the shortcomings of the 'rural myth' or to underestimate the utility of the work which it helped to

inspire. Most of the individuals who collected folklore in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain were not starry-eyed Londoners but people rooted in the localities about which they wrote, and integrated into them. The vast quantities of information which they gathered represent a major primary source for social history, and although by the standards of later scholarship it is usually badly deficient in context and presentation, it is often remarkably comprehensive; the collectors stockpiled hundreds of pieces of evidence that the 'folk' at the time were often far from being as wise, patient, good-humoured, or perceptive as the myth suggested. Jeffries, Hudson, and the other writers to romanticize the countryside also presented much closely observed and accurate detail about it. The problem is, rather, one of interpretation; that the meaning of what these collectors and authors recorded was determined according to a complex of emotions and preconceptions which now appear very questionable. Even those who lived in rural areas were often affected by these, partly because they were responding to a market and to a dominant intellectual metropolitan culture, and partly because they were reacting to the same social and economic processes. The most striking case is probably that of the Edwardian folk-song collector Alfred Williams. He was both rural in origin and working class, being brought up in a village and later making his living in a factory; yet when he published his collections, he romanticized country life as much as any other writer of the time. In the words of his biographer, he 'seemed to possess an ability to ignore anything which was not in keeping with his rose-coloured rural scene'.[12]

At first sight it is still by no means obvious why this sentiment should have attached itself to the notion of *pagan* survivals. After all, Medieval and Tudor England (the period most commonly designated 'merrie') was formally a Christian society, and its parish churches remain as enduring and often beloved components of the modern rural landscape. They were certainly more constant, solid, and obvious symbols of the communality and stability of the country people of Chaucer's, Shakespeare's, and Victoria's ages alike than maypoles and group dances. The characters of *The Canterbury Tales,* the Robin Hood ballads, and the Arthurian cycle are all presented as Christians of varying degrees of education and devotion. On closer inspection, reasons for the apparent conundrum rapidly appear. The simplest and most obvious is that at no time after 1870 was British intellectual culture prone to a large-scale reaction in favour of established religion. The dominant trends were all in the opposite direction. An equally important, and more subtle, factor in the situation lay in the very nature of a conception of rural England as an organic continuum with ancient roots, preserving timeless wisdom. To foster this, all major upheavals had to be airbrushed out of the picture. The Reformation was one, and the conversion to Christianity another. The old religions were part of the deep humus of experience out of which the eternal England had grown.

Such a notion was articulated successively by three of the early leaders of the Folk-Lore Society. Sidney Hartland got the ball rolling in the first issue of the society's periodical, in 1890, by interpreting the legend of Lady Godiva as an example of a pagan fertility rite later converted into an occasion for Christian civic pride.[13] The following year, Sir Lawrence Gomme endorsed this opinion, pointing out that most folk tales and fairy stories did not have an obvious religious content and arguing from that (more dubiously) that they therefore had to be pre-Christian. In 1892 he repeated this theory, and made a further extrapolation from it, without actual research—that English commoners remained essentially pagan until the 17th century, when they were finally converted to Christianity by 'Puritan' evangelism. In his view, therefore, until then the new religion had been understood, and accepted, only by the social elite. To Gomme, the process of conversion was also one of assimilation, the old rites continuing beside the established faith in the form of customary practices. His attitude to the matter was a logical extension of his vision of the English village community, as a unit which 'originated at a stage of development long prior to the political stage' and so was 'of the nature of a survival from prehistoric times'. Thus it incorporated in its beliefs and activities those of 'cave dwellers, hill men, lake dwellers, dolmen builders'.[14]

... it is still by no means obvious why this sentiment should have attached itself to the notion of pagan *survivals. After all, Medieval and Tudor England (the period most commonly designated 'merrie') was formally a Christian society*

In 1896 his successor as president of the society, Edward Clodd, produced a complementary view of the same theme by asserting that many medieval churches had been built on or near former pagan shrines, providing 'unbroken evidence of the pagan foundation which itself resting upon barbaric bedrock, upholds the structures of classical and Christian faiths'. He extended the message of continuity from the physical buildings to the activities within them, by claiming that many Catholic rituals had been developed from those of the older religions; as evidence for this he drew directly upon the invectives of early modern Protestants, cited above, and in particular upon those of Thomas Hobbes.[15] The ideas of both Gomme and Clodd were developed in the next two decades by Walter Johnson, a medical man and keen local antiquary. In a pair of enthusiastically researched and densely illustrated books, published by university presses, he portrayed an English rural landscape of ageless landmarks—yew trees, trackways, and dew ponds— in which virtually every parish church stands upon a former pagan shrine, and both religious rituals and secular customs echo the same pre-Christian past.[16]

Between the 1920s and 1940s, the same themes were central to the popular works of Harold Massingham. To him, the ancient religions had inculcated a mystical sense of union with nature, and Christianity had added a superior system of social ethics, so that the two combined, symbolized by the superimposition of churches upon pagan holy places, represented a perfect system of faith. This he evoked, against the 'utter darkness and savagery' which he discerned in modern urbanized culture.[17] He coined the slogan: 'Let the Church come back to earth'.[18] Like Gomme and Johnson, he saw the peculiar merit, charm, and power of the English rural landscape as lying in its continuity; in his portrait of the Cotswolds, he traced not merely the region's religion by its social system, economy, and sports, in an unbroken line from the builders of the neolithic long barrows.[19]

During the same period such sentiments continued to be expressed by leading folklorists. In 1933, R.R. Marett informed the English Folk Dance and Song Society that folk

customs (at least as interpreted by people like himself) represented 'the higher syntheses that transcends the old, narrow-minded antimony between pagan and Christian modes of hallowing the message of the spring'.[20] Feeling of this sort lay behind much of the literary and popular reception of *The Golden Bough,* discussed above. As said, by placing Christ in a context of dying and resurrecting pagan deities, Frazer had hoped to discredit the whole package of religious ideas. Instead, as some of the literary use of the *Bough* indicates, he actually gave some solace to those disillusioned with traditional religion, by allowing them to conflate the figure of Jesus with the natural world, to produce a kinder, greener variety of Christianity. As shown above, the same exercise was simultaneously being carried out by turning Pan into a Christ-figure, but Frazer's animating vegetation spirit provided an easier and less challenging means of accomplishing it.

It should be stressed that many of these ideas rested upon some truth; the problem is that in every case they went far beyond its bounds. There were certainly gods venerated in the ancient world who were believed to die and return, but they were few and localized. Only under the Roman Empire did one of these (that of Attys) develop into a widespread mystery religion, and this attracted a relatively tiny number of adherents; it may, indeed, have been influenced, or even inspired, by Christianity. It is likewise a fact that some English parish churches are associated with pre-Christian ritual monuments, Knowlton, Rudston, and Taplow being the outstanding examples. At the present day, however, the question of whether most stood upon ancient holy places if still open and likely to remain so; specifically, only a very small minority of churches examined by archaeologists have proved to reveal any sign of pre-Christian activity on the site, but it is not demonstrable that pagan worship would necessarily have left the sort of traces which archaeology can detect. What must be said is that the confident statements of writers such as Clodd and Johnson have not been borne out by investigation.[21] It is also absolutely correct that some British folk customs have descended directly from pagan rituals, such as the fires of Beltane and Midsummer Eve, and the giving of presents and decoration of homes with greenery at midwinter. The majority, however, are either of doubtful ancient provenance or (more often) developed in the Middle Ages or later.[22] The empirical evidence, therefore, is not sufficient explanation for the excitement and dogmatic certainty with which the concepts of pagan origins and of essential continuity were argued.

It is also absolutely correct that some British folk customs have descended directly from pagan rituals ...The majority, however, are either of doubtful ancient provenance or (more often) developed in the Middle Ages or later.

Nor, however, is the 'rural myth' itself. Even the 'green' Christianity of a writer such as Massingham did not much interest the bulk of folklorists between 1870 and 1970. Their preoccupation was firmly with the old religions which underlay later civilization. Proponents of the theory of continuity were more likely to distinguish paganism and Christian elements than to celebrate the blending of them, and the contrast was rarely to the advantage of the latter. In 1894, Gomme himself told the Folk-Lore Society that it should 'educate' the public 'into understanding that there is sometimes more real humanity in a touch of genuine paganism than in some of the platitudes that at present do duty for higher things'.[23] The society's president was himself using the language of radical neopaganism so strident in the early 1890s [Prof Hutton has addressed this issue earlier in the book]. Moreover, the kind of paganism which the folklorists were seeking was not the familiar kind, of the Greek and Roman classics, of Olympian deities, pillared temples, and Homeric hymns. It was, rather, a world of throbbing drums, fertility rites, ritual dances, painted bodies, and deities who represented primary cosmological forces. What was really going on?

What I think to be the answer was perceived by another modern scholar who made a consideration of *The Golden Bough,* and indeed directly provoked that by Mary Beard, quoted above. This was Edmund Leach, back in 1961, who suggested that the popularity of the *Bough* derived from the fact that, before Freud, Frazer 'was already suggesting the existence of a Dionysian, sex-inspired, primitive undercurrent sapping at the roots of conventional Victorian society'.[24] Such a view is certainly supported by the bulk of the literary use made of Frazer's work, mentioned above, and also by the reviews of it in newspapers and journals; one of the first of the latter, in *The Daily News* on 2 June 1890, commented that until Frazer wrote, 'we never knew how heathenish we are nor how old our heathenism is'.

This does, I believe, get to the heart of the matter, but to concentrate upon *The Golden Bough* while making such a point is at once to flatter and to blame Frazer unduly. One crucially important element in his vision was that he was himself a classicist, in the forefront of what was at his time still the most prestigious of the humanities. As such, his views were only part of a general development in his discipline which took place between 1890 and 1910, running parallel to that within folklore studies and essentially at one with it. It consisted of the adoption of the notion that before the opening of history, and the veneration of the familiar pantheon of deities, the ancient Greeks had worshipped a single female deity. This phenomenon was considered in the second chapter of this present work, but it needs now to be set in a wider context. It was crucial to the Edwardian classicists' view of the ancient world that the difference in deities was also one of quality of religion; the historical world of the Olympians had been that of reason and philosophy, while the older and much more mysterious time of the Goddess had been one of darker, earthier, and more ecstatic rites, concerned with magic and propitiation. It was a mirror image of the vision of the folklorists, except that to the latter the succeeding, familiar, and civilized religion was not classical Greek paganism, but Christianity.

This concept was adopted with considerable speed in the first decade of the 20th century, although presaged in the 1890s, and Frazer's University of Cambridge was central to its development. In particular, it was the hallmark of a group of scholars gathered around Jane Ellen Harrison, who has been mentioned earlier. Her own attitude to the ancient world was complex. She was careful to declare her disapproval of paganism: 'I am not an archaeologist—still less anthropologist—the "beastly devices of the heathen" weary and disgust me.' She also described herself as a 'Puritan' and grew to admire Freud only by persevering in the hope that 'below all this sexual mud was something big and real'.[25] ...

Of [Harrison's] own Cambridge friends and colleagues, Gilbert Murray and Arthur Bernard

Cook both accepted the model of a female-centred religion of magic and unreason preceding that of classical Greece, at once repulsive and fascinating.[26] It was taken up at Oxford by Sir Arthur Evans, who made the Minoans into the exemplars of such a religion, and in France by Joseph Dechelette, both of whom have been discussed earlier. All these had endorsed the idea by 1914; when Lewis Farnell wrote a student textbook on ancient Greek beliefs in 1920, it was represented as established fact.[27] In 1910 another classical scholar, John Cuthbert Lawson, provided a perfect imitation of the work of the folklorists by studying that primal religion in the light of modern Greek peasant customs; in a circular process, the modern customs were used to reconstruct the ancient rituals, and then themselves interpreted according to the significance which those reconstructed rituals were supposed to have possessed.[28]

Parallel work was carried on between 1894 and 1920 by England's leading scholar of the Arthurian legend, Jessie Weston. Directly inspired by the work of the Folk-Lore Society and the Cambridge classicists, who argued that the main motifs of the legend had descended directly from a pagan mystery religion concerned (in Frazerian fashion) with fertility. Unlike the authors cited above, she supplied no source references and at times openly stated that the vital information was provide by nameless friends with occult knowledge who assured her that the same ancient religion had survived in secret up until her own time. She did not belong to any magical groups herself; somebody who knew the world of British occultism well, A.E. Waite, accused her of making use of 'cultist fictions'. Whatever the source of her ideas, they won her a British Academy prize and an honorary doctorate of letters; she seemed to have shown that the greatest literature of medieval England, like its religion, represented a thin Christian screen overlying an essential paganism.[29] Such a vision of the past transcended religious loyalties; Harrison and Murray were romantic agnostics, Cook an evangelical Protestant, and Weston a devout conservative Anglican. It was the common property of a generation.

... the kind of paganism which the folklorists were seeking was not the familiar kind, ... of Olympian deities, pillared temples, and Homeric hymns. It was, rather, a world of throbbing drums, fertility rites, ... painted bodies, and deities who represented primary cosmological forces.

Once again, it must be asked whence it came. Intellectual lineages do not help here; it is easy to cite the probable influence of Nietzsche or Freud, but thinkers such as these were more part of the same mental world than responsible for it. A possible answer can only be achieved by moving sideways, across area after area of late Victorian and Edwardian intellectual culture. Upon entering that of class relations, we find the obsessive fear of a newly expanded and enriched European social elite, balanced precariously on top of a comparatively impoverished and underprivileged, rapidly growing, and potentially dangerous proletariat. Looking at the enormous contemporary expansion of European tropical empires, we find the same phenomenon, of small colonial elites perched upon large native populations which frequently appeared to the former as savage, contemptible, and frightening. Moving into the realm of religious experience, we find the emotional impact of the theory of evolution, with its revelations that humans are umbilically connected to the beasts. Jumping into that of creative literature, we find these themes treated repeatedly in the best-selling novels and short stories of the age: the fear of the animal or demon within us, of the subversion of respectable society by inward enemies, of the hidden forces of destruction and unreason beneath the veneer of civilization. ...

Freud's construction of the id, ego, and superego was to a great extent a rationalization of them, and the whole developing science of psychology might be regarded as another consequence (rather than a cause) of these anxieties. They represented an interlocking set of visions which were at once terrifying and alluring. The dark, unreasonable forces beneath and inside rational, science-based, progressive modern culture were certainly frightening to the representatives of the latter. The guilt and self-hatred which were often also experienced by the more sensitive of them could make those forces seem potentially redemptive, a means of restoring humanity and truth to a civilization cankered by hypocrisy and injustice. This instinct harmonized with the sense of the redemptive power of the countryside, discussed above.

Such a complex of emotions is quite visible among the scholars who have been considered in the present chapter. ... All of them were discovering, imagining, and constructing images of a culture which was the antitheses of the civilization to which they belonged, which had preceded it, and upon which it rested; and which like the bestial nature of humanity, could also be said to be built into it, with a potential to break forth again. This was one aspect of the most pervasive dream—or nightmare—of late Victorian and Edwardian modernity.

NOTES:

1. *Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year In Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1996).
2. Gillian Bennett, 'Geologists and Folklorists: Cultural Evolution and the Science of Folklore', *Folklore* 105 (1994), 25-37.
3. Wilhelm Mannhardt, *Roggenwolf und Rogenhund* (Danzig, 1866), *Die Korn damonen* (Berlin, 1868), *Antike Wald- und Feldkulte* (Berlin, 1877), and *Mythologische Forschungen* (Strasburg, 1884).
4. Mary Beard, 'Frazer, Leach and Virgil: The Popularity (and Unpopularity) of *The Golden Bough*', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (1992), 203-24.
5. Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology 1885-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78-9.
6. Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 144-5.
7. Robert Ackerman, *J.G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1-32, 164-7.
8. See especially Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871), vol. II, 443-53.
9. Many of which are collected in Trinity College, Cambridge, Frazer MS 22.
10. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), ch. 21; W.J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition* (Toronto University Press, 1975); Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit* (Cambridge University Press, 1981); Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England from 1880 to 1914* (London: Quartet, 1982); Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 62-88; Gillian Bennett, 'Folklore Studies and the English Rural Myth', *Rural History* 4 (1993), 77-91.

    Peter Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1950-1940', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th series 7 (1997), 155-76, has argued forcefully against an overstatement of this posi-

tion, suggesting that the 'rural myth' was the preoccupation of only a section of society, and not dominant in England in general. His words are well taken, and do not diminish my own case, which depends only on the belief that this 'myth' was prevalent in a significant part of the literary culture, and came under no direct attack or opposition at this time. Likewise, John Ashton, 'Beyond Survivalism: Regional Folkloristics in Late-Victorian England', *Folklore* 108 (1997), 19-24, has reminded us that provincial England contained a number of important folklore collectors who did not share the contemporary preoccupation with folk customs as pagan survivals. This does not alter the fact that they did not articulate any alternative theory to challenge the latter, and that 'survivalism' was dominant among the metropolitan scholars who presided over the movement.

11. Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 35.
12. Ivor Clissold, 'Alfred Williams, Song Collector', *Folk Music Journal* 1.5 (1969), 293-300.
13. E. Sidney Hartland, 'Peeping Tom and Lady Godiva', *Folk-Lore* 1 (1890), 225.
14. G.L. Gomme, 'Opening Address', *Folk-Lore* 2 (1891), 5-11; 'Opening Address', *Folk-Lore* 3 (1892), 4.12; *The Village Community* (1890), 2-4.
15. E. Clodd, 'Presidential Address', *Folk-Lore 7* (1896), 47-8, 56.
16. Walter Johnson, *Folk-Memory or the Continuity of British Archaeology* (Oxford University Press, 1908), and *By-Ways in British Archaeology* (Cambridge University Press, 1912).
17. H.J. Massingham, *Downland Man* (London: Cape, 1926), 327, *The English Countryman* (London: Batsford, 1942), 11-14, and *Remembrance: An Autobiography* (London: Batsford, 1944), 49-68.
18. H.J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1942), 210.
19. H.J. Massingham, *Wold Without End* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1932), 40, 47, 86-90, 156, 215. See also his *The English Countryside* (London: Batsford, 1939), 1.
20. R.R. Marett, 'Survival and Revival', *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* 1.2 (1933), 74.
21. For the latest survey of the evidence see *Church Archaeology: Research Directions for the Future*, eds. John Blair and Carol Pyrah (Council for British Archaeology Research Report 104, 1996), 6-12, 53.
22. Hutton, *Stations of the Sun, passim.*
23. G.L. Gomme, 'Opening Address', *Folk-Lore* 5 (1894), 69.
24. Edmund R. Leach, 'Golden Bough or Gilded Twig?', *Daedalus* (Spring 1961), 383.
25. Jane Ellen Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (London: Hogarth, 1925), 81-4.
26. Gilbert Murray, *Four Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 16-18, 45-6; Arthur Bernard Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1914), vol. I, 776-80. See Robert Ackerman, 'The Cambridge Group: Origins and Composition', and Robert L. Fowler, 'Gilbert Murray: Four (five) Stages of Greek Religion', in *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered*, ed. Calder, 1-19 and 79-95.
27. Louis Richard Farnell, *Outline History of Greek Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1920), 16-36.
28. John Cuthbert Lawson, *Modern Greek Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion: A Study in Survivals* (Cambridge, 1910).
29. The best study is Janet Grayson, 'In Quest of Jessie Weston', *Arthurian Literature* 11 (1992), 1-80.

According to the liner notes, Triumph of the Moon *is 'the first full-scale scholarly study of the only religion England has ever given the world; that of modern pagan witchcraft', and 'presents an authoritative insight into a hitherto little-known aspect of modern social history'.*

Professor of History at the University of Bristol, Ronald Hutton now has ten admired books and two PhDs to his credit. Three of these books, The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles *(Oxford, 1991),* The Rise and Fall of Merry England *(Oxford, 1994) and* Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain *(Oxford, 1996), are highly reccomended to our readers.*

Contested Meanings: Earth Religion Practitioners and the Everyday

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An earlier version of this paper was given at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion annual meeting, Boston, November 1999.

ABSTRACT:
In many 'traditional' cultures, religion and magic are not easily separated from people's everyday existence. Today, an increasing number of people within North America are drawn to some form of earth-centred spirituality, whether as solitary practitioners or members of Neopagan circles, Wicca covens, Heathen kindreds or Druid groves. For many of these people, religion and spirituality do not form a closed category of their experience: they inform, and are formed by, events of their lives as distinct or diverse as childbirth, gardening, social protest, sexual expression, and everyday occupations of work and leisure.

In investigating discourse and practice, the paper explores some of the sources of knowledge, examples, or inspiration referred to by informants, and attempts to link these with their everyday lives. Practitioners draw on often-contradictory words, images, and solitary and community ritual practice, in constructing 'truths' and identities for themselves as spiritual beings in a postmodern world. Practitioners seek 'holistic', unfragmented lives, but may find contradictions between personal expressions of spirituality and workplace restrictions or family practices and beliefs: their worlds are not seamless, and their quests for empowerment may meet contestation. Discourse and practice may rely on assumptions that are totalising or essentialist. Yet the focus of the paper acts as a reminder that the everyday can be magical, and everyday actions, transformatory.

An increasing number of people today, within western societies, are drawn to 'earth-centred' religions. The term covers a wide range of meaning. The most visible such religion, at least from a scan of bookstore shelves, is Wicca. However, the variety of expressions of what otherwise gets called 'pagan' or 'neopagan' belief includes those who draw on North American indigenous spiritualities for inspiration, Greco-Roman mythology and pantheon, African belief systems, European 'Goddess' imagery or 'Celtic' or 'Nordic' mythologies, Siberian or circumpolar shamanistic practices and a whole host more. 'Earth-centred' or 'Earth-religion' is hard to define and indeed in this paper I am attempting to work towards such a definition (or at least an approach that indicates a 'fuzzy' bounding of the term).

In this paper I set out to explore 'the sacred in the secular' in the discourses of long-standing adherents of earth-religions. The paper starts from where people are, with the words of ordinary practitioners, interviewed as part of a study of earth-religions and identity. It mentions some means by which people come to think of themselves as attuned with earth-based spiritualities, and how these become part of their perceptions of everyday activities. In it I examine how informants define 'spirit', and investigate ways in which concepts of body, mind and spirit form part of informants' thinking and practices. Dimensions which informants identify as important include associations of body and spirit; connecting with the past and with ancestors; earth-awareness and environmentalism; healing of self and others; power and empowerment of women and men. Importantly, these dimensions encompass many areas of their lives. Often they speak of their religion as something

... many aspects of 'everyday lives' of pagans look and sound very like the 'everyday lives' of non-pagans. Differences, if and where they exist, are in approach, degree, and underlying assumptions which influence action.

which affects small actions of their lives, viewed as part of a larger whole. As one young man interviewed in Ontario said, "I can't litter any more". For some, recycling and taking out the compost become spiritual practices. For others, everyday gestures become political acts.

In investigating discourse and practice, this paper explores some of the sources of knowledge, examples, or inspiration referred to by informants, attempting to link these with their everyday lives. Participants' discourse moves from today's authors, such as Starhawk, to older literature such as the Icelandic Sagas and Eddas, to accounts of shamanic practitioners either today or previously, and to interpretations of structures and images from earlier periods back to the neolithic and paleolithic 'goddess' figures. Sources are capable of multiple interpretation. In other published work (e.g. Blain, 1999a), I examine how practitioners move between past and present, drawing on (sometimes contradictory) words, images, and solitary and community ritual practice, in constructing truths and identities for themselves as spiritual beings in a postmodern world. Practitioners seek 'holistic', unfragmented lives, but may find contradictions between personal expressions of spirituality and workplace restrictions or family practices and beliefs: their worlds are not seamless, and their quests for empowerment may meet contestation. Interwoven with 'pagan' discourse are popular and academic concepts, phrases, indexing narratives of being, 'self', and belonging: not all are unproblematic, for the speakers or for others who seek to define themselves as 'pagan' and construct their own relations with Earth and her creatures.

BEGINNING WHERE PEOPLE ARE

Let us begin with some accounts, from practitioners, moving from the more obvious expressions of Pagan spiritualities, to the more private or everyday, and examining how these connect with each other and with Earth. Many pagans—not all—base their expressions of spirituality around seasonal festivals: for many the four quarter days (cross-quarters to the English) known to many in the community as 'Celtic' festivals, and/or four solar festivals; for others a series of days that demarcate historical or quasi-historical events, but still with reference to the turning of the year. For instance, Yule, the winter solstice, is explained with reference to the dark time of the year, the season when light becomes a prized commodity, or at least did so in the days before the century of electricity. Beltane is celebrated by some Wiccans as a fertility festival, for spring. Wiccans generally hold eight celebrations. By contrast, Heathens have four main seasonal events: Winternights, ushering in the season of darkness; Yule, held at the time the Wild Hunt can be heard riding across the skies; Ostara, the start of spring, either followed or preceded by a blessing of field and plough; and Midsummer fires at the solstice. While these festivals may not always be as 'traditional' as their practitioners consider them (see e.g. Hutton 1996), they are none the less part of today's rediscovered—or invented—'traditions', and they have a grounding in recent folklore.

Judith runs a small store in a Maritime town, selling herbs and essential oils, which has become known, she says, as the witch's shop. She described how, for her and her family, seasonal understandings are expressed through celebration and ritual:

> We have our seasonal celebrations. You know the autumn equinox, and with the kids we do solstice ... special things like on winter solstice, my husband and I would stay up all night, and we get the kids up in the morning to see the sun rise. Little things like that. Autumn equinox, that was when our big Thanksgiving dinner would be, and summer solstice is like the end of school for them. So really by just doing the little seasonal celebrations. Not that they have to be anything big, but sort of taking note. But I think even by noticing them—oh yeah, today's summer solstice sort of thing—we do sort of tune in to [the changing] seasons ... you become aware of things, of simple things, like changing tides, and when certain things bloom each year, and weather patterns, and they really connect you to all that.

But pagan attempts to celebrate the cycles of the earth are not necessarily straightforward. Pagan holidays do not always coincide with those of the wider society, although at times they do. And at times this is quite deliberate: Heathens in North America and the UK celebrate the Einherjar (warriors or heroes) on Remembrance Day. Some choose other conventional holidays or celebrations and attach a heathen 'spin' to them: Vali at Valentine's Day (though celebrated by only some heathen groups). Conversely, Lughnasa or Lammas, in Canada, coincides with civic holidays.

Pagans seeking holiday time may be supported or rejected by employers: personnel working shifts, particularly in health care professions and essential services, may find that a wish to take Dec 21st, and work Dec 25th, is very well received. Secretaries, however, have reported being put under pressure to work extra hours around the solstice, in order to clear work before a 'Christmas holiday' period. (In academic life, 'getting the grades in' can be quite a problem.) Spiritual observance and daily work-life intersect in ways that are complex, and these intersections construct practice and equally construct others' understandings of paganisms and what these are about. Workplace discussions of Samhain or Winternights, for instance, may in one workplace appear 'cool and interesting', but in another attract proselytizing attempts from other religious groups. Some pagans or heathens are more open about their spiritualities than others. Fear of recrimination, attempted 'conversion', dismissal, or simply not being seen as serious citizens, is a contributing factor for those who remain in the closet.

To an outsider, pagans may seem interesting and colourful, set apart by culture and discourse, or by lifestyle choices, depending on how you look at it. However, today's North American and European pagans and neoshamans live in the urban world of the late 20th/early 21st centuries, in environments of plastic and concrete, dealing with information technologies and bureaucratic systems. If even the occasions of community celebration become problematic, how is daily life constructed in the intersections between spirit and structure, nature and technology?

Actualities of daily living are complex, and paganisms involve their practitioners in adjustments and contradictions. Internet discussions often posit pagans in opposition to dominant groups, especially against North America Christians of various types; or against atheists in academia and much of Europe. This can sound like quite a battle. The realities are more complex: members of earth religions work alongside members of other religions, their children attend the same schools, they shop for the same foods, often in the same groceries, or in farmers' markets which could not exist if they were only supported by pagans. That is, many aspects of the 'everyday lives' of pagans look and sound very like the 'everyday lives' of non-pagans. Differences, if and where they exist, are in approach, degree, and underlying assumptions which influence action.

Judith, when asked how her spiritual practice was a part of her family, replied thus:

> We're fairly laid back, I would say. If you were to compare us to say, Christian families, we don't do the regular church thing or weekly lessons or anything like that. More like a daily basis with life, we try to fit it in, just relate life to certain beliefs: What you do is what comes back to you, or how you act ... We don't really do anything special besides the seasonal things, and you know, our beliefs. I mean, we do say … a blessing over the food. You know, we join hands and do a circle, a thing like that. … I made them dream pillows and they take those at the full moon and just sleep with them for three nights … Helping me in the garden with herbs. Learning to respect plants, that they are alive. You know, stuff like that.

In starting with differences between her practices and those she perceives as associated with other religions or spiritualities, she moves to daily or monthly routines, and then to events that link the family with other beings or lives. Helping in the garden leads in this description to the importance of her children learning to respect plants. Judith's approach is part of a wider philosophy connecting people and earth. As she says:

> … humans aren't just here to conquer the Earth, that we all combine. And of course, we do the recycling, and the composting, the basic sort of ecological things. But I think instilling in them that respect for the Earth, that type of thing.

When asked what her spiritual path meant to her, Judith's reply linked spiritual meaning with daily life:

> Well, for me I think it just sort of gives meaning to my life. It just doesn't feel so empty. When I look at people who don't have anything at all I wonder how do they survive ... They seem superficial, or flat ... You know, you don't have any sustenance. They just sort of get up, go to work, spend that money, and get up and go to work ... And don't seem to have any sort of meaning. So for me, it really gives me a lot of meaning. And because it's such an Earth-based [path], you sort of begin to become in touch with the Earth or in tune with the rhythms, you know, the cycles of the seasons, and of the course the cycles of your body. So it all fits in. So you sort of feel part of the universe, it makes you feel actually connected. That you're not just plunked here on the planet as a separate entity. I think humans sort of see themselves as apart from the world and nature. Not as connected. I think it probably gives you that sense—for me it does, anyways—that sense of connectedness.

These linkings of connectedness, nature, and daily life are central for many pagans, and we will return to them.

Another woman, Summer, also linked seasonal ritual with everyday activity and meaning: seasons are important for her, as they were, she says, for past agricultural peoples. This woman has land outside of the city, and grows herbs as part of her business.

> … one thing that I like is that the roots of paganism … and my European ancestors, the witches and midwives of the ancient European times celebrated the seasons because they were agriculturally based societies and because the fall equinox is very important in terms of our daily sustenance in life as people who are still agricultural whether we admit it or not because without food we aren't and so we must be agricultural. … so I think that even more so, I mean it's very important to mark the seasons because it helps me to mark my life as someone intimately involved with food and how the seasons of Canada make that happen ... it feels like, the sort of the daily rituals connect me with the wind and the air and the earth and the plants and the bees and the animals. But my seasonal rituals connect me to cultures and peoples and histories and ... they also are a time when I tend to be with other people in ritual. So they are a good excuse to get together.

Summer's discourse indexes a number of narratives common within strands of paganism: linking today's pagan practitioners with "the witches … of the ancient European times", and these in turn with "midwives". Her words and those of Judith also associated the witch with the wise women, or the herbalist practitioner. These concepts are echoed by Thorgerd, a heathen witch who lives in the city, who speaks of herbs and healing hands, and has trained as an aromatherapist. She is attempting to start a practice as an alternative healer: when I spoke with her, she had just come from a Sunday spent on a friend's land, preparing it for the onset of winter. Her thoughts are echoed by other practitioners who do not garden, do not heal directly, and have little connection to the land. While Summer's daily rituals connect her directly with "wind and the air and the earth and the plants …", some others may find that a ritual offering to Landwights or household deities is a reminder to them that, however much they are surrounded by the concrete and steel of the city, they are ultimately dependant on Earth for food, Air for breath, and Water for their bodies' health.

Pagans are known for polytheistic 'belief'. But in the everyday worlds of these Earth Religion practitioners, deities do not always or necessarily show up very much—or even at all.

Others make the link more concrete and more practical. Food preparation, or cooking, can be seen as a connection with what heathens call Dísir—female ancestral spirits. For instance, in Aunt Hilda's Column in the Heathen journal *Idunna,* these ancestors, both recent and ancient, are deliberately invoked in association with daily kitchen ritual.

A recent discussion in a heathen mailing list on whether Ásatrú could be considered an earth religion, emphasised this point. While several people stated Earth was an important Goddess, some opined that Ásatrú did not mandate its adherents to campaign on environmental issues: therefore it was not an earth religion. However, the consensus eventually reached was that heathenism was involved with land and landspirits, and hence was, in very direct ways that involved everyday life, an 'earth-religion'. I ended up summarising the debate and inserting, of course, my own position. Because others on the list seemed to like it, I include it here as an example or summary:

> It seems to me that the concept of earth, relationships with earth, living on the earth is central, at least to my being and practice, and to that of many Heathens I know. The mythology is stories about gods and heroes. The content of it is what makes a good story. The people of 1000+ years ago told stories, yes, whenever they could, and gave reverence to the High Gods a couple of times a year. The rest of it was, and for many people today is, personal stuff. As [a list member] so eloquently put it, right relationships.
>
> We had a number of posts on this list recently on trees. Why are trees important? Why are landwights important? Why are other creatures important? They're there, they are what we connect with most directly.
>
> When I do a blot, I ask the spirits of the place for their leave and invite them to partake. When I do seidhr (Northern European shamanistic practice), I ask their leave and guardianship. I don't always ask the God/desses! In my daily living I am connecting with Earth in many different ways, as I take out the compost, as I talk to the plants in my garden and greet the trees as I walk, as I look out of the window, as I sit here at my wooden desk with my hands physically typing on the plastic computer keys, doing stuff, being embodied within a given space, being a part of the environment, of the physical Earth of which we are all part.
>
> When I look back into what we know of earlier practice, what I see is people's concern for where they are, and how they relate to the spirits of the place. To me it seems that it's that direct connection that makes for an Earth Religion. The God/desses help us in various ways—often to do with their own connections with Earth, and ways in which they *are*, in senses that I either can't fathom or can't explain, the active principles, the growing of the grain, the construction of relationships between ourselves and where we are.

Pagans celebrate the Greenwood not primarily in its creation (as product of an abstract relationship to a transcendent being), but in its existence ... dynamic patternings of trees and rocks ... predators and prey ... the cycle of life.

This is very different from the sense of dealing with a transcendent 'power' who orders things and 'gets' an inanimate earth to grow stuff, which is what we find in much of the Christian imagery.

SPIRITS, SPIRIT, AND PLACE

A number of issues have now been raised: contested terminologies, 'Gods and Goddesses' who so far have received a bare mention within this paper, the question of 'Spirit', and a suggestion that even the major festivals are (aside from getting dressed up and having a party with friends) not much different from the 'everyday' in terms of sacredness, sanctity, or ability to touch what earth-religion practitioners hold sacred. Relationships with spirits or deities exist in the everyday: Earth is sacred; plants, animals and people are children of Earth, and hence sacred likewise. In work I'm currently planning, I am looking at 'sites' of inscription of meaning, whether these be historical or archaeological, or places of great 'natural beauty'; embodied 'selves'; texts from old or new writings that earth-religion practitioners find compelling, interesting or useful; and events. The meanings so inscribed are constructed within the relationships that pagans create, framed by their existing knowledges.

Pagans are known for polytheistic 'belief'. But in the everyday worlds of these Earth Religion practitioners, deities do not always or necessarily show up very much—or even at all. Many pagans are aware of this: heathen theologian Kveldúlfr Gundarsson points out (in the columns of the heathen magazine *Idunna,* and on internet discussion groups) that this fits within concepts of indigenous religions of Northern Europe, and elsewhere. In the days described by the Icelandic sagas, most had an everyday ongoing relationship with the spirits closest to the people and their daily tasks: those of the land, and ancestors. That Wight who lives in that rock, there, is intimately involved with the productivity of this farm. They were neighbours, helpers, friends and colleagues. According to Gundarsson, the farm people would occasionally approach the high deities, or those conceived of as Elder Kin or more distant relations, just as they would a chieftain. They would approach such deities more often if they were particularly friendly with them, as in the case of poets gifted by Ódhinn or Freyja, whom they might deal with on a daily basis. But the average person, according to Allsherjargodhi Jörmundur Ingi, would greet the High Gods once a year, at the Althing. Important, yes, but not everyday: spirits of rock and stone were local, ancestral, connected, and close. Other beings could be beautiful, and tricky, such as the elves of folklore who are interesting but potentially dangerous to deal with. Some were, and are, closer than others. Michael York, approaching a tentative definition of paganism, frames this as:

> ... an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by individual or community with the tangible, sentient and nonempirical. (York, 2000:9).

Affirmations of this sort allow not only deities and elves, but animals, plants, land, water, and air, to become at least partially sacred. This makes it possible for spiritual relationships to form between people and other beings (or realms of being) which pagan practitioners deal with in the course of their everyday activities.

CULTURE, NATURE: DUALIST CATEGORIES, TOTALISING CONCEPTS?

At times practitioners' discourse reflects a dualism of 'people and nature'. At other times this is more critically examined, and at other times there is a range of mediating beings that form part of the construction of both 'people' and 'nature'. Let us return to Summer, the greenwitch previously quoted.

> And I guess, I mean, the self of Summer, the farmer, walking on the farm and planting and harvesting and weeding. Sometimes I feel extremely connected. Sometimes I feel completely disconnected from myself, from the earth. Sometimes I feel so ignorant and such a, like I stick out incredibly in this beautiful thing called nature. What are, what are we, we seem so clumsy and so ridiculous in comparison and other times I just feel so connected and ... so myself in relation to it all changes for sure. … my academic self problematizes the notion of nature. What is nature? Does nature include us? Of course it does, but how do we talk about this entity outside of us without then resigning it to be other then human therefore different from human. … I think that the reason it hasn't sufficiently ever been problematized academically because it can't be because there is no answer which is something academics hate to admit. So, for a while I was totally into the discourse of environmentalism and I think my spirituality for awhile was more confined than it should have been because I wanted to articulate it in ways that were understandable but it feels that it's coming much more from me, sitting here talking to you about this, and fumbling with words and not actually knowing if I've made any coherent sense than when I was sitting around a table of graduate students trying to articulate it all for my head and it was so out of touch with my body.

These accounts vary between treating people and nature as a dualism, describing 'people in nature', and people as part of 'nature', whatever that may be. They illustrate some of the diversities of paganisms today: they equally illustrate some of the contradictions and tensions present in specific relationships of specific pagans with their everyday worlds.

Ontario Druid Cathbad speaks of a universal principle of life, and its relation to his spirituality:

> For everyday life, nature is constantly expressing its mysteries … the underlying animating principles or forces … that give shape and form to all the things that are around, and so wherever you look there's the sense in which a mystery is being brought into expression here. And sometimes when you take the time to sort of think about it and take a still moment through the course of the day, you can experience a mystery. Even if you're looking at a potted plant in your office … you look through the normal sense presentation of a potted plant and you suddenly see a universal principle of life … you see the functions of life are taking place in this potted plant as they do everywhere else in the world as well. And I think that there's a marvellous thing about Druidism that enables us to take a still moment to see that, wherever we are. So that's the regular daily practice I guess.

Pagan practitioners speak of nature religions and themselves as connected to nature. Clearly, nature is a constructed concept, and indeed one could examine differing constructions of 'nature' in opposition to 'people' (as has of course been done) and of people as part of 'nature' (as has been done likewise). What practitioners' discourse indicates to me is rather more complicated. First, there is a range of positions that practitioners occupy. Second, practitioners alter their orientation to nature, according to the context of their talk. They often draw on what they know to create effect, in the context of the interview or in the realms of teaching or political life, or on their construction of the self in their communities.

For instance, Anne explicitly links environment, Native spiritualities, and her own political activism:

> You read in the Jesuit relations how when [Mi'kmaq chief] Membertou was making the decision about the conversion of the Mi'kmaqs, he went and dug a hole at the base of a tree and sat all day and conversed with the hole in the ground. And of course, the Jesuits wrote this up as another example of stupid, useless, idiotic

superstition. Well, that's a relationship with the Earth that I can't even imagine. However, given that I'm a North American in the 20th century and I can't quite recover that. ... When I was doing the spiritual healing stuff, I did learn how to feel when I'm drawing energy out of the Earth and into my feet. Or if I'm lying on the ground and doing it. So I can feel it come and go, to some extent. And it's fast. You just get this feeling that it's this huge, huge, huge! reservoir of energy.

> Then you get out into the more political realm where the gardening, the camping and the canoeing have to do with connecting ... And it's amazing … And then there's the whole business of the environmental movement. Which I'm not connected to very directly, because my more direct connections have been poverty, anti-racism, feminism, anti-heterosexism, that kind of thing. But to my mind, that's all related. Because the relationships between human beings are so integral with our relationship to the Earth. ….So the whole understanding in political/economic terms of saving the Earth—because it's in desperate straits. ... I see all of the anti-oppression stuff as having a direct relation.

She has an example.

> I gave a paper at the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education in 1991—just because it's here in Halifax, and that's my professional association, and usually I can't afford to go—and the theme was the environment. And the thing that I wanted to talk about was saving education for low-income people in an increasingly-privatized education environment. I had no trouble writing that paper at all. The theme was: recovering the Earth means recovering the justice in relationships among human beings. Bang. It was no problem connecting them.

The political nature of paganism has a more personal dimension: embodiment, which appears over and over in pagan publications, yet remains contentious. 'Sacred bodies, sacred sex', are illustrated in some women's publications (e.g. *SageWoman*) with both the nubile young woman and the athletic, naked 'crone'. Gender-mixed publications primarily depict the first of these. So, while many pagans valorise 'the body' in terms of 'sacred sexuality', a number of women, and men as well, question the insertion of images and discourses of the 'perfect body' which only relate to conventional heterosexuality. Recently, on a nature religions scholars email list, a number of women expressed both irritation and concern over the image of the perfect (female) teenage 'witches' in the media. While pagans pay lip-service to 'anti-ageism' as well as 'antisexism', there are few signs that this is generally practised, not simply preached. (A 'joke' about women's body types on the aforesaid list raised some ire—exemplifying this.) Questions of ability and disability are similarly problematic: pagans with disabilities have pointed to problematic assumptions about ways in which they 'should' live, and their relationships with earth. The turning of the seasons or the approach of summer may mean something 'different' to someone who is confined to an apartment and who cannot see a tree from her window.

Sexualities are contested within a number of traditions: Gay heathen shamanic practitioner Jordsvin says that many areas of the heathen community need some education in this matter (Blain and Wallis, In Press). Yet such images also persist in popular concepts of Wicca and some other 'traditions'. Concepts of 'Goddess and God', whether presented as dualism or duality, may be empowering for some practitioners, but disempowering for those who do not see their sexualities reflected. It still happens that gay pagans raising this issue for debate may be accused of 'flaunting' their 'difference'. Pagan communities vary enormously in their awareness of complex interrelationships of body, sexuality, and identity. The 'race issue' evident within some paganisms, and discussed by Gallagher (1999), provides another example. Specific pagans adopt specific stances within prevalent discourses of 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'identity'; however, these stances may act to obscure complexity and essentialise difference, by removing political and historical process so that (for instance) 'being Celtic' becomes a matter of 'bloodline' (Blain, 2000).

> **... the extraordinary is a development of everyday practice, shamanisms ... are culturally rooted, embodied in and by their practitioners ... 'Ordinary' and 'extraordinary' ... inform and transform each other.**

PAGANS AND THE GREENWOOD: IMAGINAL POINTS OF CONNECTION

Graham Harvey (1997) talks about how the Greenwood enters practitioners' discourse. Perhaps in North America 'wilderness' is a more appropriate term. The Greenwood is not only the actuality of forest, grove, or 'where wild things are', but the concept(s) of what this represents for pagans today: places where they can go physically or spiritually to refresh 'self' and to connect with 'nature'. Such places give points of entry that different practitioners can use, and hence ways in which they can access not only the realities of other pagans, but of the other beings within the Greenwood. Cathbad's potted plant, in this sense, is part of the Greenwood. Pagans celebrate the Greenwood not primarily in its creation (as product of an abstract relationship to a transcendent being), but in its existence, continuity of a network of social relationships, dynamic patternings of trees and rocks, plants, and those who eat them, predators and prey, *continuation,* and the cycle of life. Pollution is not merely an eyesore or a problem of resource management, but a disruption to the relationships and networks of being.

People have modified their environments from early times: carving, painting, mining, removing, building, planting and harvesting. Some pagans apply a kind of 'seven generation' rule which they have acquired from accounts of Aboriginal North American spirituality. Others differentiate between the resource uses of a rather nebulous 'past' and those of today. They reason that today's scientific awareness of ecology—combined with the sheer numbers of people, the amount of resource use and misuse, and the damage that can be done swiftly—places responsibility on the scientific community, on industrial and political establishments, and on the general public, notably pagans, to act as watchdogs.

Others rationalise that they will do what they can, but that they, as people living within present-day society, also need to eat: tension is apparent between discourse and practice, even in the act of driving out to 'the land' to spend time in relationships with trees and 'nature'. While some pagans have explicitly 'opted out' into a rural existence that is as self-sufficient as can be, often without electricity, most retain their attachment to city life, and in particular to communications technology and the internet. A typical day for many pagans or heathens includes spending some time talking with other pagans electronically. These internet conversations may encompass many areas of life, including ritual, politics, and the Greenwood.

CONCLUSION: PAGANISMS AND NARRATIVES OF THE EVERYDAY

Discourse and narrative analysis attempts to examine how people speak of their daily lives in order to understand how they use social discourses and processes in creating their

A recent trip to Avebury ... showed a collection of ritual litter, primarily candles and wax, that indicated that whatever was foremost in the minds of those who had performed their rituals ... it was not environmental care ...

understanding of these lives. In my work concerning paganisms and shamanisms, I am attempting an integrative understanding of people's constructions of meaning and identity within practices and discourses that they identify as central to their being. In doing this, I acknowledge my own location within the web of meanings. I am a heathen shamanistic practitioner, with links to practices, places and people on two continents, who in my everyday research work is privileged to talk with numerous others about those relations and concepts that to me seem to matter.

This paper stems from my location and understanding, but is not, I believe, limited to my own situated knowledges. George Marcus points out that the challenge of postmodernism's critique of ethnography is leading to a re-emergence of comparison, not in the older sense of direct (controlled) comparing of points or categories, but as juxtaposition which emerges from:

> ... putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account which has different, complexly connected, real-world sites of investigation (Marcus, 1998:186).

Paganisms or earth-religions today are multiply situated, and I have the multiple task of maintaining and preserving the 'voices' and narrative of diverse participants, wherever they are, while juxtaposing their accounts to provide a multivocal display of partial meanings that reflects an approach, an orientation which is constructed within the interviews and the events that I observe. Most of my work appears to be on the extraordinary, shamanic practices which appear exotic to the 'outsider's' gaze. Such practices seem strange, different, and entrancing, even to many pagans—and, as I've said elsewhere (e.g., Blain and Wallis, forthcoming; Blain, 1999), transform the participant in many ways. But the extraordinary is a development of everyday practice. Shamanisms (as opposed to the western abstraction of 'shamanism' as 'primordial' religion) are culturally rooted, embodied in and by their practitioners, emergent from relationships and practices of daily life, and changing with socio/economic and cutural/political relations. 'Ordinary' and 'extraordinary', therefore, inform and transform each other.

The focus on the everyday, in this paper, therefore serves as a reminder that today's pagan spiritualities are developed in the context of everyday, as well as extraordinary, relationships. Everyday activities arise from possibly-contested community and individual understandings of potential, resources, capabilities and relationships. The everyday, the personal, is indeed political. Practices, however developed, have to make sense in the daily lives of their practitioners, and concepts of body, spirit, Greenwood, and 'nature' are constituted and linked by the simplest of actions.

These everyday lives are contested and political: processes of gender, 'race', and sexuality are situated and constituted in daily practice, within the institutional practices and mediated discourses of postmodernity. The mere label, 'Paganism', is not a guide to political practice, nor is it a guarantee of environmental 'friendliness'. A recent trip to Avebury, on a winter full-moon, showed a collection of ritual litter, primarily candles and wax, that indicated that whatever was foremost in the minds of those who had performed their rituals around specific stones of this great circle the night before, it was not environmental care—at least not in any way that envisaged practitioners' own actions as potentially causing problems. Other pagans will warn about damage to sites, offence to earth spirits. One person's votive offering is another's eyesore. But pagans, of whatever persuasion, are likely to see themselves, and other people, as linked with earth or the beings of earth; their concepts of 'self' include relationships they construct with the 'imaginal' that they describe as 'empowering' or affirming—whatever these are, however they are phrased.

Is it too much to hope that paganisms can encourage perceptions of complexity, and discourage essentialisms? '*What is Nature?*' asked Summer. '*Does nature include us?*' How does awareness of Earth relate to complex arguments about resource use, pollution, and so forth?

Contestations abound in this area, as in others. Paganism is not a unified movement: no college decrees discourse and practice, no leader issues dictates. People create their ways of being pagan, from observation, example, insertion into practices, reading, and other resources—but most of all from their experiences and everyday understandings of themselves in relation to Earth, spirits, and other people and beings. As a result, to many pagans, trees are real people, and magic is in the everyday.

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The Many Faces of Kali

by David Nelson

In recent years the spiritual consciousness of the Western world has seen a resurgence of The Goddess, in large part due to the efforts of Neopagans and feminists in reclaiming traditions. In contrast, the Goddess's experience in the East has been markedly different, particularly in the paleopagan religion known as Hinduism. For Hindus, the veneration of female deities is an uninterrupted, living tradition stretching back thousands of years.

Among the Hindu goddesses, Kali is one of the most powerful. How her present identity evolved over more than two millennia should prove instructive to those who would resuscitate Western goddesses after centuries of dormancy. Moreover, Kali's recent transplantation to new environments in the West, outside her original cultural boundaries, creates the possibility of unforeseen changes and opportunities for the Hindu goddess.

In her Indian temples, Kali is worshiped daily from predawn until evening darkness. The black goddess is awakened, bathed, fed, adored by her devotees, and prayed to throughout the day and additionally on the night of the dark moon (*amavasya*). The single most important and elaborate amavasya worship (*puja*) falls in the lunar month corresponding to October or November in the Western calendar. This Night of Kali occurs near the time of Samhain, the Celtic sabbat when the veil between the worlds is thinnest, and that is fitting, since Kali is, among many things, the goddess of death.

Written at the end of the 19th century, Swami Vivekananda's poem, "Kali the Mother," evokes the Night of Kali as a time of pitchy darkness that blots out the stars, while on every side, "a thousand, thousand shades of Death begrimed and black" scatters plagues and sorrows in a mad, joyful dance. In the poet's awesome vision, Terror is the goddess' name, Death is in her breath, and destruction follows every footfall, for she is the relentless power of all-consuming Time.

Little of this characterization would pass in the West as conventional religious sentiment, for Kali is Nature in her raw, exuberant power. The Hindus call this power Mother. To the Western mind, Mother Nature more often evokes visions of abundant harvests, forests teeming with wildlife, majestic mountains and inspiring sunsets; only when she goes on a rampage in the form of a natural disaster do we remember and fear her other side. Goddess-worshiping Hindus, called *Shaktas,* are more likely to recognize her auspicious and destructive aspects in equal measure.

Like the Shaktas, Western Pagans also regard life and death as complementary and inseparable arcs in the circle of existence. They acknowledge a triple goddess, characterized as maiden, mother and crone, who reflects the cyclical nature of the world: that everything has a beginning, a middle, an end, and a new beginning. Similarly, for the Shakta Hindu, Kali is a powerful and complex goddess with multiple forms. In many household shrines she is worshiped as the gentle *Shyama,* who dispels fear and grants boons. In times of natural disaster she is invoked as the protective *Rakshakali.* As *Shmashanakali* she embodies destructive power and is said to haunt the cremation ground in the company of howling jackals and terrifying female spirits. At the magnificent Dakshineswar Temple in Calcutta, she is revered as the beautiful *Bhavatarini,* Redeemer of the Universe. And as *Mahakali,* the Great Kali, she is the formless Shakti, the immanent primordial power who is not different from the transcendental Absolute.

Kali's followers regard her as the eternal reality in its dynamic mode—the creative, sustaining and destructive energy in and through all things. Philosophically speaking, she has no beginning. As for when her specific forms first entered human consciousness and human history, we simply do not know. Only a few clues survive from the Indian past.

> … as manifestations of the divine creative ideation, we are created in the divine image. At the same time, we carry that same creative consciousness within and use it to create our own images of divinity according to our needs or understanding.

Study of the early history of India is a highly contentious field. Much of the past is irretrievably lost, and attempts to assemble the surviving fragments are all too often colored by feelings of nationalism, ethnic pride, religious belief, lingering resentment of colonialism, and the legacy of the pioneering European scholars who all too often injected their own Judeo-Christian prejudices and view of history into an area where they clearly do not belong. Today, wildly conflicting theories abound, and even the best are not without serious anomalies, because at present there is simply no way to make sense of all the data at hand.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that Indian religion, throughout its long history, has always consisted of two intertwining strands, the *Vedic* and the *Tantric.* The Vedic, or orthodox, strand stems from the *Vedas,* India's oldest surviving sacred texts. Composed in Sanskrit, the Vedic hymns are in large part nature poetry written by people overwhelmed by the beauty and power of surrounding nature, which they personified and deified as a pantheon of gods and goddesses. Four thousand years later, the dazzling imagery of the hymns still conveys the poets' ecstatic response to a world in which everything was seen as divine. The Tantric strand includes everything that is not Vedic. Its origins may be traced to the magical or fertility cults of pre- or non-Vedic peoples. It is entirely possible that Tantra is the surviving Goddess religion of the ancient Indus Valley civilization, with a later admixture of folk magic and tribal shamanism.

As long as Tantric and Vedic religion have coexisted on Indian soil, they have influenced each other. The earliest Vedic hymns are tinged with Tantric elements, and at the heart of Tantra lies the sublime metaphysical philosophy of the *Upanishads,* which forms the culmination of Vedic thought. This is the cultural matrix from which Kali emerged—a world of Goddess cults, magic, sacrificial rites, the deification of natural forces, and lofty speculation over the nature of reality. In ancient India, as in most of the ancient world, multiple religious cults coexisted more or less peacefully.

There is some archeological and textual

evidence that Vedic peoples inhabited parts of the Indus Valley as early as the 3rd millennium BCE. At Kalibangan, one of the most ancient cities, archeologists discovered what appears to be a series of seven Vedic fire altars, while years of excavation at the same site have yielded a grand total of two goddess figurines. In contrast, the contemporaneous cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa were centers of thriving goddess cults, attested by the recovery of thousands of goddess images from the ruins.

After a series of natural disasters initiated the gradual collapse of the Indus Valley civilization around 1900 BCE, the great cities were abandoned. The massive displacement and relocation of entire populations led to widespread cultural cross-fertilization, documented in later Vedic texts, particularly in the Brahmanas, which introduce a large number of new goddesses and witness the coalescence of multiple deities with similar attributes into single gods or goddesses. The difficulty in tracing the origins of the non-Vedic or non-Aryan deities is that upon absorption into the Vedic pantheon, they were given Sanskrit names.

Kali is thought to have originated as a tribal goddess indigenous to one of India's inaccessible mountainous regions. The *Matsyapurana* gives her place of origin as Mount Kalanjara in north central India, east of the Indus Valley floodplain. But owing to the late date of the Puranas' composition, this evidence regarding Kali's place of origin cannot be taken as particularly reliable.

> … the strong contemplative focus of the Vedanta Society, combined with many Westerners' early impressions that a church or temple is a place of quiet reverence, accounts for this Kali Puja's relative restraint.

At least thousand years before the Matsyapurana, the name of Kali first appears in Sanskrit literature between the 8th and 5th centuries BCE. The reference (in *Mundakopanishad* 1.2.4) names Kali as one of the seven quivering tongues of the fire god Agni, whose flames devour sacrificial oblations and transmit them to the gods. The verse characterizes Agni's seven tongues as black, terrifying, swift as thought, intensely red, smoky colored, sparkling, and radiant. Significantly, the first two adjectives—*kali* and *karali*—"black" and "terrifying," recur in later texts to describe the horrific aspect of the goddess. Karali additionally means "having a gaping mouth and protruding teeth." This verse scarcely suffices to confirm that Kali was a personified goddess during the age of the Upanishads, but it is noteworthy that the adjective that became her name was used to characterize an aspect of the fire god's power. Just as fire dissolves matter into energy, the goddess Kali dissolves the material universe into undifferentiated being at the end of a cosmic cycle.

Kali first appears unequivocally as a goddess in the *Kathaka Grihyasutra,* a ritualistic text that names her in a list of Vedic deities to be invoked with offerings of perfume during the marriage ceremony. Unfortunately, the text reveals nothing more about her.

During the epic period, some time after the 5th century BCE, Kali emerges better defined in an episode of the *Mahabharata.* When the camp of the heroic Pandava brothers is attacked one night by the sword-wielding Asvatthaman, his deadly assault is seen as the work of "Kali of bloody mouth and eyes, smeared with blood and adorned with garlands, her garment reddened—holding noose in hand—binding men and horses and elephants with her terrible snares of death" (Mahabharata 10.8.64-65). Although the passage goes on to describe the slaughter as an act of human warfare, it makes clear that the fierce goddess is ultimately the agent of death who carries off those who are slain.

Kali next appears in the sacred literature during the Puranic age, when new theistic devotional sects displaced the older Brahmanical form of Hinduism. In the 4th and 5th centuries CE the Puranas were written to glorify the great deities Vishnu, Shiva and the Devi—the Goddess—as well as lesser gods. One such Purana, the *Markandeya,* contains within it the foundational text of all subsequent Hindu Goddess religion. This book within a book is known as the *Devimahatmya,* the *Shri Durga Saptashati,* or the *Chandi.*

The Devimahatmya's 7th chapter describes Kali springing forth from the furrowed brow of the goddess Durga in order to slay the demons Chanda and Munda. Here, Kali's horrific form has black, loosely hanging, emaciated flesh that barely conceals her angular bones. Gleaming white fangs protrude from her gaping, blood-stained mouth, framing her lolling red tongue. Sunken, reddened eyes peer out from her black face. She is clad in a tiger's skin and carries a *khatvanga,* a skull-topped staff traditionally associated with tribal shamans and magicians. The khatvanga is a clear reminder of Kali's origin among fierce, aboriginal peoples. In the ensuing battle, much attention is placed on her gaping mouth and gnashing teeth, which devour the demon hordes. At one point Munda hurls thousands of discusses at her, but they enter her mouth "as so many solar orbs vanishing into the denseness of a cloud" (Devimahatmya 7.18). With its cosmic allusion, this passage reveals Kali as the abstraction of primal energy and suggests the underlying connection between the black goddess and Kala ('time'), an epithet of Shiva. Kali is the inherent power of ever-turning time, the relentless devourer that brings all created things to an end. Even the gods are said to have their origin and dissolution in her.

The 8th chapter of the Devimahatmya paints an even more gruesome portrait. Having slain Chanda and Munda, Kali is now called Chamunda, and she faces an infinitely more powerful adversary in the demon named Raktabija. Whenever a drop of his blood falls to earth, an identical demon springs up. When utter terror seizes the gods, Durga merely laughs and instructs Kali to drink in the drops of blood. While Durga assaults Raktabija so that his blood runs copiously, Kali avidly laps it up. The demons who spring into being from the flow perish between her gnashing teeth until Raktabija topples drained and lifeless to the ground.

Although the Puranas and earlier Sanskrit texts characterize Kali as a hideous, frightening crone who deals death and destruction, her victims symbolize the forces of ignorance and evil, making her in fact a force for good. But later on, secular texts of the medieval period, not always sympathetic to the goddess, paint a lurid and truly horrifying picture of Kali as exacting and receiving human sacrifice.

IN THE 17th CENTURY, Kali's characterization underwent a radical change. As popularized by the Bengali Tantric, Krishnananda Agamavagisha, Kali retains little of her former fierceness. Agamavagisha's *Tantrasara*

[Essence of Tantra] describes several of her innumerable forms, among them Dakshinakali, who fits the standard, present-day idea of the goddess. Dakshinakali has a terrifying appearance, but the cronelike emaciation of the Puranas has given way to voluptuous beauty. And behind every detail of the perhaps unsettling Tantric iconography lies a cosmological abstraction or a lofty spiritual principle.

Kali has a fierce but smiling face. Her red tongue, protruding from her gaping mouth is taken either as a sign of modesty or of her thirst for blood. (Even today goats are sacrificed in most Kali temples, perpetuating ancient ritual practices.) Her untamed hair hints at unrestrained power and boundless freedom. Alternatively, it may symbolize the mystery of death that encircles life (Mookerjee 1985: 128) or the veil of illusion, made of the fabric of space-time (Bandopadhyay 1995: 79). Her three eyes represent omniscience, for she sees past, present and future. The garland of severed heads around her neck represents the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, a Tantric metaphor for creative power. Encircling her waist, a girdle of severed arms indicates that she severs the bonds of karma and frees us from the bondage of accumulated deeds. Her full breasts symbolize nurturance. Her nakedness signifies freedom from the veils of illusion, and her dark skin alludes to the infinitude of the blue-black night sky.

Kali's paradoxical combination of maternal tenderness and destructive terror appears polarized on right and left. Her lower right hand is held in the varada mudra, extended to offer a boon. One of her greatest boons is fearlessness, indicated by her upper right hand, held in the *abhaya* mudra, upright with the palm outward. Her upper left hand brandishes a bloodied curving sword, and her lower left hand dangles a freshly severed head. Behind these apparent symbols of destruction lies a different story. The sword symbolizes the higher knowledge that cuts through appearances and reveals things as they really are. The severed head represents the human ego, the limiting sense of I-me-and-mine that she slays. Together Kali's four hands seem to say, "Take refuge in me, let go of your existential fear, let me slay your illusion of smallness and separation, and you will merge into my infinite bliss."

Kali haunts the cremation ground, and she is often pictured standing on the chest of the ashen white Shiva, who lies still as a corpse. In some images Shiva is ithyphallic and engages with Kali in a form of sexual intercourse called *viparitarati* or *purushayita.* In this position the female is on top, taking the active role. This inversion sends a message of the Mother Goddess's supremacy. According to Shakta and Tantric cosmology, it is the feminine power that creates, sustains and dissolves the universe while the masculine principle is the static substratum. The sexual union of Shiva and Shakti graphically illustrates that ultimately the two are one, beyond all duality.

That monistic principle found eloquent expression in the poetry of Ramprasad, the greatest of Kali's mystical poets, who lived in the 18th century. After a lifetime of extolling his beloved goddess in human terms as gentle, elusive, playful, or mad, and in cosmic imagery as the all-pervading creative and destructive power, on his final day Ramprasad wrote that at last he understood the supreme mystery that Kali is one with the highest Brahman. Enlightenment brought him to the ultimate consciousness beyond all duality.

Because of the Bengali devotional poets of the 18th century, Kali's human and maternal qualities continue to define the goddess for most of her Indian devotees to this day. In human relationships, the love between mother and child is usually considered the purest and strongest. In the same way, the love between the Mother Goddess and her human children is considered the closest and tenderest relationship with divinity. Accordingly, Kali's Indian devotees form a particularly intimate and loving bond with her.

> … Indian religion … has always consisted of two intertwining strands, the Vedic and the Tantric. …Tantra [may be] the surviving Goddess religion of the ancient Indus Valley civilization, with a later admixture of folk magic and tribal shamanism.

Kali's Indian experience reveals that an originally fierce tribal goddess gradually assumed universal characteristics, including those of beneficence and motherhood, and eventually became identified with the cosmic creative energy and the nondual ultimate reality. What will be her developmental trajectory in cultural and religious contexts outside of India?

The experiences of some other deities or semidivine figures who left the confines of their original culture provide a frame of reference or at least grounds for speculation. Isis, the most powerful and beloved Egyptian goddess for more than three thousand years, saw her worship spread throughout the Mediterranean world after Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, but even in the broader Hellenistic world she remained the tender mother, redemptive savior and immensely powerful queen of heaven until her cult was absorbed by Christianity in the 4th century. In contrast, when the boddhisattva Avalokiteshvara traveled from India to China, his defining characteristic of compassion struck the Chinese mind as feminine, and gradually he was transformed into Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy. In the transition from Judaism to Christianity, a flesh-and-blood prophet named Yeshua became the cosmic redeemer, Jesus Christ. Like Isis, Avalokiteshvara and Yeshua were refashioned to meet their new followers' needs or expectations.

Nevertheless, in crossing borders Isis, Avalokiteshvara and Yeshua all experienced changes in iconography. For thirty centuries depictions of Isis had conformed to the stylistic conventions of Egyptian art, but her Greco-Roman sculptures are realistic in style and devoid of the distinguishing features seen in Egyptian representations. In China the Indian Avalokiteshvara assumed Chinese racial characteristics. Depending on where in the world Jesus is portrayed, he appears as Asian, African, Nordic or Mediterranean. That raises a question: Are we created in God's image, or do we create our gods in our own image?

The question is basically that of the old conundrum. Chickens come from eggs and eggs come from chickens—both facts are observable at different places in the cycle of existence. To seek proof, linear style, that one came first is absurd. It engenders a paradigm of either/or dogmatism that shatters the wholeness of the circle. Simply put, as manifestations of the divine creative ideation, we are created in the divine image. At the same time, we carry that same creative conscious-

ness within and use it to create our own images of divinity according to our needs or understanding. Ultimately, in the wholeness of the circle, we and divinity are one.

REGARDING KALI'S PRESENCE in the West, observing her in several settings will indicate whether or how the Hindu goddess has been altered in consideration of new situations or the expectations of new followers outside of India.

> The goal [of Tantra] is the ultimate freedom of unitary consciousness, which transcends the polarized concepts of spirit and matter, male and female, purity and impurity, and all other dualities.

The Vedanta Societies in America are affiliated with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, headquartered in Calcutta. Vedanta arrived in the West in 1893 with Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu delegate to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Vivekananda was a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, who spent the better part of his life as a priest of Kali at the Dakshineswar Temple.

For several decades, the Vedanta Society's Hollywood temple was the only place in the United States where a full-scale Kali Puja was held annually, complete with a sculptured image, on the amavasya night in October or November. Strings of red lights customarily outline the temple dome and windows, bespeaking festivity. Inside, the shrine is a blaze of light and activity, while the Swamis chant mantras and adorn the image of the black goddess with flower garlands, jewelry, perfumes and silken finery. Clouds of incense mingle the fragrance of sandalwood with the aromas of lavish food offerings, while music and the ringing of bells fill the air. The ritual passes through several phases, and in the dead of night come quiet moments of hushed mystery. At ritual's end, the sounds of bells, drums, gongs and raucous conches erupt, followed by a predawn feast.

The puja is conducted in most respects as in India, with some practical concessions. The constraints of time do not allow for worshipers to approach the shrine individually with offerings of fruits, flowers and sweets, and this participatory phase is omitted. The other difference lies in the demeanor of the worshipers. In Indian temples there is a constant buzz of conversation along with rousing devotional singing, hand clapping and the voluble expression of religious feeling, as if the devotees' enthusiasm will win the deity's attention. In contrast, at the Vedanta Society, devotional music is more often performed by a solo singer while the devotees sit silently in meditation. Possibly the strong contemplative focus of the Vedanta Society, combined with many Westerners' early impressions that a church or temple is a place of quiet reverence, accounts for this Kali Puja's relative restraint.

Following the change of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, an influx of Indians to America began to change the face of the Vedanta Societies, which until then had been overwhelmingly Western in membership. The resulting Indianization means a strengthening of the outward cultural expressions of Hinduism. Today the Southern California Kali Puja has an increasingly authentic Indian flavor, even to the serving of goat curry, made from a specially raised and ritually slaughtered animal.

The most authentic experience of Kali Puja in the United States can be had in Laguna Beach, California, at Kali Mandir. This organization was founded in the 1990s by Elizabeth Usha Harding, a member of the Vedanta Society. Here Kali is worshiped daily in the traditional manner and monthly on the dark moon night.

Once every summer, a special two-day Puja is conducted by Sri Haradhan Chakraborti, the head priest of the Dakshineswar Temple in Calcutta and a member of Sri Ramakrishna's family. The image in the Kali Mandir shrine is modeled after the benevolent Bhavatarini, worshiped at Dakshineswar; accordingly, the Laguna Beach Kali is named Ma Dakshineswari.

The puja, lasting for about sixteen hours on the first day and another nine hours on the second, is an exuberant occasion with almost constant, overlapping sounds of ringing bells, Sanskrit chanting, and devotional singing in the traditional call-and-response format by kirtan groups and devotees. As in India, devotees purchase offering baskets and take them to the assistant priest, who offers them to Kali Ma, returns them as sanctified prasad, and marks the devotees' foreheads with vermillion. The many hours of ritual are too long and varied to describe here, but what comes across is the participatory nature of the occasion and the open expression of spiritual fervor.

Theologically, the understanding of Kali at the Vedanta Societies and Kali Mandir is identical, conforming to the Bengali view, as defined by the Shakta poets of the 18th century and as taught by Sri Ramakrishna in the 19th. The only difference between the two groups is one of emphasis. In the private spiritual lives of most members of the Vedanta Society, Kali remains peripheral. At Kali Mandir, she is central. In both settings, like the Greco-Roman Isis before her, Kali withstands major alterations when her traditional forms of worship are carried out on foreign soil.

Kali finds a somewhat different home at Kashi Ashram in Florida, or wherever else people gather around the highly respected—if controversial—Brooklyn-born guru named Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati. For Kashi Ashram, a nondenominational, interfaith foundation established in the late 1970s, the defining moment came in the early 1980s with the arrival of a then unnamed disease. Because the shadow of AIDS is an ever present reality for many of Ma Jaya's followers, death has particular immediacy at Kashi. Fittingly Kali, the goddess of death who haunts the cremation ground, came to occupy the central place in the interfaith pantheon.

In a setting that respects all religions and draws on the practices of several, Kali remains overwhelmingly authentic, with certain facets of her personality merely emphasized or deemphasized to suit the radically different circumstances of her new followers and surroundings. She is both the maternal goddess praised by Ramprasad and the fierce devourer of the Devimahatmya. Her unconditional love promises her devotees dignity and acceptance regardless of sexual orientation, race, and economic or social standing. Ma Jaya's insistence on service embodies the true Hindu and Buddhist ideal of compassion. It is not enough to feel sympathy for the less fortunate; real compassion means doing something about it.

Kali's intense blackness represents her ability to absorb all the evil and suffering in the world. Like the fierce Camunda Kali of the Devimahatmya, who consumes the flow of Raktabija's demonic blood, Kali consumes

whatever pain and evil is offered to her, while bestowing fearlessness even to those for whom death is imminent. At Kashi the word death signifies not only physical death but also the death of the ego, the finitizing principle that causes the true self within, which is infinite consciousness, to assume all the separateness and limitation of I-me-and-mine. Referring to both kinds of death, Ma Jaya asks, "If you are unready to die, how will you ever be ready to live?" (Bhagavati 1995: 122). The realization that reality is gloriously paradoxical has distinguished the religion of Kali throughout the ages. Though expressed at Kashi Ashram in nontraditional language, the frequent acknowledgement of Kali's paradoxical fierceness and beauty indicates that Hindu Tantra remains true to its essence in this unlikely setting, far removed in time and space from its original home. At Kashi Ashram the Tantric goddess remains fundamentally intact.

Tantric religion is most broadly defined as a complex of ancient magical and folk practices outside the Vedic sphere and more specifically as an esoteric system of spiritual discipline (*sadhana*). Philosophically nondualistic, Tantra views the world as a projection of divine energy and material nature as a transformation of the female creative principle. As a spiritual discipline, Tantra is a rigorous path involving the cultivation of inner and outer purity, control of the mind, meditation, and dedication to a chosen deity. The goal is the ultimate freedom of unitary consciousness, which transcends the polarized concepts of spirit and matter, male and female, purity and impurity, and all other dualities.

While some Hindu sects see the physical body and the restless, desiring mind as entrapping the spirit, Tantra accepts that, paradoxically, the instruments used to overcome the limitations of body, mind and intellect are the body, mind and intellect themselves. India's Tantric sects are many and diverse, and because their practices are by and large secret to all but initiates, Tantra has been consistently misunderstood and misrepresented. Throughout the centuries it has been sensationalized by critics who indulge in lurid speculation about what goes on behind closed doors. It is only human nature to imagine the worst.

The most infamous practice is the circle ritual, the *chakrasadhana* or *chakrapuja,* which involves the *panchamakara* or "five M's": *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *madya* (alcohol), *mudra* (parched grain) and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse). The meaning of mudra or parched grain is uncertain, but it probably refers to a hallucinogenic substance like ergot. Since these five elements are impure or illicit within the socioreligious context of Hindu orthodoxy, indulgence in any of them transgresses the purity code. Exposure results in feelings of shame, disgust or fear (Kripal 1995: 30-32).

All Tantric sects can be classified as either left-handed or right-handed. Followers of the left-handed vamachara path physically partake of the five M's in the the chakrasadhana ritual and are often branded as degenerates by other Hindus. The more respectable adepts of the right-handed dakshinachara path interpret the ritual symbolically and perform it either mentally or with nonpolluting substitutes for the forbidden elements. Similarly, some Wiccans physically enact the Great Rite through the sexual union of priest and priestess, but in most circles the Great Rite is celebrated symbolically by the lowering of the athame into the chalice.

The real purpose of the panchamakara is not to shock a prudish public, but to break through the social conditioning that can be a mental straightjacket to the spiritual aspirant. For a Hindu the violation of dietary or behavioral taboos, either symbolically or actually, is one way to overturn the neat and tidy preconceptions of social rigidity and be jolted into an altered state of awareness. Obviously, in other societies the concepts of propriety may differ, but in every case their violation results in the same old shame, disgust and fear. It goes without saying that Tantra, especially the left-handed variety, can be a dangerous course. There is a fine line between rising above duality and falling prey to the delusion that religious attainment puts one above the moral law.

Thus, Indian Tantra is not an invitation to license, and it has nothing to do with the New Age Tantra of the West, which is a slickly marketed package of incense, candlelight and naked bodies gently writhing in soft focus. This New Age phenomenon is generally aimed at enhancing sexual pleasure while cloaking it under the mantle of religion. One example of this is a 'Tantric Massage Video' for sale to adults only. Under the title a line of smaller print reads "formerly titled 'Erotic Massage Video.'" Possibly these kinds of products derive in part from the Kama Sutra, which is a classic Hindu treatise on love and sex, but the Kama Sutra is not a Tantric text but an *arthashastra,* a book pertaining to practical life. The purpose of Hindu Tantra is to break through the barriers of nescience in order to attain spiritual union with the divine, not to have longer and stronger orgasms.

> Many Shakta Hindus agree with feminists that deity was originally conceived of as a mother goddess, but they would disagree with feminist writers … who attempt to force the sweeping epic of Indian history into a framework coming from outside their cultural tradition.

Another Western phenomenon is the rise of feminist spirituality, or more correctly, feminist spiritualities, which are still developing and reach across a wide spectrum of attitudes and objectives. At one end are the reformers: women and sympathetic men who work within established religious traditions, usually Christian or Jewish but also Muslim and Buddhist, in order to neutralize gender bias and win the just acknowledgement of female contributions to the tradition throughout its history. At the other end are the radicals: women who refashion existing beliefs, practices and myths or create new ones to fit their own political and social agendas.

Western feminists have attempted to politicize Kali by relating her to the feminist foundational myth. According to that myth, the history of the world goes something like this: Once upon a time, matriarchy was humankind's natural state, and the original religion was a form of nature-based polytheism that related everything to the Great Mother. At the end of the Paleolithic Age a paradigm shift occurred as Goddess worshipers in Egypt and Crete began directing their gaze heavenward. As the center of power shifted from the Earth Mother to the Sun God, the dominant symbol of divinity became male. Kings arose who ruled by divine right, and the feminine half of creation was subjugated to male narcissism, greed and abuse of power while the

world went to hell (Woodman and Dickson 1996: 204-205).

The interesting thing about this myth is how closely it parallels the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve, which also posits a former golden age before our present fallen state. Ironically, in attempting to overthrow the old order, many feminists are mimicking the thinking of their oppressors. And whenever the myth is accepted uncritically as dogma, feminist spirituality runs the risk of becoming another faith-based system with the same old linear thought processes. (The parallel between feminist and Judeo-Christian myth is discussed at length in John Michael Greer's "Myth, History and Pagan Origins," *Pomegranate* 9, August 1999.)

Many Shakta Hindus agree with feminists that deity was originally conceived of as a mother goddess, but they would disagree with feminist writers (eg, Kathleen Alexander-Berghorn, Hallie Iglehart Austen, Paulette Boudreaux, Buffie Johnson, Monica Sjoo, Barbara Mor, and Barbara G. Walker) who attempt to force the sweeping epic of Indian history into a framework coming from outside their cultural tradition.

According to the feminist rewriting of Indian history, at some point in time patriarchal Aryan invaders conquered the matriarchal Indus Valley, whereupon Kali's paradoxical wholeness of beneficence and terror was split into dualism by "an act characteristic of patriarchal consciousness." Thereafter demonic manifestations of Kali and other goddesses became a regular feature within the formerly matriarchal culture (McDermott 1996: 287).

> … the Kali of Western feminists is not the universal goddess and Divine Mother with whom adoring Shakta Hindus seek transcendental union. …It is not that Western feminists have changed Kali but that they have thus far embraced only a small part of her, failing to understand her immensity.

Every point in this revisionist scenario is easily refuted. First, there is no evidence that the peaceful Indus Valley civilization was ever matriarchal. Skeletal and dental remains indicate that the social organization there conformed to a cultural pattern of gender inequality called "son preference/daughter neglect," which is still observed in rural northern India today (Lukacs 1994: 150-152). Next, abundant archeological evidence from the Indus Valley cities and older Neolithic sites confirms that pre-Aryan India venerated its goddesses as well as its male gods in both auspicious and horrific forms. This is not regarded by Hindus as a sign of patriarchal dualism but as the simple recognition that divinity, though ultimately an undifferentiated unity, manifests in the bipolar phenomenal universe in polarized forms. As for the religion of the Aryans, their own sacred texts are the best source of information. The Rigveda describes a wholly evil and greatly feared goddess of death and destruction named Nirriti—Sanskrit for "decay"—who predates the first mention of Kali by a thousand years. At the same time, the earliest portions of the Rigveda extol a great mother goddess. Her name, Aditi, means "not divided" and clearly indicates that the Aryans equated the supreme female divinity with wholeness. Finally, the earliest Aryan reference to Kali as a personified goddess places her in the company of the high-ranking Vedic gods to be worshiped during the marriage ritual. So much for the supposed Aryan dualization and demonization of Kali.

Turning from revisionism to pragmatism, feminist spirituality devotes considerable attention to multiple forms of the Goddess, mostly drawn from ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern pantheons. The aim is generally not to revive old forms of cultic adoration so much as to employ the goddesses as archetypes for psychological healing and spiritual wholeness. Here Kali enjoys a small but significant presence.

In the book *Dancing in the Flames,* Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson look at Kali through the lens of Jungian psychology and see her primarily as a transformer. They conclude that true transformation lies in the death of the ego and in releasing all the false values that the ego clings to out of fear.

As praxis they prescribe confronting Kali's blackness, visualized as a vortex from which all creation emerges and to which it returns. In this whirling cosmic dance of perpetual becoming, Kali simultaneously creates and destroys with laughter and abandon, intoxicated with the paradox that death feeds on life and life feeds on death in a ceaseless round. To accept the totality is to be released from fear and vulnerability (Woodman and Dickson 1996: 14-16).

It is necessary to enter the terrifying chaos and spontaneity of our own true nature, to risk madness and become mad like Kali herself in order to "let go of the familiar landscape of our own restrictions." Change and flux, the decay of the old and the birth of the new, are the feminine rhythm. Embracing the Black Goddess will shatter illusions and reveal that the repressed feminine energies once disparaged as weak, irrational, disorganized or supersensitive are powerful tools for transformation (Woodman and Dickson 1996: 179-180). Kali's healing and empowering energy is not just for women, but also for men wounded by "patriarchy's bludgeonings" (Woodman and Dickson 1996: 88).

Of all Kali's Western settings, her place in feminist spirituality is the least traditional and most vulnerable to reconceptualization, but unlike Avalokiteshvara and Yeshua, the powerful Hindu goddess is in all likelihood too strong to be refashioned for the sake of preconceptions or ideological agendas. Nevertheless, the Kali of Western feminists is not the universal goddess and Divine Mother with whom adoring Shakta Hindus seek transcendental union. For the moment she is one archetypal energy among many goddess energies internalized for various aspects of psychological or spiritual empowerment and healing. She is a transformer, limited to the immediate task of self-actualization in the here and now. It is not that Western feminists have changed Kali but that they have thus far embraced only a small part of her, failing to understand her immensity.

Historically, Kali left her dimly remembered origins as a fierce, indigenous tribal goddess some time during the 1st millennium BCE and was absorbed into the Vedic pantheon. Fierceness remained her defining characteristic for another thousand years or more. As late as the 6th century CE, the Devimahatmya characterized her as the terrifying

cosmic devourer who embodied the wrath of the supreme goddess Durga. The Bengali Tantrics of the 18th century, emphasizing Kali's maternal characteristics, completed the cumulative process by elevating her to the position of universal Divine Mother and ultimate, nondual reality.

In Western contexts where Kali's worship is carried out more or less traditionally, she has thus far kept her character intact. She is multifaceted enough to meet a wide variety of her new followers' needs and expectations without the necessity of adding or subtracting attributes or otherwise changing her already rich personality. Moreover, it is more likely that her all-embracing, paradoxically horrific and tender nature will expand Western theological thinking, and not have a diminishing effect on her as a result of the feminists' partial embrace of her powers. Both Ramprasad and Ramakrishna tried to articulate Kali's totality and inexpressible mystery when they declared that she is both the ever changing form and the eternal, formless energy of creation. Through the imagery of their beloved goddess, they reaffirmed India's age-old philosophy of divine immanence and transcendence.

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As staff writer for Pilgrim Planet, a series of television documentaries now in development, he wrote the series' pilot and the first full-length episode on the Dakshineswar Kali Temple.

Urth's Well: A Proposed Northern Cosmology

by Dana Kramer-Rolls

With the growing practice of *seithr* among the various Northern tradition pagans, or heathens as they prefer to be known, it is perhaps time to take a look at the underlying historical texts and folk traditions that structure the understanding of retrieval of knowledge from the Otherworld. The most common ritual setting is the one practiced and taught by Diana Paxson and the Hrafnar Seidhjallr. Preparation for the seers and seekers at public rituals is established through the use of chants (which have become familiar enough to act as keys to trance induction), through invocations to particular deities of the Norse pantheon, and through a pathworking (guided meditation) to one or another particular place in the mythological landscape. While the references in the chants and meditation are most familiar to the practitioners in the Asatru communities, the ambiance of the ritual and its frequent presentation makes it sufficiently accessible to the general pagan community to create a receptive space in which to work.

Seithr is primarily ancestor work in which the *seithr* practitioner is the medium who goes to Hel's hall, the place of the ancestors, to retrieve answers for those who attend. However a technique has been developed in which three seers act as intermediaries to the three Norns. The Norns are addressed at Urth's Well, a place which is described as being the seat of judgement of the gods, although the Norns, who are a trinity of sisters who control or describe fate or fortune, act as the intermediaries in this cosmic law library. The third kind of possessory trance or séance manifests one of the gods of the Norse pantheon. In this case the medium, who is usually well versed in eddic and saga literature, may choose to 'travel' to the address of the requested deity and act as a vessel or 'horse' to allow a direct conversation between the deity and the inquirer. This technique is historically justified by several oblique references in the primary material but the technique used is based on the practices taught by the African Diaspora religions.

The notion of a 'traveling seithr show,' which the Hrafnar trained mediums are now doing, is fully supported by the sagas. Late in the Viking Age and after the general Christian conversion, mediums were still sought, although often the medium is identified as a member of the marginalized tribal peoples, the Sámi, who lived in the northernmost parts of Scandinavia from Norway to Russia and who had a reputation for knowledge of the occult arts. For example, in *Eric's Saga,* Thorbiörg, an itinerant female seer required the assistance of a woman, a Christian girl who had to be persuaded to sing the local traditional songs, to call the ancestors particular to the place before she could aid the community with her occult skills. Thomas DuBois's opinion is that the details of Thorbiörg's ritual garments are, in fact, typical of Sámi and Balto-Finnic shamans (DuBois 1999:124).

In a similar manner today, both individual and community questions are asked of the seer. Service to the community is a hallmark of historical shamanism, in contrast to closed or private circles (such as most Wiccan circles) where psychic practice is primarily kept 'in house.' In short, the *seithr* tradition of today is becoming a genuine shamanic tradition within the Norse pagan community, and at public festivals, for the wider pagan community.

But not everybody 'finds a friend in Odin,'

Service to the community is a hallmark of historical shamanism, in contrast to closed or private circles (such as most Wiccan circles) where psychic practice is primarily kept 'in house'.

to paraphrase a Christian gospel song. *Seithr*-like séances have been conducted using other pantheons and other seminal myths of the Otherworld, but the referent is still the Norse practice. As the popularity and power of this public oracular divination grows, the importance of understanding its roots and implications becomes more important. And as the Norse community grows, certain consensus assumptions are becoming integrated into their religious culture and belief system, ones which may or may not have been critically tested.

While 'gods' are generally a focus of neo-pagan religion, since prayer and worship are familiar to most pagans through family background in the major religions, especially Christianity, neither the importance of fate or the ancestors is well integrated into contemporary Western thought. Also lacking is theological consideration of the spirits of a place, such as a sacred well, mountain or grove. In the spirit of post-modernism it is well to note that the practitioners of *seithr* are themselves coming to this practice with certain post-Christian biases, such as god-centered prayer and unqualified trust in gods. These biases are reified in part by the medieval Scandinavian sources, particularly Snorri Sturluson, which were themselves somewhat removed from the practices which they described, and may ascribe Christian practices and attitudes to their forebearers which cannot be tested, nor should be taken at face value. Fate and ancestors, animal guides and land spirits are seminal to Norse practice in general and oracular practice in particular.

This paper is an attempt to deconstruct the systematic theology which modern heathens inherited from Snorri, and may not well represent either historical Norse pagan practice nor serve the contemporary Norse heathen well, and suggest a new model which is both more coherent with historical Northern shamanic practice and contemporary social and ethical concerns.

The first problem is 'Where is the font of wisdom?' It does not lie in the gods alone. Three wells are cited in various texts: Urth's Well, a 'heavenly' well tended by the Norns Urth and two sisters, Verdandi and Skuld; Mímir's Well, a font of wisdom near the realm of the void, Gennungegap, tended by Mímir, which was supposed to hide Óthin's eye; and Hvergelmir, filled with serpents and located in the primal realm of the Niffelhiem. Of the three, Urth's Well, or as it is more commonly known in English, Wyrd or Weird's Well, has the most overarching significance. Less idiosyncratic than the notion of fate taken as some sort of cosmic lottery, Urth's Well is the font of laws, both natural and civil, which the gods themselves must consult and to which they must yield. Northern literature often incorporates the workings of fate or Wyrd as a primary force, or providence, driving the unfolding narrative.

Mímir's Well has been given increased mythological importance in contemporary Asatru practice by the interest in and devotion to the god Óthin, and by Óthin's mythic relationship to runecraft, which is being widely used as a divinatory and magical tool. It is to this well that mediumistic journeys are made to seek the wisdom of the runes.

I will suggest that there was only one well, not three, underlying pre-Christian Nordic religion, and that the separation of the wells is a cultural artifact based on historical gender roles and the dissociation of early medieval Norse society with traditional shamanism. I will further suggest that the Well at the base of Yggdrasil together with the Tree itself form a powerful metaphor for a way of seeing the world in harmony with nature, with kin (living and dead), and with the gods, and is therefore a useful myth structure today.

Paul Bauschatz argues that the Well or cistern of Urth (*Wyrd* in Old English) encompasses all three of the wells named in various texts, and is the realm of the Otherworld (Bauschatz 1982). He also includes material on burial practice and cultural clues gleaned from Anglo-Saxon literature, particularly *Beowulf*, and linguistic support for his thesis. This Well of Urth is the locus of the *ørlog*, or primal law, as well as a repository of past wisdom. Bauschatz was interested in seeing how Nordic culture saw time, and how the casting of lots or interpreting of runes might be connected to the Well of Urth. He suggests we picture something like a large potted plant, the canopy of the Tree and the trunk being the created nine realms, and the pot containing the Well, and the Otherworld. The denizens of the created world (humans, gods, dwarves, elves, etc.) may keep to themselves for the most part, but are able to move from 'village to village.' On the other hand, the Otherworld of Urth is timeless and eternal.

He then suggests that we picture this potted tree on its side, only now a seer or seeker replaces the canopy, looking down the trunk toward the pot. This is the temporal understanding of the early Germanic people vis-à-vis divination. The seer doesn't look to the future. There is no future, only the present, which is perpetually moving backward as the present is formed. On the other hand, the past is not a static thing but a pattern, the pattern of the *ørlog* as it is continually woven (and remember that the Norns are, like the various other triple fate goddesses, weavers). The Well is able to reveal the emergent pattern of both social and natural occurrences in the ever-unfolding present. The pattern of the past 'predicts' the logical or ethical future.

The legend that describes the cycle of Urth's Well nourishing the Tree, which in turn rains back the water to the Well, is a model for a balanced ecological cosmology. The animals described around the Tree (hart, squirrel, eagle, etc) further this model by pointing out the natural intimacy of animal (over human) life in the balanced world/Otherworld system. Animals are not 'lesser,' as in Christian theology, but by their very natural harmony with the Tree and adherence to the *ørlog* of the Well are closer to the sacred. On the other hand, humans and gods need to apply themselves to achieve this harmonious and 'lawful' balance. All life is therefore interconnected and sacred. The presence of the serpent at the root, who may have originally been a chthonic goddess, suggests natural decay of all created worlds, and is not 'evil,' but a necessary part of the cycle of life and death, as Ragnarok is not the Christian apocalypse, but a description of the transition to a new cycle. This is a holistic model. It is useful to note that all this is in keeping with contemporary evolutionary, geological, and cosmological science.

It is from Snorri Sturluson that we learn of the three wells and nine worlds. Snorri was an ethnologist and folklorist and collected disparate tales. Snorri was a product of the growing scholasticism of the 13th century. He organized his material in a way coherent with the systematic worldview of the Christianity of his time. The degree of organization of his

Norse cosmology is itself suspect since it reflects this very medieval theological and literary notion of order. In addition, duplication is a well-known folkloric device used to establish the importance of a person or event. One dancing princess would do, but why not three, or even nine? As tidy as Snorri's cosmology is, let us try to simplify it to see what emerges.

Probably the earliest text on Urth's Well is from *Volupsá* (19-20). A prose version is found in *Gylfaginning*:

> There stands there one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are Weird [Urth], Verdandi, Skuld. These maidens shape men's lives. We call them norns. There are also other norns to visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin …(15) It is also said that the norns that dwell by Weird's well take water from the well each day and with it the mud that lies round the well and pour it up over the ash so that its branches may not rot, or decay. And this water is so holy that all things that come into that well go as white as the membrane called the skin that lies round inside of an eggshell …(16)

We know from other texts that this 'water' isn't ordinary, but is the metaphysical source for the *log* or laws (natural and social) which inform and instruct the Aesir. That is, the Tree, and its worlds of various created beings, is 'fed' by the organizational principal that holds the cosmology together, the waters of Urth's Well. Urth's Well is therefore not merely the well of the past, but the well of a past whose patterns do not so much predict the present and future, but build it.

The names of the three primary Norns who tend the Well support this model. *Urthr* is taken from the preterate plural of vertha, to become. *Verthandi* is the present participle of the same word (Bauschatz 8, quoting Grimm). *Skuld* in Old Norse, is used to express necessary truths and generalized, universal present (things that happen continuously) (Bauschatz 12-13). Thus we have 'what is, what was, and what needs to be.' In terms of Northern epic literature, a hero might meet a terrible fate because of nature (he drowned in a storm), or because of the consequences of his acts (he stole another hero's girl friend, or he insulted some unnamed god by his rude behavior). Providence has an intrinsic logic.

One of the tasks assigned to Urth and her two companions is that of 'cutting staves' (*Volupsá* 20). Tacitus describes the practice of divination by drawing lots with wood strips marked with symbols (*Germania* 10), which might well be the same sort of staves cut by Urth and her companions. Thus the practice of rune drawing (in both senses) are in the venue of the Well of Urth.

Now let us look at Mímir's Well as a separate well, holding wisdom and Óthin's spare eye. Snorri, in *Ynglingsaga* (chapters 6-9) describes Óthin as a powerful human war leader and shaman, a combination of talents found among men and women of the Siberian steppes, if grave goods are to be believed. Óthin uses Mímir's head for wisdom and prophecy (*Heimskringla,* chap. 4, Hollander 8). Certainly we know that the continental Celts used heads in this way. Shamans do draconian acts of self-sacrifice to obtain their 'second sight,' and although iconography suggests that Óthin exchanged an actual eye for wisdom, the metaphorical or even mystical meaning seems pretty clear. Óthin already had the wisdom of the Mímir head. What he desired was the 'sight' to be able to see and interpret such Otherworldly knowledge. And for that he required the 'eye' or vision of the sorceress, called Heith or Witch, the eye with which she 'sits out' or trances (cf. *Volupsá* 22-22, 24, and Hollander 5n29).

It is not Mímir's Well he goes to. It is Mímir's head, also a vessel of knowledge. The eye he uses is not a blind eye, the result of self-mutilation, but the inward-looking eye of a shaman, acquired by hanging (deprivation of oxygen to the brain, also practiced by binding with cords in certain Wiccan traditions even today) and by getting high on mead, probably laced with some herbal hallucinogen. The seeress tells Óthin in *Volupsá* 28 (Hollander 6):

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> Well know I, Ygg, where thy eye is hidden:
> in the wondrous well of Mímir;
> each morn Mímir his mead doth drink
> out of Fjolnir's pledge;

A free interpretation for this verse might be something like, 'I know where your vision is hidden, Óthin, in the vessel of Mímir, which each morning is filled with mead which acts as a pledge-cup for you to make your boasts.' Metaphorically drawing on the tradition of noble women and goddesses holding out a mead horn to champions for oaths, boasts, and sacrifices, Heith is offering Óthin the intoxicating liquor of magical language held in the skull-cup of Mímir. It is only Snorri who gives us the literal, rather than metaphorical or poetical (kenning) interpretation of this verse (*Gylfaginning* 14-15, Faulkes 17).

Let us look again at the mead. The origin of the mead is said to be the blood of the slain Kvasir, who was of the Vanir and renown for his wisdom (*Heimskringla,* chap. 4, Hollander 8). He had been an exchange hostage to the Aesir, in exchange for Mímir, who was sent to the Vanir. When the Vanir killed Mímir in a misunderstanding about his wisdom, they returned his head to Óthin, who promptly pickled it into a talking head using his shamanic magic. Kvasir, in turn, was also murdered, and his blood was mixed with honey to make mead (*Skaldskaparmal* 57, Faulkes 62). So that Kvasir's blood and Mímir's head are both magical tools for wisdom seeking. Further, Kvasir's blood was poured out into a cauldron, that is to say a container, just as a well or a skull is a container. This mead was eventually put into the charge of the giantess Gunnloth (*Skaldskaparmal* 57, Faulkes 62) from whom Óthin stole it (*Hávamál* 110). So now Óthin had both mead and head, the two magic objects obtained by the sacrifice of the two hostages. Without a doubt, Óthin is figured as a powerful shaman, one who was given understanding of that most magical of gifts, writing. Why, then, the apparent separation of runecraft and seithcraft?

Thomas A. DuBois makes a provocative suggestion regarding the gender issue of *seithkonur* (Dubois, chap. 6). A scholar of Sámi and Finnish folklore, he noted that in those cultures males tend to hold the authority as magic workers and seers, in other words, as shamans, although there is evidence of an older tradition of wise women. He suggests that, even correcting for post-Christian misogyny and Christian anti-*galdr* sentiments in the sagas (where we get most of our information), perhaps there was a shift in Norse society back to women seers and magic workers (witches) to balance the very active role of men as warriors. Although there were a few women scalds, poetry was not a woman's thing to do. Poetry was manly. Fortune telling was not. If this were so, then the considerable talents of

The key symbols are all polyvalent, and all point to the same paradigm. In psychological terms, the combined Well of Urth and the Well of Mímir are the interface between the conscious and subconscious mind, while the third Well, with its writhing proto-life is the unconscious.

Óthin as a magician would have to be separated from the magic of women. If his suggestion has any merit, then perhaps the separation of *seithr* to gather wisdom from Urth (*Wyrd*), and the *galdr* of rune spellcraft and poetry coming from another source of wisdom was developed to satisfy a cultural gender expectation. Men may have consulted women who could see into Urth's Well, and they may have lived or died in battle or at sea as a result of Urth's law, but men didn't do the looking (Blain & Wallis 1999:4-16).

But in the modern world gender roles are not cast in stone, and it seems reasonable to assume that the Well of Urth is the same well in which Óthin, as a god or as a shaman, or both, sees the *ørlog*, thus keeping order in the world(s), and the well in which the runes were interpreted to him during his initiatory trial on the World Tree. And that same World Tree is rooted in the Well of Urth and is nourished by Urth and her sacred waters, and out of the mead gotten from the cauldron Óthroerir (*Hávamál* 138-42). The key symbols are all polyvalent, and all point to the same paradigm. In psychological terms, the combined Well of Urth and the Well of Mímir are the interface between the conscious and subconscious mind, while the third Well, with its writhing proto-life is the unconscious. But all are part of the one mind, the mind that feeds the created world, which in turn grows out of it.

Bauschatz's interest is in how the early Germanic people perceived time and space, but the modern implication are obvious. The underlying idea that makes Bauschatz's observation relevant to modern heathens is 'The map is not the territory.' Most people use flat maps. Few believe in a flat earth. The Asatru community is inspired by folklore about a past civilization as interpreted by medieval Christians, most of whom were intellectuals and many of whom were well versed in Christian doctrine. These medieval Christian Icelanders also may have had a romantic or nationalistic passion for their past, but they were not men and women of the past. It is useful to approach their texts with a degree of critical suspicion because of their post-Christian origin, and their peculiar admixture of literary conceits and folklore motifs. Fundamentalism is rarely useful.

But neither are modern pagans creatures of the past, and practices such as human sacrifice, to take the extreme example, or restricted gender roles, to take a more mundane one, are not acceptable in the modern world. So we are looking at two levels of deconstruction, one to sort out pre-Christian pagan practice from post-Christian interpretation, no matter how sympathetic it may at first appear, and the second to assess the contemporary value of such practice.

One aspect of *seithr* practice that is not well addressed by the Bauschatz model is wisdom from the dead, which was and is a seminal part of shamanic and crypto-shamanic work. In historical pagan communities these dead ancestors readily were absorbed into the local landscape as guardian spirits, and if important enough, gods. The claim of the Otherworld on the imagination of the Germanic peoples continued throughout the Christian period in folklore and in remnants of shamanic discourse with the dead. In Christian communities ancestors became local saints, or at least the devout dead who could warn the living or perhaps effect small heterodox acts such as healing or finding. Significantly, these same helpful dead were demonized in periods of Christian instability, notably the Reformation (Behringer 1998).

Norse religion did not have a clear and organized idea of where dead people went. Very few religions do. A notable exception is Christianity, which has a univocal system (the dead go to Heaven, Hell, or, after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Purgatory). Post-Christian writers, and by Viking Age pagans themselves who had continuous culture contact with Christians, might have been expected to attempt a systematic deposition of spirits/souls. The various halls of the dead associated with gods, Valhalla being the most famous, were undoubtedly genuine heathen beliefs, but how old and how widespread is unclear.

An example of the ambiguity is found in the famous funeral account of a Rus Viking chieftain by Ibn Fadhlan. Although Óthinistic cult elements have been ascribed to this ritual (Simpson 1967:199-200), the Rus (Swedes living in the Baltic region) are believed to have had strong ties to Freyr worship. The slave girl turned wife and seer is ritually married to the dead chieftain. Her intercourse with his intimate friends, bringing their seed to the Otherworld with him and making her the potential mother of his replacement war band and her sacrificial death, would support the fertility aspects of Freyr worship more than a trip to Valhalla. Death by drowning is described in Vanir sacrifice, although bog mummies have been found with ropes around their necks. Although post-Dumézilian theorists specify death by drowning as a fertility function, there is no reason to believe that the hanging/stabbing act of the Angel of Mercy was necessarily Odinist (Ward 1970:83-122). There are also shamanic elements. The girl, now a *seithkona,* is lifted up, where she sees her own low caste or slave parents and relations waiting for her, and her new 'husband' who is already on 'the other side'. This is coherent with ancestor/ghost veneration, but not coherent with particular and separate realms of the dead based on class or achievement. Bauschatz argues that the sacrifice and description of the afterlife are grounded in the concept that the Well of Urth and the Tree are seminal to the interpenetration between the material world and the Otherworld (Bauschatz 33-36, 64-65). So the question 'Where do the dead go?' is a complex one, and the cultural interpretation is dependent on time and place.

The dead would fit into the One Well model by returning to the Well as part of the collective intelligence of the *ørlog* in a sort of Jungian interpretation. This later would be supported by the belief that there are many norns who are personal guardians. The realm of Urth would encompass all of the Otherworld, including the spirits of the dead. Another place of the dead would be in another of these 'villages' of beings (*eg,* elves, dwarves, gods), coexistent but transdimensional from the ordinary world. In this way the dead could 'live' in rocks or trees, as they are said to in Iceland.

In some current *seithr* practices, a totem animal is called as a helper, although wisdom is rarely directly sought from an animal. However, the model that I propose, with its central

> *... the model that I propose ... admits animal totems as shamanic advisors to the material/spiritual union of the Tree and Well ...[and] puts back into Norse religion the notion of primal goddesses, thus bringing it back in line with most of the other Indo-European religions.*

incorporation of animal spirits and recognition of animal sentience (which is only now being explored by animal behaviorists who have up to recently been heavily influenced by Christian thinking regarding *Homo sapiens*' proprietary ownership of conscience and intelligence) easily admits animal totems as shamanic advisors to the material/spiritual union of the Tree and Well, adding yet another valence to the holistic nature of the model. Animals (and their support environment) would then be considered sacred and wise by their very natural intimacy with the *ørlog*, and would require respect and protection in the material world as well as in the spiritual. In a world which rapidly is being destroyed by *Homo*-centrism, such a notion would have far reaching and positive ethical implications.

Given that historical Norse religion was heavily influenced by Christianity well before the wave of conversion in the 11th century, it is likely that early religious practice was a synthesis of animistic shamanism and deism, becoming more and more like Christian worship through the building of temples and perhaps by shifts in the perception of the power and function of gods. DuBois suggests that even the testimony of pagan devotion attributed to a character in a saga might reflect the author's desire to paint the portrait of a 'good' person in a Christian frame of reference, rather than depict any historical practice.

The gods were 'other,' beings with whom a man could make alliances as he did with human chieftains. The fact that there are scant references in the primary literature to the ritual place of goddesses, given the importance that Tacitus gives to Nerthus in the 1st century, furthers the notion of engendered religion. If religion was a 'man's business' (including the collateral participation of the mistress of the household as, for example, cupbearer) and divination was a 'woman's business', then religion would have had to distance itself from the supernatural, just as the attributes of Óthin had to be separated from the attributes of the seers of fate. Through the working of Weird, with its profound kernel of integrated pantheism, religious obligations of honor (sacrifices, oaths, feasts, burial practices) and interpenetration between the natural and supernatural could be played out within a single mythic paradigm.

What does this analysis offer the contemporary Norse pagan practitioner which Snorri's more complex model does not? For one, it tidies up the number of disparate legends upon which the various practices of *galdr* and *seithr* are currently based. It pulls together the quasi-institutional religion which may or may not have existed in the late pre-Christian period in Scandinavia with the older shamanistic practices, which are attributed to Óthin, and which are still extant among the Sámi, Finns and Inuit who live to the north, and in the folk beliefs, especially in Iceland, where land-spirits are still alive, and, from all reports, still kicking. It contextualizes the use of rune-symbolism and pathworking based on the eddas as mythopoetic, paths to intuition similar to meditation on mandalas, rather than literal maps of either the mythic past or the spiritual world. For another, it puts back into Norse religion the notion of primal goddesses, thus bringing it back in line with most of the other Indo-European religions. Finally it incorporates what has come to be known as Deep Ecology, the Tree representing both the shaman's world pole and a living metaphor for life and death in balance. It unifies the worlds of men, gods and nature. It takes an archaic religion and weds it to the modern world. It might be fair to compare this model with essential Taoism, that is to say, Taoism stripped of its ritual particularity.

While the construct of the nine worlds and three wells is well and good, certainly romantic and rich in imagery, it limits the practitioner by its presumed historical specificity and verity. By updating this divinatory model, the contemporary pagan can claim a glimpse into Urth's Well, which offers a sense of both majesty and dread, of modern science and mystery, and a basic theology on which to build a life and develop a community of belief.

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Embarrassed by Our Origins:
Denial and Self-Definition in Modern Witchcraft

by Cat Chapin-Bishop
& Peter E. Bishop

Life as the parent of a thirteen-year-old bears an uncanny resemblance to life as a student and teacher of Wiccan history. Any parents of a teenager know the experience I'm thinking of. You take yourselves out to the local movie, mall, or restaurant, offspring in tow. And as you wait in line, you notice your child slowly edging away from you, trying to look as if she never had met that uncool, middle-aged couple before in her life.

Witches, like adolescents preoccupied with their image, have an astonishing willingness to disavow our roots. We do it in a hundred ways, subtle and not so subtle. It is jarring how many Witches are uncomfortable with 'ceremonial magic' while invoking the Watchtowers, or are utterly unaware that phrases like "So mote it be" derive from Masonic ritual. Witches who are perfectly comfortable with invocations of Tiamat, Loki, Set, or Hecate, quail and run from the notion of a Witch honoring Jesus, Mary, or Jehovah, never mind the bad boy of Middle Eastern religion, Satan. It's not that either of us is in favor of rituals to honor Satan. You may be hard pressed to name the last time one of us invoked Loki in circle, either, but Witches' resistance to the Judeo-Christian Gods of our culture's mainstream is a bit jarring, given the easy, mix-and-match approach we tend to take toward other cultures' Gods. Like our daughter's paranoid fear of being seen as our daughter, Witches' embarrassment is becoming annoying. Perhaps it's time to give credit where it is due.

Wicca's debt to Crowley is probably the most obvious. By now, the passages in Gardnerian liturgy (including the *Charge of the Goddess*) that were originally Crowley's work are fairly well known. Every time we bless wine with chalice and athame, we pay homage to the Sixth Degree Ritual of the O.T.O. Every time we set our students to memorizing tables of correspondences, we honor Crowley's exhaustive work—in fact, most of Wiccan lore in this area comes straight from him. We know that Gardner was familiar with Crowley's work. *Red Garters Magazine* has published a catalog of Gardner's library, which included at least a dozen of Crowley's books—enough to suggest more than a casual interest. We also know that Gardner met Crowley during his lifetime, and possessed a charter granting him the right to create an O.T.O. Lodge, though both too much and too little has been made of this. On the one hand, there are ardent Thelemites who maintain that all of Gardnerian Wicca is simply a watered down and debased version of Thelema. At the other extreme, some Gardnerians have claimed that the textual parallels between Crowley and Gardner are indeed borrowings—but that Crowley borrowed his ideas and words from the Witches! Crowley's legacy, showing up in the very heart of Wiccan liturgy, clearly makes us uncomfortable.

We did steal from the man, but we followed the time-honored (and still used) Pagan technique of quoting out of context in order to recast the meaning. Wiccan ritual and Crowley's work have very different underlying purposes: Crowley sought to elevate the human, individual spirit to its most godlike realization, while Gardner wanted to reintroduce the Gods and Goddesses of nature into human life. There are great similarities here, but they are not the same things, any more than the Theosophy of Mme. Blavatsky can be taken as representative of the Hindu or Tibetan Buddhist thought that was her source material.

> The concept of polarity … proceeds from the Golden Dawn's way of working with the 'masculine' and 'feminine' pillars of the Kabalistic Tree of Life, and the magician's absolute need for a balance between those influences in performing the Great Work.

The downside of acknowledging our spiritual debt to Crowley is obvious. Called "the wickedest man in the world" during his lifetime, Crowley had a positive talent for scandal, and his sexual and narcotic exploits (however exaggerated they may have been by the press) still make us cringe with embarrassment. Further, as we strive to establish ourselves within our culture as a legitimate religion—something Crowley himself never sought to do—the thousand ways that Crowley delighted in rousing fear and anger in the Christian world become more and more of a burden. When one of us seeks clergy privileges at a local hospital, for instance, it's not pleasant to have to contend with Uncle Aleister's ghost along the way.

Still, there is value in accepting this man as one of our ancestors. Beyond any specific contributions of text and liturgy, Crowley links us to one of the most intriguing and energetic movements of recent times: the occult revival of the 19th century. At first glance, this may not seem like much of a bargain. MacGregor Mathers in full occult regalia looks positively ludicrous today, and Helena Blavatsky's self-serving revelations from the Hidden Masters (perhaps by way of the false back to the cabinet that received the apports?) are impossible to take seriously. But this is also the world of William Butler Yeats and Rudyard Kipling, and of the Edwardian cult of Pan, which first introduced into modern culture the idea of the sacredness of natural landscapes. Theosophy brought us, for the first time since the fall of Rome, a worldwide movement urging respect for other religions than that of one's birth. Women's suffrage, vegetarianism, and the drive toward Indian independence were all ideas represented in the great occult resurgence that began with Spiritualism and came to flower in the Golden Dawn and its successors. Everywhere we look, we see mad idealists, progressives, artists, and folks who longed for the numinous. This is a heritage to honor and treasure, for behind and beyond the work of Crowley, of course, stand the three giant landmarks of the Occult Revival: the Golden Dawn, the Theosophical movement, and, at the very beginning of the 19th century, the Spiritualist movement itself.

Crowley was a breakaway member of the Golden Dawn, and Doreen Valiente saw his popularization of their ideas as his main contribution to the world of the occult: "His great importance … was that he had wrenched open that treasure chest in which the Order of the Golden Dawn had locked up the secret knowledge of the Western Mystery Tradition

…” (Valiente 61). But the Golden Dawn had done more than lock up the Mysteries; to a very real extent, they had created them like a patchwork quilt from an assembly of fabrics never before pieced together in quite the same way. Both of the founders of the Golden Dawn, Wynn Wescott and S.L. MacGregor Mathers, had contact with Theosophy at various times (indeed, Wescott was a friend of Helena Blavatsky’s), and both had been Masons. It seems clear that some influences from each of those movements were included in the early Golden Dawn. The group claimed a Rosicrucian origin for itself. But even if this is true, and if the alleged notes from the Rosicrucian Anna Sprengel ever existed, still the coming together of all these influences with the Kabalah, the remnants of medieval grimoires such as the Key of Solomon, and a superficial polytheism (not unlike Blavatsky’s understanding of Hinduism)—all this was a new synthesis.

For modern Pagans, this time when the new year meets the old is also a time that the veil between the worlds is especially thin, making it ideal for reverencing the ancestors and contacting the dead; yet it was our medieval Catholic ancestors who first made that association.

The finished product was remarkable, introducing concepts that modern Witches and Pagans take for granted today. The idea of many names for a single wellspring of deity, for instance, proceeds logically from the marriage of rituals invoking and naming Pagan Gods with the Kabalistic idea of multiple spheres emanating from a single ineffable source. The concept of polarity, too, proceeds from the Golden Dawn’s way of working with the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ pillars of the Kabalistic Tree of Life, and the magician’s absolute need for a balance between those influences in performing the Great Work. In fact, the whole tidy pairing of Gods and Goddesses into neat little dyads seems more related to ideas about magical balance than the sprawling multiplicity of indigenous polytheistic religions. In a sense, the thealogy of Witchcraft is just the logical extension of the esoteric ideas of the Golden Dawn.

And if we look farther back in time, to the contributing influences of Masonry and Theosophy, we find more links to the Wiccan present. Not only is our habit of calling ourselves ‘the Craft’ or our references to our ‘working tools’ of Masonic provenance, but our system of degrees (the Golden Dawn’s as well) originate here. The cable tow, the confrontation with a blade during the initiation, and the very idea of a ‘Charge’ are originally Masonic. And it is no surprise that Gerald Gardner was himself a Mason, through a Co-Masonic lodge that probably combined Masonic ideas with a splash of Theosophy as well. (Co-Masonry as a movement in Britain was begun by Annie Besant, the famous Theosophist.)

The Witches’ circle contains furniture from the Theosophical attic, too: Our concept of reincarnation is very unlike the Hindu or Buddhist idea, where rebirth is to be avoided. Witches don’t want to escape the wheel of rebirth—we want to use it, in true Theosophical form, to evolve personally across lifetimes. And, what’s more, we want to take lovely vacations between our lives in a place we call the Summerlands. That word, together with terms like ‘other side’ and ‘crossing over’, are taken from the Spiritualist movement that gave rise to Theosophy in its turn. Indeed, Rolla Nordic, a self-described family-tradition Witch, claimed in an interview at the age of 95 that Spiritualism was virtually indistinguishable from modern Witchcraft: “We were not called Witches in those days. We were called Spiritualists” (Wildman 2000).

Of course, as with Crowley himself, a common history and some shared ideas still don’t make us the same thing; Wicca is quite distinct from the occult revival and its zeitgeist in many ways. There is no evidence that Kipling ever believed literally in the magic of ‘oak and ash and thorn’, and the artists and poets who contributed to the growing popularity of Pan as an emblem of nature and wildness did not actually worship Him as a God. What’s more, none of the major occult philosophies of the 19th century moved very far away from the monotheistic ideas of the Christian majority. This is very different from Wiccan practice today; most Witches are duotheists at least, and very often unapologetic polytheists. While the Golden Dawn evoked Pagan Gods in ritual, they regarded them as merely metaphoric, and few Witches today see our Gods as only metaphors. Still, a family resemblance must be noted. We aren’t polytheistic in quite the way the ancient Greeks or modern Shintoists are, either, and some Witches do sometimes accept a thealogy based on aspects of a One Transcendent Something, whether we call it Drychten (Gardner’s term, borrowed from Old English), or Kether, or simply ‘The Goddess’.

Maybe it is because of these lingering monotheistic influences that Witches are uncomfortable acknowledging our debt to Ceremonial Magic—and even less comfortable with the monotheist religions that form the mainstream of our culture. Yet here, too, we owe a debt. As a Wiccan friend of ours likes to say, “I have no quarrel with people who claim that there is an unbroken chain of agricultural rituals brought down from ancient times. It’s called the Catholic Church” (Yohalem 1996).

The wheel of the year is one of the most powerful images in Wicca, symbolizing the cyclical nature of all life and neatly encapsulating our view of reincarnation. Yet when we look closely at that familiar, symmetrical wheel, it breaks apart into a kaleidoscopic image with some real surprises. For instance, the year begins and ends with Samhain, regarded as the Celtic New Year. For modern Pagans, this time when the new year meets the old is also a time that the veil between the worlds is especially thin, making it ideal for reverencing the ancestors and contacting the dead; yet it was our medieval Catholic ancestors who first made that association. Our commonly held belief that the Catholics were Christianizing a pre-existing Pagan custom is a modern misinterpretation that Ronald Hutton traces to Sir James Frazer. Samhain may have been a pre-Christian seasonal festival, but “The dead arrived later” (Hutton 1996:364), and did so within the Church, where the Feast of All Souls was only gradually regularized to the beginning of November. Imbolg, similarly, is reputed among Wiccans to have begun as a celebration of the Goddess giving birth to the new year’s sun God, and to have been co-opted by the Catholic Church as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In fact, though Imbolg is a genuine ancient

Gaelic feast, it seems to have been Mary who first brought to it any associations with recovery from childbirth. The Wiccan Goddess' role in the holiday is "purely and simply a paganization of Christianity" (Hutton 1991:286).

Is this a problem? Many Wiccans and Pagans have a deep emotional dislike for the Christianity or Judaism they were raised in. Others do not, and some even profess to be both. As one Judeo-Pagan friend of ours explains, "The Commandment says, 'Thou shalt have no other Gods before me'—It doesn't say anything about 'after me', or 'a little to one side'…" (Novack 1992). This comment is neither a joke nor a rationalization, but has legitimate roots in Jewish history. The tribal people that wrote the Hebrew Scriptures were not strictly monotheist. They were henotheists; they acknowledged the existence of the Gods of other peoples, but maintained a relationship with only one, whom they gave precedence above all others. Those people today who call themselves Judeo-Pagans or Christo-Pagans seem to hold a similar view. It may be heresy according to Christian orthodoxy, but we as Pagans are not responsible for rooting out heresy in the Christian Church, and as polytheists ourselves, we have no rational basis for rejecting heretical Christians as legitimate Pagans. The names of El Shaddai or YHWH should be no more out of place in a Wiccan ritual than Thor or Aphrodite. None of them were originally Wiccan deities, but there is nothing intrinsic to Wicca that rules out their inclusion.

The same, like it or not, is true of Satan. If Wiccans find it irksome to have roots in the medieval Catholic Church, we are downright scared by our connections to Satanism. In our initial scramble for legitimacy in the 1960s and 70s, we were most eager to distance ourselves from Devil worship (as if Satanists were somehow not entitled to the same religious freedom we have claimed for ourselves). Again, it's not entirely rational. Pagans can and do invoke Gods as ethically questionable as Loki, Tiamat, and Set in their rituals. We're not saying they do it well, or that it's well advised, but they are still considered Pagan. However, our connections with Satanism do go beyond mere acceptance of Satan as another deity, however dislikable. The root ideas of Wicca and Satanism arose together, from the same occult revival, and only began to differentiate from one another over time.

This fact is painfully clear to anyone who has ever read Leland's *Aradia.* Published in 1890, it is another of our seminal documents, and the source of much that is basic to modern Wicca. Diana as moon-Goddess, the idea of Witchcraft as an underground peasant cult surviving from pagan times, and even the characterization of Witchcraft as 'The Old Religion' all clearly derive from *Aradia,* as does some of the language eventually incorporated into the Gardnerian *Charge of the Goddess.*

Unfortunately, our heritage from Leland comes with some serious baggage. *Aradia* makes frequent reference to baneful magic, including in the source material for the *Charge* itself: "And when ye find a peasant who is rich, / Then ye shall teach the witch, your pupil, how / To ruin all his crops with tempests dire …" (Leland 130). Worse still, Lucifer is a part of this religion, right along with his 'sister', Diana: "Diana greatly loved her brother Lucifer, the god of the Sun and of the Moon, the god of Light (Splendor), who was so proud of his beauty, and who for his pride was driven from Paradise" (Leland 127). While the mythology is conflated with that of Apollo, still Satan is recognizable from the passage. To acknowledge *Aradia* as the important book it is, we must acknowledge a document that contains more than a hint of Satanic ideas.

This is even more plain in an earlier work, Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière.* Though less well known, *La Sorcière* was a major influence on Leland, and without it, *Aradia* would probably never have been written. *La Sorciere* presented what might be the very earliest argument that Witchcraft was a Pagan survival led by priestesses. Jules Michelet wrote with passion and poetry, and was less concerned with historical fact than with making a partisan case. He was virulently anticlerical, and saw Witches as the successors of primitive pagan cults—cults naturally led by women because the primitive, in his eyes, was naturally feminine. Over time, in reaction to what Michelet saw as the parochialism and bigotry of a Catholic age, he believed this feminine wisdom became debased, and the gentle Nature spirits of the native pagan beliefs were replaced by Satan worship. Other than the inclusion of Satan in the tale, this should be a familiar story: it is very nearly the foundation myth of Wicca. Consider the following passage, which could easily have been published in almost any Llewellyn book of the last twenty years:

In our initial scramble for legitimacy in the 1960s and 70s, we were most eager to distance ourselves from Devil worship (as if Satanists were somehow not entitled to the same religious freedom we have claimed for ourselves).

> The Priest realizes clearly where the danger lies, that an enemy, a menacing rival, is to be feared in this High-priestess of Nature he pretends to despise. Of the old gods she has invented new ones … For a thousand years the people had one healer and one only—the Sorceress. Emperors and kings and popes, and the richest barons, had sundry Doctors of Salerno, or Moorish and Jewish physicians; but the main body of every State, the whole world we may say, consulted no one but the Saga, the Wise Woman. If her cure failed, they abused her and called her a Witch… Had [she] not earned some reward? Yes! And reward [she] had. [Her] recompense was torture and the stake … (Michelet x-xi).

Unfortunately, Michelet was not content to rhapsodize over Witches as Nature's Priestesses and medieval healers. To Michelet, the stories of Satan worship and black masses linked to witchcraft were as plausible as the rest of the mythos he was presenting, and Satan is very much a part of his story.

> Fraternity of man with man, defiance of the Christians' heaven, worship of Nature's God under unnatural and perverted forms—such was the inner significance of the Black Mass.
>
> The altar was raised to the Spirit of the revolted serf, 'to Him who has suffered wrong, the Proscribed of ancient days, unjustly driven out of Heaven, the Great Creator of the earth, the Master that makes the plants germinate from the soil'. Under such titles as these the Luciferians, his adorers, did him honour…the Sorceress set up her Satan … While some beheld only an incarnate terror, others were moved by the haughty melancholy that seemed to enfold the Exile of Eternity (Michelet 103-104).

Could a modern Satanist have asked for a better apologist than Michelet?

Satanism, Judaism and Christianity, Theosophy and the Golden Dawn are not ancestors that suit our sense of fashion. We Witches like the idea of our Craft as folk belief, and also the idea of folk belief as timeless wisdom, not

something syncretistic and evolving. We are inclined toward that romantic view of the Edwardian Folklore Society that saw virtually all British folk customs as survivals of ancient fertility cults. But, like real folk everywhere, Witches have always borrowed from any source that couldn't run away fast enough. We've certainly adapted the meanings of our borrowings: modern Witches don't have to be Kabalists to work with polarity, and the *Charge of the Goddess* is not a Satanist manifesto, whatever its origins. But there is beauty as well as accuracy in acknowledging our borrowings and recognizing what they meant in their original contexts.

SO HOW DO THE AUTHORS of this article feel about this skeptical logic we're offering. Is it intended to be disilllusioning? Not at all. The fanciful origin myths of Wicca told to us by Margaret Murray, the vastly inflated figure of nine million dead in the burning times—these have long been discredited, and there is general acceptance now that Wicca is primarily a modern reconstruction of what we think might once have been. What hasn't been generally acknowledged yet is the richness of the heritage we do have.

We're like the children of immigrants, embarrassed by our Mother Tongue. But it's possible to enjoy Chinese opera *and* pizza, to keep a Seder *and* play basketball. Nothing prevents us from embracing our syncretistic origins while still preserving the unique worldview of modern Wicca except for our own self-consciousness. Our smallness limits us, not our history.

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READERS' FORUM

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witches, and the evidence Dashu cites is an elaboration of that statement. However, it only presents half of the story. We cannot understand the significance of the Inquisition's actions without examining what the rest of society was doing. Yes, inquisitors wrote most of the early witch hunting manuals. But when the persecution exploded in the 16th century, most manuals were written by secular authors. The Inquisition was indeed more active in the early period of the Great Hunt. Yet this is the period when deaths were lowest. Richard Kieckhefer (*European Witch Trials*) found only 703 definite executions from 1300-1500. Of these, only 137 came from church or inquisitorial courts. So even at the height of the Inquisition's activity, the secular courts were killing far more witches. By the 16th century, the discrepancy was much worse. When the Inquisition was killing less than 1% of accused witches, local secular courts were killing up to 90%, and national courts an average of 30%.

No one argues that the Inquisition's hands were clean, that it did nothing foul. The question is, how did it compare to the rest of society? It would be rankly hypocritical to blame the Inquisition for its failings, yet turn a blind eye to the far worse atrocities carried out by secular authorities. As bad as the Inquisition was, all the evidence shows that it was far more lenient than the secular authorities.

Our discussions of the death toll seem to suffer from some confusion. I am not arguing that trial records are unbiased, or 'reliable' in an absolute sense. They cannot be. They were written by human beings, and we are all affected by our beliefs and prejudices. I would not go so far as to call their authors 'liars', as Dashu does. But they were bigoted, prejudiced, and often mistaken. That does not change the fact that trial records are still infinitely better than witch-hunting manuals. Manuals were written by people who 'lied' as much as court scribes. So the question is, which is better: an account by a 'liar' who saw the events he's describing, or by a 'liar' working with rumor and hear-say? And again, consider the purpose of the writing. Court scribes wrote to record evidence and verdicts. Manual authors wrote to 'warn' or persuade people that witchcraft was a dire threat. Neither was an unbiased reporter, but by most people's reckoning an eyewitness account is more reliable than propaganda, even if the witness is a bigot. Nor do I believe trials records are complete. I mentioned that many areas have not been counted and that many records have been lost. That's why the death toll figures are 'estimates' rather than firm figures. However the fact that our evidence is not perfect does not mean that it's useless. As I said, we now have a data-base to base our estimates on—in past generations, people simply guessed. An estimate is not a head-count, but an educated guess is still better than a groundless one, which is what figures like 9,000,000 are. I would agree with Dashu that estimates like 10,000 or 20,000 are ridiculously low. The 10,000 estimate is actually disproved, since we know of almost 15,000 definite executions. Because of the gaps in our evidence, we'll never be able to say anything more firm than 'probably 40,000-60,000, perhaps as many as 100,000'. But that is still a big improvement from wild guesses like nine million.

Another point that we definitely agree on is that neither of our articles had the space to adequately address the role of gender in the trials. That is my biggest regret about my essay: it took so long to cover the basics that I had no room to discuss more controversial questions. And a letter to the editor isn't going to do an adequate job either. But briefly, I believe that gender is one of the most critical issues in the Great Hunt. Feminist historians are doing

ground-breaking work on this issue, some of the most exciting research available. However, at the same time, a simplistic 'witch hunting is woman hunting' theory predominates in many popular feminist works. This is a theory I disagree with sharply, for two reasons.

First, as a feminist I am deeply suspicious of any theory that erases minorities, no matter what gender or race those minorities may be. Both men and women were accused of witchcraft. When we define witchcraft as the exclusive province of women, we imply that male witches are aberrations, unimportant distractions that must be ignored or explained away. I disagree. I don't think we can understand the significance of gender without studying both sexes. We need to construct theories that are broad enough to accommodate all of the evidence—from Central Europe where 90% or more witches were women, to Iceland where the reverse was true. To ignore male witches simply because they were a minority is to replicate the worst errors of patriarchal scholarship.

Second, the 'witch hunting is woman hunting' theory is superficial. It begins with the most obvious fact about witches: that most of them were women. And it goes no further. It makes vague generalizations about women's status in the 16th century and blames the rate of witch-hunting on that. However, since both high and low status can 'cause' witch-hunting, the theory is circular and useless. If women's high status kept witch-hunting low in Spain, why would it increase it in Scotland? And why not in the Scottish Highlands and Ireland, where the women were every bit as strong and independent as their Lowland cousins?

I believe that many of the fluctuations in gender percentages can be explained by looking closely at local views of witchcraft. Simply put, the authorities thought that they were killing witches, not women. So if we wish to understand why women predominated, we need to know what 'witchcraft' meant to the killers. Projecting our own definitions onto the past merely muddies the picture.

The roots of this question lie in pagan times, in Greek and Roman culture. There is some exciting work going on now that suggests that historically 'magic' is a derogatory word for other people's religions. Supernatural power wielded by one's own authorities is 'religion'; the supernatural power of Outsiders is 'magic'. With the rise of patriarchal city-states in Greece, political power solidified in the hands of free Greek males. The supernatural powers of the disenfranchised (women, slaves, and foreigners) became suspect and dismissed as 'magic', something inferior to true 'religion'. One example: our word 'magic' comes from the Greek word '*mageia*'. Mageia was the teachings of the *magoi,* a class of Persian priest. During Greece's wars with Persia, mageia and magoi became general terms for suspicious or bad supernatural power, and the people who wielded this power. This same pattern shows up in the Great Hunt. Witches tended to be women, lower classes (since slavery had been abolished), and often members of ethnic minorities (such as the Lapps or the Basque). This basic pattern was complicated by a variety of local factors. Where the people (not the elites) believed that witches were heretics, the number of male witches rose. Heresy, after all, is not a sex-linked crime. When misogynist manuals like the *Malleus Maleficarum* were influential, the number of women increased—often dramatically. Local folklore, culture, and history could all influence the gender dynamics of the trials. In summary, witch hunting is not woman hunting. Gender is only one facet of a larger picture. I believe that as long as we allow ourselves to be distracted by superficial generalizations, we will never dig deep enough to uncover the root of the problem.

Bright Blessings, Jenny Gibbons
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