

Witchcraft, magic and religion: some discursive reconstructions of belief and practice

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to further an understanding of how members of earth-centred religions "make sense" of their social and physical worlds, what sources they draw on, and how they construct identity for themselves as practitioners of minority religions. A phenomenon of the present day is the increasing number of people who are drawn towards "earth-centred" religions. Many practitioners, particularly within the Women's Spirituality Movement, state that they look primarily to "ancient" religions and practices as suggested by archaeological findings from the bronze age, neolithic, or even palaeolithic (the popularity of Venus of Willendorf statuettes comes to mind). However, many practitioners (including some of the same practitioners) locate sources for at least part of their spiritual practice in a rather nebulously defined "middle ages". A further group relate their beliefs and practices specifically to the mythologies and mythological texts of Western Europe in a period of approximately one thousand years, from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries of the Common Era.

The community of adherents of Earth-Centred religions variously described by its members as "pagan", "neo-pagan", or "heathen", is relatively small in Canada. Adherents of very different belief systems are likely to form a network of overlapping groups, whose members know, or at least know of, members of other groups and who tend to frequent the same locations, particularly the same bookstores or suppliers of ritual equipment. In some areas of Canada communities are attempting to formalize or institutionalize the links, as for example with the *Temple of the Lady* in Vancouver or the recently-formed *Earth Religions Coalition East* (ERCE) in Halifax. People associated with the earth-religions community, therefore, have access to a fairly wide range of information about different types of practice and belief, through observation of others, through specific training provided by some groups to neophytes, through workshops or classes open to any interested parties, and through books, magazines, and the internet: and much of this information is available also to "outsiders", who may indeed find it easier to locate general information than to locate practising groups. It is time to define some groups and their beliefs. Here I will give a set of definitions from the home-page of [ERCE](#) on the world-wide-web.

Wicca:

encompasses a set of related religions or traditions based on the worship of a Goddess and God who represent duality of the universe. Wicca includes Gardnerian Wicca, Alexandrian Wicca, Dianic Wicca or Wicce (which often focuses on The Goddess alone), and the Reclaiming tradition. All have some basis in the work on Gerald Gardner, though this is most obvious in the Gardnerian tradition. Readers may be familiar with the books of Starhawk, the most renowned proponent of the Reclaiming tradition, and one of the most publicly known witches in North America. Some Wiccan groups focus on particular cultures and base their worship in deities associated with these: thus, Celtic Wicca, Norse Wicca, Isian, etc. Several Wiccan traditions are represented within ERCE, including Gardnerian.

You can link to information on *Gardnerian* Wicca provided by a local group. For more general information about Wicca and its traditions, try the website of the *Covenant of the Goddess*, an official church in the US.

Asatru:

A set of modern religions based on the traditions, mythology, poetry and magic of Northern Europe (including Scandinavia, Holland, Germany, Britain and Iceland). Asatru means "true to the Aesir", generally interpreted as all the northern gods, spirits and ancestors, including Aesir, Vanir and Disir. The Ring of Troth is the best-known North American Asatru organization, with a branch in the Metro area.

You can find out about a series of Rune Workshops being run in Halifax, and you can link to the official website of the *Ring of Troth*, an international Asatru organization.

Celtic Paganism:

A set of modern religions based on the traditions, mythology, poetry and magic of Celtic Europe (including Ireland and much of Britain). The most well-known North American Celtic reconstructionist religious group is Ar nDraiocht Fein; but we do not currently have an ADF group within ERCE.

For more information link to the main web-page of *Ar nDraiocht Fein*. For information on the history of an ADF grove check out *Mugwort Grove*.

(from <http://www.ccn.cs.dal.ca/Religion/Erce/Erce-Home.html>, March 1996. Some groups omitted. (1))

In the remainder of this paper I shall examine how members of these groups locate their practice with respect to present-day views of "the middle-ages". My research continues to be conducted through observation of groups, examination of some commonly-used books and magazines, in-depth interviewing of individual practitioners in Nova Scotia and elsewhere, and further interviewing using email to contact members of groups which are poorly represented in the Nova Scotia pagan community, participation in workshops and email discussions, and general browsing of the internet.

Earth-centred belief, meaning and texts in a postmodern world

A glance around a bookstore frequented by pagan religious practitioners reveals an astonishing variety of titles: astonishing, because until the late 1980s (and in Halifax until 1995) there were relatively few available. Some works are published by mainstream presses, others by specialized small presses. "Aquarian" and "Thorson" are imprints of Harper Collins. Llewellyn is the best known "occult" publisher, and many pagans own a number of their books.

Some shelves bear titles referring to Native Spirituality, Women's spirituality, Africa, the East, and these will not be discussed in the present paper. However, large sections are devoted to religions derived from Western Europe. Titles range from translations or retellings of *The Tain* (Kinsella, 1970), *Beowulf* (Rebsamen, 1991), and *The Norse Myths* (Crossley-Holland, 1980), through scholarly discussions such as *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland* (Condren, 1990), and *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Ellis Davidson, 1988), to works that, while designed for a more general audience, present and evaluate evidence from archaeology and literature, such as *Women of the Celts*, *The Celts*, *King of the Celts* (Markale, 1986, 1993, 1994), *The Druids* (Ellis, 1994) or *Celtic Mythology* (Rutherford, 1990). Then there are books designed for a general but mostly neo-pagan readership, where evidence is presented as factual, such as *The book of Druidry: History, Sites and Wisdom* (Nichols, 1975), or *An Arthurian Reader*, *A Glastonbury Reader*, and *A Celtic Reader* all compiled and edited by John Matthews (Matthews 1988, 1991, 1991). Among these should be counted works which present themselves as revealing deep and long-lost secrets, as in *The Irish Celtic Magical Tradition: Ancient Wisdom of the Battle of Moytura* (Blamires, 1992).

A number of books are about doing religion or magic. They present the reader with instruction in how to become a practitioner of a particular religious or magical system, usually associated with more general information about the deities, myths and festivals of the system: *A Witches Bible Compleat* (Farrar and Farrar, 1981), combining two earlier works, *Eight Sabbats for Witches* and *The Witches' Way*; *Teutonic Religion and Teutonic Magic* (Kveldulf Gundarsson, 1993 and 1991); *Northern Magic* (Thorsson, 1993); *Scottish Witchcraft*, *The History and Magick of the Picts* (Buckland, 1994); *Witta, An Irish Pagan Tradition* (McCoy, 1993); *Celtic Magic* (Conway, 1990); *Norse Magick* (Conway, 1995); *The Rites of Odin* (Fitch, 1990); *Celtic Myth and Magic* (McCoy, 1995); *Falcon Feather and Valkyrie Sword* (Conway 1995). Most of the books in this latter category are from Llewellyn.

Despite the interest of the publishing industry in this sector of the market, few researchers within anthropology or sociology have turned their attention to the phenomenon of present-day paganism and its construction. Earth-centred spirituality has been treated cursorily by most mainstream sociologists of religion (e.g. Bibby 1987; 1993). Such researchers point to recorded memberships of, at most, a few thousand in North America for all non-aboriginal earth-centred religions, and are quite likely to treat members as adherents of 'cults'.

Some interesting studies do exist, such as Jon Bloch's recent work on narrative strategies of members of 'countercultural' religious groups in the United States (Bloch, 1994) or Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, an exploratory ethnography of several neo-pagan groups in Britain (Luhrmann, 1989). Some research has focused specifically on Wicca, or Dianic Witchcraft. Thus, Luff (1990) in a literature review pursues connections between Wicca and feminism, while Finley (1991) explores links between spirituality and feminist politics in her study of participants in an annual conference of Dianic witches. Lozano and Foltz (1990) explore how feminist Dianic Wicca constitutes a framework for the construction of meaning during the occasion of the funeral of a group-member's father. In a recent paper, Luhrmann implies that beliefs and practices of feminist spirituality may often have the effect of structuring gender processes in ways that empower, rather than disempower, women (Luhrmann, 1993): here a strong link with earth and environmental concerns becomes apparent. She describes images and symbolic constructions of the pagan goddess not only as mother but as a young woman independent of males, and as a destructive "crone" figure. Within feminist pagan discourse, the word "hag" and "crone" convey power. Griffin (1995) focuses on how Dianic witches use symbols, images and consciously created myths to redefine women and power, and to construct a feminist understanding of the relations of people to their world.

Within Canada, however, there have been few such studies. Researchers appear to have concentrated on mapping the allegiances of members, particularly of the religion known as Wicca, rather than examining the constitution of meaning of membership. Thus, Neil Williams has traced factions and internal divisions within Wiccan groups in Ontario (Williams, 1995). Shelley Rabinovitch, in her M.A. dissertation (1992), describes Wiccan group memberships across Canada. While this work sheds light on the construction of specific alternative communities, it does not bear directly on the larger questions of gender and power (2), and of the deliberate adoption of alternative discourses, that I refer to above.

The neo-pagan community includes many people, both women and men, who are not Dianic and indeed not necessarily Wiccan. Other constituent groups found in Canada include Ásatrú (described to some extent in the US. by Stephen Flowers (1981), and more recently by Kaplan (1993)) and various groups who attempt to reconstruct beliefs and practices of Celtic (non-Wiccan) or Eastern European religious origins, in addition to Goddess worshippers and Women's Spirituality groups. It would appear that little or no scholarly work has been carried out on discourse and the construction of meaning within non-wiccan groups. Further, those studies which do have a

bearing on the discourse of wiccan groups have for the most part been specific to particular small groups observed by researchers. There is a lack, therefore, of studies of how people insert themselves into the discourses of earth-centred religions, how these discourses spread and change, whether they are shared generally across neo-pagan groups, and to what extent practitioners use them in constructing their identities as members of earth-centred religions; and how they relate to accounts of the history and mythology of, for instance, the middle ages.

Let us now return to the bookshelves. The final category that I listed above, that of "how-to" books, is potentially the most interesting with which to begin an examination of discourse, for it is often this category that people discover first: either when they first encounter neo-paganism, or when they first discover a set of practices previously unknown to them. Indeed it is often the titles of such books that alert people to the possibility that there is something "different" that they could perhaps learn. Even a swift examination indicates that not all books in this category are equal, in terms of the information they provide or the thoroughness of the research on which it is based. Some give detailed information on sources, including scholarly books and historical documents. Others reference only other "how to" books, or works by authors from the same publisher. Still others give few or no references, claiming to be based on the sayings of "an old man from X" or "a woman descended from generations of witches".

A quick example of the quality of some of the information can be found in D J Conway's *Norse Magic*. Here some background is required. In 1984 the well-known fantasy author Diana Paxson published a novel, *Brisingamen*, in which the central character is a priestess of the Norse Goddess Freyja. Two large golden cats "adopt" this priestess, and a knowledgeable friend comments that

"It's a pity that none of the surviving literature gives the names of the two cats that drew Freyja's chariot or I would suggest you use those, but you might try, say B'ygul and Trjegul, which would be the Icelandic for Bee-gold and Tree-gold, close enough kennings for honey and amber..." (Paxson, 1984. p.42)

Conway's book, published in 1990, includes the following in a list of "Norse" names.

Bygul (Bee-gool) "BeeGold" or honey & Trjegul (Tree-gool) "Tree-Gold" or amber: Freyja's cats that pulled her chariot. (1995/1990, p.143)

Conway's research does not appear impressive, particularly as no references (to Paxson or elsewhere) are given for this piece of supposed information. Paxson's book is fiction, but its information tallies with (and is based on) that provided by researchers in the field of Norse mythology and religion, such as Ellis Davidson (1964) or Turville-Petre (1975). By contrast, within the field of "how-to" books, Gundarsson's *Teutonic Religion* gives a quite lengthy, annotated "book hoard" including some academic material, and citing specific translations of primary sources including the Poetic and Prose *Eddas* and a number of sagas.

The middle ages in pagan spiritual reconstruction

Given that there is a variety of information, of fluctuating quality, "out there", how do practitioners construct the concept of a "middle-ages" and draw upon it in their everyday religious or spiritual life? Where this concept seems to become important is in establishing precedents for practices, and status for group members. Perceptions of pagan religions in the "middle-ages", or before, provide reference points for identification and credentialing of not only group and individual practices and organization, but cosmologies and mythologies.

There are several ways in which this works. First, there are people who claim an unbroken chain of practice "back to the middle ages", which they say was disrupted, driven underground, but not fully broken by the period of witch burnings. Second, some see practices as modern and as deliberately created, but as derived from, influenced by and possibly including survivals of early practices, and influenced also by Judeo-Christian ceremonial magic, itself in turn drawn from "the middle-ages". Third are groups who seek to reconstruct, though within a modern context, such practices that are documented, and who draw inspiration from surviving documents, generally written during the middle-ages, in which Celtic or Norse mythologies are detailed. Some practitioners from these reconstructionist groups reject ceremonial magic. I will deal, here with the first and second groups together, before turning to the third. It should be cautioned that these categorizations are practical ones only, for the purposes of this discussion, and that individual people may draw on discourses of first one category, then another (3).

Categories 1 and 2: Tradition and influence

Examples of the first group are not as common as they were ten or twenty years ago. It is less fashionable to declare oneself the inheritor of an unbroken family tradition than it was in the days when Alex Sanders (founder of "Alexandrian Wicca") claimed to have been initiated as a child by his grandmother (Farrar, 1971). No claims to an unbroken tradition have been verified, though occasionally claimants do appear, particularly (in my experience) on internet groups. However, a considerable number of neo-pagans appear to consider that other neo-pagans do have a link to a tradition. Books such as Buckland's *Scottish Witchcraft, The History and Magick of the Picts*, mentioned above, rely on this concept for their sales. Somehow, according to this book, pre-Christian Pictish religion has been preserved and the inheritor of this religion of "Witta", "a descendent of the Picts" now living in the Isle of Lewis in the Scottish Hebrides was persuaded to talk with Buckland and share with him the secrets of his craft.

The original 20th century Wicca was the creation of Gerald Gardner, with assistance from various members of his coven. He claimed to have found a coven of witches, in the New Forest, who had preserved practices and craft secrets, and to have been initiated into this coven by Old Dorothy Clutterbuck. Present Gardnerians do not push this claim, for the most part, though a definition of Gardnerian Witchcraft available on the internet states:

Gardnerianism as a distinct Tradition began with the writings of Gerald B. Gardner. He was initiated into the New Forest coven in England by "old Dorothy" Clutterbuck. .. Unable to directly reveal much of his coven's workings, he developed a system that was a synthesis of various elements from Masonic ritual, ceremonial magick, French Mediterranean Craft and the teachings of his coven. Gardner, and later Doreen Valiente, re wrote some of the ritual, improving its poetic qualities and adding yet another dimension. As generations of Witches, they became the basis of Gardnerianism, and those who practised these rituals as handed down (not as published) became known as Gardnerians.

(From "Gardnerianism" by Kyril Oakwind & Judy Harrow, appearing in the spring/summer 1989 issue of FireHeart.)

"Let's not get into whether this coven ever really existed", says a Gardnerian witch in Halifax. There is recognition that many of the elements of Gardnerianism came from ceremonial magic, particularly from the Order of the Golden Dawn: rather than folk-religious practices, they may be derived from the work of qabbalistic magicians of the renaissance and late middle-ages. Gardner appears also, however, to have drawn on work such as that of Leland (1899, *The Gospel of the Witches*) and Margaret Murray (1921, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*; 1954, *The God of the Witches*) who in turn drew on accounts of late-mediaeval and early modern witch trials. For instance, the name "Aradia", familiar to Gardnerian and other Wiccans, appears to come from Leland, and may be a corruption of "Herodias", a name favoured by inquisitors for the leader of the witch-band.

Many neo-pagans use the name "Wicca" to define practices which are in part derived from the published works of Gardner and his associates. Gardnerians however consider that they are the inheritors of a mystery tradition and that training and initiation by a Gardnerian priestess or priest are required for entry into the mysteries of the tradition. Other wiccans often are more eclectic in their practices, holding that anyone, given enough time, can constitute themselves as a priestess or priest, if they read and learn from relevant material so that their practices are in line with those of recognized Wiccan groups or those of supposed earlier practitioners.

Which returns us to both the concept of past practices and to the books, the "relevant material". A number of the books listed above draw ideas from Wicca (and from the writings of Gardner and the later Farrars, and their followers), but phrase this in terms of religions of "The Picts", or "The Ancient Irish", or "The Norse". Browsing through the books, a critical reader has the sense that the books are constructed to be very similar to each other, giving sets of rituals in which the names of deities from one tradition or pantheon are easily replaced with those of another: giving the impression that all peoples of prechristian Europe worshipped in essentially the same way. To examine this concept we require to raise a spectre that Anthropologists do not like to disturb: that of Margaret Murray.

Murray's thesis, explored through a succession of books from 1921 to 1954, was indeed that there was one prechristian religion of Europe, elements of which remained intact throughout the mediaeval period. Her reasoning goes roughly as follows: prechristian European peoples worshipped a nature-god, often portrayed as horned and two-faced, identified as Dianus or Janus, or Cernunnos. The worship of this being was celebrated at the major festivals of the year cycle, and tied up with rulership of the land. She took from Frazer's *The Golden Bough* the concept of the god who is perpetually dying and reborn - corn god, oak or holly king - represented by the sacred king who also must die for the fertility of the land and its people. In the middle ages, she suggests, the Old Religion persisted, though people were nominally christian. Even rulers continued to subscribe to the Old Religion, bound up as it were with the fertility of the land, and history has recorded the sacrificial death of some (e.g. William Rufus) and the substitution at times of other prominent people as sacrificial victim, such as Joan of Arc or Thomas à Becket. The Old Religion persisted particularly in England, and the foundation of the Order of the Garter represented an example of coven organization. Only with the renaissance did the Old Religion begin to decline seriously.

Much of Murray's evidence came from a study of the witch trials of the 13th to the 17th centuries. Murray has been much taken to task by later scholars by considering confessions as "truth", and thereby believing accounts of the witches sabbat and pact with a horned god-figure (which she saw as Dianus). There are however other aspects of the trial records which she ignored: the regional variation in names given to the (usually female) leaders of the wild hunt, and the accounts of experiences which she appears to have considered too "strange" to be true - notably flying, and being in two places simultaneously (Ginzburg, 1991/1989).

Murray's work has been discredited by succeeding generations of scholars, notably Rose (1989/1962), and with reason. There seems little evidence to suggest that paganism either was, or survived as, one widespread religion based on worship of one god, called Dianus or anything else. Barstow however points out that Murray's emphasis on the trial records may not have been entirely misplaced, and speaks of

parts of her argument I have never been able to dismiss, namely, the evidence for ancient "folk religious" practices through the Western witchcraft material. Murray erred by forcing her evidence too far, by re-creating late mediaeval witchcraft as an "alternative church" instead of a loose collection of magical practices, a decision that pushed her into many anachronisms. Still, her attention to what people were doing, to folk ritual and belief, was on the right track... (Barstow, 1995, p.83)

An attention to these folk religious practices is shared by Carlo Ginzburg, who discusses how the definition of their own practices of the benandanti of North Italy was transformed within a short time period during the witch-craze from positive magic into sorcery or evil-working (Ginzburg, 1983/1966) : and later develops a thesis of the roots of many witch-practices, and of mediaeval idea about the witches' sabbat, in very ancient shamanic ritual (Ginzburg, 1991/1989). But whereas Murray was creating a thesis of survival of ancient practices, from highly suspect evidence, Ginzburg deals in particular local transformations, and takes care to map out every step of the way and let the readers know how speculative his arguments are. However, it is Murray that the creators and purveyors of many present-day pagan practices have read. Indeed, reprints of Murray's books are often to be found on the shelves of the occult bookstore. Gardner's work, as stated above, appears to draw on Murray, to whose work he makes approving reference, though transforming or re-transforming "Dianus" to "Diana" or to "Aradia" (after Leland), or to one who cannot be named as the name is a coven secret, with the god ("Dianus") becoming a consort. The Farrars' accounts of practices of Alexandrian witches draw heavily on both Murray and Frazer in describing this consort as horned (Cernunnos), or as dying and being reborn (the Oak and Holly kings). Another source of information,

particularly for Dianic Wiccans, is Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, though Graves himself is said to have pointed out that this book is a work of poetic imagery, not anthropology, religion, or mediaeval scholarship.

Many Wiccans speak of the period of the witch-trials as a time of intense persecution of the Old Religion, and identify to some extent with those who were hanged or burned. The use of the word "witch" by some is deliberate, to state this identification and, as they put it, reclaim a tradition along with the word. They see themselves as connected with Earth, connected with the agricultural year (which they celebrate at sabbats), and celebrating a polarity of male and female fertilities which they recognise as Goddess and God.

my basic principle is that there is, ..hhh, you know, a balance between, ah, a female force goddess and a male force god, and those are very, um, you know, when I, uh, sit down and think about it, you know, they're, you know, I understand them as very sort of, abstract essences as opposed to, "well, there's the goddess and she's got blond hair and she's six feet tall, and, you know, she's- she talks like this", you know. You know, in my understanding they're very, they're very abstract essences, but it's very helpful to me when I do think about them, to look at the mythologies and to call the Goddess Brigid and to call the God Lugh, or whatever's appropriate specifically to the ritual, but to have a name and to have, an image to put, for me, is important... (Rowan, feminist Witch)

"The mythologies" for Gardner tended to be classical (despite the term "British Traditional Witchcraft"): but many current practitioners look to what they see as their own roots, which for my informants are often in Celtic or Germanic sources. Rowan is a case in point:

I have a strong bias towards the Celtic mythology, you know I will admit to that, and, you know, that's the, my family ancestry for the most part, at any rate, has come out of, uhm, England and Scotland and Ireland, so, uhm, I don't know if that's, yeah, i- it's in the blood or anything (Rowan, feminist Witch)

Her "Celtic mythology" comes chiefly from stories of the Tuatha De Danaan, of the Red Branch of Ulster, and of Brigid, whether as Goddess or saint. Others look to the Mabinogi for their God/esses for their craft names. Some do not have a defined source for their deities or practices, just a general feeling that these are "Celtic".

...the most coherent name for me seems to be Wicca. Because from what I've, I'm seriously into the backgrounds of words, and so I've dug through and found a whole bunch of different things that basically lead back to it being based on the Celtic word for wise person. So I figure what I'm trying to do is gather as much wisdom about the world as I can, and spread it to as many people as I safely can, so I figure that fits. But if anybody says "what kind of Wicca" I say "Celtic Witchcraft, and if you want to get any more specific, go away (laughing). If you don't understand what I mean, you won't understand what I mean." (Rhiannon, self-defined Celtic Wiccan)

It is hard to tell what Rhiannon's practices are, as she gives no specific sources. (Several possible derivations are claimed for the word "Wicca", but other informants were in agreement with the scholars that the word is Old English.)

Formally I would call (my religion) Wicca. And whether you want to you know conjecture on the possible Saxon meaning, whether it means to bend or to shape or wise, um I don't think we'll ever get the proper etymology on that. And uh, any one of those (laugh) definitions can fit the bill. (Lance, Gardnerian High Priest)

However, a number of informants have spoken about the practices of "Wicca" or neo-paganism generally as having a "Celtic" flavour, and Celtic jewellery, and symbols are popular. Jason, a wiccan from Georgia met at a festival in Nova Scotia, says that significant symbols for him are "acorns, and oak leaves", and he wears on his arm

a brass and copper bracelet that has been twisted. And what it is, is a small torc. And I have a larger one, at home, that I wear in ceremonies ... I bought this at a science-fiction fantasy convention from a group, the person that made it was called The Crafty Celts, and I said I've got to support anybody that's going the support the culture and traditions of the Celtic world. And I, I bought some of these and made gifts to all my friends with them. (Jason, Wiccan)

Jason sees his practices as linking him with the practices of the past.

we would follow I think more the Welsh Celtic type strain, where we're very agriculturally oriented, for example when we, when we celebrate Lammas we have the grains and will actually put grains in a cauldron and have ceremonies about that, thanking the Mother Goddess and, for the fruits of the earth and things like that. So to me it's a very, it's a very nature, agrarian type of, of feel uh to the ceremonies. Which I enjoy. Which I really enjoy.

Many practitioners speak of using symbolic divination materials, such as runes, tarot cards, or both, in their magical or religious work. Often they will draw parallels between magical or divinatory systems, discussing similarities of meaning between runes and cards, relating both to the Qaballah, and discussing correspondences.

The reconstructionists

Members of the third category, here called "reconstructionists", take a different approach to their religion. Rather than seeking to justify their practices by finding links with the past, they attempt to uncover previous rituals, philosophies and theologies, and adapt these to a present-day setting, creating religious philosophy and practice that they consider appropriate. They generally define themselves as belonging to specific faiths relating to culturally-specific gods: which for the purpose of the present paper are the gods of the Celtic and Germanic peoples of Europe. Several organizations exist, in North America, Europe and elsewhere, whose objectives are not only to bring together like-minded people to practice religion, but to conduct the necessary background research to expand such practice. Not

all reconstructionists are members of these organizations, and indeed the majority are probably not members, though many may belong to local groups affiliated with national or international organizations. (As with all categories of neo-pagans, acquiring numbers is an impractical task.) Ar nDraiocht Fein means "Our Own Druidry", according to the ADF literature, and ADF is an example of a reconstructionist movement, probably the largest and best-known Celtic or "Druid" reconstructionist religion. Lee Ann is a recent member of ADF, whose story is not uncommon.

I came to college and decided that the word for I was an "agnostic". I knew that there had to be something out there, but I sure didn't know what it was ... Then, during my junior year of college. I ran across an Usenet newsgroup called alt.pagan, and a local BBS. I read these sources avidly, as well as quite a number of books that were recommended to me by people on line. I also found out that one of my roommates at the time was a Pagan, and she and I talked a little about it, and she lent me some of her books to read.

Suddenly, everything "clicked". Paganism made enormous sense to me. Here was a religion I could believe in, both the Deities and the practices. From there on out, I considered myself a Pagan, and began practising an eclectic brand of Paganism. (At this time, I also happened to meet my partner, who also "came home" to Paganism at about the same time.)

Things went along smoothly from there. I explored Wicca and decided that it was not for me. I was happily practising my eclectic mix until about 2-3 months ago. I have felt "called" to solidify my beliefs and practices, and to do so in a Celtic/Druidic way. So I am embarking on yet another spiritual journey...

For my new Celtic path, I am again doing a great deal of reading, and have joined a mail list dedicated to Celtic scholarship. I have also joined 2 Druid groups (ADF and Keltria) for additional guidance in my scholarship. I hope to eventually find a grove to practice with, and learn and share with my fellow grove members.

The "great deal of reading" she is doing is also fairly typical. These are not "how-to" books, though she is likely to have read a number of these also. What she speaks of is drawing on translations of old material, and on archaeological evidence.

The Tain (tr. Kinsella) gives an accounting of a major part of Irish myth. The Celts (Chadwick) has given me an overview of how the Celtic peoples developed and how they lived. (Lee Ann, Celtic reconstructionist: e-mail interview.)

One problem shared by reconstructionists is that there are few accounts of how their spiritual ancestors actually did worship or what they did believe, or how their religious practices fitted in with their daily lives. Much can be conjectured from the cyclical rhythms of the year: but most accounts of Celtic mythology come from the pens of christianized scribes, and available accounts may have gone through repeated copying and recopying by people who have little understanding of their contents, perhaps engaging in substitutions that appear to make more sense to the scribe, as Ford (1977) suggests may have occurred in the third branch of the Mabinogi. In the case of Germanic reconstructionists the same problem arises, but as the Scandinavian countries, and Iceland, were christianized relatively late in the middle ages, there is less distance between the writers and people whose beliefs they may describe. The Eddas and Sagas are the chief primary sources for Ásatrú-followers, many of whom acknowledge a debt in particular to Snorri Sturlusson (1179-1241) who preserved much of the material, both mythological and historical, though in a somewhat christianized form.

Laeknir is an Ásatrú practitioner of several years standing. "I hunted for this religion, since youth," he says. He now works with a local group, known as a kindred.

Some have labeled my path "Icelandic Ásatrú", which in a sense indicates a "purity" or exclusiveness to Ásatrú. There are many different forms of Norse paganism, and "Icelandic Ásatrú" generally means that the ceremonies are based specifically on what has been found in the Icelandic sagas. This can seem a little restrictive to some. The ceremonies involved with Norse Wicca, for instance, are somewhat different than those in traditional or "Icelandic" Ásatrú.

He locates the basis of his belief in:

The Eddas, especially, and many of the Icelandic sagas. They tell us not only about the mythology, but also about the mindset and feelings of the ancients. They differed in many ways from modern folk, and learning to understand how they felt gives us a good insight into how they felt about and approached the Gods in daily life. Eyrbyggja saga, for instance, is one of the key sagas for understanding Ásatrú faith. It holds one of the very few references to what religious ceremonies were like. In reconstruction of these for the modern day, we do have to be careful about Christian influence (or any other influence), however. Eyrbyggja saga is one that may be tainted with non-Ásatrú beliefs, but it provides insight into the religion of our ancestors.

Very generally, Ásatrú is "faith in the Aesir". -- the pre-Christian deities of the northern European peoples. The beliefs and ceremonies of Ásatrú are found in Icelandic and Germanic sagas, and Eddic poetry. (Laeknir, e-mail interview)

Another Ásatrú practitioner, Nuallë, explains what it means to her to be a "reconstructionist".

By "Reconstructionist" I mean that I try by scholarly study to put together an understanding of the ways that those who historically worshipped the Gods I worship lived and practiced their worship. I then try to live and practice in the same ways, so far as that is possible and/or feasible while living in the real near-21st-Century-CE world. (Nuallë, email interview)

Many Ásatrú-followers speak of finding a religion that seemed to them to have some historical basis. They could point to historical figures, or scholars' accounts of the daily lives of ordinary people, and feel kinship. This is ailsa's account of how she came to her

religion, via (in her case) women's spirituality.

... i encountered barbara walker's The Skeptical Feminist while working in the library, and read that, and set it down and said "THIS i can believe" (cos barbara said you don't have to believe in a literal deity to worship the goddess, worshipping the goddess energy in other women and the earth was ok too.)

so then i started reading EVERYTHING related to women's spirituality and witchcraft and wicca i could get my hands on, and with a university library at my disposal, that was a lot...

it didn't take me long to determine that i was not, and could not be, wiccan. it was too dualistic and dogmatic (despite wiccan claims to the contrary) and too rooted in a fictionalized version of the past that i just can't deal with. because the more i read, the more i discovered that a lot of the lovely sounding claims in when god was a woman and the chalice and the blade and other writings of that nature just didn't hold up when you traced the footnotes to see what they were basing their arguments on. and being in connection with reality in my religion is very important to me.

i got annoyed with women's spirituality a bit later, but for different reasons, although a lot of it boils down to people wanting pretty stories rather than the truth.

i'd encountered mention of Ásatrú in drawing down the moon and a few other books, so when i saw a copy of a book of troth on the university library bookshelves, i snapped it up, and incorporated elements of it into my practices almost immediately.

i also met a few asatru people on the net ...

this account leaves out the fact that whilst acting as a priestess in the women's spirituality group up in bangor, loki took me under his wing as his sister, and the fact that ancestor worship and belonging to a tradition that my ancestors practised is important to me. and i never quite worked in the fact that lately i have been deciding that the gods are not just figments of my imagination, although i haven't discussed this with a lot of people yet. (ailsa, e-mail interview)

One book often mentioned by my informants is *Our Troth* (KveldúlfR Gundarsson, 1993), published privately by the Ring of Troth, an international Ásatrú organization. This includes material on the history, religion and philosophies of Germanic peoples, in addition to accounts of present-day practices. The book includes work by academics, notably Stephan Grundy, incorporating extracts from his Ph.D. Thesis *The Cult of Ódhinn, God of Death*, and many of its authors draw on sources such as Ellis' *The Road to Hel* (1968) and Turville Petre's *Myth and Religion of the North* (1975) Most of the Ásatrú-followers interviewed make use of runes, using either the 24-rune Elder futhark, the Norwegian, Danish or Icelandic 16-rune younger futhark or (as does ailsa) the Anglo-Saxon 33-Rune futhorc. Reconstructionist books on runes usually begin with some account of their history, with reference to academic works such as that of Elliott (1959). Not all Ásatrú-followers use runes for divination, some maintaining that there is no historical evidence for their use in this manner. Many do, however, maintaining that a reconstructionist religion must adapt to the present day, and that the insights of its members, as long as they are identified as such, form an important part of their practices.

While a decade ago the overwhelming majority of Ásatrú practitioners were male, an increasing number of women appear to be attracted to this set of practices and beliefs. The image of Ásatrú as the religion of male "Vikings" who were raiders and pillagers is diminishing, and while it still attracts many (men and women) as "warriors", other practitioners identify with the farmers, weavers, spinners or poets of the past. My women informants, and some men, emphasize the importance granted women by many heathen Germanic peoples, and that several notable personages whose names have come down to us were women: such as Queen Sigríðhr, who after Óláf Tryggvason of Norway called her a "heathen bitch", organized the coalition which brought about his defeat and death. Books such as *Our Troth* and KveldúlfR Gundarsson's *Teutonic Religion* emphasize that while the extant literature speaks chiefly of the deeds of the gods, according to Snorri, "Not less holy are the Ásynjur, the goddesses, and they are of no less authority" (1960, Brodeur translation).

Conclusion

The foregoing outline of types of practice, which is all I can develop in the space available here, indicates that there is plenty of variety in pagan belief today, and that much of the variety is constructed in competing accounts of early belief and practice. With few exceptions, the people I have interviewed accept that not all pagans need practise in their way. There is room for multiple types of practice, and no claim to have the "one true way". There are some commonalities within these multiple types. The people I have interviewed see their beliefs and practices as in some way linking them with earth. Many, though not all, define themselves as environmentalists. Though not all would define themselves as feminist, all see women as potentially as capable as men in whatever spheres they choose to engage in: and see women's participation as both desirable and necessary. My informants see themselves as following the faiths of their ancestors, physical, spiritual, or both. Most have some belief in rebirth, so that in some sense they may consider that they are their spiritual ancestors reborn. In this paper there is not the space to proceed to the further question of why people seek the gods of their ancestors, and why they worship in the ways they do. One quote, from Nuallë, must suffice.

They provide me a context in which I can deal in the universe with a set of spiritual paradigms that fit me, with Gods and wights who can do things I cannot -- and also with needs that I am better suited than they to fill. They provide a framework in which I feel I am free and encouraged to develop into myself, rather than expected to conform to some "objective ideal". My religion provides me with several other people with whom I can share ideas and experiences, debate points of cosmology, and otherwise build a social and intellectual life, based on spiritual principles the same or much similar to my own. (Nuallë,

With that statement I believe that all the people I have interviewed, be they mediaevalist, "traditionalist" or reconstructionist, Wiccan or Ásatrú, would concur.

Notes

(1) This description was written by myself as consultant for the ERCE page, and is therefore offered as a short description, not as discourse to be analyzed.

(2) Lucie DuFresne is currently attempting to directly address some gender/power questions, as in her sections of "Which witch is which?", paper presented by DuFresne and Shelley Rabinovitch at the conference on The Middle Ages in Popular Culture, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, March 31 1996.

(3) This categorization is not intended to be all-inclusive: for instance, it is hard to place Sunder, an Asatru Chaos Magician, within it. It is derived for purposes of the present paper, and deals only with how informants relate discursively to "the middle ages".

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