

Modern Paganism in the United Kingdom

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I commenced the research for this doctoral thesis¹ (which I conducted part-time) in the mid-nineties, with the intention of shedding light upon a phenomenon that, by that point, had by and large only been cursorily or dismissively referenced by academia, namely British Paganism. Methodologically, it involved the detailed analysis of data primarily acquired from three main sources, these being long interviews conducted by the author with a number of British Pagans; ethnographic studies of the phenomenon; and Pagan publications.

Contents of the thesis (which was eventually submitted in October 2003, and for which a doctorate was conferred in July 2005) can be summarised as follows: Chapter one provides the background for and outline of this methodological approach. The first part critically appraises the (then) available ethnographic surveys looking either wholly or in part at the Pagan phenomenon as it has manifested within the UK, going into some detail about studies by Adler, Luhrmann, York, Simes, Rees, Pearson, Gosselin, Hutton and Greenwood, placing particular emphasis on their respective methodological approaches. The second part looks at the broader academic picture, taking in the far larger corpus of non-British – which is to say largely North American – studies. While doing so, it approvingly references Carpenter’s advice that ethnographers should attempt to delve beneath the phenomenon’s surface to find the complex (albeit inevitably ‘impressionistically’ discerned) reality behind the phenomenon, and Simes’ recommendation that academic scholars be careful to maintain a consistently analytical (rather than merely validatory or justificatory) agenda during their investigations. It ends with a lengthy discussion of the principle methodology chosen by the author for the collection of ‘first-hand’ data, this being the long interview method, which discussion assesses the strengths and weaknesses of this method in comparison to other available techniques, both qualitative and quantitative.

Chapter two describes the development of modern Paganism from its de facto inception in post-War Britain, describing key unifying and diversifying factors. It also includes descriptions of some of the phenomenon’s major sub-branches, namely Wicca, Druidry and Heathenism, along with Goddess Worship, Reconstructionist Paganism, Shamanism, and ‘High’ Ritual Magic (including ‘Left’ and ‘Right Hand’ forms).

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Chapter three discusses the range of Pagan understandings concerning the concept of 'nature'. It starts with an appraisal of what could be termed the 'semi-orthodox' Pagan viewpoint, which sees the concept as fundamental to Paganism. It then goes on to question this perspective, citing alternative or contradictory shades of opinion – particularly those relating respectively to environmentalist tropes and 'urban magic' currents – to highlight its more problematic aspects. Chapter four draws on a number of works – most notably by Greenwood – to deal with what could feasibly be seen the central or definitional concept of Paganism, namely that of the Otherworld, this being intrinsic to 'parallelist' (which is to say, 'enchanted') belief systems, which portray spiritual and corporeal realms as discrete yet at the same time profoundly interconnected. The chapter elaborates on this concept by looking in turn at Pagan descriptions of Otherworldly experiences and the sources – 'traditional' and less so – that have informed ideas about the concept within Pagan discourse on cosmological matters, taking in notions such as hierophany and 'nodes of power'. In conclusion, it argues that the Otherworld concept simultaneously serves as a universal and locative focus for Pagans, providing a sense of cosmic 'connectivity' combined with one of 'rootedness', in geophysical, cultural and/or 'ancestral' terms.

Chapter five continues on from the previous chapter by looking at the concept of gnosis, or 'magical awareness', and includes an assessment of its similarities to and dissimilarities from the Otherworld concept. In particular, it identifies the gnosis concept as the nexus where Paganism's esoteric component (pertaining to its direct inheritance from western ritual magic tradition) merges most seamlessly with the type of 'ancient' or 'tribal' influences that tend to be more overtly referenced in Pagan discourse. It categorises the key features of Pagan gnosis as being its immediacy, implication of spiritual and corporeal parity, and synonymousness with the esoteric notion of the 'noetic imagination'. As well as acknowledging the emphasis Pagans tend to place upon the notion of 'hard work' vis-à-vis the cultivation of gnostic states, it also addresses the way the concept can be seen as pertaining to the notional activation of the sort of latent or codified 'magical' symbols and narratives believed to be found in the type of Otherworld source materials used by Pagans, and looks at how such processes tie in with the strong emphasis on 'self-development' found in Pagan discourse. It also attempts to make sense of the concept by referring to the notion of 'engrossment', as employed by Gary Fine in his ethnographic study of role-playing gamers, arguing that this helps to show how Paganism's principle appeal conceivably lies in its intrinsic focus on notions of imaginative resonance and 'power'.

Chapter six deals with Pagan ritual, a highly important (albeit perhaps not defining) aspect of the phenomenon. It does so firstly by outlining a number of complementary Pagan ritual typologies from both academic and ‘first-hand’ sources – the former being represented by the work of Amy Simes, and Susan Greenwood – using these as a basis for an appraisal of general congruities and typical differences evident with regard to Pagan approaches to the subject (covering, respectively, such themes as ritual openings and closings, and numbers of participants, for example). It goes on to consider the relevance of certain key theories on the subject of ritual Pagan ritual culture, with especial regard to questions of social and individual foci. This is followed by a critique of the actual concept of ritual – or rather its ‘reification’ by social theorists – and discusses what relevance such themes could therefore realistically be thought to have to Paganism now that the ‘genie is out of the bottle’, both conceptually and practically speaking.

Chapter seven looks at the importance of individualism within the phenomenon – or to be more specific, of what Wallis called ‘epistemological individualism’. This refers to the apparently typical (and increasingly so) tendency amongst modern westerners to gauge what is ‘true’ or appropriate in terms of personal sensibilities. It argues that this is very noticeable within Paganism, on a number of levels – not only in key themes such as ‘self-development’ and individual gnosis, but also in the developmental trajectories of Paganism as a whole, and in Pagan sub-branches like Wicca, not to mention key processes and procedures such as ritual. However, it also points out that certain ‘limitations’ seem to apply in Pagan contexts, governed by, for instance, locative and cultural ‘boundaries’, and also identifies what seems to be a significant (and not necessarily ‘negative’) tension between individual and group ritual contexts and imperatives. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the oft-cited (in Pagan contexts) notion of ‘coming home’, arguing that, while useful, this actually relates to a rather more nuanced and (often) incremental process than previous studies have suggested.

Chapter nine expands from the previous chapters’ considerations of the ‘core’ aspects of Paganism by comparing the phenomenon with more ‘mainstream’ or established types of religion, laying particular emphasis upon the concept of theodicy, as famously articulated in sociological terms by Max Weber. That is to say, it asks if there is a typically Pagan way of tackling what Weber saw as the principle ‘problem’ of the religious life, namely of reconciling spiritual ideals with an awareness of the contingencies of ‘life on earth’. It proceeds to do so first by acknowledging the strongly

‘salvational’ emphasis of the term, and secondly by outlining the three theodical subcategories, these being the ‘cognitive’, ‘emotive’ and ‘moral’. The chapter continues by pointing out the potentially thorny nature of the venture, due to the seemingly largely ‘non-salvational’ nature of Pagan outlooks, and seeming disjunctions between Pagan outlooks and ‘traditional’ magical worldviews (not to mention problems to do with Weber’s own model of the latter). Nevertheless, it suggests that the concept is a useful one for helping ‘flesh-out’ and add nuance to the understanding of Pagan worldviews. Accordingly, it assesses the phenomenon in the light of each subcategory in turn. Thus, for example, the chapter elaborates further on what it regards as the characteristically ‘parallelist’ and ‘open-ended’ nature of Pagan cosmologies, which tend to portray the universe as an inclusive whole (at least in theory), while generally eschewing ‘apocalyptic’ predictions. The ‘emotive’ subcategory discussion centres on how Paganism relies to a substantial extent on a very modern tension between strongly individualistic sensibilities and the view that a person is never entirely in control of her circumstances. The chapter ends by looking squarely at the previously mentioned problem with the concept of a Pagan theodicy, by asking whether it is possible to tackle the (still) relevant question of human suffering in the sort of ‘non-salvational’ terms used in Pagan discourse without sounding dismissive or glib. It concludes by proposing that Paganism ideally proffers what could be seen as a ‘positive theodicy’ (predominantly reflected in a ‘reform-based’ political tendency), according to which ‘negative’ conditions and cognitions come inextricably bound up with an inability or unwillingness to appreciate the intrinsic magical ‘flux’ underpinning existence.

Continuing from the previous chapter, chapter nine attempts to assess the phenomenon in the light of other categories of ‘alternative’ spirituality – or to be more precise, new religious movements and the New Age. Drawing from authorities like David Martin and – most notably – Eileen Barker with regard to the former, and Paul Heelas and Wouter Hanegraaff in the case of the latter, it acknowledges the complexity and diversity of both while also suggesting some respective congruencies. Accordingly, it proposes that NRMs can be identified, not just by their heterodox ideas, but also by their tendency to rely on rigid, exclusive structures, ‘black and white’ moral codes, and charismatic leaders, while the New Age tends, to give one key example, to regard the external cosmos as the projection of an individual’s interior, ‘divine self’.

The chapter continues by making a direct comparison between the above NRM model and Pagan counterparts. It argues that as far as it is possible to generalise about the phenomenon it might be said that Paganism characteristically is hardly conducive to the sort of dogmatic, even 'totalitarian' structures seem particularly representative of NRMs, given the strong tendency towards individualistic and schismatic behaviour within the former phenomenon. Equally, and for similar reasons, it could be said that Paganism does not appear to provide fertile ground for 'charismatic' individuals to exert their authority unchecked. This section also features a critique of aspects of Greenwood's study which suggest an inclination within some Pagan sectors towards just such 'charismatic' authority, arguing that this suggestion contrasts sharply with the greater mass of studies, and is undermined by inconsistencies within Greenwood's own research findings.

In the next section, after outlining the history and prevailing features of the New Age, such as they appear to be (see above), a comparison is then made between that phenomenon and Paganism. While acknowledging strong similarities, including congruencies as regard to subject matter (for example, Shamanism, tarot, 'nature' etc.), and attitudinal factors (namely, a strong 'pull' towards epistemological individualism), much of this comparison highlights significant contrasts. Basing this on Heelas' list of New Age axioms, it draws substantially (albeit not solely) from Pearson's critique of the assumption that Paganism (or to be more precise, Wicca) is merely a sub-branch of former phenomenon. Not least, this is because of what could be seen as conflicting ontological premises, the 'enchanted', 'parallelist'-type of cosmologies favoured by Pagans jarring somewhat with the monist and strongly 'interiorised' outlooks that, it could be said, characterise the New Age. It also pinpoints other (albeit related) apparent areas of ideological and attitudinal disagreement, identifying crucial differences with respect to ideas on authority and tradition (paying particular attention to religious notions), and highlighting arguably interrelated tensions concerning soteriological, esoteric and imaginal considerations.

Chapters ten and eleven constitute the theoretical and discursive culmination of the study, attempting as they do to bring together and assess all the discussions featured so far in the light of broader sociological (not to mention historical) contexts. The first of these chapters concentrates on the ways that sociologists have tended up until recently to view the subject of Paganism, offering critical assessments of these. It starts with a consideration of the idea that the phenomenon can be understood with reference to the notion of 'cults', paying particularly close attention to York's lengthy (yet ultimately

inconclusive and unpersuasive) digression on this type of reading in his 1995 study. Taking its cue from Campbell's critique of the 'cult' concept, it takes a more approving line on that author's own notion of the 'cultic milieu', which bypasses the problems posed by the former's depiction of spiritual heterodoxies as being both 'outside' of the 'mainstream', and ideologically and structurally inchoate (and therefore by implication sociologically negligible), by positing an alternative portrayal of such as part of a diffuse yet nevertheless ingrained, and arguably even fairly robust, part of modern western life. It also revisits the epistemological individualism concept, arguing that while this is by no means confined to spiritual 'alternatives' – as is strongly suggested by, amongst other accounts, Davis and Robinson's study of the closely related trend towards theological individualism – it nevertheless seems to be most succinctly exemplified by 'cultic' forms of expression.

The next section attempts to provide some context for the trend towards epistemological individualism, by looking at the pivotal sociological concept of modernity. It briefly traces its history through such seismic changes as the Protestant Reformation and industrial revolution, and attempts to provide a foundational summary of pioneering sociological responses to the apparent axiological shift from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies, concluding that the rise of individualism – culturally, economically and politically – is, indeed, arguably the defining feature of this notional phase of history. However, acknowledging that such readings cannot comprehensively express why some 'modern' individuals should have adopted Paganism in particular, the study goes on to look at studies dealing specifically with that phenomenon, to see if any of these can shed some light. It starts off with Luhrmann's 1989 survey, which proposes that Paganism is the 'romantic rationalist's' religion, and as such is eminently suited to what she sees as today's 'conceptual cacophony'. It concludes that Luhrmann's assessment is undermined by her implicit assumption that individuals can only really become Pagans via a subtle process of disingenuousness and belief suspension.

The next interpretation to be appraised is Ken Rees' concept of 'personal myths' – or the complex 'patchwork' of ideas and influences at work in individual lives – which, it is argued, offers a rather more persuasive account of how people 'become' Pagans. However, the remainder of the chapter – and the vast bulk of it – concentrates on what seems to be by far the most popular form of scholarly reading of Paganism, which is that it is driven by the urge to 're-enchant the world'. This strand is introduced with a series of representative references, from such as Margot Adler, Graham Harvey,

Richard Roberts and Susan Greenwood, amongst others. The next section features an outline of the pre-eminent sociological influence on such accounts, namely Weber's concept of *Entzauberung der Welt*.

This in turn is followed by a much lengthier section critiquing the application of this type of theory to the Pagan phenomenon (while acknowledging the substantial positive aspects of the various studies considered), and is itself divided into a number of subsections. The first of these poses the question of whether the 'modern world' is anywhere near as 'disenchanted' as has so often been thought. In particular, it looks at the idea that Paganism represents a 'revolt' against the 'mainstream', and argues that such accounts present an exaggerated view of the oppositional power against Pagan ideologies that is exerted by the type of 'modern' societies in which adherents generally find themselves. The next employs similar arguments, as succinctly employed by Eugene Gallagher, to critique Adler's influential view of the phenomenon as a 'religion without converts'. The following subsection focuses on Helen Berger's use of Giddens' theory on the 'disembedding of tradition', and argues that such a reading not only makes too much of the 'universalising' currents present in Paganism at the expense of more the 'localised' and 'traditionalised' imperatives also evident within it, but in addition ignores the important 'cultic' dimensions of western cultural history.

This leads to a detailed discussion of Campbell and McIver's 1987 article, in which the authors exhaustively and persuasively list the many features of modernity that could be seen as actually having been conducive to 'magical' forms of expression, such as, not least, a capitalistic 'mass media' infrastructure pandering to the public's substantial appetite for 'cultic' diversions. The final subsection discusses the theory – as notably argued in the work of Shelley Rabinovitch, Siân Reid and Susan Greenwood – that Pagans tend to come from abusive or traumatised backgrounds, and therefore come to the phenomenon to be 'healed'. Rather, it suggests that the weight of academic evidence (not to mention Pagan discourse, if read closely enough) actually seems to suggest the opposite, which is that adherents tend to be comparatively 'well-balanced' individuals.

Chapter eleven follows on from the previous one by attempting to build from the previous chapter by offering some suggestions as to what the phenomenon's sociological significance might be. It commences by speculating (albeit based on survey data) on which (if any) characteristics might be thought particularly representative of Pagans, and proposes that – the previously mentioned psychological features aside – what seems most

notable, generally speaking, about the phenomenon's adherents are their potently imaginative sensibilities. Moreover, it goes on to suggest that, not only might it be possible to regard these two broad characteristics as largely compatible, but also, that such a 'positive' complex of characteristics and behaviours might plausibly be thought, more or less, to prefigure the adoption of Pagan spiritualities, rather than being largely 'produced' or facilitated as a consequence of this in the manner suggested by proponents of the Pagan 'healing' theory.

Furthermore, it might be argued that such 'microcosmic' portrayals do much to undermine the 're-enchantment' thesis, by suggesting that modernity has done little to prevent or disallow the development of such – at least potentially – 'magical' outlooks in the first place. Indeed, it might even appear to be the case that the modern world has actually done much to encourage this sort of worldview. This line of argument is pursued in the next section, which takes a more detailed look at the apparent congruence between consumerism, Romanticism, and the rise of the cultic milieu. Next, the discussion turns to secularisation, which could be regarded as the direct, foundational link, perhaps, between the numerous strands of discussion to have featured so far in this part of the study. This section traces the convoluted twists and turns over which the secularisation debate has coursed over the years – taking in Weber's 'disenchantment' theory, not to mention Grace Davie's assessment of British religiosity as generally somewhat 'low-key', in the process – and attempts to summarise current sociological wisdom on the subject. Most notably, it suggests, this seems to be that the process has led merely to the demise of institutional religion rather than the thoroughgoing 'despiritualisation' of western society per se. The next section looks at the hitherto (strangely) overlooked subject of background religious intensity, paying particularly close heed to the interviewee data, which for most is indicative just such a 'low-key' religiosity, as a direct consequence either of the parents' own values, or, in other cases the parents' decision to downplay their own 'devout' heritage. And this, it goes on to argue, appears to correlate strongly with Hutton's detection of a tendency towards the 'tepid' with regard to religious upbringing among Pagans, in the UK, at least.

This thread is taken a stage further in the next section, where it is proposed that such a 'low-key' religious environment as one finds in the UK might even in some ways be comparatively conducive to Pagan sensibilities, the rationale being that it allows for substantial spiritual freedom, without (in many cases at least) the influence of the sort of psycho-emotive 'baggage' that could cause an individual to develop a negative view of religious

sensibility and expression per se. This point is then illustrated with recourse, respectively, to ritual and cosmological notions. And despite the (perhaps necessarily) tentative nature of such a speculation, possible substantiation is provided from a study by David Martin which seems to indicate something like the converse, namely that among ‘alternative’ religionists, individuals from religiously devout backgrounds tend to favour the sort of similarly morally and cosmologically ‘black and white’ spiritual systems as are typically provided by NRMs (contrasting directly with Paganism’s characteristically ‘paralellist’ and theodically ‘positive’ ethos), after ‘leaving the fold’.

The following section considers what it might be, then, that provokes those with devout religious backgrounds to embrace Paganism, rather than, say, NRMs. Delving deeply once more into the interviewee testimony, it suggests that this might generally be due to pronounced characteristics – namely, imaginative and individualistic tendencies – that such individuals could plausibly be thought already to possess prior to any such formal or conscious adoption, in conjunction with the broadly secularised contexts of British (and, indeed, western) cultural life. Therefore, it is suggested, it might be the case that many such characters are, due to these conditions, able to embark upon a stage of radical cultural ‘reorientation’ that in turn allows them to make the transition from ‘orthodox’ to Pagan sensibilities in a manner comparatively unhindered by outstanding religious ‘baggage’. This is – again – speculative. However, it is argued, the above portrayal could nevertheless be thought succinctly illustrative of a complex socio-historical dynamic that has seen British families tending to abandon once firm religious affiliations over a mere handful of generations during the post-war era.

The critique of the Pagan ‘re-enchantment’ thesis is reprised in the following section, as part of a consideration of possible alternative reasons for the phenomenon’s development. The idea that Paganism grew out of the ‘60s counter-culture is also challenged. So too are postmodernist interpretations – the chief rationale being that the phenomenon is, in key respects, markedly anomalous with a thesis (i.e. postmodern theory) that is, in any case, a matter of conjecture rather than ‘fact’. The earlier critique of Giddens’ ‘late modernity’ concept is then recapped, specifically its underestimation of the modern world’s apparent compatibility with ‘magical’ sentiments and ideas. This leads to the suggestion that modernity’s relationship to Paganism has, in fact, pre-eminently been one of tacit encouragement and reinforcement, the pivotal factor being an attitude of epistemological individualism, linked

inextricably to secularising trends, as (arguably) consummately exemplified in Britain's 'low-key' religious culture.

Next, the question of Paganism's status as a religious phenomenon is considered. It is proposed that, while its institutional aspects are as yet fairly negligible, it still succeeds in many cases in providing a vividly 'meaningful' overview for individual existence and action, and thus as fulfilling the central role of religion, in a Weberian sense at least (although it could also be argued that a 'civic' dimension is, indeed, starting to appear, albeit tentatively). Finally, the study concludes – via a discussion of the question of Pagan parenting – that, barring 'unforeseen circumstances', the future bodes well for Pagan growth as a modern spiritual phenomenon. This is primarily to do with the phenomenon's broad encouragement of epistemological individualism, 'cultic' enthusiasms, and prevailing non-soteriological moral frameworks, which may conceivably serve as conducive to the future adoption of Pagan affiliations, even in the absence of formal instruction or direct involvement during 'formative' years.

Notes

¹ Jones, Ieuan, 2003, *Modern Paganism in the United Kingdom*, University of York: Unpublished PhD thesis.