

MODERN PAGANISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY**

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

DEPT. OF SOCIOLOGY

OCTOBER 2003

ABSTRACT

Paganism is a 'magic'-based spiritual category of fairly recent origin the general profile of which currently appears to be burgeoning within the west. Despite this, it remains fairly underrepresented in academic studies, particularly where British manifestations of the phenomenon are concerned. Moreover, while much valuable information may be gleaned from the available surveys, many of these employ a predominantly 'legitimizing' (as opposed to analytical) approach, one notable symptom being a tendency to use explanations that might appear to converge rather too neatly in some respects with the sort of assumptions towards which Pagans themselves seem to gravitate. The main intention behind this study is simply therefore to help broaden what is evidently a comparatively small field of scholarship, without adopting an 'apologetic' stance towards the subject. In doing so, it also challenges some of the more questionable academic presumptions that have accrued around the phenomenon, often in accordance with this legitimating tendency, since it first started to come under 'proper' scholarly scrutiny. The study – which employed in-depth interviews with British Pagans as part of its substantive methodology, along with detailed considerations of both 'insider' and academic literature on the subject – commences with a critical appraisal of ethnographic surveys of Paganism (placing especial emphasis upon methodological criteria), followed by an introduction to some of its diverse manifestations. The 'core' segment provides an overview of Paganism's defining features, combining this with an investigation into the sort of nuances and complexities of interpretation and experience individual Pagans may bring to those ideas. These themes are further expanded upon in a discussion of Paganism's relationship to broader sociological contexts, including those of 'conventional' religion, alternative spirituality, and 'mainstream' culture and society generally, to address the possibility that the 'modern' world might actually be more conducive to Pagan attitudes and worldviews than is often assumed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Professor Colin Campbell of the University of York for his clear-sightedness, not to mention remarkable patience, while acting as supervisor for this study. He is also in debt to all those individuals who agreed to take part in this research project, and to the many friends and family members who provided him with support and encouragement during what at times seemed to be an endless task. Pob hwyl i chi i gyd.

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INTRODUCTION

THE PAGAN PHENOMENON

1. 'Coming of Age'

Historically speaking, Paganism is a fairly new phenomenon. Its first manifestation was in post-War Britain, where it appeared in the form of a purportedly ancient spiritual 'tradition' that identified itself with the witches of medieval Europe and called itself Wicca, an arrival that happened more or less immediately after the repealing in 1951 of the three hundred year-old Witchcraft Act. The – now discredited – story told by Wicca's adherents was that they were reviving the original religion of the western world; for centuries, it had been hammered into submission by church and state authorities, but now, it was finally possible for Witchcraft to re-establish itself within the UK. However, despite the flurry of publicity which attended this advent, Wicca appeared very much to be an 'underground' phenomenon, whose followers organised themselves into small and insular groups called 'covens'. As far as their chosen 'path' went, Wiccans seemed suspicious of 'mainstream' opinion, and, by and large, very much sought to 'keep themselves to themselves'.

Since then, however, Paganism could be described as having 'exploded', both in terms of its public profile and cultural 'impact', and its apparent tendency to fragment into ever more idiosyncratic forms at a bewildering rate. For some time now, interested scholars and ethnographers have aspired not only to explain, but also to keep pace with the Pagan phenomenon, thereby – not least – having to pay serious attention to the question of why such seemingly archaic notions such as witchcraft should still seem attractive today, and moreover, to increasing numbers of individuals. Perhaps the first scholar significantly to raise the standing of Paganism (among academics and the general public alike) was the American Margot Adler, who, back in 1979, portrayed it as an idealistic and forward-looking force whose adherents "share the goal of living in harmony

with nature” (Adler 1986¹: 4). Adler also proposed that, not only do they “look to the old pre-Christian nature religions of Europe, the ecstatic religions, and the mystery traditions as a source of inspiration”, but are actively “reclaiming these sources, [and] transforming them into something new” (1986: 4).

Another important appraisal was that made by the American (but British-based) anthropologist Tanya Lurhmann, who, at the start of her ambitious, late ‘eighties study of the phenomenon, argued that the beliefs of modern Pagan magicians are eminently “reasonable” even in this day and age (Lurhmann 1989: 3). This, she explained, was because Pagans are, in effect, “recreating a childhood world”, and thereby fulfilling the important function of making life appear somehow more ‘meaningful’ to themselves during “adulthood” (Lurhmann 1989: 18).

Firm data on actual Pagan numbers is hard to come by, a situation that is due in no small part to the absence of any Pagan institutional infrastructure or governing body (or bodies) to speak of. However, such a restriction has not prevented some commentators from making suggestions in this area. Thus, the American sociologist James Lewis, for instance, cites the US academic (and Witch) Aidan Kelly’s assessment of there being around “three hundred thousand serious participants” in the US during the mid-nineties, not including the “many sympathizers and fellow travelers who are involved around the fringes of the movement” (Lewis 1996: 2). Lewis’ academic compatriots Danny Jorgensen and Scott Russell have drawn from a number of studies (including Kelly’s) to conclude that there are “at least 200,000 American Neopagans” in America, while also suggesting that “estimates of twice that number are not implausible” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 326).

Regarding the UK, the historian and authority on Witchcraft, Ronald Hutton, has suggested that there might be anything between 107,000 and 140,000 Pagans residing here² – an estimate that, he claims, is backed up

¹ These quotes are taken from the 1986 reprint of Adler’s study, but also featured in the original, 1979 edition.

² This figure includes both “initiated” and “non-initiated” Pagans (Hutton 1999b: 401). See chapter seven for Hutton’s explanation of and numerical estimates for these categories.

by other independent sources³. And while for the moment such claims should perhaps be regarded more as 'educated guesses' than as verifiable 'facts', it might also be possible to point to certain other factors that could conceivably be thought as providing a more tangible illustration of the phenomenon's rise within the UK. One such possible indication is the substantial growth in the number of 'moots' (these being what the Pagan Federation, which is arguably the closest thing the UK has to a representative organisation, describes as "social events run by Pagans for Pagans"⁴) that are held throughout the country on a regular – usual monthly – basis, and publicised in Pagan 'listings' magazines and (increasingly) websites. Thus, whereas, say, the July 1988 issue of the now defunct journal *Pagan News* could list a mere 17 moots then operating nationwide, the Spring 2002 issue of *Pagan Dawn* (the house journal of the Pagan Federation) was advertising around 120, although the likelihood is that there are many more that are not advertised in the Pagan press⁵.

Even when regarded purely in terms of cultural 'product', the phenomenon would also appear to be enjoying an unprecedentedly high profile within the UK, which currently seems to abound with magazines, films, books and websites on or with some relevance to the subjects of magic or Paganism, as a search of the internet⁶ or perusal of any high street

³ Hutton adds that this "approximate total" is corroborated by figures compiled (albeit by "means unknown to" himself) from "two other scholars": an "evangelical Christian" called David Burnett, who has written an "objective if unsympathetic study", and his fellow academic Joanne Pearson (Hutton 1999b: 401), who is another well-known authority on the subject (see chapter one).

⁴ 'Pagan Dawn Classifieds', *Pagan Dawn* (142), Spring 2002 (no page number)

⁵ JH, who is one of the Pagans whose testimony is appraised in some detail over the course of the present study, and who has run regular moots herself, has estimated that there are "at least 200-250 pub moots" that she knows of (JH: 16). She adds that other "fairly secretive" meetings are also being held "in people's homes", and, moreover, that the overall number of moots is on the increase.

⁶ See chapter seven (*n.* 47) for the results of an informal survey (conducted by the author of the present study) looking at the number of 'hits' obtained when searching for a selection of terms relevant to the phenomenon.

bookshop will attest⁷.

Giving these indicators, it is thus perhaps significant that a couple of years ago, Prudence Jones, who is the former president of the Pagan Federation (which closely monitors the treatment of Pagans and Paganism by 'mainstream' political, cultural and media bodies, not to mention academia) made an announcement where she described the phenomenon as having "come of age". Jones was commenting on the way that, to her, it has developed far "beyond the... secretive nature" that had once characterised it, to become a highly "visible" spiritual category that "can take its place in what is increasingly a multifaith society"⁸.

However, despite this apparent shift in status, not to mention the efforts of scholars such as Adler, Luhrmann and Lewis, the phenomenon has received comparatively little attention from academics. Thus, Lewis himself, for instance, asked in the same chapter how "a movement of this size [has] thus far eluded sustained scholarly scrutiny" (Lewis 1996: 2), a point echoed in Jorgensen and Russell's description of Paganism as "an increasingly significant" sociological and spiritual phenomenon that had hitherto been the subject of "surprisingly little empirical research" (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 325).

And while Paganism is arguably no less significant a phenomenon within the UK, its standing here (among academics at least) has tended to be even lower than in the US (Luhrmann's having more or less been the first study seriously to address the subject, while still remaining one of only a very small number to do so). The intention behind the present study is thus to add to what is so far a relatively small corpus of scholarly and ethnographic literature. It will involve an appraisal of the beliefs, opinions and behaviours of modern British Pagans, combining this with a discussion of the possible significance these might have with regard to broader sociological contexts. After assessing the way that sociologists and ethnographers have tended to

⁷ According to the Inventory Manager at the Borders bookshop in Leeds, the store currently has 504 titles on its books under the heading of Magical Studies, of which 65-75% (which works out at around 330-380 publications in all) are available on the shelves at any given time. (Phone Conversation 27/09/03)

⁸ 'Letter from the President' (Pagan Dawn [138], Spring 2001: 1)

tackle the phenomenon on a methodological level, and discussing (some of) the principal forms it has manifested in over the years (thereby introducing some important Pagan terms and concepts), this overarching discussion will proceed to unfurl over a succession of (roughly) incremental stages of generality. Accordingly, the study will attempt to ascertain the 'core' features of Paganism; the governing trends to have affected Paganism since its inception; how the core features of Paganism compare with those of 'mainstream' or conventional religions; how Paganism compares with other contemporary spiritual 'alternatives'; the most popular theories by which academics have sought to explain the significance of Paganism, and the extent of their usefulness; other explanations which might be proposed to help account for the initial catalysis, longstanding attraction, and current burgeoning profile of the phenomenon. The final two topics will also cover by far the most extensive theoretical ground (both sociological and historical) within the present study, with the intention of establishing a comprehensive yet nuanced interpretative framework through which to understand and appraise the phenomenon. There will now follow a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the study along the above lines.

2. Chapter Plan

Chapter one of this study deals with some of the various methodological approaches that have so far been employed for the purpose of investigating modern Paganism on a sociological or ethnographic level. The first section features an assessment of the handful of surveys to focus, more or less, on British Pagans, that were available at the time the research was in progress, followed by a broader appraisal of academic considerations of the subject (or rather, by default, mainly of those which focus upon North America). The second section features a discussion of the comparative benefits and limitations of the methodological approach chosen to acquire firsthand data for the present study, this being the long interview method. Chapter two presents a brief overview of the development of modern Paganism since its inception in post-War Britain, including a look at the prevailing or defining

trends to have governed this, followed by a discussion of some of the phenomenon's major branches, including Wicca (or Witchcraft), Druidry, Heathenism and Shamanism.

Each of the subsequent five chapters deals with a key aspect of modern Pagan orientations. Chapter three discusses how Pagans tend to envisage their relationship with the physical environment, and also addresses the question of whether Paganism should be categorised as a 'nature religion'. Chapter four looks at the pivotal role of the Otherworld concept – which is to say, the idea of magical 'dimensions' – within the worldviews of Pagans, with respect both to general cosmology and to notions of localised 'nodes' of 'power', and will also feature a discussion of the type of narrative and thematic sources from which modern interpretations of the subject primarily draw. Chapter five focuses on the subject of gnosis, or magical 'awareness'. It considers the way that Pagans tend to interpret this concept, placing especial emphasis on notions of 'self-development', and also assesses the subtle differences between Otherworld and gnosis conceptions, in addition to the significant overlap that seems to exist between the respective cultures of Pagans and role-playing gamers. Chapter six considers the role of ritual as perhaps the central mode of Pagan expression and praxis, taking in both the typical features of such activities and the significant ways in which they may differ, and also looks at how Pagan understandings relate to broader cultural and ethnographic interpretations of the concept. Chapter seven considers the prominence that seems typically to be accorded to individual sensibilities by Pagans, and assesses the importance of these as both attitudinal tendencies and expressions of an underlying cultural imperative, with specific reference to Wallis' notion of epistemological individualism.

The next two chapters attempt to situate Paganism in relation to broader religious and spiritual contexts. Chapter eight appraises Pagan spiritualities in the light of the three defining, 'theodical' features of religious worldviews as outlined by Weber. The discussion shows how such features typically seem to manifest within Paganism, while also drawing attention to the apparent uniqueness of the phenomenon that is revealed through such a comparison. Having looked at how Paganism relates to 'mainstream' religion,

the discussion turns in chapter nine to the subject of modern 'alternative' spirituality. Here, the phenomenon is compared to and contrasted with the two other definitive manifestations of such, namely new religious movements (NRMs) and the New Age.

The final two chapters tie together the numerous threads of discussion that were introduced and expounded upon in previous chapters, in order to locate the phenomenon in relation to general sociological trends evident within contemporary western society, while placing especial emphasis upon British contexts. Chapter ten looks at the way that sociological and anthropological studies have tended to interpret Paganism's significance, and most notably, the suggestion that it epitomises a substantive, even axiological challenge to prevailing conditions associated with the notional period of modernity, before going on to question the validity of such an overview. This discussion leads on to chapter eleven, where some alternative possible reasons as to why apparently growing numbers of modern individuals seem to find the phenomenon so appealing will be considered. In so doing, it will also attempt to delineate the type of ostensibly 'mainstream' conditions that might conceivably be regarded as being particularly conducive to or encouraging of Paganism, placing particular emphasis upon the question of secularisation, and will also consider the phenomenon's future prospects.

On a final note, it is appropriate for the author of the present study to reveal that he himself is a Pagan of some twenty years standing. However, lest it be assumed that the Pagan 'scene' could therefore hardly have constituted unfamiliar territory to him, it should also be pointed out that he is very much a solo practitioner (the meaning of this term will become eminently clear in due course), who, moreover, had, prior to embarking on the present study, experienced little in the way of either social or 'working' contact with other Pagans, such that his immersion for research purposes within Pagan milieux could therefore, from a social standpoint at least, almost be seen as 'starting from scratch'. More importantly, he has sought to bracket out any 'day-to-day' affinities with the phenomenon he might have, so as to survey the phenomenon from what is hopefully a sufficiently objective standpoint.

CHAPTER ONE

APPROACHES TO THE ACADEMIC STUDY OF PAGANISM

1. A Review of the Literature

The primary intention of this chapter is to look at sociological and anthropological literature that deals specifically with the subject of Paganism within the UK. However, as noted earlier, the problem is that there are as yet comparatively few UK-based studies available. Ronald Hutton affirmed this point during the course of his wide-ranging survey of Witchcraft in the UK. This was written a good ten years after Luhrmann's study, yet even by that point Hutton felt obliged to describe Luhrmann as his "main predecessor in the field" (Hutton 1999b: 389).

Nevertheless, as he also admits, Luhrmann's study signalled the arrival of Paganism as a subject to be taken seriously by British academics, and at a time when, he suggested, the phenomenon was beginning to burgeon in "size, sophistication, and public profile" within the UK (1999b: 376). Consequently, a number of studies – most of these the result of British academic conferences¹ – have subsequently appeared. Of these, only a handful draw primarily from empirical observational or survey data, although the non-empirical and non-British² surveys available may also yield invaluable supplementary information, due to the sheer weight of ethnographic and background information they present.

¹ As Hutton avers (Hutton 1999b: 376), these notably included conferences held at Newcastle University (Paganism in Contemporary Britain, which in 1994 was the first ever in the UK to focus exclusively on modern Paganism), and Lancaster University (Nature Religion Today: Western Paganism, Shamanism and Esotericism, 1996). These events gave rise, respectively, to the compendiums Paganism Today (1996) and Nature Religion Today (1998).

² As mentioned in the previous chapter, the corpus of academic studies is predominantly American in focus.

A. British studies

a) Adler (1979/1986)

Although Adler's study has a mainly American focus³, she also included British Pagans in her research. Originally published in 1979, the book was updated in 1986, using additional survey data. For the original study, Adler adopted a number of methodological approaches. She explains: "For three months I travelled thousands of miles to groves and covens in the United States and Britain. I attended ritual gatherings, conducted interviews, and met hundreds of people"⁴ (Adler 1986: *xiii*). Adler also employed a "long questionnaire"⁵, writing that she received "hundreds of pages in response"⁶ (1986: *xiii*). For the update, Adler sent out another, shorter questionnaire (intended to garner supplementary information), and received 195 responses out of 450⁷ (1986: 443). Her study also features what she describes as a phenomenological element, relating to her own longstanding involvement in the neo-Pagan "world" as an "observer-participant" from the early 'seventies onwards (1986: *xii*).

Adler describes modern Paganism as a revival of the sort of "polytheistic religions of immanence" that, she argues, characterise tribal societies (1986: *ix*). She does not seek to define Paganism as such, regarding it as far too "anarchistic" a phenomenon to allow for such a pat portrayal (1986: *ix*). However, Adler does identify a number of "basic beliefs" that she thinks may be thought generally indicative of that culture, chief of which being the assumptions that "Nature is holy. The body is holy.

³ She describes her book as "the only detailed history of the origins of Neo-Paganism in the United States" (Adler 1986: *ix*).

⁴ Adler does not specify in which year this journey took place.

⁵ This was distributed *via* an American Pagan magazine called Green Egg (Adler 1986: *xiii*). Adler does not give examples of the questions she included in the questionnaire.

⁶ Adler does not reveal the specific totals of questionnaires or responses.

⁷ This was included in another Pagan magazine, called Panegyria. Questions addressed such matters as opinions on "important issues facing the Pagan and Wiccan communities" and "the impact of Pagan festivals on the community", and elicited information on background criteria such as "occupation, former religion, attitudes toward drugs, and [...] what had led them to choose [their] path" (Adler 1986: 443).

Sexuality is holy... Thou art Goddess. Thou art God. Divinity is immanent in all Nature.” (1986: ix) According to Adler, Pagans tend also to contrast this vision with what they see as the prevailing cultural values of the western world, which they believe “has for so long denied and denigrated the creative feminine, the source of inspiration, the Goddess within.” (1986: ix)

Adler admits that these opinions are not universally held among Pagans⁸. She nevertheless ventures some suggestions as to what it might be that Pagans find so appealing about the phenomenon. Not least, there is its celebration of individual integrity and freedoms, which, Adler suggests, Pagans appear to hold in almost as high a level of esteem as they do nature:

‘Eclectic, individualist, and often fiercely autonomous, [Pagans] are often self-created and *homemade*; they seldom have “gurus” or “masters”; they have few temples and hold their meetings in woods, parks, apartments, and houses...’⁹ (1986: 3)

And moreover, writes Adler, whatever their differences, the overall similarities and affinities are such that Pagans tend to “regard one another as part of the same religious and philosophical movement” (1986: 3).

She also discusses the major traditions and trends within the Pagan scene. By far the greatest amount of space is accorded to Wicca (modern Witchcraft), a thorough explanation of set procedures (such as the ritual consumption of Cakes and Wine [1986: 168]) being counterpoised by illustrations of what she sees as the “basic anarchism” of the phenomenon (1986: 104) (the latter being a consequence, she believes, of the common belief among her respondents that Witchcraft is very much a personal “attitude toward life” and “way of living” [1986:105]). Other traditions and approaches considered include Druidry, Reconstructionism – which she defines as the “attempt to re-create ancient European pre-Christian religions” (1986: 233) – and what appear to be uniquely (or at least predominantly)

⁸ Adler reveals, for example, that these views were held by “most” (as opposed to all) of her respondents (Adler 1986: ix).

⁹ Adler’s italics.

American Pagan sub-branches, such as The Church of All Worlds (CAW) and Discordia¹⁰. She also provides a broad profile of the Pagan population¹¹.

Key among Adler's conclusions are that Pagans employ magical ritual to "end, for a time, [their] sense of alienation from nature and from each other" (1986: 162), that they "defy categorizing, and... maintain a childlike wonder at the world" (1986: 382), and are commonly engaged in a search for the "'primitive' *within*"¹² (1986: 395). Other identifying features are "an acceptance of life and death, attunement to the rhythms of nature, sense of humor, lack of guilt-ridden feelings about oneself and about the body and sexuality, genuine honesty, and unwillingness or inability to play social games" (1986: 383).

Although Adler is not an academic, and has not included much in the way of sociological analysis¹³, her book is generally regarded among Pagans and interested academics alike as an important and authoritative guide to the subject¹⁴. However, for all the respect accorded to her, some see her study as being too partisan at times¹⁵.

¹⁰ CAW was founded in a Missouri college in 1961, and was notably inspired by Robert Heinlein's sci-fi novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Adler 1986: 234), which, according to Adler, essentially "expresses the philosophy of someone in tune with the universe" (1986: 239). Discordia was founded as a parody of religious and mystical *mores* (one of its offshoots, for example, is called Hasidic Druidry [1986: 325]), although it also seems to have acquired a certain *gravitas* along the way. Thus, for instance, one of its 'leading lights', the author Robert Anton Wilson, comments that the "people in many of these [Discordian] groups began to find that they were getting something out of what they were doing and gradually they became more serious" (1986: 319).

¹¹ See the following section in this chapter for an overview of such portrayals.

¹² Adler's italics.

¹³ Hutton describes Adler's approach as that of a "highbrow journalist" (Hutton 1999b: 370).

¹⁴ The British Wiccan author Vivianne Crowley, for instance, describes Adler's book as "a comprehensive account of Wicca in the US" (Crowley 1996b: 37), while the American sociologist Sarah Pike has written that it is "unmatched in its sweeping survey of Neo-Pagan culture" (Pike 1996: 363). More recently, Hutton has described it as "intellectually rigorous and powerful" (Hutton 1999b: 370).

¹⁵ The sociologist Eugene Gallagher, for example, accuses Adler of having an "apologetic" rather than "analytical" agenda in her discussion of some aspects of the phenomenon

b) Luhrmann (1989)

Luhrmann's chosen anthropological method was participant observation. She commenced her study during the mid-eighties, when she proceeded to join and elicit 'magical' training from numerous, and it appears predominantly London-based, Pagan organisations¹⁶. In all, she claims to have got to know "several hundred people involved in various magical gatherings" during the course of her research (Luhrmann 1989: 35).

Luhrmann's stated intention is to explain why "ordinary middle-class English people... practise magic when, according to observers, the magic doesn't work" (1989: 4). Defining her terms, she writes that "[m]agical practice is... a floating, ill-defined collection of people, practices and organizations" (1989: 32), and that this inevitably compromises any attempts to render it into discreet groupings. Luhrmann thus describes her own attempt at such a task as a "crude typology" (1989: 32), but regards her categories as being of some heuristic value, asserting, "[g]roups which are true to type, however, are markedly different from others in their symbolism, their structure and their self-conception" (1989: 32). Luhrmann's categories are "witchcraft" (by which she means modern Pagan Witchcraft and Wicca), Western Mysteries, 'ad hoc' ritual magic and non-initiated Paganism (1989: 32). Briefly, the first two represent established 'streams' within Pagan culture, whereas the other two are more 'novel' and idiosyncratic¹⁷. Moreover, while the first two categories of Paganism are particularly associated with formal modes of organisation (such as covens and 'lodges'), the latter are more conducive to informal meetings and ceremonies¹⁸ (1989: 32).

(Gallagher 1994: 851 [Gallagher's italics]; see chapter ten for a more detailed discussion of this point).

¹⁶ These included "the oldest of the current witchcraft groups, and one of the best respected of the Western Mysteries groups" (Luhrmann 1989: 33).

¹⁷ Thus, for instance, *ad hoc* magic constitutes a "self-created" approach to ritual, and is "sometimes [organized] around a particular mythological theme" (such as "Celtic", "Nordic" or "Egyptian" [Luhrmann 1989: 32]). This appears strongly to accord with Adler's 'Reconstructionist' category.

¹⁸ These include "workshops", "moots" and "general gatherings in... parks to welcome in the spring" (Luhrmann 1989: 32).

For Luhrmann, “modern magic” is “compelling” because of the way it furnishes individual lives with “emotive and imaginative” resonance (1989: 337). Key to understanding this function is the concept of interpretative drift, which term refers to “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity” (1989: 312). In Pagan terms, this may be regarded as a sort of self-reinforcing ‘feedback loop’, whereby “experiences give the magical ideas content... [and] the magical ideas make sense of the experience” (1989: 314-5). Her argument also pivots around the notion of magical “planes” (namely, the differing ‘levels’ of understanding which accord with specific magical systems and traditions), which she recognises as being central to esoteric and Pagan worldviews (1989: 275). Luhrmann interprets this idea with reference to what she sees as the demise of overarching ‘knowledge claims’, and in particular, the west’s “supposedly self-confident rationalism” (1989: 343). She concludes that modern magical cultures accord consummately well with the “conceptual cacophony of contemporary culture” (1989: 344).

Luhrmann’s study is both pioneering and wide-ranging, and has been described (by Pike, albeit some time ago) as the “most theoretical and ethnographic of any study of Neo-Paganism published to date” (Pike 1996: 368, *n.* 9). Unfortunately, her book has also been accused of typifying some of the more ethically wayward avenues by which ethnographers have sought to gather information on modern Paganism, and as such has on occasion been held up almost as a lesson in what not to do when amassing data on the subject¹⁹. Furthermore, there is also the sense that Luhrmann has ‘put

¹⁹ In the introduction to her study, Luhrmann writes: “I am no witch, no wizard, though I have been initiated as though I were” (Luhrmann 1989: 18). Despite her rather self-congratulatory tone here, Luhrmann’s stance appears not to have endeared her to the British Pagan world. The British sociologist Amy Simes (see below) explains that this was because “many” Pagans saw Luhrmann’s initiation (rightly, it seems) “as a device for conducting research”, and one that was utilised dishonestly at that (Simes 1995: 70). She continues: “Some felt that this was breaking a foundational rule of Pagan practice, and that private coven activities should remain beyond the inspection of anthropologists. Respect for such views should not be overlooked by the researcher.” (1995: 70)

the cart before the horse', methodologically speaking, having, it seems (if her statement of intent is anything to go by) already settled on her general conclusion even before addressing her subjects' opinions. Bluntly put, this is that magical beliefs are false, and modern individuals know this to be the case; therefore, contemporary Paganism should ultimately be interpreted as an exercise in *de facto* disingenuousness, whatever its exponents actually do or say.

c) York (1995)

York commenced researching his comparative study of the New Age²⁰ and Paganism in 1988 (York 1995: 224). However, he also states that a "certain constraint" had been placed on his methodological approach due to the "scarce and incomplete" nature of the "available literature" on these phenomena at the time, which meant that he was therefore compelled to "rely more heavily" on other data sources, including "media coverage, participant observation, interviewing, and questionnaire sampling" to 'fill in the gaps' (1995: 3).

Luhrmann is by no means the only ethnographer to be accused of using duplicitous methods while researching Paganism, however. For example, in his 1996 survey, the American sociologist Dennis Carpenter describes how, for her 1978 study of a Wisconsin coven (*The Occult Revival: Witchcraft in the Contemporary United States*), S M Lloyd gained the confidence of her associates by falsely presenting herself as a "person who wanted to be a Witch" (Carpenter 1996: 382). Thenceforth, she neglected to tell them of her "research objectives", and in Carpenter's opinion, actually appears to have relished her surreptitious "role", regarding this as "one of camouflage, like a double-agent in spy films", and even going so far as to incorporate within her study "information" given to her in confidence by other coven members (1996: 382).

Similarly, Carpenter relates that as part of the research for their 1982 study, *Social Meaning of the Occult*, Jorgensen and Jorgensen posed as "tarot readers" – a position that entailed the establishment of something akin to a "client-counsellor relationship" with those requiring their "services" (1996: 399). To Carpenter, Jorgensen and Jorgensen thus behaved unethically because they set out with the goal of "collecting research information" rather than (as they had made out as part of their ruse) aiding their clients, and moreover, in so doing broke the strict code of "confidentiality" that is fundamental to this sort of professional relationship (1996: 399).

²⁰ This term will be explored in detail in chapter nine of the present study.

His favoured method was participant observation, the reason being, he writes, that this would enable him to “gain [more] of an overview” of his chosen subject than through a more focused, “in-depth survey of only a few specific groups” (by means of, say, “interviews”) (1995: 27). York reveals that this involved attending “as many New Age and Neo-pagan functions as possible”²¹, but adds that for the Pagan part of his study he had “concentrated on... London’s House of the Goddess (as a Neo-Pagan venue²²) (1995: 223).

York states that his intention was to “arrive at some understanding of what the New Age Movement is; how it is formed; who is involved; who its leading spokespersons are; and in particular how it differs from, is similar to, and overlaps with what is simultaneously emerging as the Neo-pagan Movement” (1995: 1). After looking at the former in some depth, he goes on

²¹ Examples of such were the “Prediction Festival, the Quest Annual Conference, the Mind, Body & Spirit Festival, etc.” (York 1995: 223) His questionnaire survey took in the House of the Goddess (see below), and “the Pagan Moon festivals held in the Students’ Union Building of the University of London (1995: 179). He received 17 replies (out of 20) from HOG in 1990, a further 24 from PM in the same year, and an additional 24 sent by post *via* HOG (“14 female” and “10 male”) (1995: 180). His questionnaire survey also included a control group, consisting of “the London Lighthouse (‘a centre for people facing the challenge of AIDS’), “a collective fiftieth birthday celebration for an American East Coast high school reunion”, and “a group of eleven people... vacationing in the south of France” (1995: 209).

²² This is a “temple room” which also doubles as a weekly discussion group, and is led by its “Clan Mother”, Shan Jayran, whom York describes as “currently the most public of British Witchcraft priestesses” (York 1995: 116-7). The main focus for the New Age segment of his fieldwork was “St James’ Alternatives program of Monday evening lectures” (also in London), which he describes as “the most accessible and general New Age forum” (1995: 223).

York writes that making “initial contact” with either milieu is quite difficult, as they normally “operate through word of mouth and extensive networking links”, but suggests also that there “is comparatively a greater difficulty involved in participation/observation at Neo-pagan events” (1995: 223). He does not actually explain why this might be the case, but hints that there is more of a culture of caution and exclusivity operating on “introductory occasions for individuals wanting to know more about magic occultism, and paganism” (1995: 223). Thus, for example, he writes: “Since I have subscribed to the magazine *Quest*, I am therefore eligible to attend the Quest conference held annually in March” (1995: 223).

to discuss the latter – primarily, it seems (and for all his espousal of participant observation), through looking at existent literature on the subject²³. York concludes that Paganism is “an animistic, pantheistic, and pluralistic religious orientation that is non-[d]octrinaire but employs traditional pagan metaphors (myths, foci and rituals) or modern reconstructions of them as a means of celebrating a this-worldly emphasis either on a solitary basis or with others of a like mind” (1995: 136). He adds that the phenomenon emphasises “self-responsibility, self-development, individual exegesis, and full freedom of self-determination, the experience of ritual and ecstasy, and ecological preoccupation with the well-being of the planet regarded as a living entity”²⁴ (1995: 136).

There follows a list of findings from his questionnaire survey of Pagan (and New Age) groups²⁵, dealing with such criteria as “profession, income, family life, background, religion, sexual orientation, and self-perception”, along with opinions on certain “contentious issues”, and degrees of “familiarity with” the ‘rival’ camp²⁶ (1995: 179). The participant observation

²³ The chapter features, for example, a digest of Adler’s study, along with *précis* of the works of the feminist Witch Starhawk and the publications of Selena Fox (the head of the US based Pagan Spirit Alliance [York 1995: 114]). It also cites existing literature to discuss such subjects as alleged “racialist overtones” in Norse Paganism (1995: 124), and Animism (or the belief in “a reality in which all things are imbued with vitality” [1995: 127]).

²⁴ Regarding Paganism’s relationship to the New Age, York concludes that “[s]imilarities between [them] include eco-humanism or some variant, the belief in the intrinsic divinity of the individual... and exploratory use of theonymic metaphors not traditionally associated with the Judeo-Christian mainstream” (York 1995: 145). Regarding their differences, he suggests that the figure of “the Goddess” is accorded higher prominence in Paganism (1995: 146), and that the New Age “tends [more] to de-emphasize the material while emphasizing the spiritual” (1995: 146). Paganism also places greater store in “ceremony” (1995: 147), but “exhibits much less overlap or compatibility with Christianity” than the New Age (1995: 128).

²⁵ York also includes information from Adler’s survey, and from the 1989 “Occult Census” conducted by the Leeds-based mail-order occult supply firm The Sorcerer’s Apprentice (York 1995: 183) (the author of the present study was unable to find any firsthand information regarding the latter).

²⁶ York reports, for instance, that “there were no respondents in any of the groups who indicated having had less than a secondary education”, and that “a higher than average percentage of HOGers had a non-mainstream religious background.” (York 1995: 192) Other

segment of his Pagan discussion mainly stemmed from his attendance at a couple of ceremonies²⁷ – one featuring a “casting off of unpleasantness”, the other the formation of a “Darklight Circle”²⁸ (1995: 228).

The final section of York’s study centres on a lengthy appraisal of the various sociological theories that have emanated from Troeltsch’s ‘church-sect’-based typological schema²⁹, these terms respectively representing (roughly speaking) mainstream and more fringe-based forms of Christianity³⁰. Having discussed numerous offshoots of the church-sect typology³¹, York suggests that while this conceptual approach might ultimately be “found wanting and unhelpful” it may nonetheless serve as a useful analytical “tool” for the discussion of Paganism (1995: 308).

findings were that the “pagan groups rank on the low end of the scale when asked if they are generally in favor of abortion” (1995: 196), and that around three quarters of the Pagan group described themselves as “familiar with New Age” (1995: 197) (compared with 29%, 22% and 45% amongst the respective controls groups [1995: 198]).

²⁷ Both rituals were organised by the House of the Goddess (York 1995: 228).

²⁸ In this, explains York, participants are expected to “[mention] ‘something dark’ and ‘something light’ that has occurred in their lives during the past week or two” (York 1995: 228).

²⁹ York writes that although Max Weber is usually credited with the original concept, it was Troeltsch who “developed its earliest substantial elaboration” (York 1995: 238).

³⁰ Explaining Troeltsch’s categories, York writes that the term ‘church’ “[represents] the institutional mediator between Christian sacramental redemption and the social-political order” (York 1995: 238). Sects, on the other hand, are “socially marginal”, as they “polarize the inherent tensions between religion and society by repudiating cultural norms as impediments to the full actualisation of a Christian ethical life for their adherents” (1995: 238). Troeltsch also added another term – mysticism – to this model, to denote the type of strongly individualistic religious manifestation that “leaps over or complements traditions, cults and institutions” (1995: 239).

³¹ These include Yinger’s schema, which includes “the universal church, the ecclesia, the denomination or class church, the established sect, the (transient) sect, and the cult” (York 1995: 243). Another notable analysis considered by York is Anthony and Robbins’ twofold conceptualisation of New Religious Movements, which divides these into “*dualistic* movements” (these “reaffirm elements of traditional moral absolutism in an exaggerated and strident manner”), and “mystical and therapeutic *monistic* movements” (meaning those “which affirm relativistic and subjectivistic moral meaning systems” (1995: 290 [York’s italics])).

York proposes some lucid generalisations about modern Paganism (not to mention the New Age). There is, however, a strangely disarticulated feeling about his study, stemming perhaps from what appears (as York's earlier statement about his methodology seems to imply) to be a lack of faith in his own ethnographic research, which seems to feature only cursorily in comparison to his literature-based discussion. Not least, the chapter where the substantive conclusions on Paganism cited above appear seems oddly to include very few references to his empirical data, being apparently more concerned with the textual comments of authorities such as Adler and Fox. In contrast, his own firsthand findings only really make an appearance in the following, questionnaire- and participant observation-based chapters, and even here, York makes little attempt to gauge what sort of broader relationship these findings might have to his earlier conclusions³². Finally, it is evident from his earlier quote that, even after his lengthy discussion, York is hardly convinced of the church-sect typology's relevance to the subject (and, again, makes little or no reference to his own data throughout).

d) Simes (1995)

At the start of her study, Amy Simes discusses the scant amount of information that existed at the time about British Paganism in comparison to its US counterpart. Her intention was thus to help to redress this imbalance, albeit with an especial, empirically-grounded focus on the East Midlands region of England. Simes' introduction to the Pagan 'scene' was through contact information found in a Pagan magazine she had bought in a local bookshop. This led to her attending a London conference of the Pagan

³² In the conclusion to his participant observation section on ritual, for example, York speculates that the seemingly "greater use of ritual" within Paganism compared with the New Age might be explained by the contrast between the latter's "focus on self-development" and the former's stress on "self-empowerment" (he does not explain the difference) (York 1995: 231), and sees ritual as a means for achieving both an "altered state of consciousness", and a sense of "group integration" and "collective energy" (1995: 232). However, even here, York only refers to existent literature on the subject (namely, an article by a Pagan called Carolyn Owen-Toyle), and does not go on to explain how his participant observation data supports these overviews.

Federation, and after that, a local pub moot (Simes 1995: 57). During her period of research³³, Simes developed an acquaintance with the Pagan “population” of that area, which she numbered at around 70 individuals (mostly Wiccans and Druids [1995: 51]), and she eventually became fully involved in four ritual groups, as well as one discussion group (1995: 53). In addition to attending numerous rituals with her new acquaintances, Simes writes that by the end of her first year of research she had established the “boundary” of the “religion”, become active in the local ‘scene’ as a PF organiser, read (and reviewed) much of the Pagan literature, “travelled to meet [Pagan] authors”, and enrolled in two “correspondence courses”, one Wiccan and one Druidic (1995: 62).

Regarding her principal methodological approach, Simes admits that she had decided against using questionnaires, as in her opinion these could be “unreliable and inaccurate” (not to mention “time consuming and expensive”)³⁴ (1995: 68). In preference, she chose to employ “extensive interviewing” – namely, a “four part, 55 question interview which separately covered areas concerning background, beliefs, ritual practice, and lifestyles” (1995: 70), and reveals that in order to avoid the sort of censure from Pagans that Luhrmann apparently received as a result of her 1989 study³⁵, she was anxious to “develop relationships of trust” between herself and her interviewees (1995: 70). Simes also writes that she selected her interviewees – who numbered 18 in all – in such a way that they more or less constituted a “representative sample” (1995: 70).

However, because she was aware of criticisms of interview-based methodologies – for instance, that they are “either partially revealing or situation-specific” (1995: 73) – Simes supplemented these “through complementary methods of fieldwork, such as observation, participation or extraneous reading”, in order that the “incompleteness” of her interview data be “corrected” (1995: 73). Most notable amongst these was a participant observation-based strategy (requiring “substantial fieldwork and note-taking”)

³³ This covered three years (Simes 1995: 50), commencing in 1992 (1995: 58).

³⁴ Simes also singles out previous questionnaire surveys for criticism. York’s, for example, is summarily dismissed as “unrepresentative” (Simes 1995: 69).

³⁵ See above.

(1995: 74), which mainly focussed on ritual experiences but also took in a number of “non-ritual” events³⁶ (1995: 75).

Simes begins by discussing in some detail the history and major traditions of contemporary Paganism³⁷, and looks at some of its – to her – representative organisations³⁸, before going on to consider what she sees as the defining features of the phenomenon (such as ritual, to which subject she dedicates a whole chapter³⁹). She also discusses in some depth the role of myths and symbols within Pagan traditions. Not least, these include symbols of ‘nature’, which Simes regards as “central” to Pagan worldviews, with trees being especially significant, denoting (in her opinion) “the most important ecological issue” to Pagans⁴⁰ (1995: 303). Thus, for Simes, Paganism represents nothing less than the “re-enchantment of nature” (1995: 310).

An important strand in Simes’ study is the idea of religious ‘creativity’, which she sees as a characteristic feature of Pagan culture (as exemplified by the Wiccan ‘five-fold kiss’, where the Priest’s or Priestess’ body is kissed at five points to form the shape of a pentagram [1995: 151])⁴¹; she also surmises that a growing recognition of such processes among Pagans explains why the “effect” of Pagan ‘lore’ now tends to be more important for them than notions of “historical validity” (1995: 236).

³⁶ The former included Lughnasadh (August 1) (Simes 1995:75) and Summer Solstice (June 21) festivals organised by an organisation called Pagan Wheel, and held in 1993 and 1994 respectively (1995: 83), which Simes describes in substantial detail. Non-ritual events included the annual Pagan ‘picnic’ in Chesterfield, and – the “most frequently attended” by Simes – local “pub moots” (1995: 92).

³⁷ These included Wicca, Druidry and the “Northern Tradition” (Simes 1995: 47).

³⁸ These include an “eco-magickal” organisation called The Dragon Group (Simes 1995: 96), and The Association of Hedgewitches (1995: 102).

³⁹ This will be referred to in some detail in chapter six of the present study.

⁴⁰ The many examples of this motif to be found in Pagan culture include Druidic “tree-lore”, the Kabbalistic ‘Tree of Life’ glyph, the Nordic ‘World Tree’ (Yggdrasil), and the Celtic ‘Green Man’ figure (Simes 1995: 304).

⁴¹ Simes explains this by referring to Hobsbawm’s notion of the “invention of tradition”, which he regarded as being a characteristic feature of “modern societies” (particularly in times of instability) (Simes 1995: 151).

Another key discussion concerns group dynamics⁴². Simes explains that structural fluidity is the norm within Pagan circles, and illustrates this point *via* a case study of a Druid “grove”⁴³ that she had joined (1995: 417). She adds, however, that, according to her evidence, Pagans are by no means cavalier about such matters, as “commitment [to magical groups] is given considerable importance” even in the face of “rapid and frequent” change (1995: 425). She then proposes that Pagan relational dynamics tend to favour smaller groupings, and cites sociological texts to interpret this trait as exemplifying how “group cohesion decreases” in direct proportion with “an increasing group size”⁴⁴ (1995: 427).

Elsewhere, Simes suggests that there is a “growing trend” towards individualism within Paganism (1995: 437), and that this is epitomised by an apparent upsurge in solo orientations like Shamanism and Hedgewitchcraft⁴⁵ (1995: 440). She then suggests some other typical characteristics of Pagan individuals, such as a strong ethical bent, a “voracious” love of reading and regard for “self-education”, and a tendency to value “[h]appiness” over “success” (1995: 444).

Having looked at the many diverse strands of behaviour and opinion she sees as being associated with Paganism, Simes considers the phenomenon in the light of studies dealing with ‘alternative’ spiritualities⁴⁶. Finding such classifications wanting, she goes on to provide a novel categorisation based on what she sees as its unique features. This she refers to by the acronym TREES (“Trans-global Reformist Eclectic Esoteric

⁴² Simes reproduces much of her material on this subject in *Mercian Movements: Group Transformation and Individual Choices amongst East Midlands Pagans* (1996), her contribution to the *Paganism Today* compendium.

⁴³ Conventional term for a Druid ritual magic group.

⁴⁴ Conversely, Simes explains that among larger gatherings of Pagans (say, at a festival) there will be more of an emphasis upon informal social “interaction” and the sharing of “information”, adding that within such situations “magical working” will still typically be performed by “small groups” (Simes 1995: 428).

⁴⁵ See chapter two for explanations of these terms.

⁴⁶ These include Eileen Barker’s work on ‘new religious movements’ (Simes 1995: 476). See chapter nine of the present study for a discussion of this and other commentaries on the subject.

Shamanism”), which term also serves as her definition of the Pagan concept, denoting “collectivities of mystics from varying traditions who are socially and ideologically united through reforming or reviving certain esoteric belief systems in order to pursue spiritual paths” (1995: 507). Simes adds that Pagans may be regarded as “self-aware and globally-informed individuals” who are also “self-reformist”, meaning that they have attempted to avoid “spiritually stagnating” along with the prevailing culture⁴⁷ (1995: 520). She concludes that Paganism stands out due to its attitude of “tolerance”, and its concerted “ritualisation” of the “search for meaning” (1995: 521).

Simes’ study presents a valuable appraisal and profile of British Pagans; moreover, her discussions of Pagan ‘creativity’ and group dynamics illustrate the facility with which at times she can interweave her own empirical data with social theory (both strands, moreover, covering an impressive amount of ground). However, it is also necessary to level some criticisms at her approach. Firstly, as will be suggested later on, the idea that any existent surveys of modern Paganism (Simes’ included) can be thought truly ‘representative’ is a moot point (although this is in no way to say that any information deriving from these should therefore be automatically discounted). Secondly, although it may well provide substantial nuance to her findings, Simes is perhaps overly confident in assuming that her participant observational data, which cannot seriously be thought any less ‘situation specific’ than her interview data, will (along with the ‘extraneous reading’ she refers to) necessarily ‘complement’ or ‘correct’ any bias to the ‘complete’ or exact extent she suggests. Thirdly, and most importantly, Simes’ interpretations sometimes seem to dovetail rather too neatly with Pagan opinion, such that on occasion it is hard to distinguish between the two⁴⁸; as such these elements of her study are a prime example of the sort of

⁴⁷ Simes also offers some tentative suggestions as to how East Midlands Pagan culture might differ from that found in other regions, the most notable distinction, she suggests, being that few of her respondents were “university educated” (Simes 1995: 462), although she adds that there was a distinct and substantial tendency in favour of “self-education” (1995: 465).

⁴⁸ Simes’ ‘TREES’ concept is a case in point; an even more glaring example, perhaps, is her explanation that this is the quintessential metaphor for the phenomenon because “[trees]

analysis that some regard as aspiring as much (if not more) to 'validate' as to objectively appraise the phenomenon⁴⁹.

e) Rees (1996)

Rees is both an educationalist and a Wiccan Priest. He commenced his "original fieldwork" in the 'seventies, and has combined subsequent "ongoing research"⁵⁰ with "consequent teaching of college-based courses in paganism, mythology and witchcraft from 1982 onwards" (Rees 1996: 18). Rees thus regards himself as having had "a unique opportunity to observe the passage of those seekers pursuing a deepening engagement with paganism" on both academic and Pagan levels (1996: 18).

Rees discusses Paganism in terms of interpenetrating layers of myth, which word he broadly defines as "an overall controlling image incorporating beliefs, attitudes and values which direct ways of behaving and derive from a range of sources – cultural, familial, institutional and the like – and which inform both a society and the individuals within it" (1996: 16). The adoption of a Pagan 'path' therefore involves the alignment of purely "personal" myths, which "a seeker brings to his or her [spiritual] search", to "more composite" (i.e. consensual) forms of myth, which "inform the various subcultural segments of paganism" (1996: 19). Rees surmises that the "magical subculture can thus be seen as a maze or... labyrinth or patchwork quilt over which individuals attempt to steer themselves following the dictates of their personal myths" (1996: 19-20), the whole process being woven around notions of individual and cultural identity.

may sprout many branches and leaves, just as Paganism has sprouted many traditions" that are "joined together... by irregular connections which lead back to the source, the centre, which is deeply covered in protective layers of mystery" (Simes 1995: 506). Similarly, after persuasively suggesting that Paganism may provide a "reinvented and redefined" understanding of community, she goes on to add a note of what could be interpreted as Pagan wish-fulfilment, by suggesting that this can be seen as something akin to a rebirth of ancient Celtic "tribal" structures (1995: 473).

⁴⁹ See below.

⁵⁰ Rees does not specify precisely what this has entailed.

Rees does not provide a definition of Paganism *per se*, but he does propose that formal Pagan allegiances are predominantly informed by “substantive myths” about ‘supernatural beings’⁵¹ (1996: 16). He also asserts that individual Pagans will attempt to achieve a “degree of synchrony” between their own personal myths and the sort of shared mythic narratives that are ascribed to in those ‘provinces’ of the Pagan scene with which they feel the most affinity, although this need not be a permanent, or even longstanding, state of affairs (1996: 19).

Rees offers a subtle and multi-faceted portrayal of individual Pagan development, although he does not attempt to provide the sort of penetrating analytical framework that might help to explain why the phenomenon appears to be becoming so popular – or, at least, noticeable – at this moment in time, or what might have caused its adherents to choose Paganism in particular rather than some other type of spirituality or creed.

f) Pearson (1998)

Pearson’s research drew from her own “firsthand communication with Wiccans in Britain”, and from “their responses to a widely distributed questionnaire”⁵² (Pearson 1998: 45). It is apparent that the questionnaire was constructed in no small part around themes addressed by Paul Heelas in his seminal 1996 sociological study of the New Age, as Pearson’s article is mainly concerned with how these “in turn... apply... to Wicca” (1998: 46). She adds that her research is “ongoing”, and that her findings “do not claim to encompass any other forms of Wicca” than the predominant one, namely “that of Gardnerian/Alexandrian, initiatory, coven Wicca”⁵³ as practiced in Britain” (1998: 46). She does not provide a definition or outline of Wicca *per se*, but rather concerns herself with the opinions of self-proclaimed Wiccans on various matters.

The purpose of Pearson’s study is to question the seemingly popular assumption that Wicca (the oldest and most high-profile of Pagan

⁵¹ See chapter four.

⁵² Pearson does not specify the numbers involved, or the year or years during which she conducted her survey.

⁵³ See chapter two for an explanation of these terms.

spiritualities) is a “part of” the New Age (1998: 45), and to demonstrate instead that it is actually “separate and distinct” from the latter phenomenon (1998: 46). Specifically, Pearson reveals that, not only are Wiccans themselves typically averse to this suggestion, but also that such protests are reinforced by important creedal and attitudinal differences. The New Age principles (outlined by Heelas) that her respondents were asked to comment upon included such axioms as, “Your lives are not working”, and, “You are gods and goddesses in exile” (1998: 46).

The major differences appear to involve respective orientations towards the wider world (including social realms), and opinions on notions of deity and ‘external’ authority. Thus, for instance, Wicca does not subscribe to the “first tenet of New Age teaching” outlined above, because, writes Pearson, it “does not regard humankind as malfunctioning”; nor, however, does it “present a romantic notion that human life is problem-free”, a stance she describes as “pragmatic realism” (1998: 47). She also disputes the relevance to Wicca of the New Age’s assumption that “[perfection] can be found only by moving beyond the socialised self”, and the latter movement’s attendant focus on notions of ultimacy, by suggesting that Wiccans tend to regard spiritual progress in terms of “wholeness”, rather than “perfection”⁵⁴ (1998: 48-9).

Another key distinction, writes Pearson, is that Wiccans do not uphold the blanket rejection of ‘external’ authority that is generally encouraged by the New Age, and are more inclined towards “sustained commitment” to spiritual pursuits (1998: 51). Pearson concludes that “Wicca is distinctive [from the New Age] in ways that allow it to claim a position as an integral religious tradition and to resist reduction to misleading representation” (1998: 54). Pearson makes her point persuasively – and, it could be added, with great relish. It should be remembered, however, that she is speaking about Wicca rather than Paganism as a whole, although this does not mean that

⁵⁴ Accordingly, writes Pearson, “as well as ‘vitality, creativity, love, tranquillity, wisdom, responsibility, [and] power’, Wiccans also accept that there may be anger, stupidity, irresponsibility, ruthlessness, weaknesses and pain” (Pearson 1998: 49). Therefore, “[according] to these Wiccans, being ‘whole’ means being aware of and gradually confronting these traits” (1998: 49).

broader generalisations might not be deduced or extrapolated from her findings.

g) Gosselin (1998)

Chris Gosselin's article was the result of a psychological survey he conducted by inserting questionnaires into an issue of a popular, broad-based British Pagan magazine⁵⁵. Despite the jocular tone of his article, the research undertaken by Gosselin (who was once employed a psychological researcher for the Institute of Psychiatry⁵⁶) is actually methodologically rather solid, comparatively speaking⁵⁷. He does not specify the number of respondents included in his survey. The questionnaire did not ask for information regarding personal beliefs about or opinions on Paganism; Gosselin himself does not venture a definition of Paganism, and makes little or no mention of associated beliefs (presumably because he assumes that readers of the journal are already *au fait* with Pagan matters). Instead (as befits a standardised psychological test) the survey included questions such as 'Do you have many different hobbies?', 'Do you always keep a promise no matter how inconvenient it might be?', 'Do you usually take the initiative in making new friends?', and 'Have you ever wished you were dead?'⁵⁸ It also included a rating system designed the gauge each respondent's level of "interest in... matters such as symbol, fantasy, artistic talent and the like"⁵⁹.

Gosselin's survey suggested that there are three significant differences between Pagans and non-Pagans. Firstly, Pagans are generally more "tough-minded" and "emotionally stable"; secondly, they are more inclined towards "fantasy activity", which is to say, they have stronger

⁵⁵ Talking Stick Magazine ([23] 1996)

⁵⁶ Talking Stick Magazine ([23] 1996: 22)

⁵⁷ It is worth noting that, York's aside, Gosselin's is the only study discussed in this section that appears to have utilised as part of its methodology a non-Pagan control with which to compare and contrast its firsthand data, and even goes further by incorporating the appropriate, statistically derived, "standard norms" (Gosselin 1998: 41).

⁵⁸ Copy available

⁵⁹ This section included such criteria as 'A liking for sci-fi or sword-and-sorcery novels', 'A liking for sex fantasy games (dress-ups, S & M etc.)', and 'A love of stories and/or storytelling'.

imaginative faculties; and thirdly, they tend to be more in favour of “kinky sex” than do non-Pagans (1998: 41).

Regarding the relevance of a study of this nature to the present, sociological, thesis, it is worth bearing in mind that (as Adler’s reference to the typical modern individual’s supposed ‘sense of alienation’ indicates, and as will also be discussed later in this study⁶⁰) ethnographic surveys of Paganism are not always above referring to psychological characteristics or explanations (typically, it seems, without citing any relevant or substantiating research from that discipline). And so in that respect Gosselin’s study might therefore be regarded as an important contribution to the growing corpus of Pagan ethnography.

h) Hutton (1999b)

Outlining his methodology, Ronald Hutton – who is an historian by profession – explains that “[b]etween 1991 and 1998 [he] made the acquaintance of hundreds of British witches, and obtained a knowledge of the full membership, beliefs, and working practices of twenty-one covens”, a “length and depth of contact” which he believes “may well exceed that of any academic who has yet published upon British pagan witchcraft”, Luhrmann included⁶¹ (Hutton 1999b: 389). It is possible to surmise that Hutton mainly employed a sort of participant observational approach (he makes no mention of interviews or questionnaires, for instance). Regarding the focus of Hutton’s study, it is important to point out that this does not just include Wicca, but also takes in other variations, such as “Traditional, Hereditary, or Hedge Witchcraft” (1999b: 390). It is also worth noting that Hutton feels confident enough about his empirical findings to make suggestions concerning the “true conceptual significance” of Paganism in general (1999b: 415).

⁶⁰ See above; see also chapters ten and eleven.

⁶¹ Hutton writes: “The total number of covens of which I have first-hand experience represents, for example, almost three times that recorded by... Tanya Luhrmann” (Hutton 1999b: 389). Later, he reveals that his “close acquaintance” with these groups “yielded biographical information for a total of 213 individuals” (1999b: 401).

The book traces the historical and current development of Witchcraft in the UK and abroad⁶² [1999b: *vii*]), the “unique significance” of the phenomenon being, writes Hutton, that “it is the only religion which England has ever given the world” (1999b: *vii*). Later on, he explains that “it represent[s] a distillation of certain notions and needs which had been developing in Western Europe, and in England in particular, since the eighteenth [century]”⁶³ (1999b: *viii*).

The sociological segment of his book⁶⁴ proffers a detailed profile of British Witches, painting a vivid picture of their backgrounds, lifestyles, attitudes and opinions, and relating this to a broad overview of what he sees as the essential “features” of their religion (1999b: 391). For instance, the “central” tenet of Witchcraft concerns “the notion of communion between human and superhuman [...], with the vital additional dimension that the superhuman is also, at least implicitly, present within human beings as part of the immanent and integral existence of the sacred, within the natural world”⁶⁵ (1999b: 391). Such ‘contact’ is primarily conducted *via* magical rituals (the “attitude” of Witches towards which he describes as both “very ancient and very modern”), which simultaneously serve also as a “means of resolving and altering situations”, and so “to transform and to confirm, to challenge and to reinforce, [and] to bond a group together and to achieve practical and external effects” (1999b: 398-9).

Hutton also takes issue with what he regards as the conventional sociological response to Witchcraft, which, he believes, is based upon a

⁶² It is, writes Hutton, “the first systematic attempt by a professional historian to characterize and account for this aspect of modern Western culture” (Hutton 1999b: *viii*), although later on he somewhat apologetically reveals that he had initially “never intended” his book to be a “sociological or anthropological exercise” (1999b: 389).

⁶³ It is, for instance, “the belated offspring of the Romantic Movement”, according to Hutton (Hutton 1999b: *viii*). The significance of this movement will be discussed in a fair amount of detail in some of the following chapters in the present study.

⁶⁴ This mainly constitutes the last chapter of Hutton’s study.

⁶⁵ Hutton similarly suggests that Pagan Witchcraft is characterised by a “yearning for integration with the divine, and the rest of the cosmos, and with oneself” (Hutton 1999b: 391).

serious misreading of the phenomenon as regressive and misguided⁶⁶. Accordingly, he recommends Adler's and Luhrmann's respective studies as steps in the right direction⁶⁷ (1999b: 395). Referring to his own data, Hutton draws attention to what he sees as the "average" nature of the typical Witch's lifestyle and opinions, with regard to such criteria as political and class affiliations (1999b: 401), and makes a number of other such generalisations⁶⁸.

Hutton goes on to dismiss the idea (presented in theories by scholars such as Glock, and Stark and Bainbridge) that individuals become Witches as a "compensation" for some sort of "deprivation" in their lives⁶⁹ (1999b: 402-3), and also stresses the strong levels of commitment evident among Witches due to the "demanding nature of the training and activity" involved (1999b: 404). He then challenges some of the "negative stereotyping" Witchcraft has accrued⁷⁰, before asserting that the phenomenon "has been strikingly free of the scandals which have attended other religious groupings over the past thirty years" (1999b: 409). He then considers the phenomenon in the light of certain notable sociological categorisations. He questions, for

⁶⁶ He illustrates this perception by referring to Stark and Bainbridge's characterisation of "the various witchcraft and pagan groups" as a "headlong plunge back into magic" signifying a wilful and "reactionary" dismissal of "the scientific culture as well as Christian-Judaic religion traditions" (Hutton 1999b: 394). Hutton dismisses such appraisals as having entailed a "total lack of research" into the phenomenon, and so as being based almost entirely upon "blatant prejudice" (1999b: 395).

⁶⁷ That said, he also shows unease at Luhrmann's implication that magical beliefs involve a substantial degree of "self-deceit" (Hutton 1999b: 395).

⁶⁸ These will be referred to in due course throughout the present study.

⁶⁹ Hutton's response is that "the rewards furnished by religious experience have a peculiar quality of their own" (Hutton 1999b: 403). He persuasively illustrates his argument by making the analogy that a "taste for vintage wine or a love of painting landscape is not automatically regarded as a compensator for other, scarce or unobtainable, rewards", and proposes that "the pleasures taken by witches in their religion seem... to fall into the same category" (1999b: 403).

⁷⁰ Hutton argues, for example, that contrary to popular or media opinion, it is actually inadvisable for Witches to be either "drunken" or "promiscuous" – during rituals, at least (Hutton 1999b: 406) – and dismisses as sheer fabrication accusations that their ceremonies involve "sexual orgies, or blood sacrifice, or worship of demons" (1999b: 408).

example, the relevance to Witchcraft of such terms as 'sect' and 'cult'; nor does he see it as particularly compatible with other 'alternative' spiritual categories such as the New Age and New Religious Movements, and even admits to having reservations about claims that it constitutes a 'nature religion'⁷¹. Eventually, Hutton suggests that it may be regarded more accurately as a 'revived religion', by which he means that it is "a modern development that deliberately draws upon ancient images and ideas for contemporary needs" (1999b: 415).

Hutton believes that his status as a historian (or at least the fact that he is not a sociologist) may actually have been a point in his favour when gathering his data, his reason being that this "looser and informal" approach enabled him to "[win] the trust of the people [i.e. Witches] concerned" – a level of confidence he believes he would not have gained had he adopted a more "formal" approach (1999b: 389). But such a stance is not entirely unproblematic. For, while he may indeed have achieved a greater level of familiarity with his subjects than might otherwise have been the case, there is also the risk that this might also make him more likely to adopt what some would regard as an overly subjective stance towards his subject⁷².

Nevertheless, it could also be argued that the sheer weight of firsthand, observational evidence that Hutton has amassed, even *via* such a comparatively 'informal' approach, might suggest that he is in a far better position than most to comment on the subject⁷³. That said, given Hutton's background, it is perhaps unsurprising that, aside from some salient points about what Paganism is not (such as, for instance, a new religious movement⁷⁴), his attempts to locate it within broader sociological (as opposed to historical) context are rather perfunctory, although he does

⁷¹ These points will be discussed at various points in the following chapters of the present study.

⁷² See below (*n.* 94).

⁷³ That is, Hutton's survey could perhaps be regarded as providing a notably complex and persuasive 'impressionistic' portrayal (see below) of the phenomenon. It could also be regarded as significant that he seems to have made far more use of his own data than his more 'by-the-book' sociologist counterpart, Michael York.

⁷⁴ See chapter nine of the present study.

provide much information that might be regarded as being invaluable for that purpose.

i) Greenwood (2000b⁷⁵)

The reasons behind Greenwood's decision to study this subject were, she writes, "part of a personal drive to make sense of the Pagan alternative to more organized religion" (Greenwood 2000b: ix). Unsurprisingly for an anthropologist, her research appears to have involved a substantial element of participant observation, and "includes material from [her] training both as a high magician and as a witch" (2000b: 13) in a number of London-based groups and covens in the early 'nineties⁷⁶. Her book includes a detailed appraisal of the methodological viability and the ethical parameters of her approach. Greenwood states that her "aim is a self-conscious reflexive engagement with magical practices", as she believes that by doing so she is challenging the 'orthodox', culturally-loaded adjunction that there should be a "strict difference between the anthropologist and the anthropologized", the observer and the observed (2000b: 12), which she believes reinforces a longstanding assumption that "Western scientific views of reality" are superior to the cultures and perspectives being described (2000b: 11). And perhaps with Luhrmann's study in mind, she admits to being in "sympathy with the broad principles of Paganism", and of being "deeply engaged" in the study of magic, despite having often felt "uncomfortable" about "[taking] people's subjective accounts of their lives and writing about them in a formal academic manner" (2000b: 15).

⁷⁵ Also 1996a

⁷⁶ These mainly included a 'High Magic' order, a Wiccan coven, and a Feminist Witchcraft group. Greenwood also attended (along with "a hundred or so magicians") an "informal discussion group" that regularly takes place at a pub in London (Greenwood 2000b: 3). She reveals that her "involvement" in this culture commenced in 1991 (2000b: 6), and later on adds that she found out about her High Magic group through an "advertisement in an occult magazine" (2000b: 51). Greenwood was introduced to her Wiccan coven through a meeting with one particular individual at a "high magic seminar" (2000b: 83). She does not appear to specify how long it took for her to complete her research, although it presumably had ceased prior to the publication of her first studies in 1996.

Greenwood proposes that the key to understanding Pagan beliefs and methodologies lies in the concept of the Otherworld, a magical realm that features centrally both in mythic and esoteric literature, and which she describes as “a holistic totality co-existent with ordinary, everyday reality” (2000b: 1). Thus, the “basic principle of magic... [concerns] communication with the otherworld and the bringing through of [its] power” (2000b: 41). Moreover, such an engagement requires a consistent and committed programme of “practice” and “training” during which the magician familiarises herself with “otherworldly reality” through “sustained and regular interaction” (2000b: 49). Having described the (notional) basics, Greenwood goes on to provide – in impressive detail – substantial testimony as to what this entailed for her on a personal and empirical level⁷⁷.

Greenwood argues that through the deliberate, ritualised interaction with Otherworld dimensions (or rather, perhaps, the impression of such interaction) Pagans are able to cultivate a sense of “power”, and so to assuage the debilitating effects normally had upon them by a “fragmented rationalist and materialist world”⁷⁸ (2000b: 121).

⁷⁷ For example, the section on her involvement with the High Magic group features copious descriptions of and references to, in turn, her introductory meeting (which included a “meditation on the Hierophant tarot card”) (Greenwood 2000b: 52), an extensive period of “study” involving the “Kabbalah” magical system (2000b: 54), a resultant ritual based on the “Thirty-Second path” of that tradition (2000b: 61), and of an even more “intensive and structured” period of training where she was given “daily assignments” based predominantly on techniques of “creative visualization” (2000b: 62).

⁷⁸ Greenwood's observations also prompt her make some comparisons between the various groups to which she belonged. She proposes, for instance, that although “high magic and witchcraft” alike “involve both mind and body”, and “are essentially polytheistic” (Greenwood 2000b: 113), there are important differences in their respective approaches to the ‘otherworld’, the former being generally rather more formal and ‘unworldly’ than the latter. That is, “high magic places great emphasis on meditation and internalising the [Kabbalistic] Tree of Life glyph, while witchcraft is *ideologically* based in [external] nature” (2000b: 114 [Greenwood’s italics]). Greenwood adds that this distinction also relates to the fact that the former is “more disciplined in its method of working”, which means that “its negotiation with the otherworld is more controlled”, whereas the latter is “more flexible within its [ritual] structure” (2000b: 114).

However, she also suggests that it is actually not uncommon for an individual's sense of 'powerlessness' to be reinforced in such situations, due to the untoward influence of domineering, "charismatic" figures over some groups (2000b: 143). Her explanation for this entails a reworking of a couple of her earlier articles⁷⁹. She explains that notions of magical 'power' and 'identity' are intrinsically 'gendered'. That is, whereas western occultists normally subscribe to Aleister Crowley's⁸⁰ "masculine notion of the will" (2000b: 175), the more Goddess-oriented magical currents (represented for her by the feminist Witches with whom she was involved) challenge such assumptions by making a "stand against... patriarchal social structures" (2000b: 176). Wicca is situated somewhere between these two poles. Thus, it celebrates the feminine 'principle', but like masculine "high magic" requires "the assumption of the status and power of deity", which practice Greenwood regards as offering the "potential for the abuse of power by magicians of either gender" (2000b: 176). In other words, 'contact' with the 'otherworld' is ultimately susceptible to "all-too-human power relationships" (2000b: 145).

It is also worth briefly discussing an earlier study by Greenwood that draws from the same research data⁸¹, if only because it illustrates an interesting shift that seems to have occurred in her interpretation of this somewhere along the line. In this study, Greenwood identifies a tension that she believes exists between Pagan 'theory' and praxis. This is that, while such ideologies proffer a "holistic" and "all-embracing cosmology" that incorporates "good and evil" forces (Greenwood 1996a: 293), in reality magicians often exhibit "dualistic" viewpoints (1996a: 294) where they "[project] evil out onto outsiders" (1996a: 293). However, perhaps because of her subsequent emphasis on non-dualistic, Otherworld-informed interpretative frameworks, Greenwood does not make significant reference to this notional tension in her more recent study, and instead suggests that Pagans understand concepts of 'good or evil' primarily in terms of the

⁷⁹ The Magical Will, Gender and Power in Magical Practice (1996b); The Nature of the Goddess: Sexual Identities and Power in Contemporary Witchcraft (1998)

⁸⁰ Influential British Occultist of the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries (see chapter two).

⁸¹ The British Occult Subculture: Beyond Good and Evil? (1996a)

“intention or will of the individual magician” rather than ‘external’ influences (Greenwood 2000b: 39). In short, for Pagans, “[u]ltimately morality is internal” (2000b: 20).

While Greenwood is perhaps being overly anxious about her methodological and epistemological approach⁸², she nevertheless succeeds in drawing some thoughtful and stimulating conclusions from her data. Furthermore, her study is invaluable for the way it pinpoints a concept (*viz.*, the Otherworld) that may perhaps be regarded as the sole substantive unifying thread between the various and disparate forms of modern Pagan tradition, belief and expression. If there is a problem with her study, it is that her conclusions do not always seem to cohere. She admits, for example, that her “own participant observation” has taught her that it is “difficult to generalize” about magical culture (2000b: 177), which would not be a problem but for the fact that her readings appear in some instances to be contradictory rather than cautious or tentative, as if she is unsure as to how to gauge the overall relevance her nuanced but often highly localised observational data might have to the phenomenon as a whole⁸³.

⁸² Significantly in this respect, Greenwood's comment that anthropologists should ultimately “accept revelation or ‘spiritual experiences’ as a source of genuine knowledge” (Greenwood 2000b: 44) is itself problematic, as by entirely removing any epistemological distinction between the ‘worlds’ of academia and magic, she is effectively calling into question the need for anthropological or ethnographic investigation in the first place. This is because such reasoning conflates the motives for ethnographic enquiry with a general quest for ‘knowledge’ that is set out in terms dictated entirely by those whom the anthropologist is purportedly attempting to study. Thus, in response to Greenwood's instruction, it could perhaps be proposed that ethnographic research requires the establishment at some stage of at least a partially objective stance towards the subject of study (while also acknowledging that this need not require ‘disbelief’ *per se*), even if this only occurs outside of the contexts within which such ‘knowledge’ is transmitted, such as (for example) the arena of ritual magic.

⁸³ This point will be explained further in chapter ten. Suffice to say for now that Greenwood's portrayal of negative ‘power relationships’ within magical culture appears to be drawn almost entirely from her experiences with her Wiccan coven, and in particular, the Priestess figure of Sarah, whom she describes as a highly “charismatic” character (Greenwood 2000b: 143) who could – and frequently would – instil a feeling of “paralysis of power” among her magical co-workers, Greenwood included (2000b: 142).

For all their respective weaknesses, the studies mentioned so far in this chapter could in combination be thought to provide a stimulating and vivid view of the phenomenon. Aside from these surveys, the picture of British Paganism may also be enhanced by referring to some of the various academic studies of the phenomenon that are not based on ethnographic research. Notable amongst these is the chapter on Paganism which appears in the Dutch historian Wouter Hanegraaff's literature-based study of the New Age (1996), and Graham Harvey's sympathetic but scholarly guide to the phenomenon from 1997⁸⁴.

And, of course, while possible differences between the two national contexts should not be ignored, there is the comparatively substantial number of US studies to draw from. This far greater corpus of literature provides the predominant (albeit not exclusive) focus for discussion within the following section, which will take a more general look at the way sociologists and ethnographers have tended to address the subject of modern Paganism.

B. Ethnographic approaches to Paganism: A general overview

In his helpful and (then) fairly comprehensive 1996 survey of sociological and ethnographic studies of Paganism⁸⁵, Dennis Carpenter lists 11 currently available texts (including Adler and Luhrmann's), all but one of which

⁸⁴ Harvey is a lecturer in religious studies at King Alfred's College, and earlier on in his career co-organised the Paganism Today conference in Newcastle University (his article on Heathenism in the resulting compendium actually served as the basis for his chapter on the subject in his 1997 book). However, while this is a wide-ranging and often critical look at (mainly) British Paganism, Harvey's approach sometimes blurs the boundaries between Pagan and academic viewpoints (see, for instance, his comments on the Pagan view on 'nature' in chapter three of this study).

⁸⁵ The surveys Carpenter discusses in his article employed any of a "variety of methodological approaches, including participant observation, questionnaires, surveys and interviews" (Carpenter 1996: 397).

(Luhmann's) having a predominantly US or North American focus⁸⁶. These include studies by Hartman⁸⁷, Lynch⁸⁸, Orion⁸⁹, and Scott⁹⁰.

Carpenter usefully points to a number of problems faced by those attempting to sift through the various studies for an objective portrayal of Paganism. Firstly, he points out that, compared with other religions, Paganism by that point had been the subject of a "relatively small amount of research" (Carpenter 1996: 379). Secondly, he draws attention to the methodologically skewed nature of the surveys in question. The problem, Carpenter explains, is that all rely on data deriving from individuals who have felt inclined to "volunteer to respond", which means that they cannot really be regarded as drawing from truly "representative samples"⁹¹ (1996: 397). Carpenter illustrates this point by referring to the parts of the surveys in question that seek to identify "psychological characteristics"⁹², which findings when taken *en masse* he regards as proffering an "inconsistent and inconclusive portrait of the typical Pagan and Wiccan" (1996: 401).

Other sociologists have subsequently expressed similar methodological reservations. For example, in an article based mainly upon their late 'nineties research into American Paganism, Jorgensen and Russell admit that "no adequate systematic investigation of the movement's current

⁸⁶ Carpenter writes that one of these – Kirkpatrick, Rainey and Rubi's *An Empirical Study of Wiccan Religion in Postindustrial Society* (1986) – entailed a survey of "144 Pagans from North America" (Carpenter 1996: 381), which suggests that some of these individuals were Canadian as opposed to American.

⁸⁷ P A Hartman, *Sociological Dimensions of Occult Participation: The Gnostica Study* (1976)

⁸⁸ F R Lynch, *Toward a Theory of Conversion and Commitment to the Occult* (1977)

⁸⁹ L L Orion, *Revival of Western Paganism and Witchcraft in the Contemporary United States* (1990)

⁹⁰ G M Scott, *Cult and Countercult: A Study of a Spiritual Growth Group and a Witchcraft Order* (1980)

⁹¹ This is problematic, Carpenter explains, because it excludes those who do not feel especially inclined to make their opinions known to researchers, including, for example, the "[many] Pagan and Wiccan practitioners [who] regard their spirituality as private", or who are worried about the "harassment and discrimination" that might result from the public declaration of such affiliations (Carpenter 1996: 398).

⁹² These relate to such criteria as "[o]verall adjustment, power, conformity, and creativity" (Carpenter 1996: 360).

population” has so far been undertaken (theirs included), and conclude that the best to be hoped for as yet is an “impressionistic” view of modern Paganism⁹³ (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 325).

Ultimately, though, the ethnographic value even of such ‘impressionistic’ surveys should be neither dismissed nor underestimated. Carpenter himself, for example, writes that, for all their limitations, it is possible nevertheless to formulate a “composite picture” that might “accurately portray contemporary Pagans and Wiccans in a very general sense”⁹⁴ (Carpenter 1996: 401). (He adds, however, that he believes his distillation of the information provided in these surveys to have been aided by “nine years of personal involvement in Wicca and Paganism” on his part [1996: 400], which comment strongly suggests that he regards a modicum of ‘insider’ knowledge to be an important component in the analysis and interpretation of such information⁹⁵.)

For example, he suggests:

‘The contemporary Pagan or Wiccan tends to be an adult individual most commonly born during the “baby-boom” years 1946 to 1964 or more recently. The majority... are of Caucasian [i.e. white European] ancestry... Somewhat more of these individuals are female.’ (1996: 401)

Elaborating on the last point, Carpenter writes how “studies suggest that more women are involved than men with women making up somewhere

⁹³ The US sociologist Mary Jo Neitz similarly avers that “such non-random surveys” as have invariably been conducted by those studying the subject “have severe limitations” for the purposes of making “generalizations beyond our local and particular contexts” (Neitz 2000: 250).

⁹⁴ Jorgensen and Russell arrive at much the same conclusion, claiming that their own study is “sufficient... to support a rudimentary portrayal of the social characteristic of contemporary American Neopagans when interpreted with caution and in terms of previous studies” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 330).

⁹⁵ On the other hand, the anthropologist Grant McCracken warns against the “dangers of familiarity”, his point being that an “intimate acquaintance with one’s own culture can create as much blindness as insight” (McCracken 1988: 12).

between 50 and 66 percent of the total population involved with Paganism and Wiccan Spirituality” (1996: 386).

Carpenter proposes some other generalisations, some of which, moreover, seem to be corroborated by studies not included in his survey⁹⁶. For instance, regarding religious backgrounds, he asserts that Pagans are “frequently either Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish” (1996: 401). More expansively, in accordance with their data (albeit also with reference to Adler and Orion’s respective studies), Jorgensen and Russell write that “except for a disproportionate number of Jews, the former religious backgrounds of contemporary [American] Neopagans approximately mirrors the religious affiliations of Americans generally” – that is to say, “38.3% were Protestants, 27.2% were Catholics, 5% were Jews, 20.3% were something else, and 9.7% did not answer this item, or they responded to multiple categories.”⁹⁷ (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 332)

With respect to profession, Carpenter cites J C Ludeke’s 1989 survey⁹⁸ as reporting that a significant minority – “23 percent” – of the informants were “blue-collar workers” (1996: 388), which is to say, involved in identifiably working class occupations such as factory work. Also significant is Kirkpatrick’s assessment that “Witches and Pagans tend to have relatively high-status occupations... [but were] underrewarded in that 80 percent earned below the national median income” (1996: 388). The studies Carpenter refers to also illustrate the “wide range of occupations” Pagans are wont to pursue (1996: 388). Adler, for instance, suggests that “computer programmers, technical writers, [and] scientists” are particularly well represented among the Pagan community, as are (albeit to a lesser extent) “doctors and lawyers”, “cooks, waitresses, and nannies” (1996: 388). For Orion, the occupations represented were (in descending order of

⁹⁶ With regard to some of the above generalisations put forward by Carpenter, it is interesting to note that Hutton describes his British informant pool as “overwhelmingly white and European” (Hutton 1999b: 405); furthermore, he writes that the “gender balance” represented by his informants was “relatively even”, but with a “majority... being female” (1999b: 402).

⁹⁷ A more British focussed discussion of this criterion will take place in chapter eleven.

⁹⁸ Wicca as a Revitalization Movement Among Post-Industrial, Urban, American Women

popularity) caring professions (“helping and healing”), “arts and entertainments”, “computer-related”, “students”, “business-related”, “office workers”, and “writers”, although by far the largest proportion (31.1 %) held down what she refers to as “miscellaneous jobs” (1996: 388-9). Overall, Carpenter’s impression is that Pagan choices concerning both profession and lifestyle typically reflect another important sociological factor, this being educational level, which, he assesses, is significantly higher among Pagans than within the “general population” (1996: 389).

From a British perspective, Hutton writes that his survey group are “drawn overwhelmingly from upper levels of the working classes and the lower levels of the middle one” (Hutton 1999b: 401). He explains that “they were overwhelmingly, artisans (carpenters, blacksmiths, painters and decorators, skilled gardeners, builders, and plumbers), shopkeepers, artists, service engineers (most often specializing in computers or sound systems), financial advisers or insurance salespeople, or owners of small businesses” (1999b: 402). They also included public servants – including “librarians”, “archivists” and civil servants – along with a number of “psychologists” (1999b: 402). Like Carpenter, Hutton helpfully suggests a pattern behind the diversity, this being a “higher than usual amount of independence and self-organization” (1999b: 402). In addition, Hutton also points to a related, “almost universal trait among them” (and one, moreover, that Simes also detects⁹⁹), this being a “love of reading and a commitment to constant self-education” (1999b: 402).

It is even possible, it seems, to discern some points of consistency within the broadly problematical area of psychological characteristics. Specifically, it appears that Pagans “display typical patterns of psychological adjustment” towards the wider society, and may also generally be regarded as “creative and imaginative individuals”¹⁰⁰ (Carpenter 1996: 401). Carpenter also helpfully outlines some of the key themes that are given by “many” Pagans as reasons for involvement in such spiritualities. These include a

⁹⁹ See above.

¹⁰⁰ These aspects of the typical Pagan ‘make-up’ will be discussed in greater depth in later chapters, and in chapters ten and eleven especially.

“recognition of the divine as female as well as male”, “reverence for nature and living in harmony with nature”, and “quests for personal enrichment and spiritual growth” (1996: 403).

However, he also adds the important *caveat* that the studies he mentions have neglected to look in “an in depth fashion [at] the reasons why individuals become involved and stay involved”, preferring instead to cite “descriptive” criteria such as “spiritual beliefs and theology”, “religious practices”, “religious political structures”, “personal psychological adjustment” etc., without attempting to fully comprehend the “complexity and interrelatedness of the factors and reasons underlying the current growth of interest in Paganism and Wiccan Spirituality” (1996: 403). Moreover, it might also be suggested that this is an imbalance subsequent studies have done little to redress.

There is another problem that must be addressed when discussing matters of methodology and the interpretation of data as these apply to Paganism – one that is succinctly outlined by Pike in her 1996 article on Pagan ethnographic studies. Pike explains that these have tended to be overly concerned with the question of whether or not it represents a ‘valid’ or ‘reasonable’ type of worldview ‘in this day and age’. The origins of this tendency, writes Pike, are basically twofold. Firstly, it is a response to ‘public’ suspicions regarding the “apparent strangeness, hiddenness, and ‘irrationality’” of Pagans (Pike 1996: 354). Secondly, it is informed by “early” (i.e. early ‘seventies) appraisals of modern magic and occultism (themselves also influenced somewhat by public opinion) by scholars such as Marcello Truzzi and Edward Tiryakian, who sought to interpret the phenomenon in terms of “preconceived agendas” (1996: 355) that portrayed it as existing in “binary opposition” to the socio-cultural “center” or ‘mainstream’ – in other words, as identifiable with “everything considered ‘other’” (1996: 356). Pike surmises that the type of “[s]ociological research” involved in these studies entailed “little, if any, ethnography” (1996: 355), but that ever since, such assumptions have nevertheless continued to “[determine] the agenda of the academic study of Neo-Paganism”, whether conducted by “sympathetic researchers [or] suspicious outsiders” (1996: 354).

Thus, even though “scholarly research” has actually tended in recent decades to be more “sympathetic... to Neo-Pagans” than not, the resulting corpus has nonetheless largely reiterated the older, ‘deviant’ interpretation of Paganism by continuing to “focus on questions of legitimacy and rationality” (i.e. relating to its overall validity *vis-à-vis* a purportedly ‘rationalistic’ modern culture)¹⁰¹ (1996: 354), the difference being that in these cases such questions are cast in terms of a “defensive” rather than accusatory “agenda” (1996: 355). This has had a detrimental impact on scholarship on Paganism, as when “[s]cholars view their task as validating the existence of occult groups” they are less inclined to ask how Pagans “experience” their own “involvement with occult activities”¹⁰² (1996: 358). Pike suggests that Adler’s book is exemplary in this regard, as it is significantly “less defensive and apologetic” than most other studies of its type (1996: 362) (although, as suggested previously, not all would agree with this assessment).

It is not the intention here to suggest that those who are broadly sympathetic to Paganism are therefore unable to be sufficiently objective in their appraisals of the phenomenon¹⁰³. Nevertheless, Pike’s comments persuasively suggest that a certain caution should be applied when consulting ethnographic studies whose interpretations either attempt to justify

¹⁰¹ Pike illustrates this specific point by referring to Luhrmann’s previously mentioned question, ‘Why do otherwise rational people believe in magic?’ (Pike 1996: 358), and also cites as typical Lynch’s conclusion that Paganism “shows a search for spiritual meaning in an increasingly secularised and individualistic culture” (1996: 360). It could also be added here that Greenwood’s adjunction (quoted above) that anthropologists should aspire to accept magical ‘knowledge’ primarily on its own terms is perhaps also indicative of this ‘agenda’.

¹⁰² For Pike, a case in point is Nacham Ben-Yehuda’s 1980 study, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences and Scientists*, the conclusion to which she accuses of “[indicating] that the researcher’s job is to legitimize and defend occult groups” (Pike 1996: 362). According to Pike, such a position “clearly misses the point; that is, what makes these activities valid and viable to those who engage in them?” (1996: 362)

¹⁰³ Addressing this very concern, York proposes that sociologists should at least “entertain the possibility expressed in Hadden’s question, ‘Why shouldn’t natives, compassionately committed to their culture, be trained to do sociological observation?’” (York 1995: 26)

or appear to dovetail with Pagan opinion, however useful or revealing these surveys might otherwise be.

On a final note, it is necessary to point out that caution should be employed when looking at interview data concerning 'profound' personal experiences such as spiritual 'discovery' or 'transformation', as studies have shown that recollections of the surrounding circumstances may be 'skewed' as a result of the highly subjective nature of such occurrences. Thus, for example, Batson *et al.* cite Snow and Machalek to assert that "such memories are refracted through the prism of one's beliefs about the effects of the experience" (Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis 1993: 110). This admittedly poses something of a problem for the analysis of such data. Nevertheless, it might be possible to arrive at something akin to 'surer ground' if such accounts are cross-referenced, not only with other similar or complementary 'events' discussed within the same interview testimony (to check for logical or emotive consistency), but in addition, with other testimonies, along with existent studies of either Pagan or non-Pagan spiritual phenomena, in order to gauge something of their persuasiveness on sociological, not to mention narrative and cognitive, grounds. However, the potentially 'refracted' nature of the data, along with the largely impressionistic methodology used here, has required that a rather tentative tone be applied when interpreting the interview testimony on a number of occasions over the course of the following chapters.

Bearing these cautions in mind, the present study will attempt to provide a clear-cut overview of Paganism based on solid conceptual foundations, and to locate it in complex relationship to broader sociological contexts, while also acknowledging relevant historical trends and, where appropriate, psychological factors. It will also attempt to do this without bringing prejudgements or value judgements (either negative or positive) to bear, while remaining sensitive to the specific socio-cultural topography of the United Kingdom. Prior to embarking on this task, however, it is appropriate to look at the methodological strategy employed for the purposes of the present study.

2. Discussion of the Methodological Approach Chosen for the Present Study

For the acquisition of personal, firsthand data relating to modern Pagans, a qualitative strategy was chosen, as it was thought that such an approach might prove useful for helping to peer behind the 'descriptive' level to unearth the 'complexity and interrelatedness' of factors that Carpenter suggests underlies the phenomenon. In direct contrast to the 'rival' approach of quantitative research, which is most notably associated with extensive questionnaire and structured interview-based techniques, qualitative methodologies generally involve the amassing of copious, multifaceted data through the application of observational or interview strategies targeting in some detail a comparatively small number of respondents. The following comments give some idea of the potential appropriateness of such a strategy for the purpose in question. The first comes from Alan Clarke, and concerns the major differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The latter, he writes, "usually involves large-scale empirical studies using social survey techniques to collect data from representative samples of the population", and is intended "to produce useful factual data from which generalisations, often about characteristics of the society as a whole, can be made" (Clarke 2001: 34). Conversely, qualitative research adopts a 'micro' as opposed to 'macro' focus, being "based on case studies or data collected from individuals and groups", and so is concerned more with "the meaning that events and situations have for participants" (2001: 34). Of course, it is important to bear in mind the caveat made earlier about the non-representative nature of all the Pagan studies carried out so far (although, as is hopefully amply apparent by now, it should also be acknowledged that invaluable insights into the phenomenon may nevertheless be elicited despite such methodological restrictions).

The method chosen to elicit qualitative 'firsthand' data was the long interview¹⁰⁴. The benefits (not to mention some of the weaknesses) of this

¹⁰⁴ To get down to basics, it is useful to refer here to Ackroyd and Hughes' definition of interviews as "encounters between a researcher and a respondent in which the latter is asked a series of questions relevant to the subject of the research", and where the

method in comparison to the qualitative-based alternatives will be discussed in due course. At this point, it is helpful to turn to the next comment (this time from Nigel Fielding), which, although primarily referring to ethnography as a combined methodological strategy¹⁰⁵, might also be said to apply to more interview-centred qualitative approaches. Fielding's point concerns the ability of "[good] qualitative analysis" to "reflect some of the truth of a phenomenon by reference to systematically gathered data" (Fielding 2001: 160). He asserts that, while the "demanding nature" of such strategies "means you are seldom in a position to claim that findings generalise to all such settings", this is made up for by "the depth of understanding" that can be obtained, which may in turn serve as a "rich source of ideas for work using methods such as surveys which can claim generalisability" (2001: 160) (although, again, the problematic nature of any such claims for generalising ability *vis-à-vis* studies of Paganism should be borne in mind).

The potential usefulness of qualitative interviewing methods in this regard is saliently illustrated in Grant McCracken's discussion of the long interview technique. According to McCracken, while the numbers of those taking part in long interview-based surveys are likely to be too small to constitute a "sample"¹⁰⁶ (McCracken 1988: 17), such an approach may nevertheless generate "substantial chunks of data" on relevant subjects (1988: 25) while also giving scope to pursue any avenues of enquiry that might be opened up by "unexpected responses"¹⁰⁷ (1988: 38). McCracken describes the principal benefits of the long interview method (along with other qualitative strategies) in terms of its "complexity-capturing ability" (1988: 16), which it possesses in spite – or rather, perhaps, because of – its

"respondent's answers constitute the raw data analysed at a later point in time by the researcher." (Quoted in May 1993: 91)

¹⁰⁵ The difference is significant, as ethnography typically involves a component of participant observation, although it may also equally include other techniques, such as interviewing. Or as Fielding puts it, it is customarily regarded as a "mix of observation, documentation and speech (interviews, nowadays)" (Fielding 2001: 146).

¹⁰⁶ By this, McCracken means that they are unlikely to be of the "necessary size type to generalize to the larger population" (McCracken 1988: 17).

¹⁰⁷ McCracken lyrically describes this approach as "[c]apturing data on the wing" (McCracken 1988: 38).

logistical limitations; that is to say, unlike quantitative strategies, the long interview “does not survey the terrain, it mines it” (1988: 17). And as Lofland suggests, this approach may thus be used to uncover the sort of fertile “materials” that can aid analysts to “find out what kinds of things are happening rather than to determine the frequency of predetermined kinds of things that the researcher already believes can happen”, as normally takes place under the comparatively rigid auspices of quantitative research projects (*quoted in* Fielding and Thomas 2001: 125).

The hope, then, was to acquire what Bryman calls “rich, detailed answers” (Bryman 2001: 313) from a small number of respondents through the use of long interviews, with the intention of variously questioning, adding nuance to, and ‘fleshing out’, on a sociological level, the broad picture provided by existent academic appraisals of the Pagan phenomenon, including the sort of ‘descriptive’ accounts that Carpenter mention – in short, of helping shed further light on the ‘complexity and interrelatedness’ at work behind the phenomenon’s surface. Or to put the above in more cautious terms, by virtue of the qualitative and small-scale nature of the ‘firsthand’ interview research conducted during the course of the present study, the resulting data were therefore used (as, indeed, seems to be the advice regarding qualitative strategies in general) primarily as a means of either illustrating or negotiating findings made in other studies, rather than generating generalisations or conclusions about the phenomenon under investigation ‘from scratch’.

Mention should also be made at this point of the vast corpus of ‘primary’ Pagan texts, which in itself constitutes a copious source of ‘insider’ information on the subject. As such, it served as another important ethnographic ‘layer’ of research material for the present study, as a complement to impressions presented in the academic appraisals¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ That is, it was able to provide just the sort of background “reading” that May sees as essential prior to embarking on the interview programme (May 1993: 100). And as methodological strategies go, this interweaving of academic, ‘insider’, and ‘firsthand’ data does seem very similar to the approach used in a number of the studies mentioned so far. York’s, for instance, also draws heavily from Pagan texts (see above), although it is hoped that in the case of the present study such documentary data has been integrated rather

(although, as was noted earlier, certain specific accounts seem to blur the categories somewhat, Simes' being a prime example, perhaps). A loose interview schedule was constructed, of the sort typifying what are commonly known as 'unstructured' or 'focussed' interviews¹⁰⁹. This schedule was based

more seamlessly with other information sources than was arguably the case in that particular work. Special mention should also go to Luhrmann, Simes and Greenwood in this regard (for instance, much of Luhrmann's central thesis relies to some extent on her interpretation of Aleister Crowley's writings on magical 'planes' [see above]) – although, admittedly, unlike York, all of these individuals seem to 'play down' the methodological significance of the documentary sources they cite in favour of existing studies and/or respondent data.

And indeed, when all is said, it could be argued that Pagan literature (not to mention the burgeoning number of internet sites) represents such a rich resource, it is perhaps not hard to see why a person researching Paganism might choose to draw from it as an alternative or supplementary font of information, especially given the phenomenon's comparatively low academic profile, not to mention its seeming resistance to representative sampling techniques.

¹⁰⁹ This is the technique that is perhaps most characteristically associated with the long, qualitative interview approach outlined by McCracken, its 'opposite number', methodologically speaking, being the 'structured' interview. As May suggests (and as was hinted at earlier), the latter approach is most characteristic of quantitative methodologies, or "survey research", as it requires that "questions [be] asked in a uniform and non-directive manner" so as to maximise the possibility of "*comparability* between responses", and thus – in theory – to elicit a 'realistic' picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny (May 1993: 92 [May's emphasis]).

However, Clarke writes that for some, the very concept of quantitative research is based on flawed reasoning, as they question the very existence of the sort of "single, objective reality or 'truth'" sought by quantitative researchers, maintaining instead that the intrinsically 'fluid' nature of the social world means that sociologists should adopt a more "interpretivist" framework – in other words, one that is open to "multiple, subjective realities" (Clarke 2001: 33). Qualitative interviewing techniques are, of course, representative of the latter tack. However, it should also be pointed out that such 'interpretivism' is by no means hegemonic within sociological circles, and that the broad-brushed approach of quantitative research is still popularly applied as a means of obtaining information (however 'approximate') on any number of phenomena. Indeed, Gilbert points out that, for practical purposes, the boundaries between the two positions are far blurrier than the accompanying "philosophical" rhetoric would suggest (Gilbert 2001: 33). In fact, sociological methodologies nowadays tend to be "pluralistic", meaning that sociologists "often combine quantitative and qualitative research methods within the same study" (2001: 33), with the latter adding nuance to the more general picture provided by the former. Citing Bullock, Little and

around a number of subject areas, these having in turn primarily been decided upon after consulting the literature to hand (both Pagan and academic). The questions were formulated to capitalise on the benefits of the qualitative interview format, by presenting a general discursive framework while allowing for substantial digression, elaboration, and personal opinion on the part of the interviewees¹¹⁰. The 'core' questions covered a broad vista of themes, including such subjects as how the respondents first became involved with Paganism, their opinions on the concept of 'nature', and how they see their practice as having developed over the years¹¹¹ (the exact wordings were dependent on conversational 'drift' and context). On a number of occasions this required what is commonly referred to as 'probing', which, in the words of Fielding and Thomas, "[involves] follow-up questioning to get a fuller response"¹¹² (Fielding and Thomas 2001: 128) (although generally speaking, since the interviewees all proved garrulous to a fault, getting any of

Millham, Gilbert suggests that the value of such symbiosis is particularly evident in the realm of "social policy" (such as that involving "the informal care of young adults with learning difficulties and behavioural problems", to give one example), where data acquired through "qualitative case studies can be used to illustrate, explain and add depth to the findings of quantitative research" (2001: 33).

¹¹⁰ Interviews were conducted with eleven individuals altogether. The interviewees were: DM (Aged 23 years old at the time of interview/Male), WS (25/Female), AM (27/M), SL (31/F), PM (32/M), SW (32/M), GM (39/M), SJ (40/M), JH (45/F), JW (49/F), CC (55/F). The author came across the participants either as a result of attending moots in various British cities, or through introductions by mutual acquaintances. Recordings and transcripts of the interviews are all available. Some of the quotes taken from one of the interviewees – SL – come from the transcript of a recording the author made (with her consent) of a talk about Paganism that she delivered in Leeds sometime in 1997 (copy available).

¹¹¹ See appendix one for a complete list of the subject areas.

¹¹² See appendix one for a complete list of the subject areas.

¹¹² To mention but one example, an interviewee (AM) was asked to elaborate further on an important Pagan concept he had just mentioned, this being the 'spirit of the land'. This provoked an interesting and, as it happened, useful series of comments, concerning such matters as how the concept can apply as much to cities as to rural areas, its relationship to the idea of "the Norse magical notion of the soul" and the closely connected notion of the 'clan symbol', and the respondent's family's own coat-of-arms. (AM: 16-7)

them to 'open up' to a degree sufficient for qualitative research purposes took little encouragement).

In addition to eliciting 'rich, detailed' information about respondents' beliefs and opinions, qualitative interviewing methods are also potentially useful for helping to place such data within broader contexts relating to personal background and history. Not least, this aspect of the schedule involved an element of what is referred to as 'sequential interviewing', which May describes as a "chronological format" that "enables people to reflect on their experiences and the event in which the researcher is interested, as it unfolded"¹¹³ (May 1993: 100). The benefits of this feature are saliently illustrated, perhaps, by the interviewees' respective comments on their 'discovery' of Paganism¹¹⁴; the discussion of Paganism's possible relationship to broader religious currents that features in chapter eleven of the present study also draws heavily from comments prompted by this sequential type of strategy, describing as they do the various respondents' experiences of 'conventional' religion during their 'formative' years.

¹¹³ May writes that although sequential interviewing may be used as part of quantitative strategies, it "is of particular interest to those which permit a greater flexibility for the person to answer in his or her own terms and involves interviewing people about events in the way they unfolded." (May 1993: 100) He adds that such an approach may also give scope for 'reflecting back'. In other words, "as the account of the event unfolds, it also enables the interviewer to ask about a previously stated belief in terms of the new information gained" (May 1993: 100). For example, when asked to say something about her life during the 'seventies, one of the interviewees (CC) started describing how she had combined her professional career as a lawyer with an enthusiasm for the hippy 'counterculture' which, she claims, was still exerting a significant cultural influence at the midpoint of that decade (CC: 5). She was then asked to comment on her connection around this time with an organisation she had mentioned earlier in the interview, this being the British Humanist Association (a body famous for championing "free-thinking" and secular values [CC: 4], which by her account she had joined some years earlier as a reaction against a strict Methodist upbringing). This prompted a series of comments where she described her then growing disillusionment with the organisation, due to what she perceived as its "right-on", blanket rejection of spiritual values (which she claimed were starting to play a prominent part in her life at around that point), combined with her deep-seated resistance to "being organised to think in a particular way", and the (to her) apparent hypocrisy of its leadership (CC: 5-6).

¹¹⁴ See chapter seven.

This point also says much about the long interview method's potential benefits *vis-à-vis* its chief 'rival' among the qualitative methodologies, namely participant observation. Prior to discussing this subject further, it should be acknowledged that the latter is by no means without its merits. For example, it can, as Bryman points out, serve as an effective means for enabling researchers to "see as others see" (as a result of their "immersion" in the "social setting" under investigation), to peer below everyday appearances (due to prolonged contact with research subjects, and the presentation of opportunities "to observe behaviour rather than just rely on what is said" [Bryman 2001: 328]), and, through its lack of solid 'focus', to pursue "unexpected topics or issues (2001: 329).

But as Bryman also points out, while it may once have been common for sociologists to favour participant observation, nowadays they are more inclined towards pragmatism, which is to say, a belief that "[specific research] methods are appropriate to researching some issues and areas but not others" (2001: 332). As a number of the studies discussed above might attest, this is by no means to say that participant observation is not a valid tactic for investigating Paganism. However, the long interview method presents opportunities of a different sort. Not least, it gives greater scope for eliciting the sort of sequential information mentioned previously. More broadly, it enables the researcher to delve into areas that are perhaps not so readily accessible through participant observation alone¹¹⁵. With regard to the present study, it could be argued that interviewing allowed for the investigation of subjects which, however close to their hearts, the respondents are not normally required to deliberate upon, such as (again) how they 'got into' Paganism, religious background, their thoughts on key – and highly complex – Pagan concepts such as nature, the Otherworld, deity, and so on. Not least, it was hoped that by providing biographically complex

¹¹⁵ Bryman cites Beardsworth and Keil's 1992 study of vegetarians as an example, his point being that without deliberate questioning by the researcher, valuable information on the subject – such as "reasons for [the respondents'] conversion to this eating strategy" – is likely only to appear in an "episodic" manner, since on a day-to-day level individuals do not tend to come up against the sort of situations that would require such exposition (Bryman 2001: 329).

and subjectively detailed accounts of the respondents' experiences (as opposed to the 'snapshots' of personal lives that participant observation on its own tends to provide), the data might therefore help to provide a more sociologically contextualised picture of the phenomenon than, as Carpenter suggests, has customarily been the case within the field.

Further, because interviewing is inherently more 'focussed' a strategy with regard to qualitative content than participant observation (2001: 331), it is therefore more useful for ensuring that the respondents will contribute data on all the issues the researcher deems to be of particular importance to the study. Accordingly, it was possible to obtain information from each interviewee on the 'key' topics mentioned in the previous paragraph (along with a number of others), and (as suggested earlier) to 'steer' the conversation so as to elicit more 'involved' information on any given subject if required, in a manner that is, perhaps, largely precluded by the more 'hit-and-miss' methods of participant observation.

Moreover, it is also not inconceivable that interview-based strategies might allow for more variation in terms of attitude and response than is often the case with participant observation. This is simply because, as Bryman points out, in the latter, "the researcher is invariably constrained in his or her interactions and observations to a fairly restricted range of people, incidents, and localities"¹¹⁶ (2001: 331). In Pagan terms, then, this means that participant observation, strictly speaking, will tend to concentrate on small, closely-knit, 'working' or ritual groups, where there may conceivably be a stronger degree of convergence or synchrony with regard to respondents' beliefs and experiences than might otherwise be expected¹¹⁷. Accordingly,

¹¹⁶ By way of illustration, Bryman uses the example of "[p]articipant observation in a large organization", since such projects are "likely to mean that knowledge of that organization far beyond the confines of the department or section in which the observation is carried out is likely not to be very extensive" (Bryman 2001: 331).

¹¹⁷ For example, as was hinted at in an earlier discussion in this chapter, this point may help to explain why Greenwood seems to have had such difficulty squaring her own observational data with more general accounts of the Pagan phenomenon, dealing as much of the former do with what appears to have been a very 'claustrophobic' dynamic on the part of her Wiccan subjects. That said, not all of the studies so far mentioned that employed participant observational methods seem to have suffered from such narrowness of focus. Hutton's

while (as was the case for the present study) a qualitative interview-based research project might also deal with comparably small respondent groups, those following such a course nevertheless have the advantage – in theory, and depending on the focus of study – of being able to ‘cast their nets’ further afield, to encompass “a wider variety of people and situations”¹¹⁸ (2001: 331), thus conceivably allowing for a broader picture of the phenomenon, to a degree, at least.

In all, then, while interviewing strategies might well be less ‘immediate’ than participant observational ones, this may – to some extent – actually work in the researcher’s favour where the purpose of the research is, less to ‘see through the eyes’ of the subjects in an anthropological sense, than (as in the present study) to appraise the sort of highly ‘considered’ (that is, complexly opinionative and biographically vivid) feedback that might otherwise not be so readily forthcoming, even through a more ‘immersive’ methodology such as the latter¹¹⁹. Having said that, it is appropriate at this

account springs most readily to mind in this regard, perhaps, given the sheer scale of that particular project. However, it should also be stressed that the approach used that study – which seemingly involved an unspecified type of first-hand ‘contact’ with numerous individuals over a substantial period of time – may not have been quite as systematic or formal as is usually the case in sociological and anthropological surveys (as Hutton himself seems to admit [see above]).

¹¹⁸ With regard to the respondents taking part in the present study, it could be pointed out that, while a number of social connections were apparent between some of them (usually as a result of attending informal events such as moots or university Pagan society meetings), actual ‘working’ relationships were not much in evidence, with only two respondents (DM and AM) among the group who, it seemed, could be regarded as having been regular magical ‘co-workers’ in any sense. Furthermore, the interviewees *en masse* represented a wide variety of individual ‘paths’, including Wicca, Reconstructionism, Shamanism, Chaos Magick, Thelema and sundry others, not to mention permutations thereof (references to their various Pagan affinities and allegiances will be made over the course of the present study). Accordingly, it is perhaps not inconceivable that a broader, more varied picture of the phenomenon was obtained by this means than would have been possible under the more ‘enclosed’ auspices of participant observation.

¹¹⁹ Indeed, it might even be said that interview-based strategies are less conducive to the sort of – arguably – self-defeating ‘insider/outsider’ concerns mentioned earlier in this chapter, since (so traditional wisdom has it, at least) they necessitate the establishment of a formal demarcation between the observer (interviewer) and the observed (interviewee).

point to stress once more that the intention behind the present study is merely to help shed further light on the subject of Paganism, and as such it should be seen as (hopefully) contributing to what is a small but growing corpus of studies encompassing (as has been illustrated elsewhere in this chapter) a broad array of useful methodological strategies.

(Although some recent schools of thought have questioned the philosophical and epistemological bases for such an assumption. Most notable amongst these, perhaps, are the ethnomethodologists, who propose, for instance, that “interview data do not report on an external reality displayed in respondents’ utterances but on the internal reality constructed as both parties contrive to produce the appearance of a recognisable interview.” [Fielding and Thomas 2001: 142]) Conversely, the technique arguably might also help guard against what Harvey refers to as “the ultimate fear of anthropologists” (not to mention participant observers generally, it could perhaps be added), namely that of “going native” (Harvey 2003: 16-7).

CHAPTER TWO

THE VARIETIES OF MODERN PAGANISM

1. A Brief History of Modern Paganism

As may perhaps be gleaned from the introductory chapter, Paganism can loosely be defined as a magically oriented form of spirituality that entails the polytheistic, celebratory, and usually ritualistic, affirmation of the individual's relationship with his or her environment (placing especial emphasis, it seems, on those elements that are deemed to be 'natural'), and with the 'magical realms' with which adherents believe this to co-exist. Its iconic representatives are the legendary guardians and repositories of magical 'power' and 'knowledge' – the “witches, wizards, druids, kabbalists, shamans, of mostly European lore”, in Luhrmann's words (Luhrmann 1989: 6), not to mention the gods, heroes and spirits of myth and folktale.

As also noted previously, modern Paganism¹ first emerged as a fully-fledged contemporary phenomenon in the United Kingdom immediately after World War II, in the form of Witchcraft, or more specifically, Wicca². Since its arrival, this has remained the most popular and, according to Hutton, “by far the most influential part of the modern [Pagan] faith” (Hutton 1991: 330). Its first champion, a flamboyant character named Gerald Gardner (who publicly set out its core features in 1954³) claimed that it incorporated the “remnants of Stone Age religion” (Gardner 1968 [1954]: 20), and had been sustained over the centuries by an unbroken lineage of hereditary Witches, despite having for much of this time been forced underground by ferocious levels of persecution from the 'powers that be'.

Closer scrutiny of Gardner's claims revealed them to be entirely

¹ Where quotes are not being used, this study will follow Hutton's example regarding capitalization. *Viz.*, “pagan' refers to the ancient religions of Europe, while 'Pagan' denotes the modern religions which are partly inspired by their example.” (Hutton 1999b: *xii*) The same will apply to such terms as Witch, Shaman, Druid, and so on.

² The term 'Wicca' stems from the Anglo-Saxon word for 'wise', and is the one that is preferred by most (though not all) modern Witches to denote their religion, another common title being 'The Craft' (Harvey 1997: 35).

³ His book *Witchcraft Today* was first published in that year.

without foundation. In fact, far from being ancient, nearly all of the elements of the tradition as outlined by Gardner (in a form that has come to be known, eponymously, as Gardnerian Wicca) can be traced to other sources. A crucial – and in hindsight, fairly obvious – influence was Romanticism. This was an intellectual, artistic and philosophical movement that arose in Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as a reaction against the perceived dominance of western culture by industrialisation, scientific rationalism and moral conservatism, and encouraged, in the words of the sociologist Colin Campbell, a “penchant for reverie and dreaming, [and] celebration of the irrational” (Campbell 1987: 181)

Wicca thus reasserted the Romantic agenda by eulogising ideas and attitudes that the latter movement had recommended to supplant prevailing *mores*. Thus, just as Romanticism held that western culture promoted civilisation, reason, and patriarchal – or at least patrician – values, Wicca, according to Hutton, was its “belated offspring” because it glorified “the feminine, the night, [and] wild nature” (Hutton 1999b: *viii*). Wicca’s political subtext was sharpened by other historical influences, and in particular a 19th century polemical tract by the French scholar Jules Michelet that suggested an explicit association between witchcraft and the radical politics of the time. Michelet painted a (somewhat implausible) vision of medieval witchcraft as a matriarchal phenomenon in both structure and ethos, and so as, in direct challenge to the surrounding culture, “joyous, democratic and peaceful” (Hutton 1996: 11). It was also from the Romantic movement that Paganism largely derived its principal godforms, through the former’s ‘rehabilitation’ of the goat-horned, “Greek god of nature”, Pan, and the “ancient Greek image... of Gaia”, who was the “presiding female spirit of the globe itself” in the ancient Hellenic world (1996: 9).

Another formative influence was that of the archaeologist Margaret Murray. Murray combined Romantic notions of witchcraft (she herself had been strongly influenced by Michelet) with ideas inspired by pioneering anthropologists such as James Frazer and Edward Tylor to propose that the phenomenon had constituted a “fairly uniform religion, surviving all across Western Europe until the seventeenth century” (Hutton 1999b: 195). According to Murray, witches traditionally “organized [themselves] into

covens of thirteen”, and worshipped a Hornéd God, who “represented the generative powers of nature” (1999b: 195). This was how Gardner chose broadly to portray Wicca, the key difference being that, according to him, the religion had survived up until the present day rather than dying out due to persecution. Gardner’s story was that he had been initiated into the tradition by a hereditary coven operating in the New Forest (despite, curiously, never claiming to belong to such a family himself).

However, after a few decades of both academic and popular acceptance, by the 1970s it had become apparent that the “Murray thesis” upon which Wicca had largely been founded was untenable, having been severely challenged by skeptical historians such as Norman Cohn, Keith Thomas, and Bengt Ankerloo, none of whom could find any credible basis for such a theory (1999b: 362). Moreover, regarding the actual ‘magical’ content of Wicca, it had long been an open secret that, as Jorgensen and Russell put it, Wicca’s magical origins actually lay in “the vast, culturally marginal stream of Western esotericism”, from which it had “freely borrowed” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 326). Bluntly put, this means that Wicca had its roots, not in any supposed prehistoric or bucolic matriarchy, but rather in a complex and urbane ritual magic tradition that had been a continuous, albeit not always prominent, feature of western culture since late antiquity. Hutton helpfully outlines this tradition in terms of successive ‘phases’. The first phase can be regarded as having constituted the genuinely antiquarian, or at least early medieval, ‘motherlode’ of western magic, and introduced such integral features as the delineation of a “consecrated circle” as a basis for magical operations, “cardinal points of the compass”⁴, the four “elements” (these being “fire, water, air and earth”⁵), an emphasis upon powerful ‘entities’ such as “elemental spirits, ... angels and demons”, and “the drawing of spirits and deities into human bodies” (Hutton 1999b: 66-7).

⁴ Greenwood explains that a “magical circle in Britain is always based on the following ‘correspondences’: the east is concerned with rational thought, the south with will and energy; the west with emotions; and the north with the body.” (Greenwood 2000b: 36-7)

⁵ Each ‘element’ has its own specific directional correspondence; accordingly, in the ritual circle the symbol of earth is placed in “the North”, air in “the East”, fire in “the South” and water in “the West” (King and Skinner 1981: 18).

The next, later “medieval” phase placed greater emphasis on the procedures and protocols of magic, and so was significant mainly for the “increasing formality and elaboration of... ritual” that occurred during this time, which occurred to the detriment of notions of individual magical efficacy and ‘power’ (1999b: 67). This changed during the subsequent phase, which took place during the Renaissance, and saw a rise in the status of the individual “magus” or magician in accordance with that period’s concern with the “potential of the human mind” (1999b: 67). It also reframed esoteric tradition in terms of recently (re)discovered occult systems and philosophies from the Mediterranean and Middle East, the most notable of these being Hermeticism and Cabbala (other spellings being Qabbalah and, as seen earlier, Kabbala)⁶ (1999b: 82). The next pivotal phase took place during the European Enlightenment. The establishment of scientific rationalism aside, this period saw the rise of radical, ‘underground’ political movements such as Freemasonry, and so in esoteric circles the “tradition of scholarly magic” was duly recast to conform with that movement’s ‘subversive’ ethos and organisational structures, which had manifested in a “proliferation of secret societies” (1999b: 67).

Wicca’s, and by extension modern Paganism’s, debt to the various waves of esoteric culture (and in particular, as Jorgensen and Russell aver, the “Renaissance synthesis of Hermeticism and Kabbalism” [Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 326]) can therefore hardly be emphasised enough. However, it is also important to consider a number of influential magical societies and organisations that emerged between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and which can be seen as its most immediate forebears, both chronologically and esoterically. The most notable of these by far was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a British-based organisation from which, in Luhrmann’s words, “[m]ost modern magical groups ultimately descend” (Luhrmann 1989: 38). During its turbulent and faction-ridden history, the Golden Dawn counted among its members some of the key occult figures of the 20th century, such

⁶ Hermeticism was based around occult knowledge found in a collection of texts called the Corpus Hermeticum. Purportedly ancient Egyptian in origin, these were actually “composed in Greek-speaking Egypt in the second century”, while Cabbala is a Hebraic body of mystic knowledge that was formalised some time during the 1200s (Hutton 1999b: 82).

as Aleister Crowley (Symonds 1973: 9), Dion Fortune (Matthews and Matthews 1986: 158), and Israel Regardie⁷ (Richardson 1984: 152).

Also crucial to the development of Paganism was Crowley's *Ordo Templi Orientis* (OTO), which was founded upon his own notorious investigations into magic, these serving to inject into a traditionally staid western esoteric tradition a heady romanticism that often strayed into licentiousness and antinomianism⁸. In fact, Crowley's influence was so direct that certain key elements of his magico-religious synthesis, called *Thelema* (which Hutton describes as a system of "explicitly pagan ceremonial magic" [Hutton 1999b: 401]), were transplanted wholesale into Wicca by Gardner, who, it appears, was himself a member of Crowley's organisation⁹. These included sections from the central rite of the OTO, the Gnostic Mass (a sort of sexually-charged Eucharist), which was 'adapted' by Gardner and his associate Doreen Valiente to become the most important Wiccan ritual, the Great Rite¹⁰; and the magical maxim of Thelema, 'Do What Thou Wilt Shall Be The Whole Of The Law' (Harvey 1997: 98), which became the 'Wiccan Rede' – namely the adjuration, "An [i.e. if] it harm none, do what you will" (1997: 38).

What is interesting about Wicca in this respect, then, is that, despite being very much a part of this highly eclectic and adaptable tradition,

⁷ The Golden Dawn also included many influential artists and bohemians of the *fin de siècle*, such as the poet W B Yeats (Symonds 1973: 31), the horror author Arthur Machen (1973: 35) and the actress Florence Farr (1973: 35).

⁸ See, for example, Crowley's 'Hymn to Pan', which includes the following words: "Dip the purple of passionate prayer / In the crimson shrine, the scarlet snare, / The soul that startles in eyes of blue / To watch thy wantonness weeping through... / And body and brain – come over the sea, [...] / Devil or god, to me, to me..." (Quoted in Symonds 1973: 259)

⁹ The occult historian and author Francis King writes that Gardner "had known Aleister Crowley for some time" prior to the development of Wicca, as he "was not only a VII° initiate of the O.T.O. but actually held a charter authorising him to operate some sort of O.T.O. Lodge" (King 1972: 142).

¹⁰ For example, this includes the following words from Crowley's ceremony, which concern the ingestion of a ritual sacrament called the Cakes of Light: 'Oh Queen most secret, bless this food into our bodies; bestowing health, wealth, strength, joy, and peace, and that fulfilment of love which is perfect happiness' (quoted in Kemp 1993: 123).

Gardner sought not only to obscure this association by putting forward an entirely spurious history for the phenomenon, but also to disseminate his system, the precepts and procedures of which were set down in a document called the 'Book of Shadows', in an largely inflexible and prescriptive manner¹¹. In recent decades, however, there has been a radical shift – or as JW, who is a Wiccan Priestess herself, puts it, “evolution” (JW: 8) – away from the doctrinaire approach demanded by Gardner in favour of a more idiosyncratic and individualistic ethos. This could even be regarded, perhaps, as the defining trend in Paganism since its inception, having resulted, amongst other things, in what JW describes as the “breaking down of the hierarchy within covens” (JW: 8), and more generally, in the emergence of the sort of “anarchism” that tends to predominate attitudinally and structurally within the phenomenon according to a number of commentators, including Adler¹², and Jorgensen and Russell (1999: 336, *n. 9*).

Moreover, it seems likely that the gradual emergence of Wicca's actual origins has played a significant part in this. Admittedly, as the historian Dianne Purkiss puts it, many Witches were left feeling “rather worried about their history” (Purkiss 1996: 39) when it was suggested to them “that the Old Religion is no older than the National Health Service” (1996: 40). More generally, however, it seems that Pagans have been more than capable of assimilating such ‘new information’¹³. Indeed, Rees suggests that scepticism towards what he calls Wicca's “*myth of continuity*”¹⁴ (Rees 1996: 26) has gone hand-in-hand with the establishment of a far more idiosyncratic and “looser-limbed neo-paganism”, by which he means “a paganism not so in need of such legitimations or conformities to strict rubric” (1996: 26-7).

¹¹ For example, Doreen Valiente – who co-authored the original Book of Shadows – writes that homosexuals were proclaimed by Gardner to be “cursed by the Goddess” simply because they did not embody the ‘proper’ sexual polarity upon which Wiccan ritual notionally depends (Valiente 1998: 24).

¹² See chapter one.

¹³ As John McIntyre of the Pagan Federation wryly put it in a recent discussion on this very subject (sparked, incidentally, by Hutton's study of Witchcraft), “[if] any Wiccans flung themselves upon their athames [ritual daggers] in horror” at such revelations, “their bodies have yet to be found” (Macintyre 2000: 39).

¹⁴ Rees' italics.

That said, it is also conceivable that other factors have been no less significant in this respect. Equally important, perhaps, has been the rise of potent cultural currents extrinsic to Wicca that have nevertheless posed a direct challenge to the more doctrinaire aspects of the tradition. One such obvious example is the feminist movement. Most notably, this prompted some female Witches to question Gardner's dictate that a male Priest is necessary to embody the Horned God for them. For example, JW (who is both a feminist and a Wiccan High Priestess) thinks that there is "nothing wrong" with "all-female" covens as "they're balancing within themselves... the male and female energies" (JW: 7). Similarly, Harvey asserts that many women now feel able to "bring out the divine essence in [their own] female polarity" without male intervention (Harvey 1997: 41).

Furthermore, it could be proposed that the implicitly eclectic 'logic' Wicca had always represented – with regard to its construction if not original exposition, at least – meant that it was perhaps only a matter of time before such factors came to outweigh the more 'doctrinaire' aspects¹⁵. Significantly, soon after the emergence of Gardner's form of Wicca, other strong personalities such as Alex Sanders (a former associate of Gardner) developed their own brands (Sanders, for example, called his *Alexandrian* Wicca). This was the start of a process of rapid 'devolution' from Gardnerian 'orthodoxy' that has seen the emergence of all manner of contesting voices within the phenomenon. These now include such variations as Hedgewitchcraft, which is the preserve of solo practitioners; and Traditional and Hereditary Witchcraft, both of which claim a more authentic connection with what practitioners regard as 'genuine' lineages¹⁶.

Another important development was the dawning perception (for some, at least) that coven structures are not always necessary to perform magic. SW describes this sentiment accordingly: "You can do solitary Wicca [since] Wicca basically is a form of ritualised magic, and rituals can be

¹⁵ For instance, Adler attributes this general flexibility – and therefore, she writes, Wicca's ability to "survive, to revive, and to be re-created" – to the impression among its followers that its tenets can be "tested by experience" (Adler 1986: 173).

¹⁶ Hutton, however, writes that, despite their differences, these are basically variations of Wicca, since their "beliefs and rituals are essentially the same" (Hutton 1999b: 390).

adapted for solo work.” (SW: 7) Harvey suggests that this trend has much to do with the “increasing availability of open meetings and of information in books”, which he predicts will therefore “probably lead to less hierarchical structures in the craft” (although he is also of the opinion that Wicca as a whole will always hold onto the allure of the notion of a “mystery religion” centring around “descent from ‘properly connected’ initiates” [Harvey 1997: 45]).

Equally significant, perhaps, is that some started adapting the Wiccan blueprint by applying it to what they clearly regarded as personally more appealing ideas and themes. For example, in the 1970 a number of Wiccans, including Philip Shallcrass and Emma Restall-Orr, decided to frame its teachings in the purportedly more ‘authentic’ terms of an “ancient native spirituality” for the British Isles¹⁷, identifying this with the historically verifiable but rather nebulous concept of Druidry. Others rejected the Wiccan concept outright, most notably the growing number of Heathens, who identified more with Britain’s Anglo-Saxon and Viking invaders than its indigenous Celtic forebears¹⁸.

Paganism was thus becoming a far broader phenomenon that could no longer be regarded as even vaguely synonymous with Wicca on either thematic or procedural grounds, for all the latter’s pre-eminence. Moreover, according to CC, at least, it was only a matter of time before Paganism started to ‘devolve’ in this way, as, in her opinion, within the phenomenon “there’s lots of people searching – sometimes together, but not committed ‘forever-and-ever, Amen’” (and, similarly, she suggests, because “magical groups [have] a worse splinter rate than any other kind of group”) (CC: 12). An interesting case in point is Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism¹⁹, which is an umbrella term used to denote an approach that strongly identifies with the idea of ancient Celtic Pagan culture, but in which it also appears to be left largely up to individuals to decide for themselves how to express or pursue this connection.

¹⁷ Quoted from the official BDO website (www.druidorder.demon.co.uk/bdo_intro.htm [copy available]).

¹⁸ See below.

¹⁹ See below.

Moreover, the growing awareness of Paganism's true origins has also meant that there is little if any justification for seeing 'revived' Pagan systems such as Witchcraft as being distinct from the 'high magic' traditions of western occultism. Certainly, it is difficult to discern any substantive distinction between these within the current Pagan scene. SL, for example, describes Paganism as "a kind of long stick", the two poles being represented by Ceremonial (or Hermetic) magic and Shamanism²⁰ respectively, with Witchcraft "in the middle" (SL: 14). Also indicative of this perception is that the (now defunct) Leeds-based periodical Pagan News used to promote itself as 'The monthly newspaper of Magick & the Occult'. Similarly, another popular magazine (which is affiliated with the eponymous monthly moot and 'discussion group' mentioned by Greenwood) is now subtitled 'A Modern Anthology of Paganism and the Occult'²¹.

Another key trend has been that Paganism's burgeoning profile, not to mention the development of sophisticated information and communications technologies, has (as was suggested in the introductory chapter) resulted in information relevant to the phenomenon being far more easily accessible than ever before. Thus, for instance, SJ compares the commercial availability of such references nowadays with the situation as it stood in the 1970s:

'There were books out, but not that many, and the ones with rituals in that were available, everyone wanted. Nowadays, any aspiring newcomer can walk into an occult shop, or Waterstone's or wherever, [and] there's a whole shelf of books which will tell them what they want to know.' (SJ: 5)

Pagans nowadays thus seemingly have far greater choice when it comes to reference points than was originally the case, with Gardner's

²⁰ See below.

²¹ Talking Stick Magickal Journal (*published by Talking Stick, London*)

Book of Shadows being but one source out of a myriad other texts, myths or symbol systems available.

In summary, the growth of Paganism has, it seems, been accompanied by substantial diversification, in terms both of opinion and practice. Notably representative of this development is the revamped Talking Stick Magickal Journal, and certain comments made a few years ago in its editorial might be thought consummately indicative of modern Paganism's current ethos. In this instance, the editors wrote that the journal was intended for a "modern pagan community [that] has come of age", and that as such its "content [was] hugely eclectic", featuring contributions by:

'Wiccans, Thelemites, Druids and ex-Chaos Magicians [...]; [...] those interested in medieval magic and those working within Northern Heathenism; [...] Earth Mysteries boffins, folklorists and mythologers; [...] those of an academic bent who find their magic in forgotten alphabets in dusty manuscripts and those of a practical persuasion who find it in the birdsong on a dawn hilltop.'²²

Having briefly considered the rise of Paganism (the trends attending which will be discussed in greater sociological depth in subsequent chapters), the remaining part of this chapter will look briefly at the phenomenon's major traditions, starting with the three most prominent of these, namely Wicca, Druidry and Heathenism.

²² Talking Stick ([2:4] 1998: 1; *published by Talking Stick, London*)

2. Modern Pagan Traditions and 'Paths'

A. Wicca

As stated earlier, Wicca has undergone important changes since it first appeared, not least as a result of coming under a significant amount of critical scrutiny. Nevertheless, it seems more or less to have retained its 'core' features (although generally speaking there appears to be far more leeway now regarding the interpretation and implementation of these).

According to Rees, the "Book of Shadows rubric" – which constituted the original exposition of these features, and which, he claims, is still largely definitive of Wicca – entails, amongst other things, "the circle (sacred space) typically [being] cast by a female", and the performance of "the sequence of quarter casting in relationship to the [four] elements" (Rees 1996: 28). In these two examples, it is possible to discern the influence of esoteric tradition on Wicca. Also indicative of this lineage is the quasi-Masonic, "three grade initiatory degree system" (1996: 28), not to mention the coven structure itself, which also recalls the 'secret society' emphasis of the fourth esoteric 'phase' identified by Hutton²³. Other direct inheritances from western esotericism include the use of ritual implements, such as for the purpose of symbolising the 'four quarters', although there are subtle differences. Thus, in Hermetic magic East ('air'), South ('fire'), West ('water') and North ('earth') are symbolised, respectively, by wands, daggers, cups and pentacles²⁴ (King and Skinner: 1981 61-4); in Wicca, the arrangement is much the same, one difference being that the wand is sometimes replaced by an "incense burner", and a sword is used to represent fire, although a ritual dagger, or *athæme* – a variant spelling being *athame* – is invariably employed at some point during the proceedings (Adler 1986: 109).

²³ As the Wiccan author Vivianne Crowley explains, Wicca's debt to freemasonry is also evident in its alternative name, 'The Craft', and in certain ceremonial procedures, such as where an initiate is "blindfold and bound by ritual cords" (Crowley 1996a: 88).

²⁴ A pentacle is a small "disc", which "should be made of... zinc, stone, or wood"; it is usually "four inches in diameter", and should have inscribed on it symbolic figures or words denoting the elemental properties of the northern quarter, such as "the Archangelic and Godname of Earth" written in Hebrew (King and Skinner 1981: 64).

The Wiccan 'rubric' is firmly based upon set ritual procedures, and so, given the nature of the coven structure, it is hardly surprising that initiation is an important part of this. The initiatory system is threefold; accordingly, after the first, introductory initiation at first-degree level, Wiccans may (there is no compulsion here) proceed to the second-degree, and thence to the third and final stage²⁵.

To understand Wiccan beliefs, it is necessary to take into account two precepts in particular. Firstly, Wiccans believe that the divine is "both immanent and transcendent" (Crowley 1996a: 83). In other words, it is appreciable as the mysterious 'source' of all things, towards which individuals should aspire at all times, and yet also as something that is readily accessible in the 'here and now'. In particular, Wiccans regard the divine as being "made manifest in Nature" (Crowley 1996b: 4), and display their debt to Romanticism in a largely antipathetic attitude (notionally, at least) to the natural world's supposed antithesis, namely 'civilisation', as represented in particular (to them) by the forces of technology and urbanisation.

The second integral feature of Wiccan beliefs is a *duotheistic* conception of deity. This means that it is seen as a bipolar force (1996b: 42) consisting of divine male and female principles, which together represent the primordial sexual and generative current operating concurrently on the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels of existence. The female principle is definitively referred to as the Goddess, and despite Wicca's notional origins in British and western European prehistory, this figure is conceptualised as the universal figure behind all the goddesses of world mythology and religion²⁶. In addition, she is commonly regarded as having three 'aspects',

²⁵ The high-profile British Wiccans Janet and Stewart Farrar explain this progress accordingly: "First degree initiation confirms you as a Witch. Second degree initiation entitles [you to] initiate others and to form your own coven with the parent coven's agreement, but still under its guidance. When the parent coven decides you are ready for independence, it will give you your third degree." (Farrar and Farrar 1987: 32)

²⁶ Such a view is illustrated by an integral feature of Wiccan ceremony, the 'Charge of the Goddess'. This presents the deity as an amalgam of goddess figures from a diverse range of mythologies, including "Artemis, Athene, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen [and]

these being Maiden, Mother and Crone (a concept deriving from Robert Graves fanciful mythological study, *The White Goddess* [Hutton 1991: 335]). The God, while also representing a universal 'pole', tends to be depicted in a more uniform way, namely as the previously mentioned Hornéd God, which is to say, as a human male figure with the head or antlers of a stag (although one of the interviewees, GM, takes a slightly different slant on this by suggesting that he actually has "three aspects", these being "solar, human and animal" [GM: 7]). While (obviously) divine, the God and Goddess also represent human qualities: the former represents an idealised representation of masculinity that is forceful, in the manner of a "hunter and warrior", yet (somehow) also peaceful and non-threatening (Crowley 1996b: 156), while his feminine counterpart is protective and nurturing but also in possession of a fearsome aspect (1996b: 149).

Interestingly, despite the ostensible parity between these two figures, the Goddess tends to predominate. This was in no small part a result of feminism, which saw (according to the authority on Witchcraft and Paganism, Anthony Kemp) the emergence of a "much stronger feminine orientation" than was originally the case (Kemp 1993: 44). And as Hutton explains, this had the cumulative effect of downgrading the status of the Hornéd God from that of "equal" partner to "son and consort" of the Goddess (Hutton 1991: 338).

Wiccans primarily aspire to engage with their deities through ritual. These include a ceremony called 'Drawing Down the Moon', which is how adherents refer to the invocation of the Goddess into the circle *via* the corporeal agency of the Priestess. Two other key procedures include the Great Rite²⁷, and the raising of the Cone of Power (an accumulation of magical 'energy'). The latter is generated by ecstasy-inducing activities such as "running, dancing, chanting or drumming" (Harvey 1997: 47), and may be used to send health-giving or otherwise beneficial 'energies' beyond the ritual circle. A common additional feature of all Wiccan rites is the ceremonial

Dana" (quoted in Farrar and Farrar 1987: 182).

²⁷ See above.

partaking of Cakes and Wine²⁸.

Particularly propitious times to perform rituals are the eight Wiccan festivals. These include the four 'fire' festivals, which Wiccans claim derive from Celtic Pagan tradition. Using their Gaelic titles, these are (starting with the Celtic 'New Year') *Samhain* (1st of November), *Imbolc* (1st of February), *Beltain* (or *Beltane* – 1st of May) and *Lughnasadh* (1st of August). To these, Gardner added the Equinox and Solstice festivals. This 'eight-fold' cycle has since become a standard feature within the Pagan world (with a few exceptions, such as Heathenism²⁹), despite its dubious authenticity³⁰. In addition to these 'Celtic' rites are the *Esbats*, which occur once every lunar month at a time when the moon is at its fullest and magical energies are supposedly at their most potent. These are all times when Wiccans feel particularly able to fulfill the *raison d'être* behind their chosen path, which is to affirm their connection with the God and Goddess by celebrating the "beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, [and] mirth and reverence within" (*from The Charge of the Goddess, quoted in Harvey 1997: 37*).

On a final note, it is worth pointing out that with the demise of Wicca's original 'myth of continuity, claims have since been made by some Witches for other exotic lineages, including, most notably perhaps, a well-documented esoteric system from the classical world called the Mysteries of Eleusis (Crowley 1996b: 18).

²⁸ Harvey explains: "The actual communion of cakes and wine may be ritualized or it may be very simple. In Wicca a priest holds the cup of wine, symbol of the Goddess, into which a priestess dips a ceremonial knife called an athame, a symbol of the God... All drink from the cup and then share blessed cakes, sometimes in the shape of the crescent moon.

Alternatively and more simply, the food and drink allow a more complete 'earthing' and a brief time to express gratitude for the results of previous 'work'." (Harvey 1997: 48) As might also be inferred from a previous footnote (*n. 10*), the use of ritual sacraments by Wiccans is another feature that they directly inherited from Crowley's 'magickal' system.

²⁹ See below.

³⁰ According to Hutton, while the four 'fire' festivals are all appropriate to the Gaelic world, this arrangement "may not have operated further afield" (Hutton 1991: 143). Moreover, he adds that the solstice and equinox rites "do not feature as feasts in any of the early Celtic literatures" (1991: 143).

B. Druidry

Aside from a handful of references in texts by Roman commentators such as Julius Caesar, Strabo and Pliny (Hutton 1991: 170), virtually nothing is known about Druid beliefs or practices. The little that can be discerned may be summarised thus: Druidry was a religion based around an autonomous priesthood; training for it was both long and arduous; ceremonies were invariably performed out of doors; the Druidic 'caste' was actually subdivided into three classes, these being Bards, Ovates, and Druids *per se*³¹. On the whole, it appears that Druids functioned as "teachers, healers, judges and [keepers of] the calendar" (1991: 170), and were also required to "sacrifice, prophesy, [...] make magic and give counsel" (1991: 171).

Their obscurity, however, has not stopped a large number of modern Pagans from adopting these shadowy figures as iconic representatives of an 'authentic' British spiritual tradition. Interestingly, however, there have been Druid societies in the UK for centuries. This 'modern' tradition was initially inspired by the 17th century antiquarian John Aubrey, who first proposed the idea of a connection between Druidry and Stonehenge (Matthews 1996: 86). However, up until fairly recently, British Druidry (or Druidism) – as represented by societies such as the Ancient Order of Druids – was an entirely Christian phenomenon, that was, moreover, also firmly entwined with the tradition of freemasonry (for example, such organisations tend to use the Masonic term "lodges" to refer to their local branches [Carr-Gomm 1991: 39]).

Druidry took on a more esoteric emphasis with the establishment in 1964 of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) by a character called Ross Nichols. OBOD updated the idea of Druidry by linking it with "environmental and artistic concerns" (Carr-Gomm 1991: 40), and presenting it as a means of celebrating the "beauty and the splendour of the natural world" (1996: 6). This 'magical' direction was consolidated by the comparatively large number of individuals – such as Philip Shallcrass – who

³¹ The precise nature of the duties accorded to each group is difficult to fathom, but it seems likely that the first of these dealt with the poetic transmission of sacred lore, while the latter two were more concerned with ceremonial and administrative matters (Hutton 1991: 170).

'converted' to Druidry from Wicca (the latter's three-grade structure being neatly transposable into the three 'Druidic' 'classes')³².

Given the comparatively complex origins of modern Druidry, there is little in the way of a cohesive 'rubric' in evidence among Druids overall, although all now seem to celebrate the Wiccan-approved festivals (even the solstices and equinoxes). Moreover, there is some debate as to how 'authentic' modern Druidry can ever really be. On the one hand, Philip Carr-Gomm of OBOD, for example, confidently states that "folklore studies show how even today many of our customs and traditions derive from our Druidic and Celtic heritage" (*quoted in* Matthews 1996: 5). Similarly, for Kaledon Naddair ('Pictish Serpent'), symbolic 'keys' encoded within Celtic tales enable modern Druids to access the well-springs of a genuine 'native' spirituality, featuring such entities as the 'Faerie Wildfolk', whom he describes as "the unseen agencies behind most of the spiritual, psychic and physical changes in creation" (Naddair 1987: 136). On the other hand, Shallcrass writes that in the absence of any detailed, authoritative sources, "the search for an 'authentic' Druidry is like shooting arrows at the moon" (Shallcrass 1996: 70), which is to say, a pointless exercise.

Interestingly, however, Shallcrass' organisation, the BDO, has based many of its precepts and rituals upon a rather less historically nebulous figure, the medieval Celtic Bard. This is perhaps significant, as according to Hutton, although devoutly Christian these eminently more recent characters nevertheless shared an "important supernatural concept" (and perhaps the only one) that had been preserved "intact" from Pagan times. This is the 'Otherworld' (or *Annwn*), which is the mysterious realm of gods and fairies that is thought to exist in parallel with this one³³, and which features to the

³² Shallcrass writes that there are "at least four Druid Orders which had origins in Wicca", and that he himself has "met a number of Druids who were, at one time, Witches", but adds that he has "yet to meet a Wiccan who used to be a Druid" (Shallcrass 1996: 69). It is possible to conclude from this that those individuals who might once have had an affinity with the notion of Druidry but were uncomfortable with its hitherto predominantly Christian and 'standard' Masonic associations were enabled by Wicca to envisage the concept in more Pagan-friendly terms.

³³ See chapter four.

point of saturation in medieval Celtic poems and stories (Hutton 1991: 324). On a final note, it should be noted that the concern to establish an 'authentic' British or Celtic Paganism has, along with the lack of a central 'blueprint' or rubric, led to a substantial overlap between Druidry and Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism³⁴.

C. Heathenism

This term refers to the growing sector of Paganism which concerns the gods and myths of the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples. In Britain, the phenomenon can be traced back to the emergence in the 1970s of a handful of groups whose members referred to themselves as Odinists, in homage to *Odin*, the Nordic 'Allfather' and god of Battle and Poetry³⁵.

Heathens generally seem keen to emphasise what they see as their tradition's significant differences from other Pagan orientations. One of the major points of contention stems from the fact that Heathenism appears to be the most "strongly polytheistic" of all the major traditions (Harvey 1997: 66), which means that its followers are usually reluctant to conflate the gods of their pantheons to accord with more universalistic or duotheistic notions of deity (although some gods – Odin in particular – are held to adopt a variety of guises, and all are seen as being subject to the workings of *Wyrd*³⁶). However, many Odinists pledge themselves to the service of a particular god or goddess: thus, Freya Aswynn of the Rune-Gild is "devoted" to Odin (1997: 67), while Hasta Tyrpriest (the former editor of *Odinn* magazine) is – as his name suggests – dedicated to Tyr, the god of Justice; Freya, the goddess of fertility and spell-craft is another popular choice. Another major difference is that while the Heathen ritual calendar is also based around key festivals,

³⁴ See below.

³⁵ Elsewhere in Europe, such as Iceland, those with similar affiliations more commonly refer to their tradition as *Asatrú* (or *Ásatrú*) (e.g. Swatos and Gissurarson 1999), although it is not unknown for the term to occur further afield, such as Arizona (e.g. Kaplan 1996) and, indeed, the UK.

³⁶ The mysterious force which is thought to bind the Nordic cosmos together, and which Harvey describes as being "a bit like karma or fate" (Harvey 1997: 55).

their versions of these (commonly known as *blots*) are sometimes (although not always) quite different from the eight-fold 'Celtic' cycle that is nigh on uniformly favoured within the rest of the Pagan world³⁷.

An integral feature of Heathenism is a "magical alphabet" – or to use the Nordic term, *futhark* (Pennick 1991: 74) – of angular letters known as *runes*, the lore governing which constitutes a prominent sub-branch of the tradition. These were found throughout the Germanic and Scandinavian pagan world, and their employment in pre-Christian ritual is well-documented, although they were frequently also used for the rather more mundane purposes of "communication and record" (1991: 87). Each rune represents a particular aspect of the Heathen cosmos, encapsulating and distilling a mythologically- and culturally-cohesive range of symbolic correspondences³⁸. For ceremonial purposes, Odinists use a technique called *galdr*, which involves the incantation of runic names in order to invoke the letters' individual magic 'essences' into the ritual area (Harvey 1997: 61). Another practice, called *taufr*, involves the construction of runic talismans to bring about specific magical results³⁹ (1997: 63). Talismans may also feature bind-runes – complex sigils (magical images) consisting of combinations of runic letters – designed to "fit an exact need" (Tyrpriest 1988: 1).

Interestingly, runic magic is by no means uncommon among non-Heathen Pagans. For example, JH – who is more inclined towards Celtic subjects – admits to using the runes "for certain workings" (JH: 11); and AM reveals that he is "interested in rune lore and the Teutonic stuff", while also claiming not to "have much of an interest in or allegiance with Odinism or

³⁷ For instance, for one of the original Odinist groups, the Odinic Rite, there is a blot for every month of the year, an example being the *Blot of Hengest* (October 12), which "[celebrates] the English settlement in Britain" (Harvey 1996: 55).

³⁸ For example, the runic letter *Feoh* (ᚼ) – meaning 'cattle' – corresponds to the letter F, and signified financial prosperity (livestock being the "main sign of wealth" in Nordic Pagan society [Pennick 1991: 89]). On a more mythic or archetypal level, this rune relates to the forces of primordial creation in the shape of "the primal cow, named Audhumla", whose actions gave rise to the first human (1991: 89). Similarly, each of the remaining twenty-three runes has its own set of graphic, phonetic, literal and esoteric ascriptions.

³⁹ The rune *Feoh*, for example, could (as might perhaps be inferred from its ascriptions) be used in a spell to attract wealth.

Ásatrú” (AM: 6).

Certain unsavoury associations, mainly stemming from the Nazi appropriation of Germanic and Scandinavian myth, along with an apparent tendency to focus on matters of race and kinship among some adherents of the tradition, have meant that Heathenism has acquired a reputation for fascism among some other Pagans (accusations that are perhaps not entirely without foundation⁴⁰). Nevertheless, some say that, generally speaking, such a stigma is unwarranted. DM, for example, comments:

‘I’ve met enough people who’re into the Norse tradition [who] I could quite honestly say are quite anti-Nazi, and [some] of them are associated with groups like Anti-Fascist Action. I just find it amusing that they’re associated with the Nazis.’

(DM: 25)

Heathenism also tends to be regarded as very ‘macho’ by other Pagans. Such opinions are – again – arguably not unjustified, and as Harvey writes, “until recently Heathenism has been a thoroughly patriarchal movement both in its stress on [male] Gods... and in its male control” (Harvey 1997: 67). However, this too has been challenged from within Heathen circles. Most prominently, perhaps, there are the efforts of the Dutch-born (but British-based) Rune Priestess Freya Aswynn, who, as well as speaking out against fascism, has also strongly emphasised the feminine side of the Nordic cosmos in her writings on Ásatrú (Aswynn 1997: 85).

D. Goddess Worship

This aspect of Paganism grew out of the feminist explosion of the ‘sixties and ‘seventies, and as such firmly connects with the feminising trends that have occurred within Wicca⁴¹. While not consisting solely of feminists, or even women, the more vocal followers of the Goddess Worship ‘movement’ are

⁴⁰ Harvey, for instance, writes that “Heathens are likely to be politically right-wing and generally conservative in their views, e.g. on sex, politics and history” (Harvey 1997: 65).

⁴¹ See above.

well represented by the radical and provocative theologies⁴² of Mary Daly, Zsuzsanna Budapest and (to a lesser degree) Starhawk, who view the images of 'Witch' and 'Goddess' as potentially liberating and empowering icons for women in an age of misogynistic oppression (Hutton 1999b: 344-5). These opinions in turn rely upon highly speculative (and contested) readings of anthropological, historical and archaeological evidence – in particular Marija Gimbutas' studies of the Cretan temple ruins at Çatal Hüyük – portraying an evocative but unlikely picture of a peaceful and earthy Goddess-worshipping matriarchy and its bloody displacement by the "warrior Gods and transcendent religion" of patriarchy⁴³ (Pollack 1997: 5).

Not all feminist opinion is favourable to such a view, however. Purkiss, for instance, has criticised the likes of Daly for helping foster what she regards as an "unhelpful" view of "women as nothing but the helpless victims of patriarchy" (Purkiss 1996: 17), and for projecting dubious and empirically unsupportable visions of a "lost maternal continent" onto the concept of femininity⁴⁴ (1996: 41), while Harvey writes that some feminists dismiss Goddess spirituality as a potentially "limiting fundamentalism" (Harvey 1997: 82).

Whichever way, the influence of the idea of 'Women's Mysteries' has come to permeate the broader spectrum of Pagan culture, although in so doing it also seems to have shed much of its exclusivism. Starhawk, for instance, broke out of its narrow enclaves to become, as Hutton puts it, "the most famous witch in the world", thus achieving substantial popularity among

⁴² This is the term adopted by Wiccans and Goddess Worshipers as a "feminist-influenced" replacement for the word 'theology', which is regarded in such circles as denoting a patriarchal emphasis on monotheistic religions (Harvey 1997: 66).

⁴³ Hutton, for example, writes that Gimbutas misinterpreted the evidence to make it fit her image of a "prehistoric fairyland" (Hutton 1991: 389).

⁴⁴ According to Purkiss, such visions "[owe] more to Romanticism than feminism" (Purkiss 1996: 42). She adds that the "myth of a lost matriarchy is disabling rather than enabling for women. To relegate female power in politics or religion to a lost past, to associate it with the absence of civilisation, technology and modernity, is to write women out of the picture. To confine female power to the marginal space of a reinvented religion which rejects any vestige of mainstream power is to reify women's exclusion from the public sphere." (1996: 42)

male and female practitioners of Witchcraft (not to mention Pagans generally) alike⁴⁵ (Hutton 1999b: 345).

Moreover, whatever their ideological differences, what ultimately unites those involved in Goddess Worship is the sense that, as the Pagan author Caitlín Matthews puts it, they have “begun to explore the myriad ways of mediating the Goddess” (Matthews 1990b: 10). And as Harvey writes, these pathways may include the various branches of Wicca, or meditation, or even the auspices of “a discussion group, an affinity group or... an evening class” (Harvey 1997: 78). Further, in common with general Pagan understandings of deity, the Goddess seems to be regarded as highly approachable when compared with monotheistic views of godhead, a good example being JH’s claims to have established a strong “rapport” with Her while living in Scotland (JH: 8). Ultimately, then, whatever problems may attend the concept, the modern Goddess-figure nevertheless seems – as Adler suggests – to provide “personal sources of inspiration” to many women (not to mention men) (Adler 1986: 174), in its representation of spiritual notions in unambiguously feminised, and often very ‘powerful’ and emotionally-charged, terms⁴⁶.

E. Celtic ‘Mysteries’ and Reconstructionist Paganism

In 1984, a Pagan calling herself ‘Jenny’ wrote that “[i]nformation about Celtic deities and ritual practice is not all that easy to come by” (‘Jenny’ 1984: 90). Times have changed, and nowadays there is a wealth of source material available to those interested in such matters. The initial reason for this development seems to have been that increasing numbers of Pagans (such as ‘Jenny’) had begun to feel that existing traditions were not sufficiently ‘grounded’ in the ethos and culture of the Celtic world, and so were keen to

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note, for example, that today, even a male non-Witch such as DM can consider her books to be “very, very good” on the subjects of “Wicca and Paganism in general” (although he also admits to regarding her work as “a bit too feminist” for his “tastes”) (DM: 12).

⁴⁶ Thus, the Goddess may be portrayed, for example, as “the warrior, the amazon, the law giver, the giver of wisdom”, and so on (Adler 1986: 175).

assemble, or (to their minds) 'rediscover' ways of interacting with the magical 'powers' specifically associated with those realms. One of the first books to deal with such subjects was by the previously mentioned Caitlín Matthews and her husband John (1985), a couple belonging to a 'ceremonial' magical order called the Servants of the Light⁴⁷. Strongly influenced by the work of a little-known occult figure called Christine Hartley, their work purported to deal with the Celtic branch of what they referred to as the Western Native Tradition, a mythologically sourced path which the authors described as relating to the "first mysteries of human awareness" (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 3).

The cohesively Celtic emphasis this entailed was radical enough (in comparison with Wicca, at least); equally significant, however, was its eschewal of the need for any representative organisational or group structures. Thus, they wrote that the Native Tradition ultimately requires "no central authority... [no] church, no pope [or] king of the witches"⁴⁸ (1985: 14). Rather, they held that the key to such experiences is in direct, individual interaction with the mythic Otherworld and its inhabitants – a procedure they claimed is "an exact correlative of the way our ancestors worshipped" (1985: 101).

According to the authors, this can be achieved through visualisation techniques such as pathworking⁴⁹ – whereby mere 'daydreaming' becomes transformed into an impression of 'genuine' magical contact – rather than elaborate ceremonial⁵⁰. That said, the ritual element is by no means absent within Celtic Reconstructionism. For example, another leading light has been the modern Druid Kaledon Naddair, whose College of Druidism employs both meditational and ceremonial procedures in order to follow "Keltic [sic.]

⁴⁷ See below.

⁴⁸ This is how Alex Sanders notoriously styled himself (Hanegraaff 1996: 88).

⁴⁹ See below.

⁵⁰ Other influential authors include R J Stewart, whose book *The Underworld Initiation* (1985) centers around an imaginal journey into the Celtic netherworld, and Steven Blamires, whose publication *The Irish Celtic Pagan Tradition* (1992) features guided visualisations based around the five sacred cities of Gaelic myth, namely *Finias, Gorias, Murias, Falias* and *Tara* (Blamires 1992).

Initiation Paths” based around such forces as “[t]he Sun God & Fertility; the Sea Powers... [and] the Dark Underworld Lord”⁵¹. What seems important, however, is the flexibility that seems to underpin this approach overall, which suggests that the main principle governing the type of methodology chosen for magical operations among Celtic Reconstructionists is that it ‘does justice’ to individual enthusiasms.

Nowadays, identifiably Celtic motifs (as opposed to Gardnerian allusions) are a prominent part of modern Paganism, and have even ‘fed back’ into the original (or at least catalytic) modern Pagan tradition, most notably in the form of what one of the interviewees – JH – refers to as Celtic Wicca⁵². Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that the basic imperative expressed here – namely the urge on the part of certain individuals to ‘recover’ their ‘roots’ *via* the visionary engagement with mythic ‘powers’ – is no less apparent among those fascinated by non-Celtic cultures. Thus, for instance, the Olympian Foundation, which is dedicated to the gods and goddesses of Greece, has announced that there has been “increased interest and sightings in Europe” of certain Greek deities, and that its aim is therefore to “provide information” for those who have had the privilege of such ‘contact’⁵³. Similarly, Vivianne Crowley explains that there are similar ‘revivals’ of national or regional Paganisms afoot in areas such as Finland (Crowley 1995: 87) and the Baltic countries (1995: 92).

What is also interesting about this Pagan sub-branch is how it has been subject to much the same sort of critical scrutiny that was brought to bear upon Wicca⁵⁴ (this being one of the reasons that Pagans now tend to

⁵¹ Inner Keltia (7) 1984: 1 (Keltia Publications, Edinburgh)

⁵² See chapter seven. Typical of this shift is the work of the Australian Witches Ly Warren-Clarke and Kathryn Matthews, who have adapted the basics of Wiccan ritual, with the intention (interestingly enough) of helping individuals (as opposed to covens) to establish ‘direct’ contact with the “the Gods of Ireland, Wales and Britain” (Warren-Clarke and Matthews 1990: 15).

⁵³ Quoted from entry in ‘The Little Red Book’ (November 1995: 5.23; *published by* The Oakleaf Circle, Preston).

⁵⁴ Ronald Hutton (who has done much to ‘debunk’ many of the assumptions Pagans once tended to take for granted) writes that most of the ‘Celtic mysteries’ scholarship that appeared from the 1980s onwards neglected the many studies from that decade which

prefer the term 'Reconstructionism' when discussing the 'Celtic Mysteries'⁵⁵), the point being (as Simes has suggested⁵⁶) that it is the 'spirit' of Celticity which is now thought to count rather than any demonstrable continuity. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this would appear to be a process of trial and error, to some extent. For example, when asked how he goes about consecrating his magical implements, DM, commented:

'[They're] not ritual Celtic. The elemental stuff is much more recent, but it works. [However,] there's no surviving Celtic practice to take stuff from [and] I've tried to reconstruct stuff but it doesn't really work that well, so I've not found anything [Celtic] I can use for [consecration rituals] yet... I *am* still trying!' (DM: 21)

The Celtic Reconstructionist author Alexei Kondratiev succinctly outlines this approach when he suggests that for those who adopt it, the governing principle is that "a compelling articulation of myth and ritual must be devised to capture the imagination of people at a deep level and root the values and aspirations of the culture in a base of certainty and empowerment" (Kondratiev 1999: 56).

utilised "textual criticism and mutual appraisal" in order to question some of the more romantic notions that had long been held about Celtic history and culture (Hutton 1991: 144). For example, it seems that the Welsh book of tales known as *The Mabinogion*, which is one of the Celtic myth-cycles that Pagans commonly liked to believe have their origins in pre-Christian times, was actually largely the product of medieval scholars, who were responsible for creating what was essentially a "new mythology" (1991: 322).

⁵⁵ It is not just Celtic Paganism that is perceived in this way, however. Interestingly, Adler includes a lengthy discussion of Heathenism in her chapter on Reconstructionist Paganism (Adler 1986: 273-82) (although she makes little reference to the Celtic world, which reaffirms the impression that as far as the Pagans of the early to mid-eighties were concerned, that cultural realm was still largely covered by the Wiccan and Druidic traditions.)

⁵⁶ See chapter one.

F. Shamanism

Piers Vitebsky, who is one of the world's foremost anthropological authorities on shamanism, writes that this is "not a single, unified religion but a cross-cultural form of religious sensibility and practice" (Vitebsky 1995b: 11). It is found mainly in 'tribal' societies, and in contrast to other religions has "no doctrine, no world shamanic church, no holy book as a point of reference, no priests with the authority to tell us what is and what is not correct" (1995b: 11). Despite this, it is, he suggests, a markedly cohesive, not to mention widespread, phenomenon, as "there are astonishing similarities... between shamanic ideas and practices as far apart as the Arctic, Amazonia and Borneo, even though these societies have probably never had any contact with each other" (1995b: 11).

Vitebsky describes shamans as "at once doctors, priests, social workers and mystics"; they have often also been regarded as "madmen or madwomen", and as such "were frequently persecuted throughout history" (1995b: 10). What makes the shaman stand out from other spiritual functionaries is that his or her "soul is said to be able to leave the body and travel to other parts of the cosmos", although he or she can also employ other 'powers'⁵⁷ (1995b: 10). From a Pagan point of view, SW similarly explains that the "core element" of shamanism worldwide is a "belief in an Otherworld", combined with the idea that such characters "can go into this dimension and do things that can have an impact on the world around us" (SW: 7), while the author Nevill Drury defines a shaman as "a person who is able to perceive [the] world of souls, spirits and gods, and who, in a state of ecstatic trance, is able to travel among them, gaining special knowledge of that supernatural realm" (Drury 1989: 6). Roughly speaking, the shamanic cosmos consists of three strata, all of which the shaman may travel to. These are the "upper world", which is inhabited by the gods of sky and sun, the

⁵⁷ Vitebsky lists the principal shamanic characteristics in full as follows: "Being chosen by spirits, taught by them to enter trance and to fly with one's soul to other worlds in the sky or clamber through dangerous crevasses into the terror of subterranean world; being stripped of one's flesh, reduced to a skeleton... and then reassembled and reborn; gaining the power to combat spirits and heal their victims, to kill enemies and save one's own people from disease and starvation" (Vitebsky 1995b: 8).

“lower world” of the ancestors and the gods of death, and a “middle zone” (1989: 6), which corresponds to the world of humanity.

These seemingly intrinsic features have led to numerous western Pagans seeing shamanic parallels within their own cultural traditions and backgrounds. Thus, for instance, the self-styled Celtic Shaman Tom Cowan writes that the “core elements” of shamanism – including “[the] journey into nonordinary reality; the help of spirit guides, usually in the form of animals; and the return with some knowledge or power to serve others in the community”, and “the ability to ‘work magic,’ that is, to heal, see and control ordinary reality in ways considered extraordinary by community standards” (Cowan 1993: 13) – are also abundantly apparent in Celtic cultural heritage.

Shamanism is also associated with a somewhat “vigorous” approach to ‘sacred’ experience (Vitebsky 1995b: 65). Drury, for example, explains that it typically involves procedures such as frenzied drumming and dancing, psychoactive chemicals, pain or extremes of temperature, and may also feature “fasting, sensory deprivation, meditative focusing [and] chanting” (Drury 1989: 9). Modern Pagans have also seized upon this aspect of the phenomenon. SL, for instance, sees Shamanism as representing the “wild and trance-like and orgiastic” side of Paganism, in contrast to the “calm and controlled, and very ritualistic” approach of traditional western esotericism (SL: 14). The Celtic Pagan Shaman Gordon MacLellan (‘Gordon the Toad’) similarly opines that Shamanism represents the “grubby end of magic” (MacLellan 1996: 145).

Others have questioned whether such claims are warranted. Harvey, for example, takes issue with some of the assertions of Celtic Shamanic parallels, arguing that these are likely to be little more than western “ritual magic” procedures given a ‘tribal’ spin (Harvey 1997: 115). Moreover, to function as a shaman in tribal cultures is not, it seems, always a welcome role. Drury, for instance, explains that it is more of a “vocation” than a matter of choice (Drury 1989: 6), and Harvey points out that it is considered by such societies to be a “serious, dangerous and potentially fatal undertaking” (Harvey 1997: 109). This has led to accusations that modern western Shamanism tends to be little more than an anemic or ersatz approximation of the real thing, having expunged the latter’s ‘rawer’ elements in favour of the

“lowest common denominators [of] drumming, vision quests and Otherworld journeys” (1997: 110).

Nevertheless, it could also be argued that, while it is certainly conceivable that western Shamanism exhibits little in the way of ‘authenticity’, such a criterion is (as Wicca’s enduring popularity among Pagans attests) hardly the be all and end all of Paganism. Moreover, it could also be argued that by encouraging western Pagans to place greater emphasis upon explicit notions of direct (as opposed to mediated) Otherworld or ‘magical’ contact, the idea of shamanism (if not the reality) may conceivably have aided Paganism’s ongoing devolution away from Wiccan ‘hegemony’.

G. ‘High’ Ritual Magic

This represents the most overt manifestation of modern Paganism’s esoteric ‘roots’ – which, according to Jorgensen and Russell, very much lie in the vision of an “occult unity of everything” (including “the cosmos, earth, plants, animals and humans”) that underpins western magical tradition (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 327). It is more openly influenced by the modern magical syntheses of the Golden Dawn than are other sectors of the Pagan world, and, as noted previously, is generally associated with a ‘very calm and controlled’ magical approach. There are, roughly speaking, two main axes, or ‘currents’, within this category – ‘Right-Hand’ and ‘Left-Hand’ Path ritual magic. The first (which is also commonly referred to as the Western Mystery Tradition) is described by Luhrmann as fulfilling an “intellectual engagement” with magical realms, and is often presented by its exponents as a sort of esoteric sublimation of conventional religious beliefs (Luhrmann 1989: 56). Those following the Western Mystery Tradition are, writes Luhrmann, usually required to join a “fraternity or lodge”, under which auspices the magician “commits himself [sic.] to the... regeneration of himself and the planet” through “disciplined service” (1989: 57). It is most famously represented, perhaps, by a British-based organisation called The Servants of the Light (SOL), which was founded by Dion Fortune, and is currently headed by the well-known Pagan author Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki (Ashcroft-Nowicki 1986:

252).

The second current is, as the anthropologist Richard Sutcliffe explains, popularly referred to among exponents as 'Left-Hand Path Ritual Magick' (Sutcliffe 1996: 109). It was pioneered by Aleister Crowley (the 'k' was a medievalist affectation on his part), who chose to emphasise the role of the individual's magical 'intent' (or, more profoundly, her True Will⁵⁸), and the cultivation of *gnosis*, this being is the notional 'magical awareness' which forms the basis of esoteric philosophy⁵⁹. Crowley combined his vast knowledge of western occultism with elements of eastern religion, and in particular, a branch of Hinduism known as *Tantra*⁶⁰.

Alongside Crowley's own Thelemic synthesis, the other main LHP tradition is Chaos Magick. Thelema aside, this drew its initial inspiration from an eccentric turn-of-the-century artist and occultist called Austin Osman Spare, Discordia⁶¹, and the weird science fiction worlds of H P Lovecraft⁶² and Michael Moorcock⁶³. It was developed in Leeds in the 1970s by Pete

⁵⁸ According to Crowley, the individual's True Will is the ultimate 'force of nature', being the same principle that causes "the Stars to shine, Vines to bear grapes, Water to seek its level" (*quoted in Harvey 1997: 98*).

⁵⁹ See chapter five.

⁶⁰ The term 'Left-Hand' as used in magical contexts actually relates to the esoteric aspect of Tantra that teaches self-discovery through the negation of prevailing moral codes, its opposite being the more conservative 'Right-Hand' path (Sutcliffe 1996: 111).

⁶¹ Chaos adopted much of Discordia's basic iconoclasm, along with some of its major symbols (not to mention paradoxes), such as Eris (the Greek Goddess of Chaos), and the Apple of Discord. The extent of this debt is illustrated in an article on Chaos Magick by one of its original champions, Phil Hine, where he appreciatively discusses Robert Anton Wilson's *Illuminatus!* novel trilogy, and Malaclypse the Younger's *Principia Discordia, or How I Found the Goddess and What I Did to Her When I Found Her* (Hine 1986: 18).

⁶² Science fiction and horror writer much favoured by the more experimental or 'Left-Hand' oriented type of magician. In fact, such is the influence of Lovecraft within occult circles that there now exist magical organisations – such as the Esoteric Order of Dagon – that are dedicated to working with the entities and realms described in his books. As Pagan News' 'Frater Impecunius' commented in a review of the first issue of EOD's in-house magazine, *Fragments*: "[The] emphasis is very much magical rather than literary... and those [whose] interests lie in the fiction of Lovecraft, [etc.] will be disappointed. These people are *serious* (well, fairly)." (Impecunius 1991: 18 [Impecunius' italics])

⁶³ The symbol Chaos Magick, known as the Sigil of Chaos, which is a black disc from which

Carroll (a 'High' ritual magician) and Ray Sherwin (a Wiccan), as a reaction against what they saw as the "dogma" and "hierarchy" of 'conventional' or "organised magick", as then typified (for them) by the Western Mystery Tradition⁶⁴. The intention of Chaos Magick is, as AM puts it, the "deconditioning of culturally-ingrained programming" (AM: 11). Or in the words of Sherwin himself, it is to "break the chains which threaten the freedom of choice and action of all members of society", for which purpose "all types of meditation and art should be looked into" (Sherwin 1986: 4-5) – an ethos summarised in the axiom, 'Nothing is true: Everything is permitted!' Accordingly, Chaoists (as exponents of Chaos Magick sometimes call themselves) have traditionally tended towards the view that the fulfillment of desires *via* the instrumental application of 'magickal' ritual is thus a more reasonable aim than the pursuit of spiritually or morally more 'worthy' goals.

All of these 'High Magic' strands have contributed strongly to the growth of an identifiably and overtly Pagan milieu. Regarding the RHP specifically, it is perhaps significant that Fortune's stated intention for the SOL was to cater for western cultural sensibilities (as opposed to "eastern minds and hearts" [Ashcroft-Nowicki 1986: 23]), and that she herself regarded the "Native [i.e. Celtic] Tradition" as constituting the principal "stepping stones" for westerners seeking access to the esoteric 'mysteries'⁶⁵ (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 150). It is also worth noting that, despite its rather formal and hierarchical reputation, the RHP has bequeathed a technique that serves as a significant counterpoint, or even alternative, to elaborate ceremonial, this being pathworking (which AM lucidly describes as "conducting a ritual in your head, effectively" [AM: 18])⁶⁶.

eight arrows equidistantly emanate, first appeared in Moorcock's tales of Elric, the 'Eternal Champion'. According to AM, enthusiasts use the adjective 'Melnibonean' to refer to the mythos surrounding Elric (private correspondence).

⁶⁴ Editorial, *Chaos International* (1) 1986: 4 (*published by CHAOS, East Morton*)

⁶⁵ Fortune wrote: "[Things] come home to our hearts, and we feel the unbroken line of our national life stretching back into the remote past, and know that it will reach into the far future and that we ourselves are a part of it" (*quoted in Matthews and Matthews 1985: 150*).

⁶⁶ Pathworking is a "method of internally directed meditation based upon visualised

Of the Left-Hand Path sub-branches, the most obvious Pagan debt is perhaps owed to Thelema, for reasons outlined above. As for Chaos Magick, Sutcliffe has written that while they are often stridently dismissive of overtly spiritual terminology, practitioners have begun to “develop a spiritual basis for their magick”, which trend he attributes to the centrality of gnosis to the Chaoist approach⁶⁷ (Sutcliffe 1996: 130). Moreover, it could even be argued that Chaos Magick is more of a combined methodology and attitude – based on a spirit of scepticism and ‘iconoclasm’ towards ‘conventional’ esotericism – than a coherent magical system (although some might beg to differ), and so is significant mainly for the way that it has helped to further distance Pagan culture further away from the formal or doctrinaire, in favour of the idiosyncratic and individualistic⁶⁸. Thus, AM, for instance, comments that the “free-style form of magic” that is commonly associated with Chaos Magick “no longer characterises “ that current “because it’s seeped out into other areas of occult and magical practice” (AM: 11).

This chapter only hints at the current diversity of Paganism, which (as indicated earlier) embraces all manner of symbolical, mythological,

symbolism” (Highfield 1984: 79). Developed initially as a means of working with Kabbalistic symbols, the technique proved to be “entirely flexible”, and has since been applied to other symbol systems and mythologies, including those stemming from European tradition (1984: 79).

⁶⁷ It is perhaps significant, for example, that – as will perhaps become evident in due course – the two Chaos Magicians among the interviewees, namely DM and AM, have both developed magical ‘paths’ that are significantly focused upon the mythic ‘energies’ of the British and Celtic realms.

⁶⁸ Grant Morrison, the celebrated Scottish comics writer and occultist, has saliently described the Chaos ‘current’ as “Punk Magic” (Morrison 1995: 25). He explains: “[It] opened my eyes to the fact that I didn’t have to know all the correspondences of the Tree of Life or read a hundred dusty exegeses on the Quabalah to practice sorcery. I didn’t have to rely on the ridiculous ceremonial pomp of Victorian magic, as typified by the rituals of the Golden Dawn and its offshoots.” (1995: 25) Morrison regards Chaos Magick as “more inventive and spontaneous” than other esoteric systems, and, by way of illustration, writes: “Inspired by the basic principles of the Chaos current, I’ve spent years customizing my own rituals, godforms, spirit allies, cosmologies etc. and now have a unique and personal symbolic framework in which to perform magical work”, adding that “[a]nyone can do the same” (1995: 25).

methodological, philosophical and procedural traditions, permutations and innovations. Having taken a broad look at the phenomenon, and hopefully given some sense of its current striking flexibility and momentum, it is now time to assess in detail those themes which arguably bind Pagan 'paths' together, rather than differentiate them from each other, starting with the concepts of nature and the environment.

CHAPTER THREE

NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Is Paganism a 'Nature Religion'?

It is evident from the preceding chapters that the concept of 'nature' is an important feature of Pagan discourse. In the ethnographic and academic literature, this is most clearly conveyed, perhaps, in Adler's statement about how Pagans believe that the sacred is 'immanent in Nature'¹, and reaffirmed, to give another example, by Simes' assertion that Nature is a "symbol for modern Paganism" (Simes 1995: 302). By way of illustration, there is the Wiccan author and psychologist Vivianne Crowley's avowal that Pagans worship the 'Divine made manifest in Nature'², and the Pagan Federation's proclamation in its charter³ of its intention to aid "people genuinely seeking a nature-based spiritual path".

The interview testimonies provided numerous statements that echoed this premise. For example, CC states that nature is "very much at the basis of Paganism" (CC: 16). Similarly, SL asserts that the "definition of Pagan religion is that it is to do with nature and with the cycles of nature" (SL Public Lecture: 13), and JW, the Wiccan Priestess, avers that "[t]here is a general respect for nature in all Pagan traditions" (JW: 8).

This view is perhaps best summarised in Harvey's 1997 book, where he describes Paganism as a "polytheistic Nature religion" (Harvey 1997: 1), and writes:

'Nature itself is formative of the character of Paganism. The cycles of the seasons and relationships between all the related inhabitants of the Earth dictate regular occasions on which Pagans celebrate and contemplate the life of their environment, of the whole Earth, of particular

¹ See chapter one.

² See chapter two.

³ This is included in all the PF's official literature, including its quarterly house journal, Pagan Dawn.

places and of themselves in relation to them.'
(1997: 186)

In essence, human and natural cycles are closely 'intertwined'. Accordingly, "[the seasonal] festivals reveal the cyclical nature of time and the facts of life – change, growth, maturity, breeding, decline, decay – and provide the context for explorations of the joys and sadness of embodied life." (1997: 186) In other words, then, nature is understood by many Pagans as a harmonious and life-giving matrix of forces, the affirmation and celebration of which enhances existence on all levels.

But how intrinsic to Paganism is the concept of 'nature' really? It is helpful to start this discussion by referring to arguments from the religious studies scholar Peter Beyer. In these, Beyer seeks to explain the phenomenon by building upon Albanese's influential concept of 'nature religion', which term he describes as a "useful analytical abstraction that refers to any religious belief or practice in which devotees consider nature to be the embodiment of divinity, sacredness, transcendence, [or] spiritual power" (Beyer 1998: 11). Such currents, he writes, are intrinsically "oppositional" to the status quo (1998: 14), having been constructed around the notional converse of "artifice", which is to say "the humanly created or the technical" (1998: 11). According to Beyer's account, this development may be regarded as a basic element of western cultural and political discourse, nature religions having thus presumably emerged as an 'organic' response to "the spread of certain powerful technical rationalities – economy, state, science, medicine, schooling and others", which he purports to have occurred under its auspices (1998: 18). For Beyer, this explains why they take their inspiration from the "myths, rites of symbols" of what he refers to as "pre-technical civilisations"⁴ (1998: 18).

A key feature of the 'nature religion' concept is that its manifestations are held to bear a close affinity with the environmentalist movement – as illustrated, for instance, by its implicit critique of 'the humanly created or the

⁴ According to Beyer, these include "pre-Christian European (e.g. Celtic, Norse, Germanic), aboriginal or eastern" civilisations (Beyer 1998: 18), although whether such societies could really be described as 'pre-technical' is rather a moot point.

technical'. Thus, Beyer writes that environmentalism is a "religiously based social [movement]", as it exists "[in] the orbit of contemporary nature religion"⁵ (1998: 21). And to a certain extent, a critical attitude towards the 'status quo' on such matters as environmental policy does not seem at all uncharacteristic of much Pagan opinion. CC, for instance, believes that, "in some way... Paganism was the Green Movement finding its soul" (CC: 16). Similarly, the British Pagan Richard Westwood writes that by identifying with nature on a 'deep', magical level, Pagans have "stepped out of the mainstream of society" (Westwood 1987: 21), while Harvey avers that they "are likely to support [environmental] organisations like Greenpeace" (Harvey 1997: 48). And for Emma Restall-Orr of the British Druid Order, the "deep connection with the earth" that Pagans share entails a wider sense of connectivity, which is to say, "takes away our alienation from our land and community"⁶.

There are, however, a number of problems with the idea that Paganism constitutes a 'nature religion'. The intention here is not to suggest, say, that JW is incorrect in her claims for a 'general respect for Nature' among Pagans. The problem is, however, that its usage as a definitional term when applied to Paganism is not as self-evident as might first appear to be the case. The first problem is that, as Hutton points out, Wicca (which, as might be recalled, was the 'original' form of modern Paganism) "has only identified itself closely with the natural world since the 1970s", as a direct consequence of the advent of the environmental movement, whereas "before that it was not a nature religion but (in part) a fertility religion" (which, he stresses, is "not the same thing") (Hutton 1999b: 415). Accordingly, since the current emphasis upon an 'essential' nature is something that only became an explicit feature Paganism some time after its inception, it can hardly be regarded as a fundamental feature of the phenomenon.

Secondly, the idea that Paganism and environmentalism are even 'kindred spirits', let alone synonymous, is problematic. It is interesting to

⁵ For Beyer, environmentalism is also very much like the "feminist movement" in this respect (Beyer 1998: 21).

⁶ Quoted in 'Pagans Gather for the Solstice', *The Guardian*, 6/20/1997

note, for instance, that only two of the interviewees (PM and CC) admit to having had any significant experience of environmentalist politics⁷. Accordingly, the following comment by WS is, perhaps, more representative of the respondents:

'I'm not involved in any [campaigning] whatsoever, but when I hear about some [campaign], though, I think I should be. [...] They were going to build [a road] in Rotherham [and] I was really pissed off about it. I got so much on my high horse – I was going to write to people. It didn't happen, anyway, so it doesn't matter now, but I was getting so irate about it. [...] I've got a strong identification with [nature], but I don't do anything about it!' (WS: 7-8)

This impression of broad concern offset by negligible activism appears to support Hutton's suggestion that while Paganism (or, at least, Pagan Witchcraft) and environmentalism are certainly "compatible" in some respects (Hutton 1999b: 415), adherents of the former actually tend to be only "loosely" political with regard to "environmental issues" (1999b: 404). They are, he states, most likely to be involved in such matters when these have "directly affected their own home districts" (1999b: 404-5), and even in these cases, "the degree of engagement [is] limited"⁸ (1999b: 405). Greenwood similarly claims to have "witnessed little active [political] interest in the environment" among Pagans (Greenwood 2000b: 113).

This is not to say that the overlap between Pagan and environmentalist circles should be dismissed, however. A case in point is the

⁷ CC was "connected with Friends of the Earth" in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies (CC: 16). PM describes himself as "very much an activist", and once "campaigned against the "M11 link-road" (PM: 10). However, he also adds that "Paganism isn't just about being Green, it's an ethos for... sensible living", and that Pagans should therefore be able to embrace causes that are not specifically focused upon environmental matters, such as trade unionism (PM: 10).

⁸ Hutton adds: "[Although] some of the members of the covens which I knew well or visited actively supported campaigns to stop construction or extractive projects in their localities, none actually joined protest camps formed to halt the latter" (Hutton 1999b: 405).

fairly well established (and previously mentioned) organisation, the Dragon Environmental Group⁹, which, according to Harvey, uses “eco-dramatic rituals” as part of its campaigning strategy “against roads, quarries and other devastations” (Harvey 1997: 63). Nevertheless, it is also fairly evident that the ways in which Pagans and environmentalists express their affinities with the natural world are not always congruent. DM, for instance, expresses irritation towards the idea that environmentalism and Paganism are somehow synonymous, commenting: “There’s plenty of people out there involved in environmental campaigning [calling] themselves ‘Pagan’ who blatantly aren’t – that I don’t like” (DM: 27). Conversely, Greenwood attributes the significant levels of environmental apathy she sees among Pagans to their tendency to engage with nature by way of “ceremony and intricacies of ritual procedure” rather than a more interactive, ‘hands on’ approach¹⁰ (although she accepts that there is quite a “different attitude” evident among those who are “involved in Pagan environmental protest”) (Greenwood 2000b: 113). Moreover, even in those cases where Pagans do want to effect change on a political level, there will always presumably be the temptation for them to channel their energies into ritual activity¹¹ – a strategy which those environmentalists who do not believe in magical principles are hardly likely to regard as efficacious¹².

⁹ See chapter one (*n.* 38).

¹⁰ To illustrate her point, Greenwood writes of “[one] Wiccan”, who, “when invited to go for a walk, cried off because it was raining and he might get his feet wet: ‘Can’t we just visualize it?’, he said.” (Greenwood 2000b: 113)

¹¹ Westwood provides an interesting illustration of this tendency in what he calls ‘political ritual’. This concept is based on the presumption that by engaging in ritual activity individuals are “making a channel through which [magical] energies can become manifest [in such] a way as to become a force [sic.] in the ‘real’ world” (Westwood 1987: 21). Thus, if the intention is to challenge the “power of the state” – or, for that matter, some other agency deemed to be ethically or environmentally dubious – magical ritual may thus be seen as a “political act” (1987: 21).

¹² Of possible significance here is Purkiss’ identification of what appears to be a similar tension between magical and political commitments occurring within the feminist movement. For, according to Purkiss, “the very notion of untrammelled creativity represented by feminist witchcraft risks obscuring the genuinely oppressive effects of ideological and material power on women’s capacity to ‘make’ themselves into whatever they want.” (Purkiss 1996: 45)

Ultimately, Pagan worldviews seem substantially to blur the conceptual and experiential boundaries between environmental and 'interior' realities in a way that is by no means always indicative of environmentalism, as it implies that substantive political change is actually unnecessary for individuals to establish a harmonious relationship with nature. For instance, when asked to describe her affinity with nature, WS replied:

'All I know is [that] I've got to look after my plants in my house. That's all I do... I've got a yard out there and I'm going to really transform it into something absolutely beautiful so that I can get some hedgehogs, and lots of lovely birds, and all sorts of lovely creatures coming towards my home.' (WS: 9-10)

Similarly, SL describes her feelings of connection with nature accordingly:

'[The] most important thing is to sit on my balcony, and just sit and commune with the moon or the trees out front... Where I [live] it *is* built up but I've got trees all around me and I can see a hill from my kitchen, so I *am* very much attuned to a kind of aspect of nature. And there's a wood very close to me that I work in as well, so if I need to go and do anything [magical] I find it very easy to contact the aspects of the God and Goddess there.' (SL: 9)

In a similar vein, JH describes the time she spent living with her children in the remote Northern Scottish region of Sutherland – during which she established her previously mentioned 'rapport' with the Goddess¹³ – in the following comments:

'I had developed a rapport with the Earth. The land where I lived in Scotland is very beautiful. [...] It has a waterfall and a small area of ancient natural woodland. [...] I used to go up there at dusk and make a sacred space in my own manner, and I

¹³ See chapter two.

used to speak directly to the Goddess, who is Earth.' (JH: 9)

Describing this sense of 'rapport' further, JH explained:

'I can be in the middle of that square¹⁴ and be as much at one with the Earth as if I were in the wilds of Scotland, 'cos once I've been to a place it becomes part of me, and wherever I am – this room, that square, a bit of waste ground, on Ilkley Moor¹⁵ – it's always part of me and I take it with me wherever I go.' (JH: 21)

CC, who is a *Feng Shui*¹⁶ consultant as well as a Pagan, describes a similar sort of perceived empathic connection, which she believes she established *via* a ceremony performed with a British-based magical group (called The Green Circle) while living in Hong Kong:

'[We] did an initiation within the Circle, and the idea was then to give a libation to the gods by a rock that I was particularly drawn to in a park near where I lived at the time in Hong Kong. So it now seems to be inevitable that I've ended up in this country working with the Chinese landscape art of Feng Shui 'cos I... tied myself to the Chinese land.' (CC: 10)

It is important also to bear in mind that, due to the influence of western esoteric tradition, Pagans not only believe that magical ritual 'tools' represent the quarterly 'elements'¹⁷, but regard them as actually embodying these forces. As the Pagan author Marian Green (who is a founder member of the Green Circle) puts it, "[m]agical tools, properly consecrated, become linked

¹⁴ JH is referring here to a "public square" that is situated just outside her house in Leeds (JH: 10).

¹⁵ A well-known West Yorkshire beauty spot.

¹⁶ An ancient Chinese geomantic art.

¹⁷ In their book *Techniques of High Magic*, King and Skinner describe these as "the symbolic representation of psycho-spiritual qualities present in both the individual human being and in the universe as a whole" (King and Skinner 1981: 17).

with their astral [i.e. 'essential' or archetypal] counterparts" (Green 1985: 103). This means that an 'elemental' connection has first to be established before they can be effectively used for this purpose. Thus, describing the consecration of his magical instruments, DM comments:

'The cup I've got at the moment was actually consecrated in Denmark about three years ago. [...] I did it in one of their nature reserves on the coast... 'cos it was really clean. [...] The wand is associated with air, so I'll go up on a nice hilltop or go up to Otley Chevin¹⁸, or go up a mildly sloping hill or mountain and do [the consecration] up on there. Daggers or athæmes are associated with fire so I'll wait until the next seasonal ritual and have a nice, stonking big bonfire and do it in one of them.' (DM: 21)

Environmental energies are also experienced by Pagans in terms of locative entities commonly referred to as 'spirits of place' or *genii loci*. These are universal spiritual forces that are also held to convey and reflect the geographical, historical and cultural specificities of a particular location. SL explains:

'[What] you often used to get [in pagan societies] is that people would see spirits everywhere, and these would be worked in [to the culture]. For instance, around solstice time you would see a lot of this guy, the Lord of Death... in the form of the Leader of the Wild Hunt. In the Nordic tradition, for example, Odin was thought to lead the Wild Hunt; Herne fulfilled this role in the British or Celtic traditions.' (SL Public Lecture: 10)

SL sheds more light on the subject in her interview testimony, commenting: "My own system is very much geared towards where I am: I will work totally differently in my own little wood than how I would when I [was] in

¹⁸ A West Yorkshire beauty spot just outside Leeds.

Bali, because I [take] on the *genii loci* of the place.” (SL: 14) To illustrate this point, she refers to a visionary experience she had had of a local “mountain deity” while conducting a ritual in Indonesia¹⁹ (SL: 15). Similarly, SW explains: “You... get entities that can assist us... It’s what the Romans used to call a *genius loci* – a spirit of the place.” (SW: 10)

Thus, in Pagan terms, a ‘sense of place’ is inextricably bound up with ideas about the ‘supernatural’ entities – the “elusive, beautiful and powerful beings” (Harvey 1997: 163) – that are held to inhabit a particular locale. Or as Emma Restall-Orr puts it:

‘[Paganism] is a religion of locality, i.e. it is where the devotees revere the spirits of the landscape around them, [...] the soil of the fields and forests that surround them, the sprites and elementals, sometimes to deification. It is a basic attitude in the Pagan mentality that the spirit of the land is the most perfect force.’ (Restall-Orr 1998: 140)

In summary, while certain affinities may no doubt exist between Paganism and environmentalism, the former entails a sense of immediate ‘connectivity’ with the world that is, perhaps, not entirely commensurate with the latter’s more critically ‘detached’ and overtly political approach to environmental issues. This point leads to the third and final – and perhaps most important – problem with the idea that Paganism is by definition a ‘nature religion’, which is that the ‘logic’ of magical worldviews ultimately renders any notional distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ realms hard to sustain.

¹⁹ Elsewhere, SL discusses another experience she believes herself to have had involving local ‘spirits of place’. She explains: “I was over in Liberia last summer, in the jungle, [...] and things went a bit pear-shaped. [...] We were three hours away on foot from the capital Monrovia, in the middle of this jungle, and we had to cross two swamps and a river in order to get back [to the city before curfew]. So I said, ‘OK, I’ll speak to the jungle, river and road spirits, and we’ll be back before curfew’, and he went, ‘OK!’ So I did, and we proceeded to do a six-hour journey in two or three hours!” (SL Public Lecture: 11)

2. 'Urban Magick'

It was suggested previously that the Pagan experience of the environment is bound up with the notion of 'spirits of place'. But how accurate is it really to uniformly describe such 'entities' as 'nature spirits'? To fully appreciate this question, it is necessary to re-examine what appears to be the key concept in the Pagan understanding of 'nature' – that of divine 'immanence'.

Interestingly, while some (such as Vivianne Crowley) explain the concept with explicit reference to 'nature', it can also be used to suggest a more inclusive idea of how the sacred is 'made manifest'. Thus, Harvey, for instance, writes that for Pagans, "the divine is immanent in all things" (Harvey 1997: 43). Similarly, Prudence Jones writes that Pagans concern themselves with the "hidden powers behind the manifest world" (Jones 1996: 38), and even Crowley herself sees the term as also meaning that "the Divine" is "in-dwelling in the universe" generally (Crowley 1995: 30).

The point is that such a more general understanding of 'immanence' does not actually differentiate between the 'natural' and the 'artificial'. It is interesting to note, then, that this more basic Pagan 'logic' has prompted some practitioners to challenge the value of the conceptual dichotomy between nature and civilisation, the underlying or implicit rationale being that if the divine really is immanent within all worldly phenomena then the exclusive association that is often made is between sacred and natural realms must therefore be, to some extent, an arbitrary assumption. Take AM's sardonic response to the question, 'Does the idea of a "spirit of the land" play an important part in the way you think?':

'Yeah. Spirits of *things*, not just the land – it doesn't have to be the sort of hippy-dippy, 'Mother Earth'-kind of way of looking at things. [...] An organisation can have a spirit, for example, and a city might have one.' (AM: 16)

Similarly, the magician and author Dave Lee approvingly describes a documentary which told of the experiences of an Amazonian shaman – who had "lived all his life in the forest, and had learned the spirit songs of animals, plants, rivers, elemental forces" – on encountering an urban environment for the first time (Lee 1997: 35). Lee writes:

'To him, a car or a cinema was as worthy a subject of a spirit quest as any creature or object he had been brought up with. He told the interviewer how he was performing his spirit vision quests to learn to sing the song of the car, and song of the cinema!' (1997: 35)

Lee concludes that this attitude conveys “the essence of the ancient [shamanic] current”, and as such is quite distinct from the “guilt ridden anti-technology attitudes” that are often to be found among modern, self-styled western Shamans (1997: 36).

Both AM and Dave Lee are Chaos Magicians, and their opinions on nature are perhaps what might be expected from the followers of such an irreverent, even (in esoteric terms) 'iconoclastic' system. However, it is interesting also to note that such viewpoints are increasingly evident among the more 'traditional' types of Pagan, such as Witches. Thus, for example, even SL (who is a Witch, although not a Wiccan) suggests that there are “spirits that control cities”, not to mention “TVs, radios, computers and things like that” – or, in a phrase, “technology spirits” (SL Public Lecture: 15). She explains:

'In old cultures you'd often find that new gods were being discovered all the time – as technology and science moved on appropriate deities would be found. So it stands to reason that you will have controlling spirits and deities of computers and cars, for instance. They're all elemental spirits – they're all the same.' (SL Public Lecture: 15)

In a similar vein, GM (who is a Hedgewitch), avers:

You've got to learn to adapt. Paganism meant 'of the countryside' in Latin, and that's where people are falling into a trap: Pagans do not have to live in the countryside to be Pagans. It's great to get out, but the God and Goddess don't go away as soon as you go into a room! (GM: 7)

Likewise, in a (fairly) recent article in an Irish Pagan online magazine, Ivan Rogers writes that while “Earth, Air, Fire and Water” once “[seemed] to cover the extent of human experience”, this has not been the case since the Industrial Revolution (Rogers 1997²⁰). He explains:

‘After that point a whole new set of elements began to strongly impress themselves upon our psyches. [...] Electricity, Oil, Rubber, Glass, Radiation and a plethora of others all seem to the average Joe on the street to have more importance in their lives than the classic four.’
(1997)

In conclusion, Roberts suggests, “we all live in a modern era of plastics and information and concrete boxes for homes, so rather than trying to ignore this fact would it not be better to assimilate this into our magickal practices?”²¹
(1997)

Perhaps the most lucid and systematic exposition of this position is provided by the Wiccan author Chris Penczak, who writes that “Magick is hiding everywhere, waiting to be found” (Penczak 2001: *xiv*), which principle in his opinion allows Pagans to update magical methodologies to suit modern environments. Accordingly:

‘The city is the new primordial forest. Like the land, it is filled with danger, but can bring sustenance. People live there quite effectively and happily, finding what they need by living in harmony with and honoring all things. Both the concrete and natural jungles are filled with their own beauty.’
(2001: 2)

²⁰ indigo.ie/~imago/dubh/news7.html (copy available)

²¹ Lilith Babelon, who asserts that “[there] is magick everywhere”, provides a lucid illustration of this approach in the following comment, which appears in an interview with the Pagan author Phil Hine: “Before I set off on a journey, I start working with modern images of Mercury, like aeroplanes. To me they are Mercury’s metal birds, which *shrink* the world, and I see them as... the spirits of air made of metal, which are taking me somewhere.” (Quoted in Hine 1992: 12 [Hine’s italics])

And so, as the “concrete jungles” are now the “chosen home” for many individuals, they are therefore invaluable for the purpose of “evoking a new magical world mythology”²² (2001: 7).

Such opinions are, admittedly, rather less prominent within Paganism than those which posit some sort of substantive nature/artifice dichotomy, the latter constituting what might therefore be called a ‘semi-orthodox’ Pagan viewpoint²³. Nevertheless, they also reveal – somewhat ironically, perhaps – that, far from being the cornerstone of Pagan worldviews, this dichotomy is actually quite vulnerable to magical conceptions if the basic premise of these is extended to its logical conclusion. Accordingly, although ideological and moral issues relating to nature and ecology are often presented as Paganism’s *raison d’être*, these are in fact a subsidiary feature of the phenomenon in relation to the more inclusive cosmological viewpoints that actually appear to define it. It is to this latter, definitive aspect of Paganism that the discussion will now turn.

²² Penczak’s book, *City Magick* (subtitled ‘Urban rituals, spells, and shamanism’), provides a very interesting illustration of the constantly changing and cross-pollinating nature of Pagan ‘currents’. Most notably, it is inspired by the cult writer Grant Morrison’s comic book series, *The Invisibles*. Penczak explicitly acknowledges Morrison’s status as a “chaos magician”, but despite his own Wiccan affiliation, is nevertheless of the opinion that these stories, which for him “demonstrate an actual magical initiation and adventure”, may help furnish a “thought-provoking new mythos” for all those who desire to work magic within modern urban environments. (Penczak 2001: xv)

²³ The author is indebted to Colin Campbell for this label.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PAGAN OTHERWORLD

1. The Otherworld Concept

Ontologically speaking, the notion of Divine 'immanence' is not unproblematic. As Colin Campbell has pointed out, by challenging both dualistic and conventional transcendentalist perspectives, the concept readily lends itself to a "metaphysical monism" (meaning that everything is held to have its source in an 'ultimate' spiritual unity, and that the universe is constantly 'evolving' back to this point) (Campbell 2001: 78). But this in turn implies that spirit must be regarded ultimately as a "higher form of reality", thus paradoxically calling into question the ontological 'reality', or indeed, importance, of the physical realm (2001: 82). Conversely, then, if the physical and the spiritual are held to be "equally real", it is difficult to see how the latter can support the "fundamental interconnectedness of everything" that is purportedly denoted by the concept of immanence (2001: 82).

Nonetheless, the attitudes of Pagans towards the environment, as described previously¹, do indeed appear to show that they regard this as both an inherently spiritual and robustly tangible realm. To explain how this might be, it could be proposed that the 'magical' type of worldview that Pagans aspire or profess to uphold enables them to bypass this ontological quandary. This is because it is based on cosmologies that are neither dualistic, monistic, nor wholly transcendentalist, but are instead based around a view of the relationship between physical and spiritual 'dimensions' as one of simultaneous separateness and symbiosis. Prudence Jones puts it this way:

'In assuming that there are hidden powers behind the manifest world which are worthy of veneration – the religious outlook – Pagans also assume a two-way traffic between the worlds. Not only communion and seership (a receptivity to messages from the hidden world) but also magic

¹ See chapter three.

(an active wielding of the hidden powers) is taken as a normal part of life.’ (Jones 1996: 38-9)

From a more academic point of view, the cultural historian Wouter Hanegraaff provides an interesting insight into this position in his discussion of the “‘ordinary magic’ of everyday life” that Pagans aspire to experience (Hanegraaff 1996: 82). Citing the work of the anthropologist J van Baal, Hanegraaff explains that the term “magic” itself (as “exemplified in particular by the spell”) “both expresses and reconfirms a distinct view of – or way of experiencing – the world” (1996: 83). This viewpoint conveys a vision describing both the corporeality of the phenomenal world, and the spiritual energies that are held to endow it with ‘meaning’. That is to say, it evokes a “‘weird atmosphere of mystery, in which things have power” (1996: 83).

Moreover, it also holds that although individuals are able to engage with this power, they cannot control it completely. Instead, they must employ symbols as “‘a means of expressing... experience of and against an uncertain, power-charged world, which makes its mystery felt in that uncertainty” (1996: 83). This constitutes what Hanegraaff calls a ‘participatory worldview’, which “does not rigidly separate persons and things” (1996: 83) – and it should also be added, by implication portrays individuals as ‘sharing’ cosmic space with other, sometimes unsettling forces. Thus, while drawing from anthropological theories on ‘traditional’ cultures, Hanegraaff’s argument thus helps explain how modern Pagans might conceivably endeavour to conceptualise the universe in such a way that notions of the basic ‘interconnectibility’ of phenomena do not serve to undermine the sense of the world’s ‘realness’ or ‘otherness’, and may even reaffirm it. Thus, “[n]eopagan magic... functions as a means of invoking and reaffirming mystery” for the modern “world” (1996: 84).

Ronald Hutton makes a similar point in his recent study of British Pagan Witchcraft, while also helpfully positing a suggestion as to the differences between modern western and more ‘traditional’ magical understandings. He writes:

‘If the informative action of ancient paganism was *propitiation*, the process of appeasing and pleasing superhuman forces, then the equivalent

action of modern paganism is *consecration*, the treatment of people, places and objects in such a way as to make them seem more spiritually powerful, effective, and significant.² (Hutton 1999b: 397-8)

More recently, Susan Greenwood has added what is perhaps the key contribution to the understanding of Pagan cosmologies in her extensive and pioneering study of modern Otherworld conceptions, which she regards as the “common uniting belief” of all Pagans (Greenwood 2000b: 1). Greenwood describes the Otherworld as “a spiritual realm which is thought to co-exist with the ordinary everyday world”, writing:

‘Magical energy is seen to be in everything that exists, and magical practice concerns channelling and using that energy. Magicians see the otherworld as a separate, although ultimately linked, sacred area; it is a place where it is possible to contact magical energies of the cosmos – the greater whole. The otherworld has its own reality, and otherworldly beings have their own existence and energies, which may be tapped into.’ (2000b: 28)

Moreover, according to Greenwood the simultaneously “internal and external” influence of the Otherworld applies as much to socio-cultural as it does environmental contexts; that is, it represents “a combination of personal and social experience that involves a paradox of going out of the self to find the self within – and is paradoxically different for everyone” (2000b: 27). It is also inhabited by a panoply of powerful non-corporeal entities – of “deities, spirits”, and other supernatural “beings” – and as such should be regarded as a, or even the, “source of sacred power” (2000b: 1).

However, although it may be thought to “co-exist alongside and in very close proximity to ordinary reality” (which is to say, the realm “ordinarily perceived by the five senses of the human body” [2000b: 23]), preparation is

² Hutton's italics.

required before the Otherworld is accessed, as it can only be “experienced in an alternative state of consciousness” (2000b: 1). Furthermore, such experiences are held to be inextricably linked to the imaginative faculties, since, writes Greenwood (citing the historian Antoine Faivre), “Western magic” centers on the “operation of the active” – which is to say, ‘controlled’ – “imagination” (2000b: 23). Accordingly, the “trance states” to which modern Pagans aspire necessitate an “opening up’ to a rich imaginative inner world” of the sort that “is often initially created during childhood”, the implication being that this is the period when the individual is most likely to become absorbed by fantastic or ‘magical’ images and narratives (2000b: 24).

In all, then, Pagan magic requires that the individual learn to align herself with the ‘two-way traffic’ of cosmic energies, as described in Pagan cosmologies, by ‘engaging’ with Otherworldly entities and dimensions in a systematic and focused way. Or as Greenwood herself puts it, the “essence of magical training is to open up the magician’s awareness to these forces so that they can be channelled, mediated and controlled” (2000b: 23), although it is important also to bear in mind that, as might be gathered from Hanegraaff’s account, such forces are not entirely the magician’s to control. Whatever the case, Pagan cosmologies are, it seems, founded upon the idea of a reciprocal, reflexive exchange of energies between spiritual and earthly ‘realities’, and therefore, that those seeking to work ‘magic’ should (as shamans and magicians have purportedly always done) place themselves directly at the notional ‘cusp’ between these realms.

The Otherworld is clearly a very complex, even paradoxical, concept. Pagan understandings of such realms are, however, heavily informed by ‘secondhand’ sources – not least, the copious traditional ‘lore’ that is to be found within mythic narratives and shamanic teachings³. Thus, Greenwood

³ It should also be pointed out that the incorporation of Otherworld notions within magical ritual procedures is not something that has developed solely since the emergence of Paganism, but rather may be seen as intrinsic to western esotericism generally. This is evidenced in the historian Daniël van Egmond’s comment that late nineteenth and early twentieth century manifestations of this current, such as the Golden Dawn, “tried to develop a spiritual or ‘occult’ school, intended to enable their students to experience for themselves the other ‘worlds,’ considered to be as much a part of reality as the world we discover by

writes (citing the clinical psychologist Richard Noll) that, like their shamanic counterparts, modern magicians employ “mythologies as cognitive maps to structure their otherworldly experiences” (2000b: 24). Methodologically, the principal means for establishing such contact is through ritual, a “multi-modal symbolic form”, which Greenwood saliently describes as “scaffolding for access to the otherworld” (2000b: 24).

In summary, then, the Otherworld may perhaps best be understood, in esoteric and Pagan terms, as a mysterious and numinous energy that exists within, but also, to a substantial extent, independently of, the individual and her environment, and endows circumstances and experiences with cognitive structure and ‘meaning’. Thus, while claims that modern Paganism stems in direct lineage from the magical systems of the ‘traditional’ world are hardly credible, the Otherworld concept nevertheless provides it with a notable degree of thematic continuity, or at least compatibility or ‘common ground’, which might (in part, at least) account for the way that all manner of mythological, folkloric and shamanic points of reference have successfully and seamlessly ‘clustered’ around the phenomenon, for all its undeniable ‘modernity’.

2. Otherworld ‘Contact’

In support of Greenwood’s arguments, there seems to be a consensus of opinion among the interviewees that, while they are inextricably connected with the tangible world, Otherworld ‘realms’ have their own distinct ‘reality’ (not to mention their own ‘inhabitants’).

AM, for instance, comments that the Otherworld – or “‘Land of the Dead’, astral plane or whatever” – is both a “figment of your imagination” (“because it appears *inside* your imagination”), and a “separate reality” that “has to be mediated somehow” (AM: 19). Even more categorically, JH states:

means of our sense perceptions” (Egmond 1997: 311-2). Crowley’s notion of magical ‘planes’ (see chapter one; see also below) is, of course, also illustrative of this point.

'There are many Otherworlds. I know they exist - I've *always* known they existed... I believe in many levels of spiritual existence. I think there are possibly nine or ten worlds to which we can gain access and which exist concurrently with this one, it's just that some are more difficult to get to than others.' (JH: 14)

Similarly, CC affirms that the Otherworld – which she associates with “the afterlife”, the “realm of gods and goddesses”, and “the astral plane” – “is real”, adding that “there is *definitely* a world that you access in an altered state, and which has its own coherence and its own rules”⁴ (CC: 23).

SW – a self-styled Shaman – explains that the Otherworld is “like an etheric version of this universe”, and “an extra dimension to space”⁵ (SW: 7). Referencing the ‘two-way’ nature of this concept, he elaborates: “It is a general belief amongst Shamans that one can go into this dimension and do things that can have an impact on the world around us – and vice versa, as the physical realm affects the spiritual realm in many ways.” (SW: 7)

GM also invokes shamanic tradition to explain his cosmological views. He describes “the Hornéd God” of the Witches as a sort of ‘primal Shaman’-type figure, who fulfils the ‘classic’ shamanic role of traveller to the spirit realms. Thus: “[He] transcends the three worlds: he’s the Lord of the Underworld; he’s also the Lord of *this* world and the Lord of the Upper World... He goes up and down the shamanic pole – the *axis mundi*.” (GM: 7) Later in the interview, he refers to another source of Otherworld ‘lore’, namely western mythological narratives, to illustrate his beliefs, commenting, “Oh, there *is* another place and I know what it’s like... [It] is real for me, like Arthur going across to the Isle of Avalon and stuff like that.” (GM: 17)

⁴ CC even believes that she has proof (of sorts) of the Otherworld’s ‘reality’. She explains that following certain group ‘journeys’ into the astral plane, “[we]’d... find that there were landscapes that one person would describe, to which somebody else would say, ‘I was there.’ So, it does seem as though there *is* [an] Otherworld.” (CC: 23)

⁵ SW backs up his conception of the Otherworld by quoting the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson’s assertion, “For every physical fact there is a spiritual fact” (SW: 7).

As suggested in SL's earlier comments on 'genii loci', Pagans also seem to believe that it is possible to establish a 'working relationship' with Otherworld beings. This may even appear to take the form of a 'one-to-one' relationship. For example, on being asked whether she had ever had any visions of the Great God Pan, SL replied: "Ooh, I've had more than visions, love! Pan is very easily called upon, and [once] called upon he *never* lets you down!" (SL: 17) JH's claims of a 'rapport with the Goddess' are another case in point⁶.

AM recounts the following experience (purportedly involving a Brazilian deity called *Exu*⁷) to illustrate his belief that Otherworld beings are 'real' entities rather than mere mental constructs. This involved two stages of 'contact'. The first stage entailed the use of active or controlled visualisation:

'I was communicating with the god-form in my head by willed imagination... [So] I was supplying both sides of the conversation: I was making my case, I was making my request, I was making his favourable response, and I was aware of my self doing all this. It was technique.' (AM: 19)

Later on, however, "something happened" which led him to believe that interaction with an actual Otherworld entity was taking place:

'I received some kind of communication from the spirit which was different qualitatively, as it felt like it was communicating directly to me of its own accord without me having to approach it. It quite literally felt like I was hearing it in a different corner of my head – further back... deeper.' (AM: 19)

And as some of JH's previous comments suggest, some Pagans believe themselves to have had what they interpret as Otherworldly experiences even prior to formally adopting a Pagan 'path'. Moreover, it

⁶ By way of illustration, JH describes a "conversation" she believes herself to have had with the Goddess soon after moving to Leeds from Scotland. She recounts: "[The Goddess] promised me a wonderful relationship in the future. I said, 'Pull the other one, it's got bells on!' But she replied, 'Just wait – you'll see!'" (JH: 13)

⁷ Pronounced 'É-shu'.

seems that the period of childhood is regarded as a particularly propitious time for this type of perceived 'contact'. Thus, for instance, JH herself adds:

'I've always believed in faeries... I've *always* known they existed... We don't see faeries very much: it's mostly children and old people, people who are close to the edge of life, who can see them. I myself don't see them very much at the moment, but I *have* seen them on a lot of occasions.' (JH: 14)

Similarly, CC says: "I believed strongly in faeries until I was about 8 or 9. I used to play faeries and see them everywhere." (CC: 3)

SL claims to have had particularly vivid experiences of this sort from the age of 5 onwards (although she admits also to having "had other [less intense] experiences from the age of about 3") (SL: 6). She recounts the following recollection of seeing some "obviously Otherworldly-type creatures" accordingly: "I saw these fairies, and it went on all night, this wonderful show... I loved it. I sat and I watched and it [was] just a fabulous experience."⁸ (SL: 5)

So in effect, as Greenwood suggests, Pagan magical workings might be regarded as an attempt by those who are so inclined to develop, or redevelop, and systematise the sort of perceived Otherworldly 'affinities' that are, perhaps, peculiarly redolent of the 'rich, imaginative worlds' of childhood. Thus, JH comments:

'When I heard about astral travel I realised that I'd been doing that since I was 10 or 11 but not known that this was what it was called. I've extended my knowledge of Otherworlds through many years of astral travel. I used to think "Doesn't everyone do this?"' (JH: 14)

⁸ This appears to have been a catalytic experience, as from that point onwards, in SL's words, "[things] like that would [happen] quite a lot, and it just got more and more intense. I'd see various things and I just went with the flow." (SL: 5)

Similarly, SL has built upon her childhood 'experiences' of Otherworld beings, so that now, as she puts it, "[w]hen I go somewhere new [I] get into a connection with a local spirit so that I can feel comfortable enough to work there."⁹ (SL Public Lecture: 15)

3. Sources of Pagan Otherworld 'Inspiration'

While not all Pagans claim to have had such intense experiences during their formative years, it nevertheless seems possible to acquire a 'sense' of Otherworldly 'power' through less 'direct' means. These, of course, include 'traditional' narrative sources of the sort mentioned above, such as myth and folklore. DM, for instance, was fascinated by Irish myths as a child ("up until the time I left primary school, really" [DM: 1]), and since becoming a Pagan has sought to utilise such narratives in his magical work. Thus, he comments: "Since I like doing the fire festivals using Irish mythology then I have a tendency to take stuff and turn it into Irish mythology, [...] which is basically what [my ritual group] did for a Samhain ritual recently." (DM: 9)

DM's comment also reaffirms Greenwood's suggestion that it is during childhood that an affinity with mythic and Otherworldly themes is most likely to arise. It is thus appropriate here to note that in stating this, Greenwood is reiterating an assertion Adler has made, to the effect that it is "common" for Pagans to have experienced as children vivid fantasy worlds based on myths and folktales (although she adds that "pantheons may differ according to circumstances, class, ethnic and cultural background, opportunity, and even chance" [Adler 1986: 16]). Luhrmann's comment on how modern Pagans are 'recreating a childhood world'¹⁰ is another case in point. Similarly, in his ethnographic study of American Ásatrú groups, Jeffrey Kaplan writes that the adoption of such a path is most likely to result from the "awakening of

⁹ Accordingly, in SL's words: "If I'm going to do a talk in Germany then I'll get in touch with a spirit from that country when I arrive... I'll go into a wood there and get in contact with a local spirit there, and I'll say, 'I'm from England, and my gods are...' or whatever." (SL Public Lecture: 15)

¹⁰ See introductory chapter.

childhood memories” concerning “storybook adaptations of Norse mythology” (Kaplan 1996: 197).

Interestingly, there also appears to be a significant overlap between Paganism and the popular pastime of Role-Playing Games¹¹. There will be a discussion of some of the similarities between role-playing and magical activities in the following chapter; it will suffice here to assert that this leisure pursuit appears to serve as an introduction to mythical and Otherworldly narratives for many with Pagan (or at least, potential Pagan) affinities.

Thus, SJ (a Witch) explains:

'A lot of people came in [to Paganism] when Dungeons & Dragons came out.... [P]eople who like role-playing and role-playing games started to research gods and goddesses and then got interested and found out more about Paganism.'

(SJ: 6)

AM backs this up, revealing that his “first contact with Pagan gods was through a book which was published for [a] game called ‘Deities and Demigods’.”¹² (AM: 4) Similarly, SW comments: “I originally started doing research [into Paganism] because I was writing a [D&D] game, and as I got more and more interested in it I started to read more and more, and that seemed to feed something within me.”¹³ (SW: 3)

¹¹ Often generically referred as RPGs or by the term ‘Dungeons & Dragons’, these activities are especially favoured by adolescent and young adult males.

¹² AM explains: “It had chapters on Greek gods, Japanese gods, Chinese gods, Norse gods and Celtic gods and things, so it was like this digest of all these gods... [It] gets you thinking about mythology because all this sword and sorcery type of thing... held an interest for anyone who was interested in fantasy role-playing games.” (AM: 4)

¹³ SW claims to have “got into role-playing games” while “at university”, and that he had specialised in “Games-Mastering” (namely, planning and directing the game), which meant that he “had to do a lot of research as regards background into worlds etc.” (SW: 3) Such was his enthusiasm that after finishing university he “started selling role-playing games to students”, as “it was the height of the ‘eighties and everyone was [playing] it”; he (somewhat forlornly) adds, however, that soon after, “they introduced student loans so my market evaporated” (SW: 3).

The relevance of role-playing games to Paganism should therefore not be underestimated, as the apparently substantial overlap between the two cultures reaffirms the importance of 'traditional' mythological and folkloric narratives and motifs in the formulation of many such 'paths'. In all, then, it is hard not to concur with Rees that it is indeed "substantive myths" – which is to say, "actual narrative structures as instanced by specific bodies of myth across the world, e.g. Hebrew, Greek, Teutonic and so on and including allied texts such as fairy lore, legend or saga" (Rees 1996: 16) – that, of all the available sources of inspiration, "[find] the most coinage with modern pagans" (1996: 22).

However, it is also important to acknowledge just how easy it seems for modern narratives and narrative genres (such as science fiction and horror) to be accommodated within (some) Pagan worldviews. This is a development that is attributable in no small part to the influence of Chaos Magick. Thus, as AM explains, the "free-style form of magic" developed by Chaoists implied that "you could take a fictional [work], such as something from the H P Lovecraft novels, and work with it magically and achieve results" (AM: 11). That said (as mentioned earlier¹⁴), even more 'conventionally-minded' Pagans now appear increasingly inclined to investigate the magical potential of certain types of modern fictional narrative. Thus, as Harvey puts it, such genres seem to be "[joining] the mythopoetic works of previous generations as resources for the Pagan renaissance" (Harvey 1997: 184), and may even acquire an extra significance by "[exploring] new and archaic understandings of the world, and of ritual and myth, and [attempting] to find alternative ways of relating technology to the needs of today" (1997: 182).

Ultimately, then, Pagans may use any symbol system or narrative for magical purposes, so long as the magician finds it both absorbing and cohesive on an imaginative level¹⁵. Thus, for Pagans the Otherworld may be

¹⁴ See chapter three.

¹⁵ Such views are consistent with esoteric principles, since these suggest that anything which can be conceived of in imaginative terms must have a symbolical reference point in the magical 'realms'. SL illustrates this point by referring to the central Cabbalistic glyph, which is known as of the Tree of Life. She does this by making the (only partially tongue-in-

understood in terms of Crowley's "mixture of co-existing separate planes", which reflect the esoteric notion that "every country, creed and literature has given its characteristic mode of presentation to some "plane" or another"¹⁶ (*cited in* Luhrmann 1989: 275).

It is thus appropriate here to reassert Greenwood's idea that the principal *raison d'être* of Paganism is the systematic cultivation of intensive yet 'controlled' Otherworldly experiences (namely, the notional ability to access and exit the Otherworld at will), and that this is therefore understood as the 'point' at which the 'active imagination' gives rise to a sensation of direct interaction with the energies that Pagans believe both inhabit and define this realm. However, although she is keen to emphasise the importance of ceremonial ritual for Pagans, Greenwood admits also that other methods may be used, such as, for example, "path-working... or meditation" (Greenwood 2000b: 120). Similarly, JH comments that Pagans may also "work [themselves] into this phase... with art, or with meditating outside and communicating with nature" (JH: 13), while SL states: "A lot of Pagans I know like to worship by just sitting in the woods and meditating rather than casting a circle and doing a ritual – they just feel at one, feel part of it all." (SL Public Lecture: 14) As seen earlier, AM, for his part, affirms the efficacy of visualisation techniques (namely, 'conducting a ritual in your head'¹⁷), which by definition necessitate none of the elaborate rigmarole or

cheek) comment that "[you] can put anything and everything... on [the] Tree of Life", even such, on the surface, unpromising figures as "characters [from] The Magic Roundabout" (SL: 13).

¹⁶ These include (not surprisingly, perhaps) "Celtic" and "Nordic" realms (Luhrmann 1989: 276). The Celtic Reconstructionists Caitlín and John Matthews suggest much the same thing when they write that any myth cycle may provide a "complete set of archetypes" which Pagans can use for magical purposes (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 72). This principle therefore applies as much, say, to "the Finnish Kalevala, the French Charlemagne cycle or the Spanish epic of the Cid" as it does the Celtic and Teutonic narratives more usually favoured by British Pagans, as "[each] of these is the native myth of the country concerned" (1985: 72-3).

¹⁷ See chapter two.

accoutrements of formal ceremonial ritual¹⁸. The discussion will now concentrate upon the central 'structural' feature of Pagan cosmologies, this being roughly identifiable as a 'parallel' arrangement of 'forces' interspersed with 'nodes' or 'cusps' of mediated 'energy'.

4. 'Parallelism'

To fully understand the Otherworld concept, it is necessary to acknowledge that the idea of such a 'two-way' flow of energies implies that the experience of the Divine serves to 'bind' the individual to the manifest world on a number of levels. Firstly, it is seen as a positive 'extension' or continuation of earthly existence. Certainly, the impression given by the interview testimony quoted above is that the interviewees' reported dealings with the Otherworld are broadly informed by a mutually reinforcing sense of 'wonder' and 'magic' with regard to earthly existence.

It is also evident that such conceptions as are strongly bound up with and informed by the 'substantive myths' referred to above. Most significant in this regard is the mythology and folklore of Europe, which seems to resonate the most with Pagan magical understandings; and in particular, it is the myths of the Celtic world that appear to be the most influential (not surprisingly, perhaps, given the importance of the concept of 'genii loci' to Pagan worldviews). To Vivianne Crowley, for example, the significance of Celtic lore for modern Pagans lies in no small part in its depiction of spiritual realms as being largely free from the sense of supernatural anxiety or dread that is associated with some other mythic or religious traditions. Thus, she writes, for the Celts, "the Otherworld [was] a beautiful realm of warmth, of nature in abundance, a perpetual early summer [etc.]" (Crowley 1995: 61) She elaborates:

¹⁸ Reaffirming AM's suggestion, the magician Filia Ritus writes: "To this day I have no magical impedimenta. No robe, no wand, no incense. Candles may grace the dinner table, not an altar. My forum is strictly inner planes: a strictly low-maintenance regime, which offers a much broader scope for magical working. I can do my best magick in the queue at Sainsbury's, or waiting for a bus. The only requirement is discipline." (Ritus 1999: 129)

'In contrast with the mythology of other peoples, the Celt has a joyful, often ecstatic approach to existence. There is no preoccupation with evil and no concept of sin and punishment. [...] When the spirit passes into the Otherworld, [...] there is nothing to fear.' (1995: 61)

In other words, then, the 'true' nature of the Otherworld is revealed in that which already appeals about the corporeal realm.

Secondly, as the historian Alice Turner reveals, the Celtic Otherworld as portrayed in myth and folklore may be regarded (along with its Germanic counterpart, which she sees as broadly compatible) as peculiarly 'close-to-hand'. She writes:

'The [spirit worlds] of most cultures are far away or inaccessible, but the Celts and Germans believed in a parallel world of earth spirits more or less superimposed on our own; many tales survive of encounters with [Otherworld beings] in either their version of the world or our own.' (Turner 1993: 108)

While acknowledging the discontinuity between 'traditional' culture and the modern magical 'currents' of the west, it is nevertheless evidently the case that such lore has contributed substantially to Pagan conceptions of an accessible Otherworld existing 'in very close proximity' to the empirical world. Turner's 'parallel world' phrase is particularly useful in this respect, as it is strongly descriptive of the mutually reinforcing ontological strata of Otherworldly and earthly 'realities' that underpin Pagan worldviews. Accordingly, the Pagan understanding of 'sacred immanence' could therefore perhaps more accurately be termed 'parallelism', such a term being eminently applicable to the 'two-way' flow of 'energies' that traverses Pagan cosmologies¹⁹.

¹⁹ The concept also helps to differentiate Pagan worldviews from monistic, dualistic, and strictly transcendentalist ontologies.

Thirdly, for Pagans, the gods of the Otherworld underline this basic ontology by exemplifying to a substantial degree the sort of behaviours that are also normally associated with humanity. SL, for example, sees the conduct and activities of participants during Pagan festivals (which she considers to be very much akin to having a “party”) as having an immediate bearing upon the gods, and by implication, *vice versa*. *Ergo*, she explains, “if we’re having a good time, then the gods and spirits and ancestors are having a good time” (SL Public Lecture: 7). According to Harvey, conditions and events such as “[b]irth, menstruation, eating, drinking, making love, getting angry, being hurt, growing older and growing old” all find magical and spiritual echoes in the tales of “other-than-human people”, which implies that “[m]odels of divinity, ‘the meaning of life’ and religion are worked out in everyday life” (Harvey 1997: 187). Shan Jayran similarly asserts that the engagement of Pagan deities in activities involving “food, drink, sex, humour, sadness, desire, constriction and ecstasy” encourages modern Pagans to regard themselves as being firmly tied to the world (Jayran 1996: 213). And as GM suggests, the gods also represent tasks and capabilities that have historically been necessary for the development and maintenance of human civilisation, which means that the pantheons effectively formed celestial versions of earthly society, thus including “gods of war, of magic, of smiths, of poetry” and the like within their ranks (GM: 7).

Lastly, as indicated previously²⁰, Pagans tend to regard their ‘paths’ as entailing a profound ‘link’ of some sort with a locative matrix of forces, which are in turn closely associated with Otherworld ‘realms’. An extension of this point is that, although Pagans in theory may find inspiration in any myth or narrative that appeals to them, most usually, this sense ultimately appears roughly to correspond to the area in which the individual considers herself to be most ‘at home’, on a cultural even if not always ‘actual’ level. Thus, it appears that UK Pagans tend (as the increasing prominence of Celtic and, albeit to a lesser extent perhaps, Germanic themes seems to attest) to see

²⁰ See chapter three.

themselves as possessing a particularly strong attachment to the myths, culture and history of the British Isles²¹.

SL's earlier comments on the importance of establishing a connection with 'local spirits' is significant here. What is also interesting is her additional proviso that a certain caution and respect is advisable when approaching the 'spirits' of unfamiliar environments. She illustrates this point with the following cautionary tale: "[A] friend of mine once went to Luxor in Egypt, but instead of being open to the energies there he found it all a bit strange, so he went to the roof of his hotel and did a Celtic ritual, which made everything twice as bad!"²² (SL Public Lecture: 15) AM even interprets the 'spirit of place' concept with reference to characters from history, as well as myth and folklore. Thus,

'Arthur was the king of Britain, and he's also bound up with the land... Robin Hood goes on the list as well. A lot of our national psyche is bound up with him – the British notion of freedom... And Byron *definitely* has [become a similar figure]. So

²¹ It should be emphasised here that this appears to be a broad tendency, rather than a 'hard and fast' rule, since, as will be discussed further later on (see chapter five, for instance), individual Pagans can and often do draw from all manner of sources. The point is, however, that they will nevertheless tend to gravitate to one particular 'stream', however diverse their influences generally, and that this will frequently correlate to some extent with a culture, country or region where they believe themselves to have a particularly strong affinity on some level. Nevertheless, a broad spectrum of variation seems to be evident within Pagan culture (especially when viewed in global terms) with regard to individual contexts for such feelings of 'belonging' (see below).

²² Other Pagans are more flexible in this regard. It seems likely, for instance, that – out of necessity, perhaps – the substantial number of American Wiccans, Druids and Heathens see no problem when invoking the gods of their European ancestors while residing within such an ostensibly 'foreign' location as the USA. For example, the Arizona based Odinists who feature in Kaplan's study do not appear to see the arid, desert landscapes they inhabit as preventing them from experiencing what he describes as "direct contact with a particular god/dess" from the Nordic pantheon (Kaplan 1996: 198). Ultimately, however, such forces are nevertheless still regarded as primarily 'indigenous' to Europe. Thus, for example, the same Odinists Kaplan writes about in his study uniformly see themselves as following an unambiguously "Norse/Germanic religious tradition" (1996: 198).

all these people – Arthur, Robin, Byron – are the national spirits. They're like a *spiritus loci*, a spirit of place.' (AM: 1)

Also pertinent is GM's avowal that British Witches are "native British Shamans" (GM: 8). He explains:

'[Witchcraft] is tailored to our environment. It's the best way for us to understand our environment and our own particular people. It's not racist or owt like that! [...] But it *is* typically British, yeah. It *does* have a signature of Britishness about it.' (GM: 8)

For GM, his personal development as a Witch has thus entailed a shift away from Wicca in favour of what he sees as a more 'authentically' British approach. Thus, in this "traditional" form of Witchcraft, "there was no use of metal within the circle, no angelic scripts, no Cabbalistic invocations. It was also devoid completely of Freemasonry: no three-degree initiations, all the Gardnerian trappings" (GM: 6).

This is not to say, however, that Wiccans do not themselves continue to see their tradition as representative of a 'national' or 'indigenous' cultural sensibility, as is neatly illustrated by Vivianne Crowley's assertion that it is "based on the religious practices of our Pagan ancestors"²³ (Crowley 1996b: 1). Broadly speaking, this sense of ethnic and esoteric 'rootedness' is saliently exemplified by the Celtic Reconstructionist R J Stewart's comment that an individual will feel the greatest affinity with "*that [Otherworld] which is closely attuned to the land of [her] physical birth*"²⁴ (Stewart 1985: 40).

²³ It appears that the modern Pagan association between magic and cultural 'rootedness' has its historical origins in the Golden Dawn Society, which, according to Daniël Egmond, was formed as a consequence of "tension between... 'western' and 'eastern' factions" within a British-based, mystical organisation called the Theosophical Society (Egmond 1997: 322). Eschewing the Buddhist and Hindu focus of the latter, dominant faction, the Golden Dawn (which later seceded from its parent order) instead based itself around a body of teachings it deemed more suitable for European sensibilities, these being what its founders referred to as "Occidental theosophy" – that is, Hermeticism (1997: 322). As a consequence, writes Egmond, "this new organization was very attractive to members of the Theosophical Society with a more western orientation" (1997: 325).

²⁴ Stewart's italics.

(although, it should again be stressed that this sense of 'innate' compatibility can in some cases apply more to presumed ancestral, or even 'incarnational', rather than geographical links²⁵).

In summary, then, it is possible to interpret Pagan Otherworld understandings in terms of a sense of 'rootedness', in which universal 'energies' are framed in accordance with cultural and historical circumstance and precedent, and mediated (to varying degrees of specificity) *via* individual experiences or impressions of physical *loci* and notional Otherworld 'parallels'. This sense is, moreover, evident in three interrelated ways. Firstly, Pagans tend to regard each Otherworld 'sector' as expressive of a particular, largely self-contained tradition. Secondly, while in theory, all of these may be 'worked with' on a magical level, Pagans will tend to gravitate towards those they regard themselves as having the greatest affinity with in geo-cultural terms. Thirdly, it is the Celtic and, perhaps less so, the Germanic realms that are most redolent of Pagan Otherworld conceptions generally, being typically regarded by Pagans as both positive in aspect and accessible in nature, which understanding reaffirms the 'parallelist' ontology of Pagan worldviews, and thus the view that contact with the spirit realms actively – albeit paradoxically – reinforces an individual's sense of 'groundedness' within her environment.

5. Magical 'Nodes'

Like their historical forebears and 'indigenous' counterparts, modern western Pagans aspire to designate and act upon what the scholar Mircea Eliade refers to as "sacred space" – a concept he defines as "any space that had been the scene of a hierophany and so manifested realities (or forces, figures, etc.) that were not from our world, that came from elsewhere" (Eliade 1964: 260). This congruence allows Adler, for instance, to invoke shamanic

²⁵ The example of the Arizona Odinists is appropriate here. See also CC's testimony (cited in the next chapter) on what she believes to have been a 'former life' in the 'lost continent' of Atlantis as an example of the second of these presumed 'contexts'.

terminology to assert that Pagan ritual may create a “place ‘between the worlds’ where contact... with ‘gods’... becomes possible” (1986: 109), and Vivianne Crowley similarly to describe the Wiccan circle as being “poised between *the world of men and the realm of the mighty ones*”²⁶ (Crowley 1996b: 43-4²⁷), and to explain Wiccan practices accordingly:

‘Humans have always believed in the *Otherworld*, the Land of Faery... This is the realm of the Wiccan circle; a sacred space not ruled by clock time or by linear thought, but by the timeless truths of the myths and dreams of the human psyche.’²⁸
(1996b: 47-8)

Modern magical practice could therefore be seen as an attempt to deal directly with Otherworldly powers within what are deemed to be appropriate arenas or locales. By ‘appropriate’, it is understood that such a location is either already regarded as the ‘scene of a hierophany’ (as indicated, say, through myth, folklore, or even personal ‘intuition’), or is made so *via ritual*²⁹. Accordingly, Pagan cosmologies not only affirm the parallel ‘co-existence’ of spiritual and tangible realms, but also the idea that some points in space and time may serve as ‘nodes’ where the distance between Otherworldly and empirical realities is particularly ‘narrow’, resulting in them being especially conducive to ‘communication’ between this world and the Otherworld.

²⁶ This idea is consummately expressed in the concept of ‘layered cosmology’, which Vitebsky regards as a defining feature of tribal shamanic cultures. He explains that such cosmologies are at once holistic, since they present a “total rendering of the universe”, and localised, because they hold that “cosmic space merges experientially into the space of everyday living” (Vitebsky 1995a: 185). This is clearly compatible with Pagan worldviews, although it should again be stressed that any ‘self-identified’ shamanic manifestations that feature within the latter in all probability owe more to the belated influence of shamanic notions upon that culture than to any direct continuity or ‘survival’.

²⁷ Crowley’s italics.

²⁸ Crowley’s italics.

²⁹ Illustrating the last of these criteria, for example, PM comments that, when using “magical tools” within a ritual, “[as] far as I’m concerned, *that* statue when I’m using it *is* Pan, just as *that* goblet when I’m using it is the vessel of the Goddess.” (PM: 13)

By extension, then, festivals (which can be understood as propitiously magical 'points' on a temporal rather than spatial level) may thus serve just as effectively as conduits for Otherworld 'energies' as do 'sacred spaces'. They are, in the Matthews' words, the "the times when the way to the Otherworld stands open"; as such, they are "celebrations out of time, subtle demarcations which cut doorways in linear time", and "remain embedded in our national, religious and folk year ready to be opened by those who know how" (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 48). A sense of the imaginative and emotional *frisson* that may be engendered by such occasions is conveyed by the Heathen writer Wulfhelm Coll, who writes that festivals should be an excuse for celebration, since both "the fun and the profound can be fully imbibed" from them (Coll 1988: 16). To illustrate this point, he recalls: "Early age saw me and others most reluctant to settle happily in bed [at Yuletide], and I'm sure I heard Lord Odin and the hunt, many a night!"³⁰ (1988: 16)

However, the Otherworld's comparative notional accessibility can also encourage individuals to dispense with official or designated intermediaries when seeking to communicate with the divine. As GM puts it:

'Our gods are immanent: we can approach them at any time, we don't need to go through a priest. We can talk directly to them – not like in Catholicism, where you have to go through a priest... Witches can have direct access because the gods are all around them.' (GM: 7)

This, as has already been noted, has had important implications for Wicca, as the sort of 'direct' access outlined above ultimately runs against what some see as its almost doctrinaire ethos, as typified by the admonition that a corporeal agent (in the form of a High Priest or Priestess) must confer initiation. Thus, SL (herself an initiated 3rd Degree Priestess, although no

³⁰ Samhain (otherwise known as Halloween) is the Celtic festival most obviously associated with the 'crossover' from Otherworld to the realm of mortals. Traditionally, it is the time when it was thought that the "spirits of the dead" could be found "walking" the earth (DM: 16). Even today, according to the Pagan writer Jacqueline Memory Patterson, it may still be regarded as "the time when the veils between this and the Otherworld are at their thinnest", thus enabling individuals to "commune with departed friends" (Patterson 1996: 116).

longer a Wiccan) comments: "What right has anyone to say to you, 'I'm going to put my hands on you and transfer my energy from the universe into you', when you could just sit there, open up and do this yourself?" (SL Public Lecture: 13)

Similar sentiments are also conveyed by SW, who, having rejected the "authority trip" mentality he saw as being characteristic of conventional Wicca³¹ (SW: 3), embarked upon a more idiosyncratic and individualistic approach to contacting the Otherworld, incorporating "meditation", "visualisation" and a specific "breathing regimen" (SW: 9).

Moreover, this principle also applies to other designated 'authorities', such as the myths themselves, or rather, the 'official' or established texts upon which Pagans have conventionally relied for their mythic reference points. Thus, the rune magician Jan Fries challenges what he regards as the tendency within Heathen circles to envisage a "static, unchanging tradition" passed down to modern practitioners from the ancient Nordic world (Fries 1996: 17). This he sees as an impediment to the reconstruction of Heathenism as a "living and changeable religion" (1996: 18); Fries thus suggests that "modern pagans" should instead aspire to 'revive' this "ancient faith" in a more 'direct' and imaginative fashion, "through joy, inspiration, and sheer creative enthusiasm" (1996: 17). Consequently, "[the] Odin you encounter in your rituals may be more genuine than the warrior-deity described in the sagas: the traditional form may be obsolete in our days, but what you experience is the living reality." (1996: 17)

Accordingly, as suggested previously³², it could be argued that the 'logic' inherent within Pagan Otherworld notions has contributed substantially to the 'looser-limbed' ethos that Rees has identified as being so characteristic of Pagan culture today. However, it should also be reaffirmed that, as perhaps the predominant Pagan tradition, this tendency is (as also

³¹ By this, SW means the attitude often associated with Wicca's "Gardnerian and Alexandrian" branches, which, to him, holds that "[this] is what you have to believe, and this is what you do!" (SW: 4)

³² See chapter two.

noted earlier³³) perhaps no less a feature of Witchcraft itself, as illustrated, for example, by the rise of such variations as Celtic Wicca.

On a final note, it is important to point out the crucial Pagan admonition that after interaction with the Otherworld the experiential and cognitive *status quo* be imposed, which is to say that the normative 'boundaries' between the worlds are re-invoked, thereby reaffirming the presumed parallel ontological integrity of these realms. Typically, this requires that the ritual circle be firmly 'closed'³⁴ in order to prevent the magical energies that have been invoked from 'spilling over' unduly into the everyday world. For instance, in his description of a typical Wiccan ceremony, Harvey writes that those taking part will "eventually close the circle, saying farewell to those they invited, including the directions, elementals, deities and each other" (Harvey 1997: 46), thus ushering normality back into their lives (although the Otherworldly energies that have been invoked will, all being well, "continue to affect them outside the circle" [1997: 47]). Greenwood says much the same thing – namely, after "[embodying] cosmic energies", closing the circle enables "the return of the ordinary world" (Greenwood 2000b: 36). And WS neatly sums up the whole procedure when she says, "if you don't open [the circle] the gods aren't going to come in and if you don't close they're not going to go away!" (WS: 11)

Even when conducting more meditational or 'pathworking'-type operations, an effective 'closing' is still seen as vital. Thus, Caitlín and John Matthews, for example, recommend the following procedure after the completion of such an exercise:

'Consciously close off any esoteric work you do from the rest of your life: this is common sense psychic hygiene. [...] A quick sealing-off gesture made with intention takes only a few seconds and is preferable to leaving your psyche running like a car engine.' (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 19)

³³ See chapter two.

³⁴ See chapter six.

And after describing a visualisation technique for establishing outdoor contact with the Celtic gods, they caution: “[A]lways remember to dismiss your contact after you have spent however long you desire in his or her company”³⁵ (1985: 102).

In all, then, Pagan activity revolves around the attempted interaction with the Otherworld and its denizens, which process is held to reaffirm the parallel, ‘two-way’, ‘symbiotic’ interaction that Pagans definitively regard as characterising the relationship between spiritual and earthly energies. However, it appears to be equally important that after any such perceived contact the notional ‘distance’ between spiritual and empirical worlds be reaffirmed in order that the magician may function once more as an inhabitant of this world, albeit hopefully in a manner somewhat ‘enhanced’ by her experiences. Pagans have directly inherited such outlooks and procedures from western esoteric tradition, although they have also substantially adapted these by incorporating ideas, images and themes from mythological, folkloric and shamanic sources.

The next section will deal with another integral concept that Pagans have also acquired from esoteric tradition – that of gnosis, or magical ‘awareness’. As may be inferred from this definition, the term is strongly compatible with the Otherworld concept. It also, however, features subtle differences – such as, not least, an explicit, as opposed to implicit or ‘sub-textual’, congruity with notions of individualism – and so warrants an equivalent amount of consideration.

³⁵ By way of warning, the authors advise: “[N]ever leave the impression of your chosen figure behind, as this can be disturbing to other sensitive visitors, and may make the continuation of the rapport you have begun to establish difficult.” (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 102)

1. The Concept of Gnosis

To fully appreciate the importance of the idea of gnosis to modern Paganism, it is necessary to reaffirm once more the crucial formative role that western esotericism played in the development of the phenomenon (and also that, as Harvey avers, “contemporary magic” remains “deeply embedded” in this tradition [Harvey 1997: 90]). For, according to Sutcliffe, it is the concept of gnosis – which literally means “spiritual knowledge” (Sutcliffe 1996: 118), and is equated with the understanding of “one’s own true reality” (1996: 120) – that constitutes the true binding thread of that tradition. Thus, writes Sutcliffe, the “attainment of gnosis, understood in its fullest sense, is perhaps the most fundamental aim of magick” (1996: 118), and as such has been the “central principle linking the various manifestations of Western esotericism” down to the present day (1996: 118).

It is therefore necessary to ask what this magical ‘self-awareness’ is actually supposed to entail. Firstly, it is regarded fundamentally as an experiential state. It is, writes Hanegraaff, “characterized by the primacy accorded to experience” of the divine “over mere reason and faith” (Hanegraaff 1997a: 373), while JW comments that gnosis may be identified with the “spiritual ecstasy” that Wiccans aspire to experience through their rituals (JW: 14).

Moreover, as Ray Sherwin avers, a successful ritual ideally requires that the magician “build and maintain an atmosphere which excites and inspires the imagination” (Sherwin 1984: 84). Thus, PM, for instance, describes the concept as redolent of the “extreme emotions” (such as “fear, hate, love, desire, passion”) that prevail “when your everyday states of mind are switched off”, and without which “your rituals are [therefore] just going to be empty or dead” (PM: 13). He explains:

‘The gnosis is the event. It’s like your first kiss – afterwards, you examine it, you replay it in your mind. If it went well you try and pick up on the good points and remember them; if it went badly

you'll consider the bad techniques and remember not to do these again... Gnosis is not an intellectual thing but an emotional thing – the rationale comes after.' (PM: 12-3)

Also significant is AM's description of gnosis as, simultaneously, "magical trance" and "direct, divine experience" (AM: 13). He explains that, in Pagan terms (that is, "[if] you take away monotheist notions"), gnosis may be understood as the "direct experience of the magical quality of the universe" (AM: 13). He regards the term "gnostic trances" as therefore eminently descriptive of the sort of mind-states to which modern magicians aspire, and adds that the "intensity" of such experiences depends "on what techniques are being used and why, and your degree of reluctance to enter into [gnosis]" (AM: 13).

Thus, however it actually manifests, ultimately the term may be considered, in Harvey's words, as denoting an "immediate, intense, perhaps numinous, personal, revelatory and initiatory" state of mind (Harvey 1997: 92). And for Pagans, writes Adler, this means that magical experiences are seen more as "*processes that lead to a widening of perceptions*" than as the by-products of "theology, belief, or the written word"¹ (Adler 1986: 441).

Secondly, as AM suggests, the idea of gnosis (as Pagans see it, at least) is fundamentally bound up as much with the phenomenal world as it is the divine. Or as Faivre puts it, it has traditionally been held to provide the magician with the means of "penetrating the hieroglyphs of Nature and understanding the processes of interaction between Man, God, and the universe" (Faivre 1997: 119-20). However, it is important here to distinguish between the Pagan interpretation of gnosis, which stems from Hermetic tradition, and that associated with the early medieval, heretical Christian sect known as Gnosticism. Chiefly, the difference is that the type of 'direct, divine experience' proffered by these two, once contemporary schools denotes, respectively, a positive and negative ontological and experiential orientation towards the phenomenal world. Basically, whereas the latter (as JW explains) upheld the notion of a 'dualistic' cosmos in which the Heavens

¹ Adler's italics.

were ruled by a “Good God” and the world by a “Bad God” (JW: 14), Hermetic tradition regarded the universe in an altogether more benign light. Or, as the cultural historian Roelof van den Broek puts it, “[in] Gnosticism the creation is bad, in Hermetism it is not”² (Broek 1997: 12).

Accordingly, as Harvey explains, unlike the Gnostics, “Pagan magicians celebrate gnosis – the intensity of ecstatic awareness – without feeling trapped by flesh or transmuting it into a symbol of sin and evil” (Harvey 1997: 92). Magical gnosis therefore serves to reaffirm the importance of the corporeal self as the phenomenal or tangible correlate of the spiritual realm within ritual contexts. Or in Greenwood’s words, it is the body that serves as the “initial focal point of all Western magical work”, being “a field of energy that has the potential to channel the forces of the entirety of the macrocosm [i.e. magical cosmos]” (Greenwood 2000b: 36). Thus, it is “understood through an ongoing relationship with the otherworld through magical practices” (2000b: 36.).

According to GM, Witches commonly refer to this principle as “squaring the circle”, which means “balancing the physical with the spiritual” (GM: 15). He explains: “Some people are far too spiritual and forget the physical, and *vice versa*. It’s ultimate balance that we’re after: the prime mover of most Witches – positive and negative principles.” (GM: 15) This sense of ‘balance’ should, in theory, extend to all individual circumstances – thus, Adler writes that “participants” in Pagan ritual “expect to lead normal lives *in the world*, as well as attain spiritual enrichment”³ (Adler 1986: 441).

Thirdly, magical ‘awareness’ revolves around the cultivation of what Sutcliffe refers to as the “esoteric” or “creative, noetic imagination” (Sutcliffe

² The historian Frances Yates, who has done much to increase awareness about the influence of esoteric ‘streams’ upon western history, made a similar point some years earlier when making her distinction between ‘pessimistic’ and ‘optimistic’ types of “gnostic” (referring respectively to adherents of Gnosticism and Hermeticism). She explains that whereas the former “needs to know the magical passwords and signs by which he may rid himself of the evil material power of the stars in his upward ascent through the spheres” towards Heaven, a follower of the latter “has no fear to draw down by sympathetic magic, invocations, talismans, these same powers of the universe which he believes to be good” (Yates 1964: 44-5).

³ Adler’s italics.

1996: 122). This can, Sutcliffe explains, be understood as the “imaginal modality of consciousness” (1996: 127), meaning (in words quoted from Faivre) “an imagination that allows the use of [magical] intermediaries, symbols and images for gnostic ends”⁴ (1996: 117). Moreover, the world of the imagination is also “accorded its own ontological positivity”, since “it is recognised as having a real existence” (1996: 117). The concept of the esoteric imagination thus clearly illustrates the congruence between Otherworldly and gnostic experiences, especially given Greenwood’s comments on the centrality of the ‘active imagination’ to the ‘experience’ of such notional dimensions⁵. Or as PM succinctly puts it: “Imagination to me is another world which I can access on command” (PM: 12).

As Simes has suggested⁶, the Pagan quest for ‘magical awareness’ is by no means an effortless process. Not least, it involves the honing of the magician’s imaginative faculties (not to mention the cultivation of the ability to memorise and familiarise herself with the appropriate symbols, mythologies and ritual procedures). Thus, for instance, on being asked how she gets into ‘contact’ with the Goddess, JH makes the following, telling comparison:

‘You have to build yourself up to it, and it does help if you practice everyday. It’s very much like the artist and the musician... When musicians get lost in their music they sometimes do incredible things, and at the end go “Phew, how did I do that?” The same goes for artists: “Wow, where have I *been* for the last three hours?”’ (JH: 13)

Dedicated practice will, however, pay dividends. Thus, CC comments that in her capacity as a hypnotherapist, “working with people who are magically-trained is a joy as they get so much out of their trance”, the reason

⁴ Faivre’s understanding of the esoteric imagination is that it operates in combination with what he calls ‘mediations’, for the purpose of gaining “access to different levels of reality” (Faivre 1997: 119). By ‘mediations’, Faivre means the techniques and forms through which the magician may approach the Divine, including “rituals, symbolic images, numbers, mandalas, intermediate spirits, and the like” (1997: 119).

⁵ See chapter four.

⁶ See chapter one.

being that “if you’ve trained your powers of visualisation and creative imagination and you know your magical correspondences, then taking you on a symbolic journey is easy” (CC: 22).

SL is particularly insistent in this regard, and advises her coven members to acquire a thorough grounding in esoteric and Pagan matters, even to the extent of acquiring a working knowledge of other ‘paths’. Accordingly, she comments that to prepare a member for a 1st degree initiation,

‘I’ll say, “I’m going to set you a test, and even though you may not be interested in Egyptian or Norse magic or whatever, I want you to go away and have a thorough study [over] three months [to get] to grips with [those traditions], and come back and present a ritual”.’⁷ (SL: 13)

Such testimony thus appears to illustrate Simes’ point that Pagans see their ‘paths’ as an “on-going process” of “self-mastery” (Simes 1995: 279) based upon the cultivation of “an extensive... esoteric body of knowledge” (1995: 278) (and, ideally, sustained by the “cautious sense of self-confidence” they might expect to develop through such a grounding [1995: 279]). It also supports Hutton’s avowal that “considerable dedication and hard work” is required from those who are serious about their Pagan undertakings (Hutton 1999b: 73).

⁷ For SL, this sort of a gruelling schedule is also necessary because “if you’re a guest [of] another group and they start talking about Isis and Osiris [principal deities of Egyptian myth], or Thor [Norse god of Thunder] or whoever, you’re going to know what they’re referring to and you’re going to know what sort of energy that [god-form’s] going to bring in, and you’re going to know in what way the ritual has to be set out.” (SL: 13)

That said, there might seem to be a conflict here between such instructions on the one hand, and on the other, SL’s own injunctions concerning ‘genii loci’ (see chapter four). Nevertheless, as was also discussed previously (see chapter four, esp. *n.* 22), while generally speaking the latter proviso may indeed be complexly and even contradictorily expressed by Pagans, it is invariably fundamentally bound up with notions of locative ‘uniqueness’, as SL’s own comments on the ‘sort of energy’ associated with specific godforms, and her clear implication that each ‘system’ represents a discreet magical tradition, seems to exemplify.

Finally, the gnostic 'process' features an intrinsically individualistic component, for, according to the theory, when the magician discovers her 'own true reality' she is getting to know the universe on an esoteric level, and *vice versa*. Thus, writes Harvey (again citing Faivre), magical ritual is "intended to result in a metamorphosis of the magician into one who knows their goal, is fully aware of it, and experiences it with immediacy"⁸ (Harvey 1997: 91). This last point bears further scrutiny, as it is here that the subtle difference between the concepts of gnosis and the Otherworld become evident. For, while notional Otherworlds may be alluded to through narratives and symbols, gnosis is recognised first and foremost as an experiential state – and one, moreover, that is regarded as being inextricably bound up with notions of 'self-development'.

2. Gnosis and 'Self-Development'

Ultimately, the fundamental importance of gnostic 'self-knowledge' to western esotericism has resulted in the tradition placing a significant emphasis on notions of what Harvey refers to as "self-discovery and personal growth" (Harvey 1997: 94), the origins of which tendency may be traced back to the Renaissance⁹. He adds: "As a set of techniques magic can be used for a number of purposes by people with widely different beliefs and motivations, but primarily it encourages personal growth and self-

⁸ Underlining this simultaneously experiential and individualistic 'logic', Adler quotes Aidan Kelly's assertion that modern esoteric methodologies are intrinsically incommensurate with "dogmatism", as the "magical system that works for one person may be totally contradictory to the system that works for another" (Adler 1986: 173).

⁹ According to Harvey, magicians started focussing upon such notions "in the fifteenth century" (although he adds that modern magic testifies also to the "continuous creative development and experimentation" that has subsequently taken place within esoteric culture) (Harvey 1997: 94). Hutton says much the same thing, while also emphasising the broader cultural contexts of that period. Thus, he avers that the modern Pagan outlook is, in this respect, a product of "the Renaissance stress upon the potential of the human mind", as "reinforced by a parallel emphasis upon personal spiritual development" in Hermetic philosophy (Hutton 1999b: 67).

awareness” (1997: 105). Thus, for example, SL asserts, “if you’re a Pagan then you can look at different belief systems and forms of meditation, and anything that is to do with self-evolvement¹⁰ [sic.]” (SL: 12). Similarly, AM comments that magic is ultimately “about personal development”, adding: “That’s the key word - it’s *development* of the person... The point of magic is that you develop and improve yourself. It is actually spiritual bodybuilding.” (AM: 7)

Likewise, PM comments that Paganism fulfils a personal need for “emotional and spiritual fulfilment, [and] mental stimulation” (PM: 11). Also significant are GM’s comments regarding the mythic character he claims most strongly to “identify” with – the legendary Cymric bard *Taliesin*, who underwent several wondrous initiations (GM: 9). Accordingly, “[Taliesin’s] life mirrors all human life: we go through all these changes to improve ourselves, and then when you have all these answers you... feel young and at the beginning.” (GM: 9)

In all, then, Pagan magic combines ‘parallelist’ cosmological notions – which imply that the magician may use the ‘imaginal modality of consciousness’ to positively orientate herself in relation both to earthly and Otherworld ‘realities’ – with explicit notions of personal fulfillment and ‘self-development’. It is therefore possible to regard the Pagan approach to gnostic states as involving the notional ‘activation’ by the magician of Otherworldly or ‘mythic’ narratives, themes, and symbols *via* the ‘controlled imagination’. It is to this characteristic Pagan emphasis upon the imaginative faculties that the discussion will now turn.

3. Gnosis as the Magical ‘Activation’ of Narrative and Symbol

As noted previously, whereas Otherworld sensibilities may be ‘indirectly’ expressed *via* narratives or symbols, ‘gnosis’ denotes an ‘immediate’ sense of interaction with such ‘realms’. In Pagan terms, this means that Otherworld

¹⁰ Elsewhere, SL explains that Pagans should ideally act “for the sake of the planet, the sake of the Gods, the sake of self-development and for helping others” (SL: 20).

motifs might therefore be considered as 'codifications' of the means by which the individual may access these states, and conversely, that gnosis itself lays bare the essential 'magical' inspiration for such fictions.

Moreover, although (as Rees attests) Pagans usually draw inspiration from 'substantive' mythologies¹¹, other, more contemporary genres such as science fiction or horror can, as also noted earlier, serve just as well, or so it seems¹², thus indicating that, in theory, any narrative or symbol may be utilised as a 'doorway' to magical states of consciousness, no matter how seemingly 'modern' its content or genre. The Chaos Magician and Shaman Phil Hine is well known in magical circles for this type of 'experimental' approach, and has lucidly illustrated his rationale with reference to the Star Trek TV science fiction series. During this discussion, Hine admits that "[s]ome people still argue that the older a Mythic cycle is, the more powerful it is" (Hine 1999: 25), but protests nonetheless that Star Trek has become an important Otherworld narrative. This is because "[m]ore people are familiar

¹¹ See chapter four.

¹² As indicated previously, the sci-fi horror of H P Lovecraft is a popular case in point (see chapter two). This is illustrated by a ritual script that was disseminated online by Kabal (the University of Leeds Occult Society) in 2000. The ritual was intended to summon the Lovecraftian entity *Yog-Sothoth*, and had been chosen by the group for the purpose of celebrating Beltain (May Day) that year. Although the ritual text itself purported to be from the sixteenth century, the accompanying notes cheerfully declared such claims to be entirely "bogus" (Ye Rite To Summon Yogge-Sothothe: 3 [Copy available]), describing it instead as being "of unknown authorship", and of having "[circulated] on the internet since the mid-90s" (Ye Rite To Summon Yogge-Sothothe: 8).

What is significant, though, is that the ritual's authors clearly had no qualms about adding elements from Lovecraft's books to a ritual platform deriving from 'genuine' esoteric sources such as "the Greek Magical Papyri" and John Dee's Enochian system of magic (Ye Rite To Summon Yogge-Sothothe: 9). The Kabal ritual can thus be seen as an interesting, not to mention very contemporary, amalgam which utilises a fusion of twentieth century imaginative fiction and established esoteric ritual 'scaffolding' (to use Greenwood's term), as the basis for a modern Pagan seasonal celebration (the festival of Beltain). It is also interesting to note that, according to an email message sent to its members (copy available), Kabal had suggested an alternative rite for the same occasion, in this case to invoke a Lovecraftian sea-dwelling entity called *Cthulhu*, to take place (appropriately enough) during a "trip to Blackpool".

with [the programme] than any of the mystery religions”, and although it “has a high fantasy content, and seemingly few points of contact with our ‘everyday’ worlds of experience”, it is nevertheless highly ‘meaningful’ to modern sensibilities¹³ (1999: 24). He continues:

‘As we “get into” the Star Trek universe, we find greater depth and subtlety. We find that the universe has its own rules which the characters are subject to, and is internally consistent... So we watch TV, and enter, as an observer, the unfolding of a Mythic event.’ (1999: 24-5)

Thus, for Hine, while on one level the programme may be regarded as mere “entertainment”, it can also be engaged with magically, which means that it may function as “a Mythic world in which to enter into to bring about change”¹⁴ (1999: 25).

¹³ For instance: “The characters embody specific qualities – Spock is logical, Sulu is often portrayed as a martial figure, Scotty is a ‘master builder’, and Kirk is an arbitrator, forever seeking resolution of conflict through peaceful means.” (Hine 1999: 24)

¹⁴ On the surface, there would appear to be a contradiction between the Pagan understanding that Otherworld realms correlate with geographically or culturally specific frames of reference, and Hine’s suggestion that science fiction narratives may, despite having few such ‘points of contact’, also serve as conduits for magical ‘energies’. Delving deeper, however, congruities become apparent. Firstly, if, as Hine’s example (not to mention the genre’s current overall popularity) attests, science fiction narratives can resonate at least as well with modern sensibilities as do ‘substantive’ myths, they might therefore prove to be no less comprehensive or effective in both reflecting and bringing ‘meaning’ to individual experience. Secondly, as noted in chapter two, some (such as Penczak and Harvey) are of the opinion that science fiction narratives may be particularly useful for appreciating modern urban, technological landscapes in magical terms.

Thirdly, it is not unknown for Pagans to reinterpret science fiction in terms redolent of ‘conventional’ magical, folkloric or mythic tradition. For instance, SW describes a late ‘nineties sci-fi film called *The Matrix* as the “neatest analogy” for Shamanic worldviews that he has yet seen (SW: 9). Some have even gone so far as to claim that certain physical locations possess a magical ‘link’ with characters or tales from the world of science fiction. Hine himself, for example, suggests that Ilkley Moor might be a suitable location for the invocation of entities from Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu Mythos” (Hine 1988: 27). This, he writes, is due to its “long, and well-documented history of strange phenomena encountered, from ghosts and black dogs to UFOs and what modern researchers in the field of Earth Mysteries

The notional 'grey area' between 'mere' narrative diversion and magical gnosis that Hine identifies is highlighted by the phenomenon of role-playing games. Prior to explaining this point further, it should be acknowledged that Pagans themselves do not necessarily see RPGs as magical *per se*. AM, for one, is insistent on this point, stating categorically that he does not regard the playing of RPGs as a "magical process" (AM: 10). Nevertheless, the seeming overlap between Pagan and RPG milieux suggests that there are important congruities between these two 'worlds'.

Firstly, as noted previously¹⁵, such games can provide modern individuals with their first proper 'taste' of substantive mythology, which may develop in some cases into formal Pagan affinities. Secondly, there are notable methodological similarities, as suggested by the following observation from AM: "I actually think that most of the role-players that I've met who are also occultists are just like me, in that both these interests have developed in them side-by-side – one hasn't led to the other." (AM: 10) Significantly, he adds:

'If anything, quite a lot of occultists have become interested in role-playing games. It is an interesting adjunct to astral work and meditation, as it is an imagined landscape and the group dynamics are similar to magical workings.'¹⁶ (AM: 10)

Phil Hine also makes the interesting point during his discussion of Star Trek that the RPG format may enable individuals to "increase [the] sense of participation" they usually experience from passively watching the programme because "group belief allows us to generate, for a few hours at

call Earth Lights" (1988: 27). Hine's suggestions here thus echo the 'conventional' Pagan 'reframing' of Lovecraft's 'mythos' described in the previous reference to Kabal's Yog Sothoth rite.

¹⁵ See chapter four.

¹⁶ This influence may also work the other way. Thus, AM avers: "Tarot cards have worked their way into role-playing eventually, especially if it's a fantasy role-playing game which includes magicians and stuff, or if you're doing a horror role-playing game. So some role-players will look at Tarot cards like a game, or as an adjunct to the game." (AM: 10)

least, the semblance of the Star Trek universe, in the comfort of your sitting room” (Hine 1999: 25). In other words, it encourages a sense of immersion within, and identification with, imaginative worlds that is of an intensity not normally encountered through conventional, one-way media channels such as TV or books. Moreover, the ‘fact’ that the gaming process is ‘powered’ by the enthusiasm of those involved for the chosen subject matter persuades Hine that this sense of involvement is greatly facilitated by personal tastes and proclivities¹⁷.

Crucially, Hine asserts that this principle also extends to magical activities. Thus, he proposes, it doesn’t matter if the magician chooses “Star Trek, Celtic Myth, Tarot trumps, Alchemical images, Greek creation stories, [or] Amerind worlds” as the basis for magical work, as “it’s really a case of whatever turns you on” (1999: 25). The sense that personal affinity with and enthusiasm for a particular symbol system or mythic narrative might serve as a ‘litmus test’ in the development of a magical path was made apparent many times during the interviews. To cite a few examples: DM reports that his longstanding fascination with Irish and Celtic myths and awareness of his “Celtic Heritage” (DM: 4) prompted him eventually to apply such themes to the magical ‘grounding’ and impetus (or what he describes as the “big kick-start” [DM: 6]) that he had acquired through Chaos Magick. Also illustrative is GM’s self-proclaimed affinity with certain Welsh tales, as is AM’s attraction to Lovecraft’s fiction. For her part, SL admits that a “heavy, ritualistic kind of magic and worship” – involving “Cabbalistic and Egyptian training” – were “very, very important” to her in the early stages of her path (SJ: 9). SJ’s involvement in Paganism commenced, he claims, as a consequence of a “natural ability” with the Tarot¹⁸, a fascination that led “onto other things” (SJ: 4). Also pertinent is CC’s recently developed interest in the myth of Atlantis,

¹⁷ Hine himself, for instance, admits to being “well into *Star Trek*” (Hine 1999: 25).

¹⁸ This prompted SJ to pursue a sideline in Tarot reading. Describing his early experiences, he comments: “I usually said to [clients], ‘Look, I’ll give you a reading ‘cos I’m trying to learn this. If I have to go back to the book I *will* do: don’t take it as gospel to start with because I’m just learning’. But within three months I didn’t need the book, and within six months I was doing it [proficiently]. And the first year I did it I ended up doing readings for... a military charity” (SJ: 4).

which she attributes to having lived there in a former life. This impression has prompted her to use “past-life regression” while under self-hypnosis to discover more about her ‘former existence’¹⁹ (CC: 20).

For Rees, the Pagan idea that selfhood can be understood in terms of “mythic foundations” is inextricably bound up with notions of personal identity. This means that a Pagan will actively come to define herself as, say, “a Celt, as a follower of the Northern way, as an Isian initiate and so on” even on a day-to-day basis, although such affinities may shift over time to some extent (Rees 1996: 29). He explains:

‘Wicca, and the new paganism... represents an example of mythic restoration (and transformation) and functions as an arena within which the production of a modern identity can be forged via willed action on the part of the seeker in exchange with the range of representations available to him or her within the magical subculture.’²⁰ (1996: 29)

Greenwood concurs with Rees’ appraisal, writing that the “magician’s sense of identity” draws heavily from the “emotional power of myth”, which “is vital to the way that humans constitute a self in the everyday world, but [is] also essential to the otherworld”, as it “functions as a language of alternative reality” (Greenwood 2000b: 120).

Aside from pertaining to broad affiliations with a specific tradition or mythology, the notion of magical identities is also exemplified by a popular motif found within Pagan circles – the power or totem symbol, which is usually (but not always) conceived to be an animal of some sort, and is thought simultaneously to express both a person’s magical ‘lineage’ and individual ‘essence’. Illustrating the first aspect, AM describes the totem as

¹⁹ CC admits to finding this process “extremely fascinating” (CC: 21). Discussing her ‘remembrances’ of life as an Atlantean, she comments: “I’m very proud that I had been the best seer of my day. I could see ships when they were four days away. I could tell you how many men were on board and what the cargo was.” (CC: 21)

²⁰ It could be added, however, that Rees’ emphasis on explicitly magical representations, as opposed to narrative or symbolical representations generally, underestimates just how creative Pagan individuals can actually be when formulating their magical ‘paths’.

“basically the spirit of you clan, or the accumulated wisdom of your ancestors, including everything they’ve done, and which you can have access to on a magical level”²¹ (AM: 16). Regarding the second aspect, SW relates the following anecdote concerning his particular Shamanic ‘power symbol’:

‘I took a vision quest²² once to look for a totem animal as a symbol I *believed* in... I went out [...], thinking, “Well, what am I supposed to be looking for?” when this crow’s feather came spiralling down from – I swear! – a clear blue sky. There were no crows to be seen anywhere either, so I thought, “OK... I’ll take this as a hint!”’ (SW: 11)

Caitlín and John Matthews – who provide a visualisation method for ‘finding your totem’ in one of their books – write that such symbols are “your symbol of belonging”, and as such act as “your call-sign, your passport and recognition symbol” on “your journeys to the Otherworld” (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 44).

Such notions also suggest that Pagans might not see their magical affiliations and proclivities as being entirely a matter of individual choice. Rather, they seem to reaffirm the impression (discussed previously²³) that a person’s relationship with magical ‘realities’ is regarded, to a significant extent, as being beyond her control, by suggesting that it is as much a matter of personal ‘discovery’ as anything else.

²¹ AM regards the wildcat as his personal totem, this being the symbol of the particular Scottish clan to which he belongs. He explains that a Scottish clan symbol is already “on your coat-of-arms – you’ve just got to look it up.” (AM: 17) Elaborating further, he adds: “There’s a cat above the shield on [my clan’s] arms. The motto is ‘Touch not the cat but the glove’, which is written in English, actually. You wouldn’t go near a wildcat - it’d bite you! That’s what the motto means.” (AM: 17)

²² This is a Native American term describing a tradition where “[y]oung men, and sometimes women, go into the wilderness and fast for some days to seek a vision from the spirits” (Vitebsky 1995a: 43). It has been adopted and popularised by western Pagans, who (as may be inferred from the discussion of shamanism in chapter two) have tended to represent this process in a rather less daunting (not to mention more gender inclusive) fashion.

²³ See chapter four.

4. 'Engrossment'

Given the close parallels between magical and RPG cultures, it is useful to look at what the American sociologist Gary Alan Fine refers to as *engrossment*, which he describes as being (along with "fun") the "sine qua non of [role-playing] games" (Fine 1983: 236). By way of explanation, Fine writes that "[g]ames are designed to provide 'engrossable' systems of experience in which participants can become caught up" (1983: 196). Thus, in order "[for] the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to 'bracket' their 'natural' selves and enact a fantasy self" – in effect, they "must lose themselves in the game" (1983: 4). Accordingly, the key to engrossment within RPG circles lies in the gamers' suspension of disbelief, which means that they must be "willing to accept the fantasy world which is provided [in the game] as a 'real world'" (1983: 235), although this in turn requires that "all fantasy must be shaped to what is considered engrossable by the players" (1983: 235), even if they do not consider such sources to be 'real' outside of the gaming context. Thus, "[f]antasy gamers... are explicitly concerned with the development of a cultural system; they judge their satisfaction with the game by the vigor of the culture they have created and by the degree to which they can become personally engrossed in it." (1983: 229)

The similarities with Pagan methodologies are striking. Firstly, magical procedures also require that the magician regard the imaginal realms and characters with which she aspires to interact as 'real', which is to say (as Sutcliffe suggests) in an ontologically positive light, rather than as mere 'figments of the imagination'. The parallels with Otherworld cosmologies are even more apparent in Fine's comment that "these [gaming] worlds have a logical structure, recognizable as parallel to the mundane world" (1983: 182). Secondly, the cultivation of a sense of gnosis is made all the more likely if the imaginal realms in question are associated with themes, motifs or narratives the magician already 'considers engrossable'. Thirdly, Pagans too are involved in the formulation of 'cultural systems', in the form of spiritual

'paths' (such as Wicca or Ásatrú) based on elements drawn from a variety of sources²⁴.

There are differences, however. Firstly, the state of engrossment that occurs within RPGs tends not to be constant, but rather "is a flickering involvement" (1983: 196). Thus, "[p]layers do become involved when they face a monster; but once this encounter is completed, they may return to 'mundane' discussions about politics, girlfriends, or the latest science fiction novel, even though the game continues." (1983: 196) Nor is this identification total even when it occurs, there being what Fine (citing Goffman) refers to as a certain "role-distance", which ensures that "the outcome of events affecting his character²⁵ doesn't really affect the pleasure that he can derive from the game" (1983: 222). But for Pagans, engrossment must (during ritual at least) be unwavering, since gnosis – the whole 'point' of magical activity – is by definition held to occur outside of 'everyday' consciousness.

Secondly, whereas the engrossment elicited by RPGs requires only the temporary 'suspension of disbelief' (the imaginal realms of gamers generally being only considered 'real' while they are actually playing the game), Pagan magical activity is sustained by patterns of belief that are held outside of the ritual arena, which is to say, within the realm of everyday life and consciousness – that is, they 'believe' that magical Otherworlds are no less real than the phenomenal world. Thirdly, whereas the cultural systems that gamers establish focus, by necessity, upon the shared experience of a group, Pagans have the option of individual practice (a trend epitomised, as Simes suggests, by solo orientations such as Hedgewitchcraft and Shamanism²⁶).

²⁴ Also significant is Fine's own comment (citing Malinowski and Allport) that the "beliefs of game players are akin to belief in magic" because an element of "uncertainty and importance" towards "results" is engendered into the narrative by the "centrality of the dice" within such games (Fine 1983: 92). This is particularly interesting given Hanegraaff's earlier comments on how Pagan magical worldviews deliberately invoke – indeed, depend upon – an atmosphere of 'uncertainty' and 'mystery' (see chapter four).

²⁵ These include what in the real world might be considered unpleasant or undesirable conditions, such as death or "failure" (Fine 1983: 112).

²⁶ See chapter one.

These are significant differences, particularly considering the evident reservations some have concerning the actual magical 'content' of the RPG experience. Nevertheless, the similarities are also important, as the spectrum of experiences that is revealed when the two, overlapping milieux are considered together, alongside more conventional, 'one-way' narrative channels – from 'mere' entertainment', though 'flickering identification' incorporating 'role-distance', to the impression of fully-fledged magical 'awareness' – might conceivably shed substantial light upon Paganism's attraction to its followers.

As noted previously²⁷, Rees suggests that the way Pagan individuals negotiate and identify with symbolical and social contexts is bound up with the idea of 'personal myths'. This will be discussed in more detail in due course²⁸; for now, the main point to consider is that the chief *modus operandi* of Paganism and RPGs alike hinges upon the establishment of a sense of imaginal connectivity with 'mythic' themes and characters. In both cases, as AM avers, the principal enthusiasm appears to be for mythic fantasy ("Classical or Northern sagas and things like that" [AM: 4]), which consequently provides substantial thematic common ground, although any imaginatively stimulating narrative may actually suffice. Accordingly, Pagan magical 'awareness' may be regarded as an intensive version of RPG engrossment, the principal substantive difference between these 'states', it appears, being that the former is sustained by a foundational belief in the 'truth' of magical processes and dimensions, and the existence of 'mythic' levels of 'identity', rather than by an intermittent and conditional 'suspension of disbelief'. In summary, it could therefore be argued that Paganism's fundamental appeal stems from its presumption that the sort of intensively imaginative 'realms' that an individual might strongly identify with or find inherently absorbing may be directly experienced, *via* gnosis, not only as complex 'realities', but also as the basis for a programme of self-development, the connecting precept being the imagination as understood in

²⁷ See chapter one.

²⁸ See chapter ten.

its esoteric sense – that is, as both instrumental faculty and ontological principle.

1. Pagan Ritual Typologies

As noted earlier¹, Pagans do not regard formal ritual as the only way of experiencing magical 'states of mind', there being numerous other means, including 'pathworking', outdoor meditation, and creative or artistic activities. Nevertheless, it is ritual that is perhaps most likely to come to mind when considering Paganism, this being, as the sociologist Sabina Magliocco points out, "central" to Pagan notions of "worship"² (Magliocco 1996: 93).

Moreover, it appears also to provide a substantial degree of congruency among the various Pagan streams. This enables JW, for instance, to make the following points on the subject of open rituals ("where you'll get a lot of traditions coming together to perform a ceremony" [JW: 11]):

'[All] traditions work within a circle, and they all recognise the four quarters. So a circle will be cast and the quarters called, [then] there will be perhaps singing and dancing, or circle dancing, and all paths can take part in something like that.'

(JW: 11)

Thus, open ceremonies are "not necessarily Nordic or Wiccan or Shamanic, just everybody of a like mind joining together" (JW: 11). However, JH proposes that Wicca can serve as a "*lingua franca*" for this purpose, as "[when] you do rituals with a lot of participants, Wicca is a sort of common

¹ See chapter five.

² That said, it is, as York saliently comments, often difficult to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual based Pagan magical workings, as Pagans may "indulge in ritualistic behaviour that does not include specialists, paraphernalia, or even special time or space apart from a sensitised recognition of the here-and-now" (York 1995: 147) (or, it could be added, the Otherworld).

ground from where one can talk” (a belief in the “eight festivals” being one such typical feature)³ (JH: 11).

Most notably, perhaps, ritual’s prominence within Paganism is illustrated by the ‘Book of Shadows rubric’, which, as Rees suggests (and as was pointed out earlier⁴), “still remains authoritative for many [Wiccan] covens today” (Rees 1996: 28), central features including a “circle (sacred space) typically cast by a female”, “the stress placed on the three grade initiatory degree system”, and “the Drawing Down of the Moon ritual on to a female by a male” (1996: 28).

On a more general level, it is possible to discern a basic ritual model common to most, if not all, Pagan traditions. In a Pagan newsletter (which he also edits) PM (writing under the name ‘Gryffyn’) describes the five stages that are normally involved in such procedures. This starts with the ‘opening’ of the ritual circle, which involves “purifying the space” to prepare for contact with the “world of... Magick”, and usually, the welcoming of the “four quarters” to establish magical and psychosomatic ‘balance’ within the ritual circle (‘Gryffyn’ 1999: 2). This is followed by the ‘calling’ of the appropriate spiritual ‘powers’. As PM puts it, “[m]ost rituals involve calling something or other: the god and goddess, the moon, the intelligence [spirit] of this or that planet [etc.]” (1999: 2-3) Next comes the most important stage, during which “you make [your] demands/requests of the beings you’ve just called up” (1999: 3). There then follows “an important component of many ritual[s]”, which is the ritual sacrament (1999: 4). Thus, for instance, “the Wiccans have their cakes and wine, while the Thelemites have their Cakes of Light” (1999: 4). Finally, there is the ‘closing’, which “is just like the opening of a ritual except instead of saying ‘Hello’ [you’re] saying ‘Goodbye’” (1999: 4).

Simes proffers a similarly concise, but more theory-driven breakdown of Pagan ritual structure. She bases this on Van Gennep’s ritual model, which consists of “three distinct stages”, these being separation, transition,

³ Significantly, though (given Wicca’s debt to western esotericism), JH also adds that she herself had “found out about a lot of these things” – such as “using four directions” within a ritual circle – “a long time before” coming across Wicca, having actually discovered them through “research into Crowley and the Golden Dawn” (JH: 11).

⁴ See chapter two.

and incorporation or reaggregation⁵ (Simes 1995: 169). She explains her ideas on the relevance of Van Gennep's model to Paganism accordingly. The first stage denotes the partial and temporary detachment of the individual from the wider society. For Pagans, this may entail a lengthy period of "preparation" (which can take "weeks or months"), during which a study of the appropriate ritual texts and myths takes place. This is followed by a process of "purification", which may involve a period of fasting, the 'purging' of the *chakras* ('power' centres purported to reside within the body), and (among Gardnerian Wiccans) ritual "scourging" (1995: 193). This preliminary stage culminates in the demarcation of the "ritual boundaries" (1995: 194). The second stage – the 'core' of the ritual – denotes the individual's passage to a 'threshold' state of awareness and behaviour that is unhindered by normative restrictions. For Pagans, there are three sub-stages involved here: invocation, the "raising of power", and "workings" (1995: 194). It commences with 'callings' of magical 'forces' such as the four quarterly elements (1995: 195). The next sub-stage may be achieved through such methods as "dancing, drumming, scourging, walking or singing" (1995: 196-7). This may also be combined with the culminating sub-stage, in which the resultant magical 'energy' is 'directed' in order to achieve a specific goal. This is attempted through the application of such methods as "meditation or visualisation", "path-working" or ritual drama (1995: 197).

The third and final stage also characteristically features a number of sub-stages. The first is "grounding", which normally involves the consumption of consecrated "food and drink", as in the Wiccan Great Rite (1995: 199). It culminates with the 'shutting down' of the ritual. This usually entails "three simple tasks", these being the "banishing" of magical 'entities',

⁵ According to the sociologist and specialist in ritual theory Catherine Bell, Van Gennep had formulated this model to denote the processes that he thought lie beneath 'rites of passage', which he identified primarily with initiations, and therefore (he so believed) ritual in general. Thus, in Van Gennep's model of "the ritual process", an individual "leaves behind one social group and its concomitant social identity and passes through a stage of no identity or affiliation before admission into another social group that confers a new identity." (Bell 1997: 95)

the closing or 'deactivation' of the circle, and a formal declaration that the ritual is over (1995: 200).

In her study, Greenwood presents a slightly different yet complementary overview. For her, the process is "based on the creation of a sacred space" – most usually a circle – within the "mundane world" (Greenwood 2000b: 35). This enables the magician to "[feel] 'at one with' otherworldly forces", and in addition, serves as "an 'amplification chamber' for the powers of the cosmos, which are channelled by magicians' invocations and spells" (2000b: 36). Greenwood adds that ritual procedure also entails the utilisation of a "special language" intended to establish connections with the Otherworld (2000b: 35). Citing Malinowski, she writes that in this respect modern practices reflect those of 'traditional' cultures, according to which "spell-making had a mystical power associated with mythology, the influence of the ancestors, and a sympathetic influence of animals, plants and natural forces" (2000b: 36). Thus, within magical ritual contexts words are accorded a high symbolical resonance due to a presumption by the magician or magicians involved of specific esoteric or mythic correspondences.

Finally, the ritual must end with the closing of the circle, in order to reassert "normal everyday consciousness" (2000b: 36). Greenwood neatly encapsulates the general esoteric methodology and *raison d'être* of Pagan ritual accordingly: "[The] magician has to balance the powers and energies of the macrocosm [i.e. universe] within his or her body... and then directly channel them, through the active imagination, to a particular magical intent"⁶

⁶ These stages are illustrated in the following instructions (provided by DM for Leeds Kabal's regular Beginners' Magic Group) for assuming godforms (copy available). After completing the necessary preparations (including researching and familiarising herself with the godform in question), and 'opening' the ritual, the magician proceeds through the following stages: "1. Visualise the god or goddess standing directly behind you. / 2. Step back into them. / 3. As you feel your form combine with that of the god or goddess, go through their senses; see what they see, hear what they hear, smell what they smell etc... / 4. Feel your whole self combine with that of the god or goddess. Assume the personality, mannerisms, powers etc... of the god or goddess."

Additionally, "[when] you have finished, you simply step forward out of the god or goddess – visualising their form dispersing, before finally vanishing. Perform a banishing if

(namely, the specific aim the magician hopes to achieve as a result of the ritual) (2000b: 37).

In summary, for Pagans, ritual entails that the magician consciously ceils herself off from 'normality', so as to fully 'attune' herself with the magic forces and 'meanings' that underlie sensory reality. She achieves this, in theory, through the judicious arrangement, articulation and manipulation of symbolic representations of these forces, which process serves also to 'channel' them towards the fulfilment of a desired purpose. The ritual culminates in the 'dismissal' of the symbolic 'energies' and the re-instatement of normal consciousness⁷.

2. Differences in Pagan Ritual Approach

This is not to say that distinctions should be overlooked, however. Simes suggests that the significant differences that are apparent in this regard make Pagan ritual performance "difficult to categorise", and lists some of the ways that these may manifest (Simes 1995: 186). Firstly, and most obviously, perhaps, there are symbolical and procedural differences between the various traditions. For instance, Wiccans are more inclined to celebrate the cycles of the moon than other Pagans, and tend also to be particularly fond of "spell-craft" (1995: 202). Druids, by contrast, are more "intellectually" minded in their ritual approach, and favour "self-initiation" above the group or coven procedures that are normally associated with Witchcraft (1995: 203). SL's comments on evident differences between traditions along the broad

necessary." The reason for the conditional nature of the final instruction is that a banishing (i.e. 'dismissal' of magical 'entities') is only regarded as unnecessary if the operation is "part of another work of magick", in which case "you should be performing a banishing at the end of it anyway". Otherwise, it is seen as essential to banish "as soon as you can" after dismissing the godform. Affirming the importance of this stage, the instructions offer the following cautionary example: "e.g. If you have assumed the form of Mars to assist you in playing a game of rugby, you should banish after the match – otherwise you will remain aggressive, impulsive and violent."

⁷ See appendix two for the transcript of a typical Pagan ritual.

spectrum of Pagan culture (such as between Shamanism and 'High' ritual magic)⁸ are also relevant here.

Secondly, rituals can also differ in accordance with the various "sub-divisions" that may arise within a tradition (1995: 185). For instance, GM (a Hedgewitch) dismisses the more elaborate type of Witchcraft ritual (involving, for instance, "sword-waving, fantastic cloaks and that") favoured by some Witches as "theatrical claptrap", adding that "[s]ome people feel happy with that, and that's all right for them but personally, for me, it's not needed." (GM: 11) This is clearly a reference to Alexandrian Wicca, which is distinguished by a peculiarly elaborate ritual approach. For instance, Vivianne Crowley writes that "[l]oosely speaking, the Gardnerians are more Low Church and the Alexandrians more High Church"⁹ (Crowley 1996b: 36).

Thirdly, there is the question of participant numbers, and in particular, whether the ritual is performed by a solo individual or a group. A key point of contention here is initiation, which is regarded as "one's own responsibility" by some Pagans, and as the responsibility of the group or coven by others, most notably certain of the more established traditions (such as Gardnerian Wicca) (Simes 1995: 188). It could be added that individual ritual might also offer greater flexibility, in accordance with personal tastes and temperament. 'Gryffyn', for instance, admits that, depending on his mood, when invoking the Great God Pan he will choose either to use Aleister Crowley's "long and verbose" Hymn to Pan, the somewhat more contemporary (not to mention brief) lyrics from a song called Return to Pan by the 'eighties rock group The Waterboys, or a rather more playful poem of his own devising¹⁰ ('Gryffyn' 1999: 3).

⁸ See chapter two.

⁹ As Maxine Sanders – the wife of Alex Sanders – puts it, Alexandrian Wicca is more concerned with "elaborate ceremony, robes and headgear" than the Gardnerian, which typically utilises a more 'low-key' approach to ritual (Sanders 1996: 16). Discussing these "different streams" of Wicca, SL explains that, compared with Gardner, Sanders "was a bit more of a showman who was fond of ceremonial – he liked his regalia and his long sword, and stuff like that." (SL Public Lecture: 1)

¹⁰ "Oi Pan you horny goat / Maker of music / Lover of Gods / (you smoothy you) / I call you to aid me in my rite..." ('Gryffyn' 1999: 3)

Simes also identifies three different categories of Pagan ritual. The first is “personal rituals”, by which she means rites of passage (such as birth or marriage¹¹ ceremonies) (Simes 1995: 186). Secondly, there are “cyclic or seasonal rituals”, such as the eight ‘standard’ festivals and the Wiccan lunar esbats (1995: 187). Thirdly, there are “purposive rituals”, which have a more functional (as opposed to celebratory) focus, such as the elicitation of concrete results in the magician’s life, or magical “consecrations” (1995: 187).

In all, then, it appears that the commonly accepted ritual parameters of Paganism cover a broad spectrum of behaviour, expression and ‘intent’.

3. Social Cohesion and Individualism in Pagan Ritual

As noted previously on a number of occasions, one of the major features of Paganism is its ‘anarchistic’ diversity, which appears to stem from a highly individualistic climate of opinion and expression within that milieu.

Accordingly, it is important to consider how this quality relates to Pagan ritual culture.

Interestingly, a number of key sociological theories on ritual would regard the idea of an individualistic – as opposed to group – ritual dimension as something of an oxymoron. For example, in what is perhaps the classic theory on the subject, the pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim portrayed ritual as the backbone of religion, and so by extension, as the societal ‘mortar’ through which the members of a community traditionally bonded with each other. The sociologist Malcolm Hamilton paraphrases: “It is in participating in religious rites and ceremonies that the moral power [of society] is most clearly felt and where moral and social sentiments are strengthened and renewed” (Hamilton 1995: 101). In other words, as Durkheim himself put it, in “[the] midst of an assembly of society animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces” (1995: 101).

¹¹ These are commonly referred to as ‘handfastings’ in Pagan circles (Harvey 1997: 201).

Whereas Durkheim portrayed ritual as the means by which normative structures are ordained and consolidated, another – more contemporary – key theorist, Victor Turner, suggested that it might instead be regarded as a sort of ‘safety valve’ through which “the original order is simultaneously legitimated and modified” (*cited in* Bell 1997: 40). That is to say, ritual serves to “affirm the social order while facilitating disordered inversions of that order”, which Turner identified with a ‘threshold’ or ‘liminal’ and ‘liberated’ stage of social awareness he called *communitas* (1997: 40). Most closely associated by Turner with initiation ceremonies, the *communitas* experience is one of “ambiguity and paradox”, during which the individual is “effectively outside the structure or organization of society” (1997: 40). However, it also “fosters an intense experience of community” with peers; and, after the initial period of disorientation, the initiate emerges from his symbolic chrysalis into “a new position on the social hierarchy” (1997: 40).

Despite their differences, both accounts depict ritual as intrinsically oriented towards and framed within group contexts. To an extent, these interpretations appear congruous with certain aspects of Pagan ritual. For instance, ‘classic’ Wicca’s definitive group methodology, which effectively precludes solo ritual under its auspices, seems to indicate a Durkheimian equation between spiritual sensibilities and collective ritual expression. This is illustrated *par excellence* by the concept of the Cone of Power¹², which involves the focussing of individual ‘energies’ by coven members to achieve, it is held, a level of ‘power’ far greater than the ‘sum of its parts’¹³. And given both the partially ‘subversive’ nature of the *communitas* concept and the vaguely counter-cultural tone of Paganism, it is perhaps not surprising that Turner’s ideas have been referenced in relation to the latter phenomenon on

¹² See chapter two.

¹³ The cone of power procedure is notably evocative of Durkheim’s concept of ‘effervescence’. This denotes the sense of “excitement” and “exaltation” associated with communal religious involvement, and is described by Durkheim as an ecstatic affirmation of the “sense of dependence upon an external and spiritual and moral power which is in fact society” (*cited in* Hamilton 1995: 101). The relevance of Durkheim’s term to the Wiccan example is thus that the cone of power represents an experience of sacred energy that is by definition thought to be unavailable to the individual acting alone.

a number of occasions. Thus, for instance, Simes approvingly cites York's suggestion that Pagan festivals may elicit a sense of "spontaneous communitas" for members of a modern society in which notions of community have been largely supplanted (Simes 1995: 262).

On the other hand, theories of ritual which prioritise collective or group sensibilities are problematic when applied to Pagan contexts in general, as they preclude adequate consideration of the strong individual focus that appears in some respects to be so representative of the phenomenon. Thus, Greenwood, for example, points out that by regarding the world of "the social" as the "baseline" of ritual, and the experiences engendered by such activities as invariably conforming to "pre-existing meanings that are imposed by culture", they say little about what she regards as the principal purpose of such rituals, which is to "offer the individual practitioner a direct route to self-transformation through an experience with the otherworld" (Greenwood 2000b: 35).

Accordingly, in order to fully understand Pagan ritual it is necessary to acknowledge a dimension that is not entirely dependent on broader social or collective 'meanings' or points of reference, even when featuring in group contexts. Magliocco, for example, writes that Pagan ritual is

'... not strongly fixed, but fluid; while it is built around a basic framework... it is subject to constant innovation and variation according to the personalities of the individuals involved, their moods and desires, the time of year, and multiple other factors.' (Magliocco 1996: 95)

It is conceivable, though, that this sensibility has become more overt in accordance with the general 'loosening' of Pagan culture away from its former comparatively doctrinaire approach. There has also, for example, been the emergence of the category of 'ad hoc' ritual magic, which Luhrmann defines as involving a "self-created" approach to group ritual (Luhrmann 1989: 32).

Whichever way, the following quotes provide succinct and evocative examples of the ways in which Pagans may personalise group ritual formats. For example, regarding a Beltain ritual that he had invited the author to

attend, GM made the comment: “You’ve got to go with the flow – you can’t have [ritual] written in stone... The little thing that we did was just a Mayday dedication. I did mine more or less silently, somebody else approached it differently.” (GM: 11) Similarly, when describing a Samhain ritual she and her coven have devised, JW said:

‘Samhain traditionally is a time for remembering the dead, so we now have a ceremony where everybody writes a list of members of their family who’ve passed on. We then go around the circle and put the names into the cauldron, so we’re inviting these people who have passed on and who belong to us to spiritually join in the ceremony.’ (JW: 7)

Another consequence of this individualistic ‘logic’ is that Pagans on the whole appear to be becoming far more open-minded on the subject of solo magical ritual. Regarding the interviewees, for example, it is interesting to note that of the two Wiccans represented, only one of these – JW, a Priestess – actually belongs to a coven. The other, WS, performs her rituals alone. This is not to say that she has no wish to join a Wiccan group¹⁴; however, when asked if she thought group magic was any different to solo magic, her reply was that she believes being in a group “would lessen” its efficacy (WS: 15). She explains: “I know if there’s lots of you then [the ritual] will get bigger and stronger, but at the same time, all of you are giving less; if you’re on your own, you’re going to give your whole, aren’t you?” (WS: 15) These sentiments prompt her to assert: “I think I [was] born to be on my own as a Witch. I need to be on my own. I need to belong somewhere, but at the same time I don’t want to be committed to [other] people” (WS: 15).

For SL, who has her own (non-Wiccan) coven, there are many possible permutations regarding the number of participants who may take part in an effective magical ritual, although she also adds: “I think that of all

¹⁴ WS comments: “I would love, love, *love* to join a coven. That’s what I *am* gonna do, one day! I know I *will* do [that] when I’ve got the time and energy.” (WS: 14) She adds, “I’m sure that I’ll come across [a coven] eventually... I’m sure that I’ll *head* one, eventually.” (WS: 15)

the different groups that I've had, the most powerful [arrangements have] just been me and a priest working side-by-side" (SL: 19). SW, on the other hand, when asked if he had ever belonged to a magical group, replied: "Only once, and the dynamics were horrible" (SW: 6). As he puts it: "It just felt incredibly uncomfortable, although I'm not uncomfortable in groups usually. It was like, 'Urgh! This is not me!'" (SW: 6)

On the subject of solo ritual, the following comments illustrate how Pagans might go about constructing their own rituals within the customary parameters. DM, for instance, reports: "Well, my personal practices always change – I don't really keep anything static, I have a tendency to always be trying new stuff out and to keep stuff that works" (DM: 15), and admits also to having a "tendency to stick to Celtic ones for seasonal rituals and [to] use whatever's most appropriate for whatever else [he is] doing"¹⁵ (DM: 15). And WS comments: "[Nowadays] I like to write my own [rituals]. I definitely like to write my own because they're more special. They're not going to work if they're someone else's, are they?" (WS: 10)

Interestingly, Simes quotes Geoff Wright (from *The Association of Hedgewitches*) as stating that there are now "more solitaires [i.e. solo Pagans] than people in groups" (Simes 1995: 207) (although, admittedly, neither appears to divulge the methodological basis for such a claim). More recently, Jorgensen and Russell have suggested that American Pagans nowadays "frequently alternate between solitary practice and group participation" (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 333). They write: "Some individuals primarily are solitary practitioners, except perhaps for their involvement in festivals or selected collective rituals. A substantial majority of these people participate in groups, supplemented by solitary acts of magic and worship for more or less extended periods over the course of their religious careers." (1999: 333)

It could be argued, then, that while many Pagans may certainly use ritual as a means of allying or 'bonding' themselves with an immediate circle

¹⁵ As to where he gets his ideas for rituals from, DM comments: "I have a tendency to get books [from] second hand book shops and then take them to another one about a month later. I've photocopied the interesting bits, so I've got a pile of photocopied rituals out of books [that's] about two and a half to three feet deep" (DM: 9).

of contacts (such as a coven or magical group), this aspect is also counterpoised by the potently individualistic and idiosyncratic 'dynamic' that seems to be at work within the phenomenon.

4. The Reification of Ritual

However useful anthropological and sociological theory may prove to be for the purposes of delineating and typifying Pagan ritual processes, it is important also to acknowledge that studies of the phenomenon which refer to such theories also presume a 'deeper' level of significance, which is that there is a substantive connection between the rituals of Pagans and those of other societies and cultures. For example, Van Gennep intended his 'rites of passage' typology to portray what he regarded as "the universal practice of ceremonializing life's major events" (*cited in* Bell 1997: 264). Accordingly, Simes' usage of this model suggests that she regards it as describing a generic experience of ritual that is common to all of humanity, Pagans included. This highly generalised understanding thus reaffirms a longstanding and powerfully influential view of ritual as, in Bell's words, a "universal medium of symbolic expression" (1997: 262), or more bluntly, a "transparent phenomenon out there in the world waiting to be analysed and explained" (1997: 266).

However, Bell also suggests that it is advisable to show caution when seeking to extrapolate or deduce a broader ethnographic significance for modern ritual forms from such explanations. This is because the idea that ritual "practices" can be regarded as "cultural variations on an underlying, universal phenomenon" is actually a product of western discourse, and a fairly recent one at that (1997: 266). That is, by presenting ritual as a "quintessential human and social dynamic", accounts such as those by Van Gennep and Turner (which in turn built upon the work of Victorian ethnographic pioneers like Frazer and Tylor) served to portray it as a "reified construct" that functioned as a "more important focus of attention than the doctrines that appear so tied to particular cultures and histories", despite

often having little relevance to the actual worldviews of non-western societies (1997: 263).

Moreover, the construct is neither analytically nor empirically neutral, but rather comes attached to a traditionally highly-loaded cultural agenda. This is because initially, it was “primarily used to define and mediate plurality and relationships between ‘us and them,’ with the practices of ‘them’ ranging from primitive magic to papist idolatry to the affirmation of traditional wisdom in the face of brutal modernity” (1997: 262). In other words, it has conventionally been employed as an identifier of ‘otherness’ – denoting either “disgust or romantic attraction” (1997: 260) – in direct, even defining, contrast to what is commonly assumed to be the symbolical ‘blank slate’ of modern western culture.

The American anthropologist Ronald Grimes (who, like Bell, is a specialist in ritual) says much the same thing, arguing that grandly universalising explanations of ritual – such as, for example, Mircea Eliade’s claim that it has a “metacultural and transhistorical” significance (Grimes 2000: 100) – are untenable because in reality such activities “are ways of embodying meaning, and bodies are doggedly local, rooted in the entangled mess of events we like to call history or society” (2000: 9). He marks Van Gennep out for especial criticism in this regard. For Grimes, Van Gennep’s model is the consummate example of the construction of “academic myth” (2000: 93) around the subject of ritual. Specifically, he argues, it was Van Gennep who (along with Eliade) was mainly responsible for the now ‘common assumption’ that “initiation rites display a pattern shared throughout great expanses of time and across the vast array of the world’s traditions” (2000: 107), even though he actually “imposed” such interpretations upon the data in accordance with his own preconceptions¹⁶ (2000: 107).

Ironically, as Bell points out, “the concept of ritual” that resulted from such interpretations has actually “influenced how many people in these

¹⁶ In a particularly barbed reference to Van Gennep, Grimes writes: “We should be suspicious of threefold sequences, since they too obviously reflect the Western intellectual habit of preferring threes – the doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Ghost), the idea of dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), and the generic narrative (beginning, middle, end).” (Grimes 2000: 107)

[European and American] cultures go about ritualizing today” (Bell 1997: 262-3). In other words:

‘For modern ritualists devising ecological liturgies, crafting new age harmonies, or drumming up a fire in the belly, the taken-for-granted authority to do these things and the accompanying conviction about their efficacy lie in the abstraction “ritual” that scholars have done so much to construct.’
(1997: 264)

The references to ‘ecological liturgies’ and ‘drumming’ here show that Bell is clearly including Pagans in her category of ‘modern ritualists’. It could be argued, then, that Paganism conforms to certain ethnographic ideas on ritual, not because of some basic or archetypal ritualistic ‘resonance’, but rather because it is already so influenced by western discourse on the subject.

On the other hand, it is important also to remember that Paganism is rooted in a demonstrable western esoteric ritual tradition that is both longstanding and eclectic, which would suggest that Pagan ritual culture should not be regarded as being entirely the product of modern academic ‘myth-making’, although the tendency of exponents to frame or reinterpret that tradition in terms relating to the ‘other’ (such as ‘nature’, ‘witchcraft’ or ‘tribalism’) should also be acknowledged. Either way, Grimes has persuasively suggested that, with a modicum of sensitivity, modern individuals (Pagans included) need not simply be reaffirming western preconceptions in their approach to ritual, even while treating the process as a ‘reified construct’. He proposes a more generalised definition of ritual as simply “*sequences of ordinary action rendered special by virtue of their condensation, elevation, or stylisation*”¹⁷ (Grimes 2000: 70-1), which he believes may serve as a culturally neutral guideline for western scholars and ritualists alike.

And when stripped of references or allusions to cultural ‘otherness’, Pagan rituals could be thought no less evocative of Grimes’ basic ‘blueprint’

¹⁷ Grimes’ italics.

than those of any other culture or milieu. This is especially apparent if the word 'special' is interpreted here as denoting the intrinsically magical concepts of gnosis and the Otherworld, with ritual actions and processes being accorded an 'enhanced' level of meaning by practitioners by virtue of such activities' presumed symbolic connection with these notional states.

1. 'Herding Cats'

As may by now be apparent, Paganism's individualistic ethos can hardly be emphasised enough. It is certainly well represented in the interview testimony, and is peerlessly exemplified by the following comment from PM, to the effect that "*my* Paganism is different to *your* Paganism; *my* relationship with the gods is not *yours*, and vice versa" (PM: 11). PM elaborates further, saying, "every individual's path is just as valid, and I would never want to take that away from anyone – I don't have the *right* to do that" (PM: 11). Also indicative is SW's avowal that "individuality is a core component of Paganism" (SW: 16), and JH's (only slightly tongue-in-cheek) claim that "trying to organise Pagans is like trying to herd cats!" (JH: 16) Such testimonies might therefore shed light on why, as Simes puts it, "[r]apid and radical change" is the norm within Pagan group relations, and certainly seem to illustrate Jorgensen and Russell's appraisal that "freedom" is a principle that is "valued extremely highly" by adherents (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 327).

And as has already been noted, the defining trend of Paganism over the decades has arguably been a shift in favour of such attitudes, away from comparatively doctrinaire origins (as especially epitomised, it seems, by the 'original' Pagan tradition of Gardnerian Wicca) as adherents become increasingly inclined to establish for themselves what is and is not personally appropriate or effective, in spiritual terms¹. Not least (and as discussed at length in the preceding chapter), this seems evident in the way Pagans tend to personalise 'standard' ritual formats. (Thus, for instance, if a magician decides to construct a ritual around, say, an obscure Brazilian god such as

¹ Mike Howard, the editor of what is perhaps the longest running British Pagan periodical, *The Cauldron*, succinctly expresses this attitude when he writes that the "role of the Divine in loco parentis has passed and the opportunity is arising for us each to become our own priest or priestess communicating direct with the spirit" (Howard 1987: 1).

Exu, a “little-known Sumerian deity”², or one of Lovecraft’s ‘Great Old Ones’, there is little to prevent her from doing so.)

Also symptomatic of this broad trend is the rise of Luhrmann’s category of ‘non-initiated’ Paganism. Ronald Hutton – who defines non-initiated Pagans as “people who have an active Pagan identity, honour Pagan deities and make an effort to attend Pagan ceremonies, but are not [formally] inducted into a particular Pagan tradition” (Hutton 1999b: 401) – gives some indication as to the general extent of this development. According to his estimate, by the turn of the millennium the British Pagan population consisted of “17,000-20,000 initiated Pagans”³, and “between 90,000 and 120,000 non-initiated Pagans” (1999b: 401), which figures (if they are any reflection of actual numbers, of course⁴) starkly illustrate the current predominance of the latter category.

In a telling comment, giving some indication as to why this may have occurred, SL suggests that she now believes that formal initiation is ultimately unnecessary for magical development because “you can learn just as much [about magic] through meditation” or certain other means (SL Public Lecture: 13). The comparison with Wicca is (again) telling. Thus, elsewhere SL describes this as a fairly rigid “system”, commenting that she herself

² John and Caitlín Matthews include this particular reference in their practical guide to Hermetic magic, as an example of the myriad ‘god-forms’ that could be included “in one’s ritual” (Matthews and Matthews 1986: 162). Other examples cited by the authors include figures as diverse as Adam and Eve (1986: 164), the poet Dante (1986: 170), and the nine Muses of classical mythology (1986: 180).

³ This category covers “pagan witches”, Druids, “those in groups inspired by ancient Germany, Scandinavia, or Egypt”, and those involved in “explicitly pagan ceremonial magic, such as the Ordo Templi Orientis, or in trained and initiatory shamanist traditions” (Hutton 1999b: 401).

⁴ It is important once more to raise the earlier caveat that these are only educated guesses (see introductory chapter), although it is conceivable that Hutton’s estimate may give a broad indication as to the current ratio of initiated to non-initiated British Pagans.

tends “to veer towards more of an eclectic way of worship”⁵ (SL: 13). GM likewise regards Wicca’s comparatively rigid ethos as stifling. As he puts it:

‘In Gardnerian Witchcraft there are three stages or initiations, and you can only learn as much as that initiation calls for, but when you’re asking questions that are *outside* those initiations you start thinking “Ey, up! You can’t answer my questions! I want the answers!”’ (GM: 5)

For her part, CC bemoans what she regards as the “very exclusive” nature of Wicca, whose adherents she accuses of tending to adopt “a sort of playground, ‘We’ve got a secret and you don’t know what it is’ type of attitude.”⁶ (CC: 12)

This is not to say that a great number of people might not still find satisfaction through Wicca, however. Nor does it mean that Wiccans themselves (or, indeed, those belonging to any other initiatory Pagan system) are necessarily lacking in individualism – indeed (as was also discussed earlier⁷), the tradition itself does not appear immune to this individualistic (even ‘anarchistic’) logic. This is saliently illustrated by JW, who describes her High Priestess role as that of “co-ordinator” rather than authority figure⁸ (JW: 8). JW even admits to taking “a back seat” in her

⁵ Commenting further on her reasons for no longer following Wicca, she adds: “I don’t like following scripts and I never have done. I think it’s important to be able to say what you feel you ought to say or to conduct a ritual how you feel it ought to be conducted.” (SL: 13)

⁶ It is not just Wicca that comes in for criticism in this regard. PM, for example, is similarly dismissive about another system of initiatory Paganism, Thelema, or more accurately, its proclaimed representative body, the OTO. He dismisses the organisation’s “structure” as “archaic”, and believes that this has been allowed to happen because “[p]eople are trying to emulate what [Aleister] Crowley did who have failed to realise that times have changed” (PM: 6).

⁷ See chapter one.

⁸ JW, it should be remembered, made the earlier assertion about the ‘breakdown of hierarchy within covens’ (see chapter two).

coven's affairs on many occasions, and explains that "we [i.e. her coven] *do* have a degree system, but... don't look on it as a hierarchy"⁹ (JW: 8).

Moreover, even today, Wicca's importance as the main catalytic and formative influence on Paganism generally, not to mention many individual Pagan 'paths'¹⁰, should not be underestimated. And in that respect, it is possible to regard the following comments by SW as perhaps emblematic of this pervasively individualistic trend. He is discussing a magical 'power object' of his – a "pentagram with feathers" (SW: 11), and explains that this is

'... a sort of statement of belief, meaning that I started out as a Wiccan and became a Shaman. I put the feathers on when I finally decided that I'd earned them. I put out a request [to the spirit powers] that if I was worthy of being a Shaman then some sign would come my way, and it did.'¹¹

(SW: 11)

He also relates the following, very telling comment to describe his feelings at that point: "Wicca was very much in the news at the time so it seemed like it was an obvious direction to go in, but it wasn't the right one for me. I decided to *listen* to myself, as it were, to decide where I was going."

(SW: 4)

In summary, then, it seems that overall, Pagan culture has far outgrown its original, defining Gardnerian 'blueprint' in accordance with what is arguably an inherently individualistic 'dynamic' (although this by no means appears to indicate that Wicca itself has been 'left behind' as a consequence). And as such, this trend is consummately encapsulated,

⁹ She describes her duties accordingly: "I think the High Priestess' job these days is mainly just organising everything – and doing the washing-up after! [Laughs] / tend to get everything ready for the ritual – the basics: printing everything out and making sure everyone's got a copy of what's going on." (JW: 8)

¹⁰ A majority of the of the interviewees (GM, SW, JW, WS, SJ, PM and SL), for example, report having gone on to other things after some sort of grounding in Wicca, but only two (JW and WS) claim to have consistently identified themselves as such since becoming Pagans.

¹¹ This is the same feather that SW came across during his 'vision quest' (see chapter five).

perhaps, in the following comment by PM, defining what he calls “free-thought” – namely, “don’t rely on doctrine, question the rules and see how they apply to you” (PM: 3).

2. Epistemological Individualism

In all, the phenomenon could therefore be regarded as a consummate example of what the sociologist Roy Wallis called ‘epistemological individualism’, which he identified as the predominant ideological and cultural trend currently operating within western cultures. To him, the term meant “a belief that the individual is the ultimate locus for the determination of truth” (*quoted in Lewis 1992: 7*); Paul Heelas has more recently proffered an equally useful definition – namely, that it denotes how “voices of authority emanating from experts, charismatic leaders and established traditions [are] mediated by way of inner experience” (Heelas 1996b: 21). It thus represents an increasingly prevalent disposition which can be thought to run counter to ‘established’ authorities and dogmas, and in particular, to those attached to religion¹².

What is equally important, however, is that, as previously noted¹³, Pagans are also strongly drawn to notions of cultural continuity and ‘rootedness’, and therefore tend to appreciate concepts of individuality and identity in terms of interpretative frameworks pertaining to locatively- or

¹² It appears that for some Pagans, even magical ‘entities’ may be subjected to such criteria. For example, after outlining a visualisation technique for enabling individuals to contact their personal inner “guide” to the Otherworld, John and Caitlin Matthews offer the following caution to those who “have a tendency to follow wonders or be dependent upon stronger personalities in... everyday life” (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 127). They write: “Do not act on everything your guardian tells you but reflect whether this advice is right for you at this time. Test the guardian’s advice against your highest principles, submitting it, if necessary, to the source of your spiritual focus. Don’t totally surrender yourself to the guardian, but try to be responsible for your own actions and thoughts” (1985: 127-8). They conclude: “Don’t worship your guardian like a god; he or she can be seen as an older brother or sister, a companion with a little more experience than yourself.” (1985: 128)

¹³ See chapter four.

culturally-specific points of reference such as myth. As such, Paganism's form of epistemological individualism should not be interpreted as encouraging a methodological and symbolical *carte blanche* with regard to the formation of individual 'paths'. This dynamic is succinctly illustrated by JH, who asserts that although Wicca has "progressed to what is very much a personalised form" of Witchcraft, the pre-eminent manifestation of this has been the more culturally 'focused' and purportedly 'native' system of Celtic Wicca¹⁴ (JH: 18). JH herself regards that concept as "a complete piece of generic nonsense"; nevertheless, for her, it epitomises how Witches are "taking a framework which was developed from many sources and are personalising it"¹⁵ (JH: 18). In effect, then, "we are all going towards an increasingly *individual* type of Paganism where we're going back to our own roots whether they be Australian aboriginal, of the North American variety, or of mixed variety"¹⁶ (JH: 18). Thus, the idea that "what's right for you may not be right for me" is inextricably intertwined with "the resurgence of people's traditional ethnic cultures" in a spirit of "live-and-let-live" (JH: 20). PM makes a similar point: "If you look at it on a global scale then Paganism helps us remember our roots, where we're from. [...] On a global level it's more of a macrocosmic than a microcosmic [thing] ... but ultimately it's individuals that matter the most." (PM: 11)

¹⁴ See chapter two.

¹⁵ JH explains that "in place of what Gerald Gardner said they're using traditional bits-and-pieces, their own frameworks, and bits from songs and poems." (JH: 18)

¹⁶ JH is referring here to the hybrid ethnic and cultural backgrounds of many western Pagans. With regard to her own practice, for instance, although she regards Celtic tradition as "a major part" of her magic, JH also admits that "there's also other strands", such as the runes (JH: 11). To illustrate her point further, she goes on to describe something of the history relating to an area of Northern Scotland to which she feels strongly 'attuned'. Thus, "[you] have a lot of... cross-references in that area thanks to the fusion between the Pictish population – who were presumably Brythonic Celts – with an admixture of the earlier inhabitants, the Gaelic Scots and the Vikings, [so you] have the profusion of Gaelic, Brythonic and Viking place-names." (JH: 11) Accordingly, she does not believe that "you can look at any culture in isolation in that area" (JH: 11).

It is important also to acknowledge (as indicated earlier¹⁷) that the notionally 'localised' focus of Pagan worldviews is often thought to place certain restrictions on magical ritual activities, although these parameters appear also to vary according to individual interpretation. DM, for example, is quite strict on this matter, averring, by way of illustration, that magicians should not even mix pantheons within the Celtic stream – or “not in a ritual, anyway”¹⁸ (DM: 19). Similarly, Caitlín and John Matthews caution that although the magician may “work with whichever [godform] excites” her, she should not “mix systems” when constructing a “ritual working” (Matthews and Matthews 1986: 164). Thus, for example: “Celtic and Enochian systems won't necessarily mix, neither will Gnostic and Native systems. Isis and Demeter should not appear in the same ritual – one is an aspect of the other, but from a different mythos.” (1986: 164) Vivianne Crowley also asserts that “invoking two or more deities from the different pantheons may not be a very good idea”, writing that “[a] friend who invoked Isis and Odin in the same ritual decided, as more and more things started to go wrong, that there was a problem: ‘They just didn't get on!’” (Crowley 1995: 190)

It might seem odd to assert such restrictions in the context of such an apparently syncretistic cultural stream as modern western magic¹⁹, particularly when its most prominent tradition – Wicca – is so indicative of this approach²⁰. However, it is also important to acknowledge that among Pagans, even such eclectic amalgams are popularly framed within terms that evoke a feeling of cultural continuity and 'rootedness'. And, arguably, modern Wicca is no less indicative of this tendency, even though (as Rees avers) few

¹⁷ See chapter three.

¹⁸ DM avers that any ritual he was participating in “would only include British [gods] if [he] was using British gods or goddesses; it would only include Welsh ones if [he] was using Welsh gods or goddesses; it would only include Irish ones if [he] was using Irish gods and goddesses.” (DM: 19)

¹⁹ It is interesting to note that even the Matthews admit, for instance, that “Gentile Qabala has successfully combined both Jewish and Christian aspects” (Matthews and Matthews 1986: 164).

²⁰ One striking example is the Charge of the Goddess, which includes references to goddesses from a markedly disparate range of mythic traditions, including Astarte (Phoenician), Aphrodite (Greek), and Ceridwen (Welsh) (*cited in* Harvey 1997: 36).

now believe in the tradition's purported 'prehistoric' origins. That is, even despite the demise of the 'myth of continuity', Wicca's followers still tend to regard it as profoundly 'native' in some way – an assumption which allows even a Gardnerian like Vivianne Crowley, say, to proclaim that to “recreate our rites, we draw on... the wealth of mythology, folklore, fairy tale and village custom, which lingers in our heritage” (1995: 191). In other words, within Pagan culture, eclecticism need not preclude the accrual of all manner of 'traditional' and antiquarian associations. Indeed, this could even be seen as 'par for the course'²¹.

And of course, another way that Pagans may add contextual definition to their sense of individuality is through group ritual; furthermore (as JW's testimony concerning her 'priestly' status conceivably demonstrates), it could also be argued that individual sensibilities appear to be becoming even more prominent as the phenomenon's individualistic (or 'anarchistic') 'logic' unfurls. As was also mentioned previously²², another representative trend in this respect is the emergence of Luhrmann's category of 'ad hoc' ritual magic (as represented *par excellence*, perhaps, by the “radically individualistic and anti-hierarchical” UK-based organisation, the Oxford Golden Dawn Occult Society²³ [Sutcliffe 1996: 126]).

²¹ This is arguably no less so for what is perhaps an even more transparently 'novel' magical tradition, namely Hermetic or ceremonial High Magic. For while it is manifestly evident today that this did not emanate intact from the ancient world, many still regard it as having its origins back in the 'mists of time'. For instance, in a recent article in the Pagan journal *Talking Stick*, Simon Hinton of the Typhonian OTO (the 'official' OTO organisation) describes Thelema as a “Typhonian/Stellar current” that “is of ancient antiquity and predates the solar, masculine cults [i.e. monotheisms such as Christianity] by thousands of years”, and so is “the current which the OTO and... every 'true' pagan wishes to revive” (Hinton 1998: 96). This may even apply to those utilising modern mythic fictions. For instance, in an official handout from the Esoteric Order of Dagon, which is a magical organisation dedicated to the “Starry Wisdom” supposedly hinted at in the tales of H P Lovecraft, it states: “[Only] a few have been able to piece together the scattered obscure knowledge necessary to discover deep within their unexplored unconscious the cryptic key which awakens the memories of far past and distant future lives in forgotten dimensions.” (Copy available)

²² See chapter six.

²³ Sutcliffe writes, “[e]ssentially, O.G.D.O.S. is a community of individuals who share similar interests in magick, but who usually do solitary magickal work”, but adds that “there is an

A number of studies have emphasised the seemingly complex and mutually reinforcing relationship between Paganism's individualistic and collective or contextualising tendencies. Simes, for instance, writes that, regarding group organisation, Paganism is "reflective of the modern era, encouraging social behaviour alongside individual creativity" (Simes 1996: 188). Similarly, Jorgensen and Russell propose that Pagan collectivities tend to be "very loosely organized but intimate groups which ordinarily stress tremendous individual freedom." (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 334-5) In summary, Paganism's organisational ethos appears largely to reflect its ideational and symbolical features, by combining a strong sense of individualism and independent-mindedness with a tendency to express this in terms pertaining to more encompassing, albeit often firmly 'localised', frames of reference.

3. The Emergence of Pagan Identities: a Case of 'Coming Home'?

According to Adler, it is typical for those 'finding' a Pagan orientation to experience this by way of a single "entry point", which in "most cases" will take the form of "word of mouth, a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article" (Adler 1986: 14). Adler writes that this serves to "confirm some original, private experience", and that the words "I've come home" are "a common phrase you hear" to describe such circumstances (1986: 14). Adler clearly sees the phrase as especially indicative of this process of Pagan 'self-discovery'; moreover, her opinion is reiterated by Harvey, who writes that Paganism "make[s] it possible to 'come home' to oneself and one's own way of celebrating"²⁴ (Harvey 1997: 193).

inner ritual group which] meets on a monthly basis" (Sutcliffe 1996: 126). Affirming OGDOS' basically 'ad hoc' approach, Sutcliffe quotes the organisation's own literature to assert that these sub-groups "work with a 'freestyle' approach to magick, and incorporate such interests as 'ceremonial magick, witchcraft, Tantra, Qabala, shamanism, runes', and Thelemic magick" (1996: 126).

²⁴ Harvey is very possibly referencing Adler here, although he does not credit her at this point.

Interestingly, the phrase also crops up in some of the interview testimonies. SW, for instance, comments that when he “eventually discovered Shamanism it was like coming home” (SW: 3). SL also uses it to describe her “first introduction to Psychic Fairs” (SL: 12). She explains: “[When] you’ve been in this environment [where] there’s no-one else like you [...], [then just] to walk into a room and [have] people come up to you and say, ‘Ooh, I can see purple around your head, dear!’ [...] I really felt very at home.” (SL: 12) In accordance with Adler’s (and Harvey’s) interpretation, the interviewees’ respective uses of the phrase gives the impression that they see themselves as having ‘discovered’ a spiritual system with which they feel profoundly compatible, as if such proclivities were somehow ‘innate’ (or as CC puts it, “inborn” [CC: 3]), or at least indicative of some deep-seated affinity.

It is thus important to try to understand why the term seems to feature so prominently in Pagan discourse. Firstly, ‘coming home’ logically implies that prior to this occurrence there was a certain sense of social and cultural ‘displacement’ or ‘dislocation’ on the part of the individuals concerned – a feeling of not quite ‘fitting in’ with family or peer groups, or with prevailing *mores* or expectations, in certain respects. The notional sense of ‘belonging’ that may thus arise with the discovery of other Pagans is emphasised by Adler, who writes during the above discussion that “the most common feeling of those who have named themselves Pagans is something like ‘I finally found a group that has the same religious perceptions I always had’.” (Adler 1986: 14)

SL’s account certainly seems to at first glance to affirm Adler’s point, her discovery of a group with which she appears to have felt a strong affinity serving (it could be inferred) to validate her feelings of individuality, while also offsetting what could be interpreted as a sense of socio-cultural isolation. Similarly, WS admits both to having always felt “different to other people” (WS: 4), and to having had an affinity with the idea of witchcraft from an early age (a not implausible claim considering the seemingly common

importance to Pagans of the 'rich imaginative worlds' of childhood)²⁵. Thus, when recounting an experience of seeing someone she describes as a "real Witch" on television for the first time, she comments:

'I was sat in front of the TV like this... [Adopts expression of avid concentration] And I was saying, "She's a Witch Mum, I thought you said Witches never existed!" [...] And I remember thinking from that point, "They're *real*, people *are* Witches!"' (WS: 5)

WS claims to have "felt a real connection with this woman", attributing this to "the way that Witches connect with each other" (WS: 5). This experience could thus be interpreted as having elicited within WS the sense that she was 'not alone' in her proclivities, therefore helping to validate her belief in her own 'innate' status as a Witch²⁶ (WS: 14).

Secondly, the term appears also to denote the 'bringing into focus' of individual tastes and proclivities along explicitly spiritual or magical lines as the result of a burgeoning perception that such orientations are personally 'valid', culminating in the conversion of 'private experience' into formal or overt affiliation with a specific 'path' or tradition. This aspect, it could be argued, is bound up with the process (described earlier²⁷) whereby an individual comes to believe that mythic or narrative 'fictions' may serve as 'entry points' into notional Otherworlds, and thus as 'tools' for magical self-development.

However, lyrical though it may be, the problem with using the term 'coming home' to denote the process whereby individuals 'become' Pagans –

²⁵ For example, WS relates that after seeing traditional images of witches on television, "wearing black and with a pointed hat", she would think, "Right, that's what I'm going to be!" (WS: 4) (See chapter ten for further discussion on this subject.)

²⁶ Although admitting to "never [having] come into contact" with other Pagans since becoming one herself (WS: 13), WS continues nevertheless to place great store in the idea of "companionship", "friendship", or "just [having] someone to talk to about what [you] believe in" (in short, a sense of "belonging"), and seems to regard this as an important and desirable criterion for Pagans like her. However, having said all this, WS poignantly added: "I don't belong anywhere at the moment" (WS: 14).

²⁷ See chapters four and five.

as opposed merely to describing certain 'feelings' they might experience while doing so – is that, in Adler's reading, at least, it is suggestive of the idea that this constitutes a single, generic moment or period of 'discovery' (*via* a catalytic, revelatory 'entry point'). This usage is problematic because the 'discovery' a Pagan 'path' is by no means necessarily instantaneous, not least because the two aspects of the process outlined above are not always coincidental.

For example, the following comments by DM suggest that the 'discovery' of a Pagan path may be a far more incremental or longwinded, process than Adler implies. DM claims to have "just drifted into more interest in [Paganism]" from an early age, a process that he reports had started with his previously mentioned childhood enthusiasm for Irish myths²⁸ (DM: 2). The next stage, according to his testimony, saw him joining (at the age of eleven) his first Pagan group, which was based in the Glastonbury area²⁹ (DM: 5). DM reports having continued his magical practice until the age of "about 14/15", but also adds that by then this was "getting a bit staid", involving little else but "doing... seasonal rituals" (DM: 6). His enthusiasm for Paganism was, he reveals, revived after moving to Leeds to go to university. During the "1991-92 academic year", he started working at the mail order Occult supplies shop, The Sorcerer's Apprentice, and it was at this point that DM "started looking then at Chaos Magick", a system he regarded as having "this... energy and vitality... that was lacking in the rest of the occult scene" (DM: 6). Thus, rather than 'coming home' to Paganism in one fell swoop, DM's account suggests that his initial introduction to the Pagan 'scene' was just the start of a lengthy search for a personally fulfilling 'path'.

SW's testimony makes a broadly similar point. Significantly, he began his magical career, not as a Shaman, but rather as a Wiccan, albeit (he claims) of a rather non-committal sort³⁰. Thus, in the light of his above quote,

²⁸ See chapter four.

²⁹ DM comments that although the group would do rituals to "invoke or communicate with gods", his status within it was "always [that of] the newcomer who was a member of the circle rather than one of the actual practising magicians" (DM: 7).

³⁰ SW comments: "The first book that I seriously read that could be described as Pagan was Raymond Buckland's Complete Guide to Witchcraft... and also Eight Sabbats for Witches by

SW's testimony could be regarded as indicating that even after having come to identify himself as a Pagan, he did not feel truly 'comfortable' as such until discovering what he clearly saw as a more personally appropriate and meaningful system, namely Shamanism.

For SL, a childhood fascination with fairies³¹ eventually led, she reports, to a burgeoning adolescent curiosity about magical and esoteric ideas. As she puts it,

'I was one of those kids that whenever I was at home [i.e. out of school] I was never just watching telly or down the back of the supermarket. I was usually reading, and my parents got quite used to me sitting down studying Crowley and Haitian Voudou, and stuff like that, at a very young age.'³²

(SL: 1-2)

According to SL, her early involvement in magic even included the performance of surreptitious, makeshift rituals. She explains:

'I had to wait 'til [my parents] were both in bed. I had to creep downstairs and do little rituals in the kitchen. We had this little foldaway table that had been given to my granny by one of her neighbours... and that was my little altar. And I couldn't have any incense because my mum would think, "What's that pong?"' (SL: 4)

SL recounts that her interest in magic continued to grow while she travelled the world as a dancer for several years from the age of 19, explaining that she found herself "doing more and more spiritual work [such as Tarot] readings [and] spells", and decided eventually that she was "meant

the Farrars [Janet and Stuart]. I was into the Wiccan trip for a while, as you can probably gather... This was just after I'd left university [although] I wasn't seriously involved in Paganism or Witchcraft by that point." (SW: 3)

³¹ See chapter four.

³² According to SL, her parents knew that she was "very heavily into" magic and the occult, but "didn't say anything" about the matter (SL: 4). Their only proviso, she claims, was that there not be "any candles in the house and no bits of regalia" (SL: 4).

to do magic” (SL: 11). She comments that on returning to the UK she joined a Gardnerian coven, after being approached by a Wiccan practitioner at the previously mentioned ‘Psychic Fair’ (SL: 12). Significantly, then, although the discovery of a Wiccan ‘peer’ group had clearly been important to SL, by that point (if her testimony is anything to go by) she had already long established for herself a foundation of Pagan belief and practice, and an attendant sense of personal identification with such matters.

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge the earlier *caveat* concerning the interpretation of data describing ‘profound’ personal experiences, such as those associated with religious ‘discoveries’³³. That is, it is important to consider the possibility that the interviewees could be ‘colouring’ their past experiences (albeit ‘subconsciously’, perhaps), including any spiritual ‘transformations’ they might have had, to accord with their current worldviews. But what is interesting about these testimonies – indeed, the notion of ‘coming home’ itself – is how different they are from more conventional descriptions of religious transformation, which often seem to portray a far more turbulent process, according to some studies³⁴. This suggests that even when taken on purely narrative and cognitive terms the interviewees’ testimonies appear to describe a peculiarly ‘Pagan’ type of ‘transformation’ experience, whereby such processes are framed in what could be deemed comparatively ‘positive’ or, at least, accommodating (i.e. as opposed to disruptive or traumatic) terms with regard to everyday circumstances, as exemplified in these instances by the conditions adherents associate with their ‘pre-Pagan’ lives.

As such, the testimony would certainly seem to accord, it could be argued, with the phenomenon’s defining, ‘parallelist’ worldview, which combines the spiritual and corporeal facets of existence in a comparatively

³³ See chapter one.

³⁴ It is perhaps significant that while they acknowledge Snow and Machalek’s findings, Batson *et al.* are convinced by reports which indicate that such a process is normally characterised by (amongst other things) “*existential crisis*” (Batson, Schoenrade and Ventis 1993: 115 [Batson *et al.*’s italics]), which condition they associate with debilitating and chaotic states of mind characterised by “intense feelings of fear, anxiety, and yearning” (1993: 107).

seamless manner³⁵. What it does not do, however, is support the idea that Pagans will necessarily see themselves as suddenly having ‘arrived’ at such an identity as the result of a single, epiphanic feeling of ‘recognition’. Nevertheless, all said, the term (especially in Harvey’s reading) could be thought notably evocative of the way that Pagan identities typically seem to emerge – as befits such an epistemologically individualistic spiritual category – *via* a process of ‘personalisation’.

In all, then, when attempting to discern a general pattern from the testimony in this respect, it might be more appropriate to see the adoption of Pagan identities and affiliations as an ongoing process, and one characterised, perhaps (if the interview accounts are any indication), by an impression of incremental ‘progress’ (or even, at some points, stasis) interspersed with any number of catalytic experiences of either a societal or ideational focus, if not both. In the following section, further interview testimony will be cited to show how the development of Pagan identities (or, at any rate, recollections of this process) might differ from individual to individual, in seeming accord with this general appraisal.

4. The Development of Individual Pagan ‘Paths’: Some More Interview Testimony

According to SJ, his main interest in the ‘unconventional’ had chiefly concerned “ghosts and things like that” (SJ: 3). Consequently, not long after breaking his ties with Catholicism he “started looking behind” such accounts in order to find out “what real ghosts and monsters and things like that were” (SJ: 3). On moving to York, SJ bought his “first Tarot deck”, and soon began “looking into the background to the Tarot” (SJ: 3). This led (at “around the age of twenty”) to him investigating “alternate religions and things like that”³⁶ (SJ: 3). However, despite having known “a little bit about Witchcraft” at this

³⁵ See chapter four.

³⁶ SJ explains, “it got me thinking about what I actually believed and what I didn’t believe in, and then I started looking around to see who believed in stuff that I believed in” (SJ: 3).

point, he claims not to have actually become actively involved in the field until “some time later” (SJ: 3).

According to his testimony, AM did not have any interest in spiritual ‘alternatives’ until his early teens³⁷, when he apparently “developed a fascination with... non-orthodox religions” such as Taoism and Shinto (AM: 3-4). AM’s introduction to mythical worldviews also seems significant in this respect, having involved, as already noted, an enthusiasm for role-playing games³⁸. Another key point in his magical development seems to have occurred at the age of sixteen, when he read Marion Zimmer Bradley’s popular Arthurian novel, *The Mists of Avalon*. AM describes the book as “very Pagan-centric”, and comments: “It was at that time that it dawned on me that you could have one of these myths as an actual religion; and it also dawned on me that there *were* Pagan religions” (AM: 6). However, this awareness does not appear to have led anywhere until after he arrived at university, not least because he “didn’t meet other Pagans or magicians” up to that point (AM. 9). It was only after doing so that AM began to study esoteric or occult subjects, including Chaos Magick and “rune-lore” (AM: 6).

According to PM’s account, it was a teenage enthusiasm for the Japanese martial art of *Ninjitsu* that led to him eventually getting “into Paganism”³⁹ (PM: 3). Another influence, it seems, was a love of “tacky horror films”: interestingly, PM claims that it was a viewing of the film *The Devil Rides Out*⁴⁰ “at the age of 11 or 12”, which prompted him to “[start] looking into occult things” (PM: 4-5). He adds, however, that “what really got [him] on

³⁷ Unlike SL or WS, for example, AM does not regard himself as having experienced any sense of “incipient Paganism” during his formative years (AM: 3).

³⁸ See chapters four and five.

³⁹ For PM, there are significant parallels between the two pursuits, such as elemental ascriptions. Thus, for example, he would use as part of his Ninjitsu practice “a technique called the *Fanshin-no kata*, which is based upon the five attitudes of Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Void, or Spirit.” (PM: 3)

⁴⁰ The film is based on a book by the sensationalist and deeply *passé* (for magicians, at least) works of Dennis Wheatley. PM, however, considers that the value of the occult content found in Wheatley’s novels – such as information pertaining to certain “numerological systems[s]” – has been greatly underestimated by contemporary magicians (PM: 6).

the path” was “a very good friend” who knew “a lot about Witchcraft”, which contact led to him eventually “joining the OTO” at the age of twenty (PM: 4).

A notable feature of much of the interviewee testimony relating to personal Pagan ‘development’ is that it describes the seemingly potent effect a single Pagan, occult or ‘cultic’⁴¹ text can have in this regard (although it is also important to acknowledge that this need not be the defining influence on a person’s ‘path’). According to SL, the text in question was “this big book on astrology” that she discovered at the age of five in her local library⁴² (SL: 7). WS had a very similar experience at the age of 15 on finding a book on Witchcraft (she does not specify which one) in Rotherham library’s somewhat under-stocked occult section. As she puts it, “I pulled [this] one book out – I was reading it, thinking: ‘This is me!’” (WS: 4) JW says much the same thing about the first Pagan book she came across, by Janet and Stuart Farrar (JW: 4): “[T]here was just something about it that clicked. I couldn’t put my finger on *why*, it wasn’t Road-to-Damascus sort of stuff – it was just a case of ‘This rings a bell, this does!’” (JW: 4)

GM reports that he first became interested in “spirituality and the occult” in the late ‘sixties (when he was thirteen) through an article on Anton le Vey (founder of an American organisation called The Church of Satan) in a magazine in his local library (GM: 2). GM himself is dismissive of Satanism, claiming to have “never touched it”, and that he doesn’t “even believe in the Devil” (GM: 3). Nevertheless, he stresses that it was “that one article” that really catalysed his later interest in Paganism, commenting: “It was just that outlet. It was my own mind, you know? It wasn’t outside influences. I didn’t come into contact with Witches and wizards and warlocks and mediums, it was just like a reawakening in myself – a spark.” (GM: 3)

CC’s ‘innate’ (to her) magical tendencies were sparked in a very similar fashion, according to her testimony. She comments:

⁴¹ This term specifically relates to Colin Campbell’s concept of the ‘cultic milieu’, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter ten.

⁴² SL comments: “I said to my mother, ‘I want it! I want it!’ [...] My mum said, ‘It’s too old for you. You won’t understand it!’ I took it home, and had to keep [renewing it], and I read it from start to finish [over] about 3 months.” (SL: 7)

'When I was doing my 'A' levels I remember getting a book out of Keighley library called The Art Of Scientific Hand-Reading and then proceeded to teach myself to read hands. A few years later I taught myself astrology from books. In the '70s someone gave me a Tarot pack and I taught myself how to read Tarot. I taught myself because there wasn't anybody around to teach me. (CC: 3)

Possible reasons for why the sort of themes found in cultic or magical literature can have such an apparently potent influence on these individuals will be discussed later on⁴³. Here, it will suffice to say that these testimonies seem to indicate that individuals of a Pagan 'disposition' are capable of being 'absorbed' or 'engrossed' by this type of subject matter to the extent that such texts can elicit at least the perception that profound or catalytic changes may have occurred within themselves (although, as suggested above, this need not be the 'be all and end all' of the process).

Certainly (as noted previously⁴⁴), a number of studies have made reference to what appears to be characteristically 'voracious' love of books among Pagans (Adler's assertion that they tend to be "avid readers" being a notable example of such [Adler 1986: 22]). This was especially notable in a number of cases, SL's being the most obvious, perhaps⁴⁵. Similarly, GM claims to have "always read" (adding that he still reads "all the time") (GM: 2). DM avers that his parents aided his magical career only to the extent of providing him with any books he required, the result being that, in his words, "prior to school, I was basically reading what I wanted" (DM: 5). According to DM, this precocious appetite for books carried over into school, where he claims to have had "free run of the... library" (DM: 5). All this would appear also to point to the noticeable 'love of learning' – or what Hutton describes as

⁴³ See chapters ten and eleven.

⁴⁴ See chapter one.

⁴⁵ SL claims that after her introduction to cultic literature she proceeded to work her way through the other occult books in the library, and was "reading Crowley" by the tender age of eleven (SL: 7).

a “commitment to constant self-education” (Hutton 1999b: 402) – that, along with an unusually high standard of educational achievement, so many studies describe as being characteristic of Pagans generally⁴⁶. That said, it is important also to bear in mind Adler’s comments suggesting the broad variety of channels through which those interested in Paganism may garner information relevant to the subject (which, as the interview accounts attest, may also include such sources as TV, films, martial arts and role-playing games⁴⁷).

⁴⁶ See chapter one.

⁴⁷ It should also be pointed out that, although none of the interviewees describe themselves as having been influenced in this way with regard to their discovery of Paganism, over the past few years it is the internet that has arguably come to serve as the most popular and effective means for acquiring information about the phenomenon. For instance, the PF reports that a recent MORI opinion poll “on behalf of teachers” (the magazine does not specify the specific brief of the survey, nor the exact demographic range or make-up of the groups under scrutiny) revealed that “half of the 2,600 youngsters [surveyed] between the age of 11 and 16 had used the internet to pursue interest in the occult, [and] half of those to a significant extent” (‘Big Bad World’, Pagan Dawn [136] 2000: 14).

To gauge something of the possible importance of the medium in this regard, the author recently conducted an informal survey, by simply inputting a number of relevant terms into the Google search engine (www.google.com). Of these, the word ‘Paganism’ itself elicited 263,000 ‘hits’ (from 10 pages chosen at random from these particular results, only 6 out of 100 ‘hits’ did not appear to bear any relation to modern Paganism, being more concerned with historical or literary understandings of the term). Other results were as follows: ‘Wicca’ (574,000), ‘Aleister Crowley’ (57,500), ‘Druidism’ (20,600), ‘Golden Dawn’ (87,300), ‘Ordo Templi Orientis’ (10,100), ‘Celtic Paganism’ (3,040), ‘Asatru’ (59,200), ‘Chaos Magick’ (8,970), and ‘Ritual Magic’ (13,200). While such figures might appear small when compared with the number of results that are to be had from similar surveys of some of the more conventional religious terms (‘Islam’, for example, elicited 4,670,000 ‘hits’; ‘Christianity’, 3,790,000), they nevertheless seem amply to reveal just how much information on Pagan subjects is now instantly available to those with internet access.

5. Summary: Pagan Individuality and Tradition

In the light of previous chapters, the preceding discussions in this chapter arguably suggest that Pagans are able to fulfil the – on the surface, at least – paradoxical task of affirming modern day sensibilities, as typified by an attitude of epistemological individualism, by ‘rooting’ these within a framework relating to locative, mythological, historical, cultural, environmental or organisational contexts, in further accordance with notions of self-development and the ‘controlled’ imagination. As such, Hutton’s concept of revived religion⁴⁸ could perhaps be regarded as a more or less accurate description of the phenomenon; the same might also be said of Jorgensen and Russell’s suggestion that the “religio-magical practices [of Pagans] commonly are modeled on premodern traditions which have been revised to deal with present circumstances” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 335).

Problems to do with the use of the word ‘religion’ in reference to Paganism aside⁴⁹, such readings persuasively suggest that (as Simes and Rees have also proposed) it is the idea of tradition or links with the past more than actual historical connections or continuities that now tend to accord definition and weight to such spiritualities in the eyes of adherents. As such, Paganism seems to illustrate *par excellence* – that is, in a markedly, and, it appears, increasingly, transparent, idiosyncratic and self-aware fashion – the cultural theorist Raymond Williams’ assertion that “[t]raditions are ‘[cultural] reproduction in action’, representing ‘not a necessary but a *desired* continuity’, actively selecting among received and recovered elements of the past” (cited in Fornäs 1995: 22⁵⁰).

Having looked in some detail at the core features of Pagan belief and praxis, together with the important individualising trends to have affected it over the decades, it is time to consider the question of Pagan theodicy – that is, the elements of Paganism that identify it as a religious or spiritual system – in

⁴⁸ A ‘modern development that deliberately draws upon ancient images and ideas for contemporary needs’ (see chapter one).

⁴⁹ These reservations will be discussed in chapter eleven of this study.

⁵⁰ Italics taken from Fornäs’ text.

order to bring into sharper focus its similarities with and distinctions from other such phenomena.

1. Weber and the Concept of Theodicy

Before attempting to assess Paganism further, it is necessary to establish a basic notion of what the concept of religion actually means in sociological terms. It is helpful here to invoke the sociologist Malcolm Hamilton's suggestion that religion fundamentally relates to "the search for meaningful understandings of reality" (Hamilton 1998: 244). Hamilton's appraisal is telling because it gives a sense of why it is that religion has historically been so important, while also accommodating the "enormous diversity" of its manifestations (1998: 244).

Particularly useful for this discussion is the work of the pioneering German sociologist, Max Weber. Weber was dismissive of theories – espoused by the likes of Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim (the other principle forefathers of modern sociological theory) – presenting the "reification" of social "collectivities" or structures "as organisms or as cultural totalities" (*cited in Morris 1987: 60*). Instead, he regarded the individual as the "fundamental unit of analysis" for sociologists (1987: 59), and focused more upon the question of subjective meaning. For Campbell, this is the key to comprehending Weber's sociological approach, which, he writes, "[attempts] to explain the conduct of individuals via an understanding of the meaning which their actions have for them" (Campbell 1996: 30). Such an understanding allows sociologists to take into account an integral 'interior' dimension of experience that the more 'situationally'-focused perspectives summarily dismiss. That is, Weber's theories recognise the importance of the "actor's view of the world", that which lies "under the skull" of the individual being regarded as no less important than the phenomenal world 'outside'¹ (1996: 43).

¹ Referencing Weber, Campbell explains that in order to "confront the problem of how people manage to act" it is necessary "to recognise the relevance of the fact that people feel, desire, dream and imagine, let alone struggle" (Campbell 1996: 153). Given Campbell's (not to mention Weber's) concerns, it is interesting to note that scientists endeavouring to investigate the nature of consciousness have recently started to take the subjective experiences of

Weber extended this “methodological individualism” (*cited in* Morris 1987: 59) to his extensive study of religion, which subject concerned him greatly due to what he saw as its close association with the perennial quest for ‘meaning’². Consequently, according to Weber it is religion that may be regarded as “the main source from which people have through the ages sought to construct a sense of meaning in their existence” (*cited in* Hamilton 1995: 157).

Moreover, Weber was no mere ‘subjective idealist’; that is, he also appreciated the relevance of ‘external’ conditions to ‘interior’ states (*cited in* Morris 1987: 88). However, rather than depicting these as ‘static’ structures, he instead portrayed them as dynamic “sociohistorical” processes (1987: 88) through which subjective belief and external conditions act upon each other complexly over time. That is, religion does not relate to society in a direct, “mechanistic” (1987: 61) or “deterministic” (1987: 88) sense, but instead illustrates the “multiple causation” that is involved in “historical” circumstance (1987: 88).

Although Weber himself neglected to provide a theoretical definition of religion *per se*³, he nevertheless regarded it as (historically, at least) intrinsic to the social realm. For Weber, “the belief in the supernatural is universal” (*cited in* Campbell 2001: 69), its importance being that it “can make the

individuals more seriously. Thus, for instance, the author and academic David Lodge writes in a recent article that Gerald Edelman, a “Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist”, has proposed that the only way accurately to study the way people think is “to collect [their] first person accounts, and to correlate them to establish what they have in common, while also bearing in mind that these reports are inevitably ‘partial, imprecise and relative to... personal context.’” (Lodge 2002: 4)

² As Hamilton puts it, Weber saw in religion “the main source from which people have through the ages sought to construct a sense of meaning in their existence” (Hamilton 1995: 157). In Weber’s own words, humanity has “metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it” (*quoted in* Campbell 2001: 74).

³ Weber considered that the “[d]efinition of such a complex phenomenon as religion can be attempted... only at the conclusion of a study”, but did not actually get around to formulating any such statement (*cited in* Morris 1987: 69).

apparently arbitrary world seem meaningful and ordered" (*cited in* Hamilton 1995: 138). At the heart of Weber's discussion of these complex and dynamic interactions lay the notion of theodicy. This refers to the way that humans find themselves having to 'square' the prospect of life as it is lived with the overarching vision of a 'meaningful' cosmos as presented by religion. As Campbell explains, theodicy may therefore be thought of as the "engine" of history, by expressing the "logic" and "tension" that arises from "the expectations that [such] world-views create in people and the experiences they actually undergo" (Campbell 2001: 73).

For Weber, the term was thus bound up with the notion of salvation, which hinges upon the idea that the world "is, could, and should somehow be... meaningful", regardless of outward appearances (*cited in* Hamilton 1995: 142). Weber's theories of religion are consequently "organised around the problem of the drive for personal salvation, the directions of salvational paths and, finally, the accommodation of this salvational quest to the practical exigencies of daily life."⁴ (*Cited in* Turner 1991: 9)

⁴ According to Weber, there are four ways of approaching this task. Firstly, there is world-rejecting asceticism ("*weltablehnende Askese*" [Weber 1965 (1922): 166]), which entails a "formal withdrawal from the 'world'" and all of what Weber colourfully referred to as its "creaturely interests" (1965 [1922]: 166). These include "social and psychological ties with the family", "the possession of worldly goods", and "political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities" (1965 [1922]: 166). Secondly, there is inner-worldly asceticism ("*inner-weltliche Askese*"), which in contrast sees the 'salvational quest' as requiring active involvement "within the world", with the understanding that this is the only way for an individual to demonstrate (to herself and to others) that she is "the elect instrument of god" (1965 [1922]: 166). Weber believed that it was in the Protestant sect of Calvinism that this orientation found its epitome, which is to say, "reached its most consistent development" (Weber 1965 [1922]: 173). This to Weber was due to what he saw as the "absolute inexplicability, [and] utter remoteness from every human criterion" of the "Calvinist god" (1965 [1922]: 173). This meant that all a Calvinist individual can do is hope and expect that "through his rational actions in this world he is personally executing the will of god, which is unsearchable in its ultimate significance" (1965 [1922]: 173).

Thirdly, there is what Weber calls "world-fleeing contemplation" (1965 [1922]: 170). This is founded on a "mystical" understanding of the cosmos, which is regarded as "incommunicable" by exponents yet may also be "recognized as knowledge" (albeit typically in the form of a "perception of overall meaning in the world" rather than "facts or doctrines"

However, while Weber employed the notion of theodicy as part of his exhaustive discussions of the 'established' world religions, such as Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism, he did not concern himself with "post-Calvinist solutions to the problem of meaning" (Campbell 2001: 76), which, as Campbell suggests, leaves contemporary sociologists with the task of outlining for themselves the theodical precepts that underlie more 'modern' spiritual manifestations – including, of course, 'alternative' currents such as Paganism.

In order to do this, however, it is first necessary to look at the three theodical subcategories – cognitive, emotional and moral. The first denotes the sort of ideational, cultural and symbolical frameworks that "are required to explain why things are as they are" (2001: 75). These characteristically feature "a cosmology", which may be understood as "an account of the nature, origin and possibly the destiny of the cosmos in general – as well as, more especially, of this particular world" (2001: 75). The second refers to the belief structures that enable individuals to "know exactly what they are meant to feel about the picture of life and the universe" denoted by the first theodical subcategory (2001: 75). The third refers to explanations which attempt to make existence explicable "from the very interested and partial perspective of human desires, hopes and expectations", and so is especially relevant to an individual's perception of her own life situation, while also pertaining to the more perplexing and problematic aspects of human existence⁵ (2001: 76).

(1965 [1922]: 170). Exemplified mainly by eastern religions like Buddhism, exponents of this orientation hold that salvation is achieved through the intensive and systematic contemplation of such 'knowledge', and requires the removal of any distractions from such endeavours, which is to say, "everything that in any way reminds one of the world" (1965 [1922]: 169). The fourth category is a form of mysticism that is able to accommodate, to a degree, the "secular social structure which happens to be at hand" – a stance whereby the individual is expected to be "relatively indifferent to the world but at least humble before it" (1965 [1922]: 175-6). Weber saw this orientation as being pre-eminently exemplified by the Taoist tradition of China, and in particular by its founder Lao Tzu's teaching that "one recognizes the man who has achieved union with the Tao by his humility and by his self-depreciation before other men." (1965 [1922]: 176)

⁵ Specifically, writes Campbell, "the interpretation provided must explain not only why human life is characterized by such universals as pain, suffering, failure and disappointment (not to

2. Problems with the Notion of Pagan Theodicy

Before attempting to delineate Paganism's theodical features, it is necessary to point out what seems to be an crucial, substantive distinction from other religions, namely that there seems to be only a peripheral, as opposed to central, concern with the notion of personal existence outside of the 'here and now' within Paganism. Certainly, such considerations – involving, for instance, eschatological or afterlife notions – hardly featured at all in the interview testimony, despite numerous references to spiritual or Otherworldly 'dimensions'. In part, this may be because, as JW puts it (and as befits such an apparently individualistic orientation), "[n]either Wicca nor Paganism have any dogmatic teaching as to what the afterlife *is*"⁶ (JW: 13). Then again, it may simply be that Paganism's experiential emphasis and ethos of positive engagement with the world ('natural' or otherwise) serves to render such speculations largely irrelevant. This is certainly the impression given by GM. After comparing the afterlife to the Arthurian "Isle of Avalon" ("meeting up with other people then going on to somewhere else"), he asserts: "I'm here at this moment and there's too many questions out there to be answered to be concerned with thinking about the next plane" (GM: 17).

mention the universal fact of death itself), but more importantly why these negative experiences should be differentially distributed in a manner that appears unfair if not unjust." (Campbell 2001: 76)

⁶ The closest the interviewees came to this was for some to express a belief in a conception that, according to Vivianne Crowley, "[m]any Pagans share", namely "reincarnation" (Crowley 1995 152). JW, for example, describes the concept accordingly: "[It's] like pouring the wine back into the bottle, and then into another glass. It's poured into different vessels and then poured back again. I think that it's the whole of everything that's constantly learning and expanding" (JW: 13).

Some were more specific, describing what they believe were actual past lives. CC's comments on her 'previous life' as an Atlantean are a case in point (see chapter five). Also significant is SL's attribution of her "affinity with Jewish culture and traditions" (including the "Cabbalistic system", which she claims to find "very empowering") to several past lives she believes herself to have spent as a Jewish person (SL: 8). She relates: "I was a Jewess in one of the [concentration] camps in the last war, and I was gassed... I've got a lot of very clear memories about that life. I also have other memories of being involved in mysticism through the Cabbala as a rabbi in the 1400s, in Spain or France I think... [In] another life I was a Hebrew slave in Egypt". (SL: 8)

A number of sociological studies have affirmed this distinction. Lewis, for example, writes: “Neo-Pagans do *not* view release from the physical world as the goal of the religious life. Rather than a burden, life in the body is viewed as good, and physical pleasure is a blessing that should be sought rather than avoided”⁷ (Lewis 1996: 3). Even more explicitly, Joanne Pearson writes that Wicca is “neither utopian nor a salvation religion” (Pearson 1998: 50). Hutton reaffirms these opinions in his assertion that the “instinctual position of most pagan witches... seems to be that if one makes the most of the present life, in all respects, then the next life is more or less certainly going to benefit from the process and so one may as well concentrate on the present” (Hutton 1999b: 393). With specific reference to conventional oriental and western religions respectively, he contrasts this with the “belief in a cycle of constant dreary reincarnation from which the wise and the blessed break free, or in a single process of judgement, salvation or damnation” (1999b: 393).

It thus appears that Paganism’s emphasis upon the cultivation of a state of equilibrium between spiritual and physical ‘poles’ (as denoted in the term ‘squaring the circle’⁸) largely precludes it from encouraging either ‘flight’ from the world, or grudging tolerance towards it in lieu of future ‘perfection’. Furthermore, this tendency not to portray individual fulfilment in salvational terms – that is, as involving a totalising shift from ‘worldly’ to spiritual ‘awareness’ – suggests that Pagans regard ‘self-development’ as an ongoing and cumulative process. Accordingly, AM, for example, sees magical development as constituting an “apprenticeship” (Private conversation 18/8/2001). Similarly, SL comments: “I started on my learning curve when I was about four, and I’m still learning... You never consider yourself done, even though you might be an initiated priest or priestess – you’re still gathering that knowledge.” (SL Public Lecture: 3) In this light, Paganism could thus be regarded as offering a ‘scenic route’ to spiritual enlightenment, as it were. As Vivianne Crowley puts it, “[while] the East teaches that the journey of lives is an undesirable binding to the material world, Western Paganism

⁷ Lewis’ italics.

⁸ See chapter five.

teaches that journeying hopefully is worthwhile and enjoyable in itself" (Crowley 1995: 233).

Another potential problem for those attempting to outline a Pagan theodicy relates to the question of magical understandings. For Weber, magical worldviews centre upon what he called the 'magic garden', a conception that bears a striking resemblance to modern Pagan Otherworld notions⁹ (not surprisingly, perhaps, given the importance to modern Pagans of 'traditional' sources regarding such matters). However, Weber also saw magical cultures as primarily the preserve of 'peasant' or otherwise "primitive societies", as these, he thought, are "bound closely to nature and dependent on elemental forces", meaning that they are predominantly concerned less with metaphysical speculation than with the "immediate control of such forces" (Hamilton 1995: 140). Weber thus regarded magic as "largely manipulative", which is to say, as an "[attempt] to coerce gods and spirits" in order to achieve worldly goals (1995: 139). His understanding therefore contrasts sharply with that of modern Paganism, with its equally great (if not greater) emphasis upon complex ethical, metaphysical and philosophical considerations, relating to such matters as gender, the environment, and in particular, 'self-development'¹⁰.

⁹ The Dutch cultural historian Pieter Spierenburg paraphrases Weber to state that the magic garden portrays an "enchanted" realm inhabited by "romantic beings and positive forces such as fairy queens, satyrs, guardian angels [etc.]", and "consists [not only] of humans and dead and living nature, but also of magical forces and supernatural beings, god(s) included." (Spierenburg 1991: 9)

¹⁰ Having said this, Paganism might nevertheless be thought (in this respect, at least) to resemble one of the 'classic' religious theodicies, namely that of the ancient religion of Taoism, which emerged in China "around 500-250 BC" during the "time of the Warring States" (Hamilton 1998: 113). Although originally a sophisticated "philosophical" system that was favoured by the Chinese intellectual class (1998: 117), it soon also developed a "macrobiotic and magical side" that "appealed to the mass of the ordinary population" (1998: 118).

The similarities should not be pushed too far, however. Not least, modern Paganism's highly individualistic ethos jars somewhat with the traditional conservatism of Chinese culture and religion, with its emphasis upon political "order" and "good government" (1998: 118). Such principles were cultivated in no small part by the efforts of the "Chinese intelligentsia", who served also as the country's "administrators and bureaucrats", and who came into their own in Lao Tzu's time, when China was becoming "increasingly bureaucratically organised"

Then again, Weber's view of 'traditional' magical societies has been much criticised in past decades for what some see as the empirically groundless nature of a number of his assumptions¹¹. Nevertheless, as indicated by its characteristically individualistic ethos, Pagans do appear in certain important respects to be very much a product of their times. Importantly, however, such a context does not appear in any way to discourage them from aspiring to magical 'states'. Indeed, as Hutton saliently points out, Paganism's characteristic encouragement of "personal accomplishment and development" suggests that it could even be regarded as entailing a "distinctively modern application" of magical beliefs and methodologies (Hutton 1999b: 398).

But when all is said, if Pagan 'paths' really do constitute a 'meaningful', spiritually informed worldview for their subscribers – which, for some of these individuals, at least, clearly seems to be the case – then it might nevertheless be interesting and, perhaps, useful to look at the phenomenon in the light of Weber's three theodical subcategories, not least for the purpose of shedding further light on the phenomenon's significance in relation to other religious and spiritual categories.

and "centralised" (1998: 113). Their pivotal influence thus meant that China's religious and ethical culture (which also included the philosophical system known as Confucianism) came to be inextricably associated with the promotion of "harmonious administration" (1998: 114).

Moreover, although, as with modern Paganism, Taoism emphasises the "enjoyment of life *per se*" (1998: 118), it also encourages the "withdrawal from worldly involvement" (1998: 117). In other words, its "aim [is] to remain in the world but devoid of worldly interests and desires", or in other words, "to live in the world while at the same time seeking release from all striving" (1998: 118), which attitude contrasts sharply with Paganism's characteristically positive and engaged orientation towards the manifest world.

¹¹ According to Morris, some sociologists see the problem as lying in Weber's (unsubstantiated) theory that societies become more complex over time, through a sequence of stages roughly centring around the categories of "magic, religion, and science" (Morris 1987: 85). He cites Levi-Strauss, for example, as taking issue with Weber's equation of the "systematisation of culture" (*via* "increasing rationality") with the rise of elaborate "cosmological schema", since "ethnographic evidence suggests that complex cosmologies are to be found in many preliterate communities" (1987: 85).

3. The Pagan Theodical Subcategories

A. Cognitive

The matter of cosmology is, as noted in previous chapters¹², central to Pagan orientations, which adhere to a 'two-way', 'parallelist' conception of the universe, according to which co-existent physical and spiritual 'realities' interact with and mutually reinforce each other *via* imaginably resonant, magical 'energies'. However, whereas Weber himself specified that a cosmology should explain the 'origin and possibly the destiny of the cosmos' in addition to its 'nature', Pagan cosmological understandings appear far more open-ended. Certainly, as noted above, Pagans seem to be too focused upon their 'current' lives to be overly concerned with what lies in store for them at some notional existential *terminus*.

Consequently, rather than being gauged in terms of distant eschatological reference points, Pagan spiritual 'progress' is more often held to occur from a comparatively positive existential foundation, this being a magically fortified and balanced 'self' that can function equally effectively within manifest and metaphysical realms (GW's notion of 'squaring the circle' being, again, highly relevant). The Celtic Reconstructionist R J Stewart, for example, writes that within western magical tradition, "there is no urge to flee the sorrows of the world, for these sorrows are known to be cured by a reformation of the body-psyche interaction", based upon the assumption that "ultimately spirit and body are one complete being" (Stewart 1985: 69). In a broadly similar vein, Pearson states that in contrast to certain other spiritual systems, Witches regard the "socialised" self (or "ego") that engages with the world on a day-to-day basis as a "filter" for, rather than impediment to, spiritual experience, and so as "essential to the health of the psyche" (Pearson 1998: 50).

That Celtic myth and folklore stands as the main repository of Otherworld conceptions for modern Pagans is also significant. For, aside from describing a peculiarly accessible spiritual realm, it seems also that (as Caitlín Matthews puts it in one of her many guides to Celtic Paganism) "there are no

¹² See chapter four especially.

myths of creation as such” in Celtic lore (Matthews 1989: 8). Rather, the “ongoing chain of existences – of land, tree, bird, animal, humanity, heroes, beings and gods – is a continuum which is recreated from within a shifting cosmology” (1989: 8). Thus, the Pagan type of engagement with cosmic forces dwells, not on ultimate ‘alpha’ and ‘omega’ points, but rather, upon sequences delineated in “mythology and festival” (1989: 8), according to which “there is one world”, and “one year, one cosmic shape, in which things happen” (1989: 8).

This ‘boundless’, Celtic type of cosmology thus evidently suits Paganism’s non-salvational ethos. It also appears, however, that even the more conventional type of cosmological narratives – that is, those which incorporate ‘creation myths’, together with eschatological or apocalyptic themes – can also be interpreted in an integrative, Pagan manner. Vivianne Crowley, for example, makes the following comment on the subject of Ragnarök, the ‘end of the world’ foretold in Nordic myth:

‘In the Pagan myths there is no irreversible finality. The cosmos has seasons and cycles even as does the planet itself. The phase of destruction [i.e. Ragnarök] is followed by a period of dormancy, the Fimbul-Winter, and then by a new manifestation.’ (Crowley 1995: 85)

Moreover, the ‘parallel’ nature of Pagan cosmologies means that this type of mythic eventuality need not be thought to impinge upon the manifest world in any literal sense. For example, in his study of one of the few ‘apocalyptic’ Celtic texts¹³ R J Stewart proposes that such narratives actually codify “deep and powerful modes of consciousness rooted through time into the ground of being itself” (Stewart 1986: 131), and so should primarily be seen as “complex and powerful psychic and magical Keys” (1986: 132) (a view that accords with Greenwood’s understanding of Pagan Otherworld tradition as primarily dealing with the cultivation of alternative, ‘magical’ states of consciousness *via* the application of the ‘esoteric imagination’¹⁴).

¹³ Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *The Prophecies of Merlin*

¹⁴ See chapter four.

Interestingly (given Weber's definitive association of magic with 'traditional' cultures), Luhrmann proposes that the multi-levelled cosmologies favoured by Pagans are ultimately untenable in 'this day and age', as, in her opinion, they represent "implicitly contradictory truths" to modern sensibilities (Luhrmann 1989: 282), and thus serve to "[keep] the unhappy bedfellows [of magical and objective 'realities'] apart" (1989: 276). But while Luhrmann should be commended for recognising the centrality of notional magical 'planes' to Pagan worldviews, her portrayal of the latter as exemplifying inherently disarticulated understandings underestimates the seemingly typical ability of Pagans to acknowledge and celebrate the 'occult unity of everything' while also remaining firmly situated within the empirical world. The vital importance accorded to 'closing' and 'grounding' procedures within modern magical methodologies¹⁵ arguably testifies to this principle; it is, however, also evident – albeit more diffusely – on another level of appreciation, namely that of science. That is to say, it is by no means self-evident that Pagans are unable to combine magical and scientific explanations without experiencing some sense of cognitive or philosophical dissonance.

By way of illustration, SW (who admits to having "a degree in Molecular Genetics" [SW: 1]) makes the following comment: "[Magic is] an art form, but part of me insists on trying to treat it as a science as well. I've got a foot in both camps, you see. I try and put knowledge into an orderly scheme with a certain degree of internal logic, if you see what I mean." (SW: 7) And in general, Pagans do appear to have no problem acknowledging the basic tenability of scientific method. Indeed, there seems to be no contradiction here, for, as Adler puts it, although the "prosaic and poetic ways of looking at the world are different", Paganism's "polytheistic framework of multiple realities" means that "both can be maintained in a single individual" (Adler 1986: 169). Thus, Harvey, for example, writes that "Pagans are usually happy to assent to scientific accounts of the origins of life" – the understanding being that "[s]omething *in* this planet led to the conditions responsible for the way things are" – and will tend also to conceive of the "origins of time and space"

¹⁵ See chapters four and six.

in terms of “scientific narratives”¹⁶ (Harvey 1997: 145). It could thus be argued that Pagans in the main are able, to some extent, to regard both magical and scientific outlooks as providing ‘internally consistent’ yet hardly irreconcilable explanations of the universe.

That said, Hutton suggests that the accommodation of scientific principles by Pagans has been facilitated in recent years by the increasingly high cultural profile of some of the more outlandish sub-branches of science such as “chaos and quantum theory”, which, he writes, serve to “portray a universe which functions in some respects more like that of ceremonial magicians” (Hutton 1999b: 395). Accordingly, it is not unknown for Pagans to “[rationalise] the operation of magic in terms of quantum physics, chaos mathematics, or electronic particle theory”¹⁷ (although Hutton also adds that this is by no means always the case) (1999b: 396).

Conversely, Penczak has suggested that the Otherworld itself may appear to change in accordance with modern scientific and technological understandings. By way of illustration, he writes:

‘As they are being reborn in the underworld, a new element, a new bone, stone, or crystal, is added to [the shaman] ... [but modern] shamans may get a microchip implanted or computer-program-like wisdom downloaded directly into their nervous system.’ (Penczak 2001: 91)

¹⁶ Harvey's italics.

¹⁷ The creative (not to mention humorous) way that Pagans can seemingly incorporate ‘cutting-edge’ scientific ideas into their worldviews is illustrated by a comment the author heard from one individual at a pub moot in York sometime in 2000. The person in question had just purchased a lottery ticket, and was awaiting the result. In his opinion, this made him a “quantum millionaire”, as the events that would determine whether or not he was an actual millionaire had not yet taken place. Although a quantum theorist might well take issue with this interpretation, it nevertheless arguably reveals a fair grasp of such ideas (in this case a knowledge of the famous ‘thought experiment’ commonly referred to by physicists as ‘Schrödinger’s Cat’), and their potential for helping to explain, or at least negotiate, the less mechanistic aspects of existence.

B. Emotive

It seems evident from previous chapters¹⁸ that Pagans characteristically see their paths as eliciting or building upon an intense sense of 'connection' between individual and cosmos. It was also suggested, however, that such holism is somewhat offset – that is, lent a certain *frisson* – by another intrinsic component of Pagan worldviews, which has to do with the understanding that an individual's circumstances are not entirely hers to control, and that the universe abounds with a myriad other autonomous or semi-autonomous forces that humans would do well to treat with respect. SL's earlier comments on 'genii loci' and local deities¹⁹ are especially salutary here. Likewise, Shan Jayran recommends that Pagans should pay head to "myth and folklore" when dealing with Otherworld 'powers', as such sources "give excellent and specific guidance on how to manage these meetings", thus (hopefully) enabling them to avoid any unfortunate repercussions²⁰ (Jayran 1996: 213). Accordingly, given the profound influence of Celtic Otherworld notions on Pagan worldviews, the following comments by Caitlín Matthews are especially illuminating: "[The] Celtic world is shot with the uncertainty and random influence of the Otherworld, whose gateways lie ever open to surprise and entrap the unwary" (Matthews 1989: 9-10).

This aspect of Pagan 'paths' is also arguably bound up with the notion of engrossment (the sense of excitement that results from the ability to identify with and 'bring to life' imaginal themes, characters and narratives), as this too depends, for Pagans at least, on seeing such realms, along with their supposed inhabitants, in a vivid, immersive and 'ontologically positive' light rather than as mere 'figments of the imagination'.

But lest it be assumed that traditional and modern Pagan worldviews necessarily elicit an identical set of emotional resonances, it is worth recalling

¹⁸ See chapter three especially.

¹⁹ See chapter four.

²⁰ By way of illustration, Jayran offer the cautionary words (with specific reference to the legendary Scottish 'seer' Thomas the Rhymer), "do not eat their [faery] food if offered... and do not make love with them if you wish to return to your ordinary life", before adding (somewhat cryptically) that there is "a craft to these things" (Jayran 1996: 213).

Hutton's distinction between propitiatory and consecratory emphases²¹. Some Pagans would certainly concur with this appraisal. SL, for example, comments that "the early forms of pagan religion were fear-based – you didn't worship something because it was happy and jolly, you got down on your hands and knees because you were frightened to death!" (SL Public Lecture: 13) Modern Pagans, on the other hand, are more concerned with 'raising their consciousness' than appeasing the gods. Accordingly, "[it's] like, when you go to see the doctor you're a bit more respectful than you would be to the average guy in the pub, but you're not on your knees to him" (SL Public Lecture: 14)²². For Caitlín and John Matthews this reflects a change in general patterns of existence. They explain that "[m]any of those old times were not good times", and that humanity was therefore "too near the survival point" for the sacred to take on anything other than an imposing or threatening aspect (Matthews and Matthews 1985: 101). Nowadays, on the other hand, "no element of... worship need necessarily be applied" when 'meeting' the same deities (although the authors add that "[f]irst contact with an ancient site may be frightening or at least very powerful" [1985: 101]).

That said, although their comments would appear to support Hutton's distinction, whether or not these Pagan individuals are *au fait* with current academic research on traditional magical worldviews is another matter. However (as noted above), the general sentiments they express appear nevertheless to be indicative of the way that modern epistemologically individualistic trends seem to have permeated western magical culture, such that even Pagans themselves may be aware of the distinctly contemporary nature of some of their assumptions. In short, then, while – as befits their explicitly magical worldviews – Pagans characteristically appear to regard the cosmos with an 'enchanted' sense of awe, wonder, and imaginal 'charge', they also seem able to prevent the sense of 'uncertainty' that is seemingly

²¹ See chapter four.

²² Jayran makes the similar point that although they are "certainly awesome, powerful beings", for her, "[m]eeting the gods in [her] own country is not an encounter with the remote, or the dizzyingly virtuous." (Jayran 1996: 213)

intrinsic to such perspectives from undermining an overall inclination towards individual integrity and existential 'balance' on their part.

C. Moral

Perhaps the most prominent moral element of Pagan spiritualities is a broadly 'green' agenda that – to quote Campbell – lays the blame for environmental ills on “mankind's ignorance, stupidity, and general arrogance and insensitivity in the face of nature” (Campbell 2001: 80). But as discussed elsewhere in this study, while undeniably important, a concern with 'nature' should perhaps be thought a secondary rather than defining feature of the phenomenon²³. In terms of actual moral codes, it seems that the predominant, (or at least most widely-known) precept is the Wiccan Rede ('If it harm none, do what thou wilt'), closely followed, perhaps, by Aleister Crowley's Thelemic axiom, 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law' (the former being, more or less, a 'diluted' version of the latter²⁴). Both axioms are indicative of the apparently characteristic attitude of epistemological individualism among Pagans, as they imply that spiritual 'power' and existential fulfilment depend upon individuals being 'true' to themselves.

Paganism's general avoidance of soteriological speculation is, again, possibly key here (and is succinctly expressed in Vivianne Crowley's statement that “[t]here is no preoccupation with evil and no concept of sin and punishment” among its exponents [Crowley 1995: 61]) – as, conversely, is its focus on personal development, or more specifically, the cultivation of a 'balanced self', which is to say, one positively and effectively engaged on spiritual, social and environmental levels. And furthermore, this connection likewise relates to the 'parallelist' nature of Pagan cosmologies, which depict Otherworld and earthly 'existences' as mutually reflexive and reinforcing. Harvey draws specific attention to the moral implications of this understanding accordingly: “Rather than rejecting the body and its gendered realities for a more 'spiritual' existence, Pagans experience their deities and other

²³ See chapter three.

²⁴ See chapter two.

companions as revitalising and revalidating imagination, intuition, sensuality, sexuality and many other human characteristics.” (Harvey 1997: 174-175)

Consequently, by drawing equally from earthly ‘realities’ and magical Otherworlds, the magically enhanced ‘self’ is therefore able, or so theory has it, to negotiate seemingly unpleasant conditions on earth without being overwhelmed by *angst* or despair, by assessing these in terms of a morally and existentially integrative spectrum of experience. The earlier discussion on the notion of ‘coming home’ as possibly denoting a peculiarly ‘positive’ Pagan understanding of the notion of spiritual transformation²⁵ might well be significant here. The same could be said for Adler’s avowal that for Pagans, “there is no such thing as sin (unless it is simply defined as... estrangement)” (Adler 1986: ix). Jayran uses the term Darklight Philosophy to describe this understanding. According to her, this states that the “opposites” of earthly existence may be reconciled through “desire, or passion” (Jayran 1996: 214), and therefore presupposes “a wholeness neither good nor evil, but natural”, since the cosmic forces with which it is associated are “not good or evil, just utterly complete” (Jayran 1996: 212).

Similarly, Hutton writes that “Pagan witches do not regard pain and distress as experiences inflicted by deities, or as aspects of a material world which is itself inherently flawed, corrupt, or filled with grief.” (Hutton 1999b: 393) Accordingly, while “[emphasising] the beauty, sanctity, and potential for pleasure of the apparent world”, they also “regard [suffering] as a series of experiences from which humans may learn, and in learning equip themselves better to encounter and overcome it in the future.” (1999b: 393) Affirming the importance of the concept of personal development to this understanding, he writes that Paganism’s “concentration... upon the present world and life” is a “consequence” both of its “lack of a concept of salvation, and of eternal reward or punishment, and its emphasis upon self-realization.” (1999b: 392) He adds: “A common theme... is that the vital first step in attaining a better life

²⁵ See chapter seven.

and perhaps a better world is to know and fully express one's own self."²⁶
(1999b: 392)

This perspective is illustrated by Pagan attitudes to the matter of Death, which 'force' they tend to regard as an integral component of the universe, both existentially and symbolically. Thus, JW, for example, describes the Goddess as "the bringer-in of both Life and Death" (JW: 7). Similarly, SL makes reference to the "Lord of Death" (represented, it might be recalled, by Herne and Odin in British and Northern traditions respectively²⁷), whom she describes as "a very important figure" for Pagans (SL Public lecture: 10), while an unaccredited article in an online Pagan magazine describes a European vegetation 'spirit' called the Green Man – now very popular among Pagans – as the "Lord of the Spiral Dance of Life, Death and Rebirth"²⁸. JW's Samhain ritual²⁹ is also significant here, as it illustrates a perceived connection among Pagans between the ritual acknowledgment of Death and the maintenance of ancestral continuity. Thus, as Harvey explains, as well as helping prepare for their "own dying", the symbolic recognition and incorporation of the 'power' of Death by Pagans also theoretically provides them with an invaluable opportunity for "honouring the dead" (Harvey 1997: 205), which process in turn helps the ancestors to "maintain a relationship with their descendants, and vice versa"(1997: 204). Accordingly, the Pagan 'way of death' can be understood as affirming an individual's place within her ancestral 'community', and so further 'rooting' notions of personal 'fulfilment' within broader interpretative frameworks.

²⁶ For those following the 'Left-Hand Path', such as Chaos Magicians, this involves what AM refers to as "the deconditioning of culturally-ingrained programming" in order to "readjust the psyche or personality" (AM: 11). However, lest this type of stance be regarded as evidence of soteriological tendencies, it is worth bearing in mind Greenwood's change of opinion on the matter, as described in chapter one (not to mention AM's own assessment that Pagan magical development constitute a form of 'apprenticeship'). In other words, the process of 'deconditioning' that some magicians aspire to does not seem to preclude a broadly integrative cosmological and existential standpoint on the part of such individuals.

²⁷ See chapter three.

²⁸ The Green Man, published in Ritual Kiss Issue 2, Spring Equinox 2000 (<http://kiss.to/ritual> [copy available])

²⁹ See chapter six.

Thus, although critical of contemporary life in many respects, Paganism appears ultimately to encourage a positive, even celebratory, orientation towards earthly conditions, an approach which bears scant resemblance to the 'classic' theodical orientations (or, it seems, to notions of 'spiritual transformation' generally). This broad moral and cosmological perspective, moreover, seems to be reflected in a largely accommodating attitude towards the everyday social world of relationships and institutions. It is interesting to note, for instance, that only one of the interviewees admitted to having sought to 'detach' themselves from the 'wider world' to any substantial degree³⁰.

Combined with their comments on 'coming home' to Paganism, the interview data might thus perhaps be regarded as generally supportive of Carpenter's previously cited impression³¹ in his 'survey of surveys' that Pagans tend to 'exhibit typical patterns of psychological adjustment' towards the wider society³². Carpenter contributes further to this portrayal in his persuasive suggestion that "[w]hile [Pagan] individuals may display nonconformity in certain aspects of their life such as religious beliefs and practices, they may seem to conform quite well in other aspects of their lives such as occupation"³³ (Carpenter 1996: 401). Furthermore, this principle also seems to extend to political and ideological considerations. Certainly, as

³⁰ This is JH, and her account of this (temporary) period of her life will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

³¹ See chapter one.

³² To quote the sentence in full: "While some maladapted individuals end up being involved with Paganism and Wicca after not fitting in anywhere else, the bulk of those who are involved do seem to display typical patterns of psychological adjustment." (Carpenter 1996: 401)

³³ It might be significant in this respect that nearly all the interviewees were in full-time employment (at the time of interview, at least). Occupations cited were as follows: artist (JH, JW), supermarket checkout employee (JW), trainee counsellor (SW), psychic consultant (SL), postman (AM), freelance computer consultant (PM), warden of a psychiatric home (WS), chef (GM), and solicitor (specialising in refugee rights)/hypnotherapist (CC).

It is also worth pointing out, perhaps, that a number of the interviewees (including two of the unemployed ones) were involved in non-profit making, Pagan-oriented activities, such as organising moots (JH, GM, CC) or festivals (JH, GM), publishing Pagan magazines (GM, SJ) and websites (PM), or holding workshops (DM).

noted previously³⁴ there appeared to be little actual evidence of radical proclivities among the interviewees, even on the subject of environmentalism, which would suggest a rather more conciliatory or compromising approach to political matters, all said (especially considering the 'live and let live' attitude that is amply suggested by some of the previously cited testimony³⁵). Accordingly, taken in conjunction with Carpenter's impressions, the interview testimony would seem to support Hutton's claim that Pagans characteristically do not "openly challenge the wider culture" (Hutton 1999b: 413), the political and broader ideational opinions associated with the phenomenon converging instead in a tendency to uphold the vision of "a tolerant and pluralist society with maximum potential for individual choice and self-expression" (1999b: 404).

In a very similar vein, Jorgensen and Russell have asserted that Paganism is "neither a reactionary nor a revolutionary religious movement" (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 334). What is also significant about their conclusion, however, is the additional statement that the phenomenon may rather be considered "a reform-oriented cultural alternative to traditional religions and other new religions, especially those endeavouring to create a totalistic organizational culture" (1999: 334), which seems to affirm the apparent peculiarity of Paganism's simultaneously integrative and individualistic spiritual ethos.

4. A 'Positive' Theodicy?

However, while a consideration of the three theodical subcategories may help shed significant light upon how Pagans see the world, any such discussion will eventually come up against the substantive discrepancy noted earlier. Namely, whereas the notion of theodicy is categorically regarded as a 'problem' requiring a 'solution', Pagan worldviews do not appear to frame human existence in such terms. Bluntly put, 'conventional' religions see

³⁴ See chapter three.

³⁵ See chapter seven especially.

humanity as being in need of salvation, whereas Paganism does not. Moreover, it is unlikely that this may simply be the case because Pagans have rejected the 'old', Christianity-infused theodical assumptions of western tradition. This is evident from a comparison with William James' revised theodical definition, which Campbell approvingly (albeit cautiously) cites as "more pertinent [to] individuals living in modern societies", for which the "overly theistic version favoured by Weber" might not seem so appropriate (Campbell 2001: 76-7). James' updated, 'secularised' understanding holds that there "is a sense that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand", and [that] 'the solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the higher powers'" (2001: 77). Thus, while avoiding some of the more archaic elements of 'classic' theodicy, it nevertheless reaffirms the idea (seemingly antithetical to Paganism) that humanity bears an inherent 'taint' simply by virtue of its existence within the world³⁶.

But on the other hand, it also seems clear that since Pagan worldviews are typically underpinned by the tacit or even explicit acknowledgement of human imperfection (tending, as Pearson notes, not to favour 'utopian' explanations³⁷) this still leaves the question of how Pagans might account for the occurrence of misfortune or injustice, on either general or personal levels, in the first place. Conventionally, religions have been able to explain this as the sorry consequence of humanity's 'fall from grace', but as a 'non-salvational' type of spirituality Paganism effectively precludes such interpretations³⁸. Nor is the task of determining any such 'first causes' in

³⁶ Campbell writes: "[James'] formulation of 'the problem of theodicy' is a good deal more vague than that favoured by Weber, eschewing as it does not merely any reference to God (or gods), but also to suffering, injustice or death. None the less, it still corresponds to Weber's general formulation of a discrepancy between peoples' hopes and expectations on the one hand and their experience of reality on the other." (Campbell 2001: 77)

³⁷ See above.

³⁸ Greenwood provides a striking illustration of the distinction between Pagan and 'classic' religious outlooks in this regard, in this case involving 'High Magic' tradition. She writes: "[A] high magician may work with the 'powers of light' or the 'powers of dark', but both practices are shaped by the Hermetic gnostic Kabbalistic system, which embraces the view that Christ and Lucifer were brothers and equally the sons of God. This position differs from orthodox

Pagan terms aided by what appears to be the tendency of Pagan worldviews towards cosmological 'open-endedness'³⁹. Not least, there is a problem in explaining how or why, if the existence of 'negative' conditions such as death are made sense of by invoking notions of the 'reconciliation of opposites' (as in Jayran's 'Darklight philosophy', for instance⁴⁰), some individuals should feel compelled to 'tip the scales' between the 'dark' and 'light' poles, thereby necessitating the re-imposition of cosmic balance.

This quandary can be illustrated by referring to Pagan notions of instrumental magic. For while, as discussed earlier on, magical or gnostic 'awareness' is in theory regarded in an ultimately 'positive' or benign light (denoting as it does the 'true' or spiritual 'self', albeit perceived from a foundation of 'worldly' existence⁴¹), practically and philosophically speaking magic is also (and paradoxically) conceived of as a morally neutral force that may be used for ill as well as good. This is conventionally explained by what Greenwood refers to as 'internal morality'. That is, the uses to which such techniques are put depend entirely on the performer's own "magical intent" or 'will' (Greenwood 2001: 37). Of course, one way to reaffirm the primacy of cosmological equilibrium is through the espousal of 'laws' such as the Wiccan Rede ('if it harm none, do what thou wilt'). However, this only glosses over the question of how or why, in terms of Pagan ontology, individuals should have the capacity to 'upset' the cosmic balance in such a way (not to mention why some should feel so inclined to conceive of their relationship to circumstances in an overly or intensively 'negative' light, in the capacity of either agent or 'victim').

A possible way to help make sense of the 'human condition' in Pagan terms is to recognise how the occurrence of 'misfortune' or otherwise chaotic or unpleasant conditions *per se* need neither preclude nor undermine the ability to interpret circumstances in terms of magical 'consciousness' (these being no less illustrative of the 'occult unity of everything' than ostensibly

Christianity, which teaches that evil was brought into the world through Lucifer's rebellion from God and is directly related to the Fall of humanity." (Greenwood 2000b: 196)

³⁹ See above.

⁴⁰ See above.

⁴¹ See chapter five.

more 'benign' circumstances). Indeed, they may even help sustain it. This is because, in theory, any vivid or 'extreme' sensibilities, including the type of characteristics that other theodicies portray as indicative of humanity's 'fallen' state (such as 'fear, hate, love, desire, [and] passion', to repeat PM's words), may serve as 'grist' to the ritual 'mill', which is to say, as effective conduits to magical or gnostic experience⁴². And of course, Pagans may also make sense of 'negative' or unfortunate circumstances, on whatever scale, by referring to myths, which abound with tales of cruelty, injustice and woe (such themes being crucial to their overall narrative and imaginative 'meaning' and 'force', it could be argued)⁴³. Here too, then, there is the sense that negative circumstances play a foundational role in the 'cosmic scheme', and that to fully comprehend such conditions (and to prevent them from having undue or

⁴² See chapter five.

⁴³ For example, Hasta Tyrpriest (the editor of the Heathen magazine *Odinn*) cites an early Scandinavian poem called 'The Lay of Harbard' (subtitled 'The Coming of Odinn') to help explain certain (to him) unfortunate aspects of Nordic medieval history. In this tale, Odinn, behaves in a way that "is not what you would expect from a High God", by boasting of "treachery, sowing destruction, denying peace [etc.]" (Tyrpriest 1989: 12). What seems significant about this poem for Tyrpriest is that it not only lays the blame for the misdeeds it describes on the shoulders of the gods – or rather, of one god – the Scandinavians themselves worshiped, but also implies culpability on the part of those mortal followers who indiscriminately pandered to the more unsavoury aspects of deity. Thus, he writes, it shows "the worst side of Odinn appearing", this being "the Odinn of the pirate, [and of] the treacherous Kings of Scandinavia who gave in to Christianity when it suited their purse" (1989: 13). Accordingly, Tyrpriest's reading suggests that the capacity for ill-will (such as may manifest, for example, through political machinations and self-interest) is part-and-parcel of cosmic and human schemes alike, and so is something that individuals have to learn to negotiate for themselves, for better or worse.

On a more personal level, Caitlín Matthews chooses to interpret an abusive relationship she had once suffered in terms of a medieval Welsh tale concerning the Otherworld figure of Rhiannon, the "Bearer of Burdens" (Matthews 1990a: 100). Thus, she sees her own role as having resonated symbolically with that of Rhiannon herself, her ex-partner as akin to the "possessed" and "dangerous" Gwawl, who was both the suitor and the oppressor of Rhiannon (1990a: 87), and her current husband as Pwyll, the "innocent youth" who "delivered [her] from the Underworld" (1990a: 98). According to Matthews, the dawning recognition of such parallels enabled her eventually to transform the negative effect had upon her by these experiences through a process of "ritual healing and forgiveness" (1990a: 101).

'unbalanced' influence, it could be added) the individual therefore needs to learn how to regard them in the light of magical 'knowledge' and individual integrity equally.

More substantively, it should be reaffirmed that, unlike the 'conventional' religions, magical worldviews do not hinge upon notions of a 'perfect world' (as perhaps seems evident from their accompanying 'substantive myths', moreover). Thus, while modern magical worldviews might not be quite so informed by fearful attitudes as defined more traditional, 'propitiatory' counterparts, they nevertheless (as Hanegraaff suggests) still seem to rely for their sense of numinous 'charge' (at least in part) upon the idea that the individual's relationship with the cosmos is, to a significant extent, 'uncertain', and that she is therefore never entirely in control of her circumstances. Accordingly, it follows that 'unfortunate' events could thus be seen as an inevitable pitfall of humankind's inhabitation of a manifestly imperfect yet nevertheless profoundly 'magical' cosmos⁴⁴.

But moreover, it further implies that the possibility (if not necessarily the actuality) of strife or of 'things going wrong' is accorded an intrinsic or *a priori* function within magical worldviews, as this is presumably vital to the sense of dynamic 'uncertainty' which attends these⁴⁵. The implications of this sensibility for those wishing to live 'magically' are peerlessly articulated by the Pagan writer Chrys Livings, who summarises them accordingly: "With the friction of the strangeness, and the grasping of the strangeness, comes a releasing point, a kind of magickal orgasm" (Livings 1998: 104). For Livings, this tension

⁴⁴ Or to repeat Pearson's comment on the matter, 'being whole' in Pagan terms requires an acceptance that 'there may be anger, stupidity, irresponsibility, ruthlessness, weaknesses and pain' in the world (see chapter one, *n.* 54).

⁴⁵ With regard to this seeming contiguity, it is possibly helpful at this point to refer once more to Vitebsky's 'layered cosmos' concept (see chapter four, *n.* 26). For, despite their overarching holism, such 'total renderings of the universe' as are found in shamanic and traditional magical cultures are, writes Vitebsky, not meant to "imply a steady state", since they are seemingly defined just as much by chaotic or "eristic" principles such as "battle and risk" as by more benign conditions (Vitebsky 1995a: 185). As such, "intervention into cosmic processes" by individuals may be both "bold and necessary" (1995a: 185); accordingly, the "power to act" in such a way "is precarious and this human action is fraught with danger" (1995a: 185).

has its source in the nexus between 'self' and environment; thus, the "line of friction is also the membrane that defines us as individuals, as human, as real, [and as] solid"⁴⁶ (1998: 102).

Hence, this magical 'boundary' constitutes what could be described as a zone of 'creative tension',

'where things are held together, by energy, by friction, by life... a line of teeming potential as well as a barrier, a potential zone of conflict. The coming together of apparently opposing forces can be perceived as potentially synergistic. Everything can be translated to this principle in magick'.
(1998: 102)

For Livings, the key thus lies in living in "synergy" – a state of profound connectivity and identification – with the environment, a prerequisite for which, however, being the recognition that it is "constantly in a state of flux" (1998: 105). She concludes (in words that could be seen as particularly resonant for a discussion of theodicy) that this basic orientation can "apply to magick, the way we perceive reality, our situation and our surrounds, even our success; and through [it] we can get the measure of ourselves" (1998: 105).

In an in-depth discussion of magical ritual methodology, another Pagan writer, Chris Low, approaches this idea – that living 'successfully' requires viewing the contingencies of everyday living in a 'positive' way, which is to say, in the light of their magical or gnostic 'potential' – from a slightly different (yet entirely complementary) slant⁴⁷. He assesses that the significance and

⁴⁶ To explain this 'magickal membrane' in metaphorical terms, Livings invokes the "ethological" concept of the 'ecotone', this being "the dividing line of two ecological communities where competition arises" (Livings 1998: 102). Thus, human skin may be seen as "a magickal *ecotone* – the skin that binds us in" both as organisms and as individuals (1998: 102 [Livings' italics]).

⁴⁷ Using a fairly pithy metaphor, Low writes that, perceived from an esoteric perspective, "normal life' is seen to be a complex magical balancing act, like a man who keeps a hundred plates spinning on canes at the same time and is always on the point of losing one." (Low 1996: 35) The succinctness of its image aside, the significance of this comment lies in its suggestion that the problem for individuals living in such a state is that, while their existence could already be thought intrinsically 'magical' (which is to say, profoundly 'connected' with

'power' of ritual ultimately lies in the concept of 'limitation', which he sees as "so important in the way magical ritual has developed" as to warrant rather more scrutiny than it is usually given (Low 1996: 36). Working on the understanding that "[we] are limited beings", and that "[l]imitation of consciousness is the trick we use to cope with the complexity of life", Low writes that magic is therefore about "[making] a virtue out of this necessity" (1996: 36). Accordingly, the "principle of limitation is a key to understanding the structure of magical ritual, and a key to successful practice", since such a "limitation of consciousness" is vital so that individuals may "channel that [magical] energy in the correct direction, with minimal 'splatter'"⁴⁸ (1996: 36). In summary, "magical ritual" can thus be seen as "the calculated shifting and limitation of consciousness" (1996: 36), in accordance with the human individual's foundational and 'guiding' predicament as an already 'limited being' living on the earth.

In conclusion, then, this explicitly magical, Pagan type of moral perspective could be said to describe a 'positive theodicy', as it suggests that the problem lies not in the occurrence of 'misfortune' *per se*, but rather in the disinclination of some individuals to see ostensibly or incipiently 'negative' circumstances as illustrative of an integral and potentially vivifying component of the existential 'flux' that underscores human experience. It should also be added, moreover, that to comprehend this picture fully, it is necessary to acknowledge how the capacity to interpret, conceive of, and ultimately, to act upon circumstances in an 'unbalanced' way could itself be seen as an intrinsic

the cosmos), the fact that they do not recognise this situation means that they are unable to capitalise on it fully, thus bringing about the risk that their lives might simply career 'out of control'.

⁴⁸ Low explains: "What limitation means in practice is that magical ritual is designed to produce specific and highly limited changes in consciousness, and this is done by using a specific map of consciousness, and there are symbolic correspondences within the map which can be used in the construction of a ritual." (Low 1996: 36) This view is, of course, virtually identical with Greenwood's description of ritual as a sort of symbolic 'scaffolding' constructed to produce controlled (and therefore 'safe') ingress into Otherworld 'realms' – and in particular, her suggestion that the 'essence of magical training is to open up the magician's awareness' to magical energies 'so that they can be channelled, mediated and controlled' (see chapter four).

feature of Pagan ontology, for to assume otherwise is to deny the 'internal morality' (or sense of overall individual responsibility for personal actions and behaviour) which, as Greenwood notes, is central to Pagan exegesis⁴⁹.

Having looked at the Pagan phenomenon in comparison with other, more 'conventional' religious outlooks, it is useful to backtrack slightly at this point, to consider once more Jorgensen and Russell's above description of its status as 'neither a reactionary nor a revolutionary religious movement', which paragraph implies two further themes of importance for the present study. Firstly, the phenomenon is not the only modern spiritual alternative available; and secondly, some of these others stand in radical contrast to Paganism in certain key respects. Just how complex the vista of contemporary spiritual 'alternatives' really is, and how Paganism compares and contrasts with its 'rivals' in this category, will be the subject of the next chapter.

⁴⁹ That is to say, without the option of adopting such a course of action, the notion of individual 'intent' (either magical or otherwise) could hardly be thought a matter of choice or 'will'.

CHAPTER NINE

PAGANISM AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUAL CATEGORIES

The last few decades of the twentieth century saw what the sociologist Steve Bruce has described as a “flowering of alternative religions” (Bruce 1998: 27) – an upsurge that as yet shows no sign of abating. The recent rise of Paganism to some sort of prominence, both in the UK and elsewhere, would, of course, appear testament to this. But as was hinted at just now, there are a number of other spiritual alternatives currently on offer. Chiefly, these may be grouped into two broad but distinct categories, namely new religious movements (NRMs), and the New Age. Often, academics (and other onlookers) make little attempt to distinguish between the three; the following discussion will therefore look at NRM and New Age spiritual manifestations to see how they compare with the Pagan phenomenon.

1. New Religious Movements

A. What are NRMs?

The sociologist Luigi Tomasi has proposed that the phrase ‘NRM’ be used as an umbrella term to denote “the phenomenon generally referred to as alternative religions” (Tomasi 1999a: 1). Such assumptions, however, have not gone unchallenged. Woodhead and Heelas, for instance, stress that “[m]ore strictly defined” criteria should be employed in order to distinguish NRMs from other alternative spiritual categories (Paganism included) (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 113).

And in point of fact, thanks largely to the pioneering work of sociologists such as David Martin, James Davison Hunter and, most notably, Eileen Barker, sociologists have indeed by now generally come to regard NRMs as representing a distinctive spiritual trend. That said, at first glance, such an assessment might appear problematic, as, their basic novelty aside, the spiritualities associated with this category constitute a bewilderingly diffuse and eclectic array of approaches and organisations, ranging from

heterodox versions of Christianity such as the Children of God and the Unification Church (i.e. Moonies [Hunter 1981: 10]), through eastern-inspired spiritualities like Transcendental Meditation and Krishna Consciousness (1981: 9), to radical psychotherapies such as Silva Mind Control and *est* (1981: 11).

Barker herself admits that this diversity is frustrating for sociologists, since “almost any generalisation about NRMs is bound to be untrue if it is applied to all the movements” (Barker 1991: 10). Nevertheless, it is possible to discern substantial threads of congruity underneath the surface variety. Most notably, NRMs can be characterised as radically alternative spiritual orientations that seek actively to maintain and reaffirm a basic sense of difference from the ‘mainstream’, whether this be understood in terms of religious or temporal structures and traditions, and so brook little or no dissent or divergence from decreed patterns of belief and behaviour among their followers.

Hunter, for instance, writes that NRMs generally adhere to an ideology of “*absolutism or totalism*”, which “manifests itself at the cognitive level as well as the socio-organizational level of human experience”¹ (Hunter 1981: 9). NRMs “profess to offer a superlative, providing its possessor with an ultimate system of relevance which transcends the bland ordinariness and meaninglessness of everyday life in the modern world” (1981: 10). The most suitable type of organisational strategy for this purpose is “communitarianism”, because, writes Hunter, this “provides a thorough insulation and protection from the cognitive contamination that a sustained encounter with ‘the world’ necessarily brings about”² (1981: 56). Martin echoes this point by suggesting that the chief attraction of NRMs for many individuals is that they provide a powerful sense of existential clarity involving an unambiguously “black and white” moral universe (Martin 1981: 56). In other words, those who join NRMs “[enter] into a personal devotional discipline which offers secure markers and boundaries”, of the sort that might

¹ Hunter’s italics.

² Hunter warns that this can sometimes manifest in a “*total institutionalization*”, meaning, in effect, “a microcosmic totalitarianism” (Hunter 1981: 10 [Hunter’s italics]).

otherwise be lacking in a person's life (1981: 56). Similarly, Barker asserts that the "new religion typically offers a direct and unambiguous promise of salvation to the community of true believers – or to the individual who follows the true path of practice", with the result that "the mainstream religions... may appear remote and continually indulging in prevarication and equivocation" in comparison (Barker 1991: 11).

Also characteristic of NRMs are what Barker refers to as 'charismatic leaders'. She explains that the "followers" of such individuals "*believe* that he or she possesses a very special (possibly divine) quality and that the followers are, as a consequence, willing to grant him or her a special kind of authority over them."³ (1991: 13) These characters are therefore "unpredictable, for they are bound by neither tradition nor rules", and maintain their position of authority so long as their "followers accept the legitimacy of their leader's right to pronounce on every aspect of their lives" (1991: 13). In summary, then (to cite Woodhead and Heelas), NRMs characteristically revolve around "hierarchy, committed membership, exclusivism, and [a] prescription of determinate steps to be followed in order to achieve enlightenment" (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 114).

B. Paganism and NRMs: a comparison

Having established a general portrait of NRMs, it is now possible to gauge to what extent Paganism can be thought compatible with this spiritual category. Some do indeed regard it as representative of the phenomenon – not least Barker herself, who has suggested that the term is appropriate to describe "Witches' covens, and [other] pagan, occult and 'magick' movements" (Barker 1991: 148). And technically, this would appear to be the case – at least, as Hutton acknowledges, "in the sense that it has appeared or surfaced only in the relatively recent past" (Hutton 1999b: 412).

There are, however, important differences. For example, whereas communitarianism or a desire to keep the world 'at bay' may well be integral features of NRMs, such structures do not appear in any way characteristic of

³ Barker's italics.

Paganism. This is certainly the impression given by the interviewees, virtually none of whom give any indication of ever having wished to detach themselves from 'civilisation' to any substantial degree. But even in the case of the one apparent exception to this (hinted at earlier⁴) – namely JH, who spent a lengthy period of time living with her family on a remote Scottish croft – the state of 'exile' from the 'modern' world described in the testimony seems to have been partial and entirely volitional, rather than unconditional or 'policed' by others⁵.

A number of studies have acknowledged just such a contrast. Adler, for example, writes that "Pagans do not live in ashrams" – an overt reference to the type of eastern-tinged, communal groupings often referred to in NRM typologies – but rather "in city apartments and suburban homes" (Adler 1986: 372), and concludes that Paganism is therefore "still, by and large, a movement of people who live very much within the modern world"⁶ (1986: 372-3). Also affirming Paganism's general socially integrative ethos (albeit without making reference to contrasting NRM typologies), Simes reports that

⁴ See chapter eight.

⁵ JH describes her existence at that point as having been "very remote from what was going on in England, or the 'civilised' world, if you like" (JH: 8), and "very different to the modern European lifestyle" (JH: 10). However, her testimony also suggests that she had maintained and enjoyed a substantial degree of contact with others in the surrounding area. These included "a small, very independent group" of "loose-knit" Pagans who "used to meet on a twice-yearly basis" (JH: 8) (all of whom, JH avers, "would have regarded themselves as Druids" [JH: 7]), as well as non-Pagan "village members" (JH: 9). Equally importantly, JH stresses that she returned to 'civilisation' when she felt that it was appropriate to do so. She explains: "It just seemed the right thing to do... You don't realise how out-of-touch with the rest of the world you get in places like that, and after quite a number of years up there I felt I wanted to get back in touch with the world and to give my children the possibility of work and education that there just wasn't up there – and myself too" (JH: 10).

⁶ In an even blunter comparison, Adler writes: "The Pagan movement does *not* include the Eastern religious groups. It includes neither Satanists nor Christians. Almost every religious group that has received massive exposure in the press, from the Hare Krishna movements to the Unification Church to the People's Temple, lies outside the Pagan resurgence. The many hundreds of Pagan religious groups, by and large, stand in contrast and opposition to these authoritarian movements" (Adler 1986: *xi-xii* [Adler's italics]).

the phenomenon “supports and encourages individuality without denying a need for communities within society” (Simes 1996: 88).

Similarly, it is clearly NRMs that Jorgensen and Russell are referring to when they write of the ‘totalistic’ new religions to which they believe Paganism is largely antithetical⁷. This incompatibility is also at the root of Hutton’s apparent unease with sociological accounts that attempt to associate Pagan traditions (such as Witchcraft) with this “particular category of religion” (Hutton 1999b: 412), his previously cited assessment that Pagans do not ‘openly challenge the wider culture’⁸ being a deliberate response to such interpretations⁹.

As could perhaps be expected from such an epistemologically individualistic orientation, Pagans might also typically be thought to have a rather more flexible approach to group organisation than that portrayed in NRM typologies (JH’s comments on ‘herding cats’ being particularly evocative in this regard, perhaps). For example, CC claims that she personally favours a “looser federation” of magicians, for the reason that “modern people aren’t going to pledge obedience for very long, and to run a magical group completely democratically means that you must accept that some people will leave” (CC: 12). Hutton employs an especially insightful (and engaging) metaphor to underline this distinction, writing that, in direct contrast to NRMs, covens – which are the organisational structures that are perhaps most representative or emblematic of Paganism – “tend to resemble lobster pots in reverse, being very difficult to enter and very easy to leave.” (Hutton 1999b: 404)

⁷ See chapter eight.

⁸ See chapter eight.

⁹ Hutton believes that such categorisations rest upon a superficial knowledge of Paganism on the part of scholars like Barker. With specific reference to Witchcraft, he writes that this “is not a religion to which [Barker] and her colleagues have devoted any research”, having “[concentrated] instead upon Christian sects and religious groups of Eastern provenance.” (Hutton 1999b: 413)

Hutton also makes the related point that Witchcraft does not tend to rely on “charismatic leaders”¹⁰ (Hutton 1999b: 413) (which assessment JW’s comments on her own coven organisation would also appear succinctly to illustrate¹¹). Not all would agree with such an appraisal, however. For example, based on her own observations of coven behaviour, Greenwood writes that some Wiccan Priests and Priestesses can indeed cultivate a sort of “charismatic leadership” over more vulnerable and impressionable coven members that borders on the authoritarian (Greenwood 2000b: 143). To Greenwood, such relationships therefore “[illustrate] the tension between the ideal theory and the actual practice” of Witchcraft (2000b: 143), as this type of “[c]harismatic attraction implies a loss of personal will and identity”, and so is “the antithesis of a search for individual magical identity.” (2000b: 144)

There are problems with Greenwood’s reading, however. Some of these reservations – in particular her assumption of a link, in some cases, at least, between magical culture and psychological dependency – will be addressed in a later chapter; for now, it suffices to point out that while (as perhaps in any other walk of life) there undoubtedly are unscrupulous and opportunistic individuals within the Pagan scene, on the whole, the evidence would suggest that such characters should not really be regarded as representative of a phenomenon in which a marked independence of mind appears actually to be the norm. Carpenter, for example, writes:

- * ‘While some ineffectual individuals seem attracted to the magical lure of power in order to control others as well as their environment, the majority of individuals seem to be appropriately interested in improving themselves as individuals and making life’s circumstances better for themselves and others.’ (Carpenter 1996: 401)

¹⁰ Hutton admits that “dominant figures” such as Gerald Gardner “were certainly more obvious in the first two decades of [Witchcraft’s] recorded development”, but adds that “those who knew [him] have commonly made the point that he lacked both the disposition and the behaviour of a charismatic religious leader” (Hutton 1999b: 413).

¹¹ See chapter seven.

Making a very similar point (and further illustrating Paganism's dissimilarity from NRMs in the process), Hutton saliently observes: "Eileen Barker has stated that new religious movements tend to contain 'a slightly above average peppering of both rogues and saints'. Pagan witchcraft, in my experience, does not." (Hutton 1999b: 404)

2. The New Age

A. What is the 'New Age'?

As with NRMs, this term also refers to a type of contemporary, non-mainstream spirituality involving a broadly experiential orientation. Compared with the former, however, the New Age seems far more compatible with Paganism, being, it would appear, notably flexible and individualistic in approach. Thus, Woodhead and Heelas, for instance, write that it places far greater emphasis on personal "freedom" than do NRMs (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 113).

However, as with NRMs, the task of analysing the phenomenon is made awkward by what Lewis refers to as its "diverse, decentralized nature" (Lewis 1992: 6). That is to say, it has no officially sanctioned credos or representatives, and so tends to preclude neat categorisations. But regardless of its nebulous character, the New Age is nevertheless being increasingly recognised as an important cultural trend. This has been the case since the nineteen eighties, when academics such as Lewis and his colleague Gordon Melton began to notice an apparent 'groundswell' of interest in "alternative spirituality" of a kind that did not conform to the general picture of "high-profile groups" belonging to the category of NRMs (Lewis and Melton 1992: x).

However, it is also quite evident that this particular "subculture" (1992: x) has a lengthy history. In her historical study of the phenomenon, Kay Alexander writes the New Age evolved in two broad stages. Firstly, there was the introduction to westerners of certain 'alternative' spiritual currents such as, most notably, eastern mysticism in the late nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, *via* metaphysical philosophies such as Theosophy and New Thought¹² (Alexander 1992: 44).

Enthusiasm for these movements, and for the oriental spiritualities that they were presumed especially to represent, was in part a sign of disaffection with conventional Christian religion¹³. This 'sense' – both mystical and questioning of prevailing *mores* – was carried over into the late twentieth century in the second stage of New Age 'evolution', in the form of radical psychological therapies such as the Human Potential Movement (HPM) and, latterly, transpersonal psychology¹⁴. According to Alexander,

¹² According to Alexander, the Theosophical Society was founded in England in 1876 under the leadership of an enigmatic, self-proclaimed psychic from Russia called Mme Helena Blavatsky (Alexander 1992: 32). She explains that "Blavatsky claimed she was conveying the essence of all religions which had been the universally diffused religion of the ancient and prehistoric world, and [that] she predicted the imminent dawn of a new age in which man would be transformed" (1992: 31); Blavatsky also purported "to be conveying esoteric teachings which had been kept alive in occultism, mysticism, and free masonry." (1992: 31) By the turn of the century, the organisation had branches all over the western world (and beyond), America included (1992: 32).

New Thought, on the other hand, was a distinctly 'national' manifestation, which drew from the US's tradition of Unitarianism (a 'free-thinking' Christian sect), and the transcendentalist philosophy of thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1992: 36). It was also informed by the Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg's concept of the Divine Mind (1992: 34), and expressed a burgeoning "interest in world religions", a notable influence being the visit to the USA in 1893 by the Indian mystic Swami Vivekananda (1992: 36). New Thought preached the "Oneness of God as well as the themes of divine love, divine wisdom, and the necessity of opening oneself to the divine plan" (1992: 35).

¹³ Alexander writes that this burgeoning western enthusiasm for eastern religion had commenced "in a period when orthodoxies within Christianity and Judaism were being threatened by the historical-critical study of their sacred texts" (Alexander 1992: 44-5).

¹⁴ Alexander explains that the former emanated from certain Californian 'bohemian colonies' in the 1950s, and was extolled by celebrated 'counter-cultural' figures such as Aldous Huxley (Alexander 1992: 37). It was strongly influenced by a post-war American movement known as Humanistic Psychology, the stated 'goals' of which included the cultivation of "creativity, love, self, growth, [...] self-actualization, higher values, [and] ego-transcendence" (1992: 41). The "basic assumptions" of HPM were twofold – namely, "*people are more similar than different*", meaning that its techniques are applicable to everyone; and "*different methods can be successfully combined out of context*", meaning that such methods are "likely to be wildly eclectic" (1992: 42 [Alexander's italics]).

these therapies combined a Theosophical-style enthusiasm for eastern or mystical-type conceptions of the self with a broadly individualistic and “liberal” ideology (1982: 47), expressed in terms of personal ‘transformation’ and ‘growth’. Alexander concludes that the New Age can therefore “be understood as developing broader, more applied versions of the interests of transpersonal psychologists” (1992: 46). This process was characterised by the cultivation of a more overt “religious-mystical emphasis” (1992: 46), and the extension of HPM’s ‘wilful eclecticism’ to cover a strikingly diverse array of systems and methods (1992: 44).

Some sociologists have also noted distinct trends or ‘fashions’ in favour of successive philosophies and practices within the phenomenon. For instance, Lewis and Melton write that there was a “movement away from the prominence of eastern spiritual teachers (particularly characteristic of the seventies) to an emphasis on channeled entities during the nineteen eighties”¹⁵ (Lewis and Melton 1992: *xii*). And more recently, this has given

HPM portrayed the idea of mystical understanding in terms of the scientifically more credible notion of “peak experiences” (1992: 42), and eventually began drawing from “ancient spiritual techniques such as yoga” in order to cultivate these states (1992: 42). Transpersonal Psychology was the logical culmination of this trend, as it reinterpreted the ‘peak experiences’ of HPM in explicitly mystical terms, such as a “euphoric state of spiritual awakening” (1992: 43), while retaining that system’s psychological and psychoanalytical frames of reference. Thus, as Alexander notes, it “was a short step to understanding experiences happening in the [HPM] groups as somehow transpersonal, spiritual, or even mystical” (1992: 42).

¹⁵ Writing in 1992, Melton suggested that this was at the time “possibly the single most important and definitive aspect of the New Age” (Melton 1992: 21), although this is not to say that that is necessarily the case today. Melton reports that channeling (to give it its, perhaps more appropriate, American spelling) may be understood as a form of “spirit contact”, of the sort once practised by Spiritualists (1992: 21); however, he adds that it derived its contemporary “purpose and content” in the 1970s, when arose a “new wave of spirit contact” in association with supposedly ‘channeled’ books such as *A Course in Miracles* (1992: 22). In contrast to the purported communications of the Spiritualists, which dealt with “life after death”, ‘channeled’ information largely presents “variations on New Age philosophy” (1992: 23), meaning that, as Melton puts it, “the only criteria for their value [has been] their internal consistency and their ability to resonate with the audience” (1992: 23).

way to a “new emphasis” upon “shamanism and Native American spirituality”¹⁶ (1992: *xii*).

Like Paganism, the New Age appears to be characteristically highly individualistic both in theory and in ‘tone’ – or, as one of its most prominent spokespersons, William Bloom, puts it, it ‘reasserts’ the “right to explore spirituality in total freedom” (*quoted in York 1995: 89*). New Agers therefore draw inspiration from a wide variety of sources and traditions. The sociologist Adam Possamai, for instance, writes that these may include “astrology, automatic writing, Buddhism, channelling, crystals manipulation, feminist spirituality, meditation, naturopathy, numerology, palmistry, reiki, spiritualism, Tantrism, tarot and urban shamanism”, amongst other things, adding that his list actually “understates the diversity of practice” that is evident within the New Age (Possamai 2000: 365).

Indeed, the New Age even goes so far as to portray the individual self as the ontological basis for spiritual considerations; that is, it encourages the cultivation of what Bloom refers to as a “new sense of personal divinity” (*cited in Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 115*). Similarly, in his seminal study of the phenomenon, Heelas writes that New Agers see themselves – ideally – as ‘*Gods and Goddesses in exile*’¹⁷ (Heelas 1996b: 19). This viewpoint therefore suggests that humanity is inherently perfectible, an idea succinctly expressed in the affirmation, “I am my own God” (1996b: 20). Thus, to “experience the ‘Self’ itself is to experience ‘God’, the ‘Goddess’, the ‘Source’ [and] most frequently, inner spirituality’.”¹⁸ (1996b: 19) Consequently, the New Age may be understood as constituting an “*internalized* form of religiosity”¹⁹ (1996b: 29), the implication being that the “inner realm, and the inner realm alone, is held to serve as the source of authentic vitality,

¹⁶ In a recent copy of the British New Age magazine, *Kindred Spirit* (49 [Winter 1999-2000]), there was an inordinately large number of adverts (running to around two pages) for *Reiki*, which purports to be an ancient Japanese healing system, suggesting (possibly) that this may be the ‘definitive’ New Age trend of the present moment.

¹⁷ Heelas’ italics.

¹⁸ The sociologist Steve Bruce similarly identifies the idea of the “divinity of the self” as being of central concern to New Agers (Bruce 1998: 27).

¹⁹ Heelas’ italics.

creativity, love, tranquillity, wisdom power, authority and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect life.” (1996b: 19)

It is thus easy to see the New Age as evidence of the trend towards epistemological individualism – and in fact, Heelas employed his previously cited definition of the latter phenomenon²⁰ in a discussion of its relevance to the former. Even more categorically, he states that New Age ideology renders ‘external’ voices of authority subsidiary to the individual Self, even if these are presumed to derive from ‘channeled’ sources, or ostensibly autonomous entities such as deities. Thus, “if there is too much external authority – theistic, traditionalized, polytheistic – one can conclude that one is no longer with the New Age” (1996b: 35).

It is possible also to identify other notable features of the phenomenon. For example, New Age spirituality is holistic, which term Heelas defines as denoting an “interconnected, essentially the same, basically unified” perspective (1996b: 33). Moreover (as might also be inferred from previous descriptions), New Age holism is also monistic, which means that adherents seek to peer “beneath the surface of things” to find the unitary spiritual core (1996b: 33). Similarly, Hanegraaff writes that New Age spirituality interprets the holistic “*universal interrelatedness* of everything” as entailing “the possibility of reducing all manifestations to one ‘ultimate source’”²¹ (Hanegraaff 1996: 120). And more recently, Possamai has described New Age “monism” as a “paradigm which recognises a single ultimate principle, being or force underlying all reality” (Possamai 2000: 364).

An important implication of all this is summed up in Heelas’ phrase, “detraditionalized New Age monism” (Heelas 1996b: 37). Heelas’ point is that the notion of an ultimate, divine Self enables the individual to “[reject] voices of authority associated with established orders” (1996b: 22), or with what New Agers see as the archaic and restrictive forces of tradition, and in particular, religion. Thus, he argues, “[r]eligion’ is associated with the traditional”, and so in turn, with “the dead; the misleading, [and] the exclusivistic” (1996b: 23), whereas in contrast, “(much) of the New Age

²⁰ See chapter seven.

²¹ Hanegraaff’s italics.

Movement is beyond tradition, beyond established or codified ethicality, indeed beyond belief²² (1996b: 23).

Another New Age tenet identified by Heelas – “*Your lives do not work*”²³ (1996b: 18) – indicates a powerful tendency within the movement to counterpoise visions of personal perfectibility with the manifest imperfection of the world. Or, in common New Age parlance, an individual’s Higher Self stands in direct opposition to the “‘ego’ [or] lower self”, which conforms to social and moral conventions (1996b: 19). More bluntly, Heelas states that “[t]here is thus general agreement that it is essential to shift from our contaminated mode of being – what we are by virtue of socialization”²⁴ (1996b: 19). Campbell also detects a prevailing attitude of ambivalence towards broader socio-cultural contexts within the New Age, arguing moreover that its encouragement of “Self-transcendence” in fact leads to a state of profound self-absorption whereby “the individual does not so much ‘lose’ himself or herself in [a] larger system of meaning, as become inflated

²² Heelas makes a similar point in an earlier article, to the effect that the “‘traditional’ is... defined [in the New Age] as that which speaks with the voice of ‘external’ and established authority”, and so de-traditionalisation is therefore “the process whereby such voices lose their authority” to that of the “individual” (Heelas 1993: 109). Accordingly, New Agers hold that any ‘wisdom’ which does not stem from “within” therefore corresponds to the “doctrines, dogmas and encoded moralities of traditional religiosity” (1993: 109).

²³ Heelas’ italics.

²⁴ Moreover, New Agers also tend to apply this logic to their understanding of humanity’s ‘development’ as a species. As William Bloom put it, “the evolution of the planet and of humanity has reached a point when we are undergoing a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness”, adding that “[t]his is why we talk of a New Age” (*cited in* Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 115). The logic behind this presumption is that since such efforts hinge upon the overcoming of the ‘socialized self’ (or, in Woodhead and Heelas’ own words, the “lower self” that is “formed by institutions such as the family, schools, capitalism or religious traditions”, and is therefore “not to be trusted” [2000: 110]), it follows that if enough individuals engage in this type of self-development then society as a whole will change for the better. Thus, in Melton’s words, the New Age is “ultimately a *social* vision of a world transformed” (*quoted in* Hanegraaff 1996: 375 [italics used in Hanegraaff’s text]).

York makes a similar point when he states that “[w]hat unites all New Agers... is the vision of radical mystical transformation on both the personal and collective levels” (York 1995: 40). That is to say, the New Age is a “springboard for the quantum leap of collective consciousness, which is to bring about and constitute the New Age itself” (1995: 40).

by it” (Campbell 2001: 84), thus serving in effect to “render both history and community irrelevant” (2001: 83).

And in broad corollary with the New Age's basic premise of the 'divinity of the self', the above also seems to extend to what could be seen as a general attitude of ambivalence towards the 'manifest' world itself. On the one hand, the New Age is characterised by what Hanegraaff refers to (citing Arthur Lovejoy's interpretation of the term rather than Weber's) as 'weak this-worldliness', meaning that it is sustained by the “[hope] for ‘a prolongation of the mode of being which we know in the world of change and sense and plurality and social fellowship’”²⁵ (Hanegraaff 1996: 114). On the other hand, however, this focus also belies a deeper paradox, which relates to Campbell's above suggestion that monistic beliefs ultimately question the overall 'reality' or importance of the physical realm²⁶ – an implication that is doubly apparent within the New Age, perhaps, given its emphasis upon what is thought to be a fundamentally 'internal' spiritual 'source'. Indeed, this is precisely what William Bloom is saying when he writes that the perceptual world is “only the outer veil of [this] invisible, inner and causal reality” (*cited in* Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 114) And as Heelas himself observes, in New Age spiritualities “the world beyond the individual Self tends to be of a (relatively) precarious ontological standing” (Heelas 1996b: 35). Thus, while ostensibly well disposed towards the physical realm, New Agers actually tend to regard it in a rather negative light, from a philosophical rather than moral point of view, at least.

B. Paganism and the New Age: A comparison

Before embarking on this discussion, it is important to note that authorities on the New Age – both academic and otherwise – have tended in the past to identify Paganism as a part of that phenomenon. William Bloom, for instance,

²⁵ This statement therefore expresses a vaguely positive orientation towards the world based on what could be, and so can be contrasted with 'strong this-worldliness', which involves, in Hanegraaff's words, “a focus on the world of experience as *such*” (Hanegraaff 1996: 114 [Hanegraaff's italics]).

²⁶ See chapter four.

has proclaimed that the New Age includes “native traditions” such as those of “Celtic Europe (both Wiccan and Druidic)” (*cited in* York 1995: 89). From the academic camp, Hanegraaff includes a chapter on ‘neo-Paganism’ in his lengthy 1996 study of the New Age. Similarly, Heelas has written that the New Age includes “elements from ‘pagan’ teachings including Celtic, [and] Druidic”, along with “Wiccan rituals” and “shamanic activities” (Heelas 1996b: 1). More recently, the American sociologist Jon Bloch has described New Age and modern Pagan encampments in that country as forming an ideologically cohesive alternative spiritual “community” (Bloch 1998: 2).

Certainly, as may be inferred from Possamai’s list, there is a substantial amount of thematic common ground between Paganism and the New Age (with astrology, feminist spirituality, tarot and urban shamanism coming most obviously to mind). It should also be acknowledged that both are defining features of Campbell’s cultic milieu category. This concept will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter, but suffice to say for now that this categorisation relates to their similarly highly epistemologically individualistic orientations and ostensibly ‘outlandish’ and culturally marginal aspect.

But while it might be par for the course for commentators on the New Age to regard Paganism as an adjunct of that phenomenon, the reverse is by no means always the case. Some of the author’s interviewees, for example, were very negative (even damning) towards the New Age, the general impression being that – rightly or wrongly – they regarded it as dilettantish and shallow. For instance, while commending its “open-mindedness”, CC nevertheless takes exception to what she sees as New Agers’ “lack of discrimination”, and admits to “feeling revolted” by what to her mind is their “brainless enthusiasm” (CC: 19). In contrast, she regards “people who are attracted to Paganism as having “something a little bit stronger that pulls them in that particular direction” (CC: 19). Similarly, DM comments that “New Agers who have the opportunity or the ability to do research have a tendency to start doing other stuff within a rather short space of time”, and that “a lot of people involved in the New Age movement... are only in it for the money” (DM: 24). WS is especially dismissive of New Agers who, in her words, erroneously consider themselves Pagans simply by virtue of possessing

superficial counter-cultural *accoutrements*, such as “dreadlocks and a big spliff” (WS: 24).

These interview comments back up certain conclusions that have appeared in a number of academic studies, include York (1995)²⁷ and Pearson (1998)²⁸. Notably, Hutton writes that “witchcraft is one of the religions upon which New Agers attempt to draw in their effort to create an ideal spirituality, but British witches do not generally collaborate in this process” (Hutton 1999b: 412). Moreover, Bloch's impression of a cohesive and harmonious ‘community’ of New Agers and Pagans is undermined by Jorgensen and Russell's assertion that, “notwithstanding ideological similarities and the inclination of some scholars to categorize the New Age and Neopagan movements together”, the latter “is almost completely independent” from the former on a social level (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 326). Thus, whether or not such damning Pagan opinions are justified, they nevertheless call into question the presumption that Paganism and the New Age represent a united ideological or spiritual vanguard.

Moreover, it could be argued that there might be more to claims of a substantive disjunction between Paganism and New Age than mere personal prejudice²⁹. Most notably, the two phenomena have markedly different

²⁷ York cites an opinion pole conducted by the Pagan Spirit Alliance which suggests that followers of Paganism “tend to see [it] as more specialized, more true, more of a religion and less of a fad” (York 1995: 157). Interestingly, Heelas (along with his colleague Linda Woodhead) has recently adopted the term ‘spiritualities of life’ in preference to ‘New Age’ to denote “those teachings to do with the immanence of the divine” (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 112) and emphasise the “quest within” (2000: 110) because of the reputation for “consumeristic, trivial, ‘Hollywood spirituality’” that they feel the original term has (unjustly) accrued in recent years (2000: 112).

²⁸ Pearson asserts that there is “considerable antagonism” among Wiccans towards the term ‘New Age’ (Pearson 1998: 45).

²⁹ Interestingly, academic authorities on the New Age have been hard pressed to reconcile the two encampments on anything more than the broadest of levels. Most glaringly, perhaps, Hanegraaff (as Pearson herself points out [Pearson 1998: 55, *n.* 5]) describes Wicca as a “complicating factor” for those attempting to assess the “general trend of New Age religion” (Hanegraaff 1998: 31, *n.* 11). Given his influence on academic understandings of the New Age movement, it is also significant that Heelas himself has (along with his colleague Linda Woodhead) recently proposed that modern “polytheistic” orientations should be regarded as

cosmological perspectives, being characterised by 'parallelist' and monist orientations respectively, which means that even where common thematic ground is in evidence, interpretations may differ radically³⁰. In other words, Pagans characteristically regard the universe as a matrix of dynamically interacting forces (including individuals) that has to be negotiated judiciously and respectfully, rather than as simply the projection of an ultimate, 'Higher Self'.

A number of recent commentators have been alert to this discrepancy. Pearson, for instance, writes that Pagan worldviews jar substantially with the New Age belief "that exclusive importance should be accorded to the inner realm" (Pearson 1998: 49). She explains – in specific reference to Heelas' comments on 'theistic, traditionalized, polytheistic' spirituality – that, "although a small number of Wiccans do not believe in the gods as external reality (using concepts of deity as archetypes existing only within the psyche)", Wiccans as a rule "worship their gods and goddesses in a form of invocation that involves both an external reality and an inner, psychological component" (1998: 49). Also significant is Hutton's assertion (deliberately alluding in the process to one of the 'bedrocks' of New Age thought) that the main reason why Pagan Witchcraft should not simply be regarded as a "straightforward process of therapy, self-development, or human potential" is that it "makes explicit reference to a supernatural and at least partially external source of empowerment" (Hutton 1999b: 391).

This distinction is also evident with regard to attitudes towards the notion of authority. Thus, whereas both encampments may be thought consummately epistemologically individualistic, the characteristic Pagan

having "more in common" with a different spiritual category to that of the "spiritualities of life", this being "religions of difference" (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 113) (see below).

³⁰ This is illustrated by differing understandings of the idea of Shamanism, which – as noted above – is a popular subject among Pagans and New Agers alike. Thus, whereas (as indicated in chapters two and four) Pagans will tend to see shamanic (or Shamanic) power as emanating from a 'separate' or distinct yet accessible Otherworld 'dimension', the New Age perspective is perhaps better represented by the American author Kenneth Meadows' assertion that it requires "[o]nly the power source that is within to be awakened" for an individual to become a Shaman (*quoted in* Heelas 1996b: 23).

belief in 'external' agencies effectively precludes the view that the 'Self' is the ultimate seat of 'power' in the cosmos. Accordingly, Pearson points out that, while Wiccans and New Agers appear to share a distaste for authority in its dictionary definition of "the power or right to enforce obedience", other "applications" of the term "appear more accurately to reflect the meaning of authority in Wicca"; Wiccan authority may therefore be understood "as 'delegated power', and as 'an influence exerted because of recognised knowledge or expertise'" (Pearson 1998: 51). She concludes that for Wiccans, "[a]uthority is not simply located within the individual, the individual's 'higher self', or the individual's experience and intuition"; rather, "[it] is to be found in other Wiccans and in the gods as well as in oneself" (1998: 53) – an assertion that might, moreover, be thought no less descriptive of other (i.e. non-Wiccan) Pagan 'paths'.

More broadly, while (as Heelas and Campbell both aver) socio-cultural and historical or otherwise 'traditional' terms of reference tend to be displaced within New Age discourse by the conception of individual ontological ultimacy, Pagans, as explained throughout this study, characteristically appear to aspire to 'root' notions of individuality within broader (yet also consummately 'local') interpretative frameworks.

For Hutton, an implication of all this (and one that is especially significant, perhaps, given the New Age's apparent reputation for 'faddishness' among Pagans, not to mention the latter's characteristic view of 'self-fulfilment' as a process of incremental development, or even a sort of 'apprenticeship'³¹) is that Pagans are more inclined towards consistency in their spiritual pursuits. Thus, whereas the New Age "regards people as free to draw upon any historical traditions which can assist them in the quest for transition to a better way of living", Pagans tend more to exhibit a "sustained commitment to a single process of training and initiation, and very much [regard] themselves as following a specific tradition." (Hutton 1999b: 411-2)

³¹ See chapter eight.

Thus, while New Agers may tend to be ambivalent or even hostile to the notion of tradition (however this might be understood³²), such frameworks are clearly vital to Pagan outlooks, whether or not they derive from demonstrable precedent. Attitudes towards the concept of religion are an important case in point, for, rather than seeing this as uniformly denoting a 'dead' or 'exclusivistic' outlook, it seems that Pagans are typically quite happy to frame their spiritualities, at least in part, in such ostensibly 'conventional' terms. This is notably evidenced by the pivotal usage of (often elaborate) ceremonies and rituals³³, and is also exemplified by the recognition that is commonly accorded to quasi-hierarchical functionaries such as Priests and Priestesses, as well as the belief in 'exterior' (or at least partially exterior) spiritual agencies and realms. In all, then, it might therefore perhaps be possible to invert Heelas' New Age proviso by stating that if there is too little external authority ('theistic, traditionalized, polytheistic'), the individual is no longer with Paganism³⁴. The benefit of this *caveat* is that it enables observers to take into account the important thematic and epistemological common ground that exists between Paganism and the New Age while also recognising crucial differences with respect to ideology, ontology and the interpretation of source material.

³² That is to say, whether the term is understood as referring to either actual or notional socio-cultural continuity, or to the 'external' transmission or formalisation of a spiritual system.

³³ Acknowledging just such a (seeming) paradox, Adler writes that Pagans are able to "remain anti-authoritarian while retaining rituals and ecstatic techniques that, in our culture, are used only by dogmatic religions or are the province of small and forgotten tribal groups" (Adler 1986: *ix*).

³⁴ It is presumably in this specific regard that Woodhead and Heelas currently see Pagan 'polytheism' as having less 'in common' with New Age-type 'spiritualities of life' than with another spiritual category, namely 'religions of difference' (see above). The authors have adopted the latter term to denote the more 'traditional' forms of religion, the most important aspect of which, with respect to Paganism, at least, being its reliance on the notion of a "transcendent" (and therefore, to an extent, 'external') deity (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 481), as opposed to the emphasis on "the god within" that the authors see as intrinsic to the former category (2000: 482). That said, Paganism's concern with certain other 'core' or 'conventional' religious features such as ritual might also be regarded as relevant here (see also chapter eleven).

Another important distinction concerns the contrast between Paganism's definitively non-salvational orientation (as explored previously³⁵), and what could perhaps be seen as a vaguely soteriological outlook on the part of the New Age³⁶. For example, Pearson (whose above comments on the importance of the 'ego' to Pagans are specifically intended as a *riposte* to New Age assumptions) contrasts the New Age suspicion of social reality and its purportedly attendant 'lower self' with the Wiccan presumption that the latter is essential for a 'healthy psyche' and so "does not need 'exorcising' or destroying" (Pearson 1998: 50). She concludes that Wiccans "elect to live in the world rather than attempt to overcome or escape from it" (1998: 47) (although this point might also be extended to include Pagans generally, it could be argued³⁷).

Similarly, while Paganism and the New Age are both holistic in outlook, the former's 'parallelist' ontological foundation contrasts sharply with the latter's supposition that the physical realm is ultimately little more than an insubstantial 'veil'³⁸. Michael York points out that Pagans come in for

³⁵ See chapter eight.

³⁶ Significantly, Campbell's discussion of James' 'modernised' theodical statement (see chapter eight) is intended to show the relevance of the notion of theodicy to New Age thinking.

³⁷ The Pagan writer John Hargreaves-Pearson illustrates the not insignificant differences of ideology and overall moral 'tone' that seem to exist between the two encampments, while also providing evidence of the sort of vitriolic opinions Pagans can hold about New Agers, in the following comments. He writes: "The aura of the New Age is like sweet icing sugar. These people are third eye, heart'n'throat specialists, developing their upper chakras whilst leaving the guts'n'gonads untouched. Their shadow selves are buried like coffins, festering under the superego... And I do get cynical when folk don't get down to the nitty gritty of admitting that there is a Dark Side that needs dealing with... Pagans do not, in my opinion, live in cloud cuckoo land." (Hargreaves-Pearson 1988: 7-8)

³⁸ The differences between New Age and Paganism in this regard are neatly illustrated in Steven Sutcliffe's study of the Findhorn New Age "settlement", which was founded in the early 'sixties on the north-eastern coast of Scotland (Sutcliffe 1998: 43, *n.* 2). Sutcliffe explains that at one point in its history, the community's perspective on the material world was redolent of traditional occult (and by extension, it should also be added, modern Pagan) lore, as outlined by Faivre. Accordingly, Nature "[acquired] the properties of a distinctive realm, a subtle world of 'numinous materialism' accessible only to emic – and specifically

considerable criticism from New Age quarters for this very reason, with the latter commonly accusing them of adopting a “materialistic orientation” that is “‘too this-worldly’ and without a proper spiritual perspective” (York 1996: 167). Conversely, Pagans tend to dismiss the New Age’s “Eastern” influenced adherence to the “concept that all is illusion, to deny the reality of death, pain, etc.”³⁹ (1996: 167) With these moral and cosmological distinctions in mind, Campbell persuasively suggests that the New Age and Paganism may therefore be usefully compared to Gnosticism and Hermeticism – the ‘pessimistic’ and ‘optimistic’ approaches to gnostic or ‘cosmic’ awareness – respectively⁴⁰ (Private conversation).

Moreover, drawing from a number of accounts, it could also be argued that in addition to matters of soteriology, the relationship to esoteric tradition that is respectively represented by the two encampments differs sharply in another way. That is, whereas Paganism – according, say, to Harvey, Sutcliffe and Greenwood – seems to exhibit substantial continuity with

esoteric – exegesis” (1998: 36). However, over the decades Findhorn’s ideology has followed an “interiorising trajectory” whereby the “ontology of nature” has been recast through a philosophical “sleight of hand”, culminating in a credo which states that “‘the whole universe is within me’” (1998: 37). Sutcliffe explains that as a consequence, the previous “picture of an enchanted reality” has been displaced by an “abstracted, introverted, quasi-solipsistic understanding” of the universe as “‘something internal and mystical’, a trigger for ‘attending to the inner being’” rather than balancing interior and exterior dimensions (1998: 37).

³⁹ This quasi-oriental ‘bias’ might also account, at least in part, for the distaste expressed by some of the interviewees towards the New Age. CC, for instance, summarily dismisses as “contemptible” the western fashion during the ‘sixties and early ‘seventies for what she describes as “Karma-Cola”, by which she means “[v]ery watered-down Indian religion” (CC: 3).

⁴⁰ Given their generally ‘weak this-worldly’ orientation, it is perhaps unlikely that New Agers would necessarily see themselves as endeavouring to escape the ‘evil material power’ of the universe that was identified by the Gnostics. Nevertheless, it could also be argued that the New Age admonition that ‘your life does not work’, together with its tendency both to downplay the importance of physicality and to emphasise future perfectibility, does indeed bring to mind the old Gnostics’ simultaneously moral and ‘cosmic’ dissatisfaction with the phenomenal world, and attendant desire to supplant this with an unambiguously spiritual focus.

esoteric principles (as outlined by Faivre) with respect to such pivotal concepts as the 'noetic' or 'controlled imagination'⁴¹, this does not appear to be so for the New Age, which, according to Hanegraaff, at least, is "worlds apart" from "traditional esotericism" (Hanegraaff 1997a: 379). Hanegraaff argues that this is because, although the phenomenon is indebted to esoteric currents such as Theosophy, the "mental horizon" of the "contemporary New Age movement" is quite different from that which once circumscribed 'traditional' esotericism, not least because it "interprets esotericism from distinctly modernist and secular frameworks (instrumental causality; evolutionism; psychology)" (1997a: 379). In other words, then, whereas Paganism celebrates an unambiguously 'magical' cosmos, New Agers will tend to portray magical frameworks as metaphors for other, ostensibly more 'rational' interpretative schema.

Having compared Pagan spirituality with other heterodox spiritual currents, it is thus possible to conclude that, while the rise of Paganism has clearly played a part of the 'flowering of alternative religions' referred to by Bruce, a discussion of its full sociological significance requires that it be looked upon as a distinctive, even unique, phenomenon combining an integrative, magical ontology and an epistemologically individualistic ethos, rather than merely as a sub-branch of either NRM or New Age spiritual categories. Accordingly, when discussing Paganism's relevance to and significance for twenty-first century British culture, it is therefore insufficient simply to look at alternative spiritualities *en masse*; rather, the peculiar features and contours of the phenomenon must be taken into consideration. It is thus to this more generalised appraisal that the discussion will now turn, starting with a look at some of the sociological theories that might conceivably be thought relevant to such an endeavour.

⁴¹ See chapter five

Having established what appear to be the characteristic features of Pagan worldviews, attitudes and behaviours, it is time to look at the theories that may (or may not) help to locate Paganism within broader sociological contexts. This is not an unproblematic undertaking, however, for, as may by now be evident, Paganism is in some respects quite unlike any other spiritual category, 'conventional' or otherwise. Along with its comparative novelty, it is this factor that has ensured that it is a phenomenon which, in Hutton's words, "scholars trained in traditional history, theology, sociology, and anthropology [do not] find easy to understand" (Hutton 1999b: 416). Nevertheless, by bearing this *caveat* in mind, in addition to considering some of the increasing number of studies of Paganism that are now available, it should be possible to gauge something of the phenomenon's sociological significance.

1. Is Paganism a 'Cult'?

One of the commonest ways by which sociologists have tried to interpret the relationship between heterodox and 'mainstream' spiritualities is through invoking the notion of 'cult' religion. Most closely associated with the works of American scholars like Howard Becker and J Milton Yinger (York 1995: 241-4), the term's use in such a context was a consequence of attempts to extend what is known as the 'church-sect' typology¹, in order to account for more 'novel' or unusual spiritual manifestations, and in particular, "new religious movements" (Hutton 1999b: 410).

In brief, whereas 'church' and 'sect' are supposed to denote, respectively, the orthodox and inclusive, and radical and exclusive categories of western religion (the latter typically arising out of the former, so the theory has it, in a dialectical fashion), the 'cult' concept is a catch-all category intended to denote religions that are not encompassed by those terms. Cults

¹ See chapter one.

are thus 'outside the bounds' of organised religion, both in creedal and structural senses, and so are defined within the sociological tradition as, according to Campbell, "any religious or quasi-religious collectivity which is loosely organized, ephemeral and espouses a deviant system of belief and practice" (quoted in York 1995: 251).

York cites the church-sect typology as the most appropriate framework for analysing Paganism (along with the New Age) to be found within the sociology of religion. He assesses the various schemas that have evolved out of the basic 'church-sect' model, arguing that it is possible to derive from these "practical concepts... which help to locate the place and range" of the phenomena in question (1995: 238), before deciding – eventually – upon Stark and Bainbridge's notion of the 'audience cult' (1995: 319). For York, the latter's appropriateness is evident on two levels. Ideologically, such groupings (as outlined by Stark and Bainbridge) proffer a minor *frisson* of vaguely anti-establishment sodality (manifesting as a "mild vicarious thrill" and "social entertainment"); and structurally, they have "virtually no aspects of formal organization" (1995: 259).

On the surface, such a term could be thought at least vaguely applicable to Paganism, due to the phenomenon's apparently 'centrifugal' and idiosyncratic approach to belief and organisation, and the suspicion of the cultural 'mainstream' articulated by many adherents. However, York's assessment is ultimately unpersuasive, principally because the phrase 'mild vicarious thrill' hardly does justice to the highly intensive type of experiences (as epitomised by the concept of 'gnosis') that are often described by followers of Pagan paths, which point serves also to undermine Stark and Bainbridge's apparent assumption of an intrinsic association between precarious structural organisation and 'lukewarm' spiritual orientations in such cases.

Significantly, York himself appears unhappy with most of the 'church-sect' type models available to him, even admitting to having felt "forced" to choose Stark and Bainbridge's concept, and suggests elsewhere that Gerlach and Hine's notion of SPIN (an acronym for "Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network") may actually be "perhaps the most accurate sociological construct applicable to [Neo-Paganism]" (1995: 325). Basing

their notion on politically radical, structurally elusive and apparently 'rudderless' organisations such as the Black Panthers and "Palestinian guerrillas", Gerlach and Hine define such sodalities as "highly diversified and multifunctional enclaves lying outside of the web of governmental supervision which increasingly enmeshes 'secular' organizations and enterprises."

(1995: 324) Moreover, their membership consists of

"[P]eople who are organized for, ideologically motivated by, and committed to a purpose which implements some form of personal or social change; who are actively engaged in the recruitment of others; and whose influence spreads in opposition to the established social order". (1995: 325)

York concludes that, the "question of 'active recruitment'" aside, "this definition covers the New Age and Neo-Pagan movements as well" (1995: 325). Whether it actually does, though, is debatable. For, even granting that there might conceivably be a superficial resemblance on structural grounds, it is difficult to reconcile Paganism's largely individualistic, integrative and 'reformist' ethos with the radical, even revolutionary or paramilitary, ideologies Gerlach and Hine principally identify with the SPIN model. And even if this were possible, it would still beg the question: What is it, then, that distinguishes Pagan collectivities from the other bodies – some of which can hardly be regarded as focussing on spiritual matters – that are covered by this term?

Thus, in attempting to assess Paganism's significance, it is clearly not enough merely to regard it in terms of all-encompassing categories defined in terms of their supposed negative ideological and organisational relationship to broader, 'mainstream' institutions. Rather, a Pagan tradition such as, say, Witchcraft, should, as Hutton suggests, be seen as "neither a sect² nor a cult", but should instead be gauged on its own merits, as a "fully developed, independent" spiritual category (Hutton 1999b: 411).

² Hutton's reservation here relates to the dialectical relationship this category has with mainstream 'church'-type organisations. Thus, citing certain "American scholars", Hutton

Consequently, contrary to York's suggestions, it is necessary to look elsewhere for concepts that may be useful for locating Paganism in sociological terms. The following section will consider a number of ideas that might prove more valuable for this purpose, including a couple that have been discussed already in this study (one at great length, the other less so), namely epistemological individualism and the cultic milieu.

2. The 'Cultic Milieu', and Epistemological and Theological Individualisms

Campbell came up with the first of these sociological concepts as a result of his dissatisfaction with the prevalence of the term 'cult' in sociological discourse, and in particular, with its implication that a defining characteristic of 'alternative' spiritual manifestations is a propensity towards dissolution both on structural and creedal levels. According to this view, the absence of a proper institutional set-up or ethos ensures that the inevitable removal or fading away of whatever 'core' features such an organisation may once have had – such as, most characteristically, a “charismatic figure” (*cited in York 1995: 251*) – will cause it eventually to disintegrate, and so, in effect, to disappear off the sociological 'radar'. But as Campbell pointed out, 'alternative' spiritual culture, generally speaking, is both represented and upheld less by discrete, inward-looking and self-contained groupings (of the sort commonly associated with NRMs) than by a diffuse yet “constant” and

writes: “[The] word 'sect', properly speaking, applies only to religions which are formed by separation from an existing religious body and tradition, such as a Church”, and although this “is indeed how most new movements emerged in the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”, it hardly applies to “a large number of those which have appeared” subsequently (Hutton 1999b: 409). Accordingly, “Wicca and [other forms of Pagan Witchcraft] would only be sects if they had split off from a larger and more inclusive body of modern Paganism”, whereas in fact the “reverse” had happened – namely, “Paganism has been formed largely out of the example set by the earlier appearance of pagan witchcraft” (1999b: 409).

“largely stable feature of society”, which he labelled the ‘cultic milieu’³ (1995: 252). This, he explained, is a nebulous but pervasive phenomenon, a cultural substratum that is dependent on no specific organisations, structures or personalities, but rather encompasses all “collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with [such] beliefs” (1995: 252). And, being concerned more with the “common ideology of seekership” (1995: 252-3) than received dogma or charismatic leaders, it is characteristically “ecumenical, super-ecclesiastical, syncretistic and tolerant in outlook”, not to mention markedly individualistic (1995: 252).

If there is a problem with the concept – for the purposes of the present discussion, at least – it is that it does not distinguish between its Pagan and New Age ‘sectors’. Nevertheless, in emphasising the flexibility and individualism behind much ‘alternative’ spirituality (NRMs being a notable exception), Campbell’s term is thus consummately and equally descriptive of both phenomena. As Jorgensen and Russell explain, the term is “ingenious in recognizing that this novel collective form permits and encourages extraordinary individual freedom balanced by opportunities to create highly intimate, even if loosely organized and short-lived, groups” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 335).

The cultic milieu concept thus adds contextual nuance to Paganism’s notably epistemologically individualistic character, highlighting as it does the specifically esoteric or heterodox notions within which Pagans typically frame this approach. Conversely, however, while acknowledging the relevance of the two terms to the discussion of Paganism, it would be unwise to regard them as synonymous. This is because the trend towards epistemological individualism is not solely identifiable in ‘cultic’ terms, but, according to Woodhead and Heelas, is also currently manifesting more generally, in the

³ Campbell writes: “Substantively [the cultic milieu] includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure.” (Quoted in York 1995: 252) Oddly, York himself accuses Campbell of tending towards “over-generalization” (1995: 252), even though the latter’s concept appears to be the only sociological category that is specifically and exclusively intended to denote New Age and modern magical spiritualities, together with the *penumbra* of associated themes that surrounds them.

“political, domestic [and] economic realms.” (Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 478-9) Interestingly, it also appears to be almost as evident within ‘conventional’ or orthodox religious circles as it is ‘cultic’ encampments, being indicative of a more general and widespread “culture of choice which favours religiosity beyond the regulation of tradition” (2000: 378). Thus, Tomasi, for example, writes that among modern Italian youth, “[p]ersonal conscience frequently serves as the benchmark of what is good and bad”, such that they now “exhibit considerable diversity in their attitudes to morality and are dubious of Catholic eschatology” (Tomasi 1999b: 35). Thus, while “strongly committed” to Catholic religion, they will nevertheless be inclined to “invent their own ritual and symbols in order to transmute their experience as believers – in other words to establish their identities” (1999b: 35).

Very similar (albeit with less of an emphasis on generational differences) is the sociologists Nancy Davis and Robert Robinson’s notion of ‘theological individualism’. The authors arrived at this concept through looking at surveys of (again) Italian religious beliefs (although they cross-referenced these with earlier US-based studies⁴), concluding that patterns of religiosity in western societies currently constitute a “continuum from orthodoxy to modernism” (Davis and Robinson 1999: 340), with the theological individualist pole being largely inimical to “religious traditionalism”⁵ (1999: 341). Accordingly, Davis and Robinson explain (citing Hunter, and echoing both Wallis and Tomasi) that the term essentially means that the individual self, rather than “Providence”, is regarded as the “ultimate source of moral authority” (1999: 340), and so denotes a significant trend towards a “faith which is ‘privatized’” as opposed to centring around established institutions (1999: 343).

However, while the cultic milieu might not have a monopoly on epistemological individualism, some have suggested that it is nevertheless consummately representative of this trend. Campbell himself, for instance,

⁴ Davis and Robinson also make similar claims for the rise of theological individualism in a later, more wide-ranging study, which they base on “national surveys of 12 European countries and Israel” (Davis and Robinson 2001: 23).

⁵ Davis and Robinson also use the phrase “theological modernism” to denote the same phenomenon (Davis and Robinson 1999: 341).

argues that the overall displacement of a “commitment to specific doctrines and dogmas” correlates above all with a rise in “seekership or in other words a valuation of individual intellectual and spiritual growth”, and so is indicative of a “major shift” in favour of cultic spirituality (*cited in* Hamilton 1995: 178). Conversely, Wallis has suggested that the latter is a ‘prevalent’ feature of the cultic substratum (*cited in* Lewis 1992: 7), and Lewis adds that the current growth of New Age and cultic spirituality is particularly representative of a “significant cultural shift” in favour of a “new, truly pluralistic mainstream” that is congruent with the apparent ongoing establishment of epistemological individualism as a normative value within western society (1992: 4).

Thus, while they might not be identical, cultic spiritual manifestations and the trend towards epistemological individualism appear nonetheless to be closely, or even synchronously, related, with the former serving, it could be argued, as a sort of sociological barometer for the latter. However, this still leaves two important questions. Firstly, why is society becoming more individualistic? And secondly, why do increasing numbers of modern individuals choose to pursue Pagan paths in particular? The second of these questions will be considered in due course. To attempt to answer the first question, it is necessary to look at what has perhaps been the most important theme in the entire sociological cannon, namely modernity.

3. Modernity

The term ‘modernity’ stemmed from the response of eighteenth and nineteenth century European and American intellectuals to the comprehensive disruption of the traditional social panorama that they believed to be occurring at that time, as a consequence of encroaching urbanisation and the rise of industrial capitalism. This cultural anxiety and ideological ferment also drew upon the burgeoning enthusiasm for scientific method that was ushered in during the European Enlightenment⁶, along with

⁶ According to the sociologist Krishan Kumar, this term refers to the period of seventeenth and eighteenth century European intellectual history during which the principles of

the radical political turmoil that had given rise to successful revolutionary movements both in the New World and on the Continent⁷. Kumar explains that the notion of modernity grew out of the impression that these changes were so extreme as to signal a total disconnection with “all that had gone before”, not least the hitherto unquestionable power of church and aristocracy (Kumar 1978: 58). It thus came to be widely held that “[h]istory, by its very propulsion of one part of the world into an era that felt itself uniquely new, had thereby abrogated its authority in the eyes of that part of the world” (1978: 58).

The discipline of sociology was developed as an attempt to consider these perceived changes on a systematic level of inquiry. According to Kumar, the ‘general features’ of modernity that can be identified from the ‘classic’ sociological theories of pioneers such as Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel are threefold (Kumar 1988: 10). Firstly, there is ‘individualisation’, which means that “the structures of modern society take as their unit the individual rather than, as with agrarian or peasant society, the group or community” (1988: 11). The second feature is ‘specialisation’, which refers to the thoroughgoing “division of labour” and rationalised delegation of the “diverse tasks” of “production, consumption, socialization and authoritative decision-making” (1988: 11) that enabled the development of modern industrial society. The third is ‘abstraction’, which term denotes the extent to which “modern institutions” came (in theory) to depend on

“rationalist philosophy” that had arisen in association with the likes of Newton and Descartes began to take a prominent place in European cultural awareness (Kumar 1978: 25).

⁷ The revolutionary political events of the time prompted European intellectuals to adapt Enlightenment principles, to formulate an ideology of Progress. This concept was first mooted by radical French philosophers (or *philosophes*) such as Condorcet, who saw the emergence of Science and Reason as constituting a powerful challenge to what they regarded as “the superstitious and unregenerate forces of Church and State” (Kumar 1978: 20). This led to a quasi-prophetic sensibility which held that such philosophies would serve ultimately to liberate humanity from the morally and spiritually “unendurable” conditions of contemporary life (1978: 16). In time, the ideology of Progress, expressing as it did “the idea of fundamental transformation, of the whole restructuring of human society”, would become “deeply lodged in the European mind and, [subsequently], in the consciousness of the rest of the world.” (1978: 20)

“rational and impersonal precepts formulated by scientific experts” rather than the “divine or prescriptive authority” or “custom and tradition” that were assumed to have characterised the ‘pre-modern’ era (1988: 11).

Kumar stresses that this is a somewhat ‘idealised’ and incomplete typology; nevertheless, as he explains, the above theories all attempt to validate a broad conceptual dichotomy that has proven to be highly influential. Thus, “[it] is indeed such a set of contrasts, not necessarily carefully distinguished, that most people have in mind when they think or speak of ‘modern’ as opposed to ‘traditional’ society”. (1988: 11) In summary, it is commonly presumed that the shift from traditional to ‘modern’ forms of society entailed the displacement of ‘irrational’ sources of authority (such as church or crown) in favour of systems of inquiry, production and governance that pragmatically prioritise ‘rational’ self-interest.

It should be stressed at this point, however, that ‘classic’ sociological discussions of the question of modernity are not without their problems (some of which will be considered in greater detail later on). Nevertheless, in one respect at least, the presumption of a radical shift between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ forms of social organisation appears incontrovertible, this being the first of the characteristics identified by Kumar – namely, the unprecedented ideological attention that came to be accorded to the idea of ‘the individual’. This was due in no small part to the hegemonic rise of liberal democracy (with which the model of modernity is closely identified), and of the capitalist economy that accompanied this development. Thus, as the sociologist Don Slater puts it, “[by] making liberty the central and overriding social value, liberalism [argued] that personal interests – desire, choices, beliefs – can be the only sources of social legitimacy” (Slater 1997: 40).

Another, earlier factor in the rise of modernity was the Protestant Reformation – a period of theological and political change that saw the substantial problematisation of the relationship between religious and secular (i.e. non-religious) involvements in many regions of sixteenth century Europe⁸. Without delving too deeply into the convolutions of western

⁸ According to the religious historian Alan Gilbert, Weber wrote that Protestantism “rested on two basic premises. It stressed the sovereignty of a transcendent God over a rational,

religious history, it is possible to summarise the Reformation's key significance with respect to modernity by quoting Gilbert, who writes that Protestantism's inherent individualism and "rejection of Roman [Catholic] authority", together with the "normative cultural role" the latter upheld, resulted in a "*de facto*" pluralism, which is to say, a climate of "religious toleration" (Gilbert 1980: 28). And so, the broad acceptance of "religious deviance or irreligion" that was tacitly encouraged by Protestantism "implied that religious conformity was regarded no longer as a necessary condition for acceptance within a wider culture" – an imperative that, moreover, came eventually to be "adopted as official policy" throughout the western world (1980: 28) (even, it could be added, in nominally Catholic nations such as France). And lest the emergence of epistemological individualism be regarded as an entirely contemporary development, it is worth bearing in mind Bruce's assertion that "the right of the sovereign individual to determine what is truth and what is falsity", which he regards as the defining characteristic of modern western religious trends (Bruce 1998: 27), stems in no small part from the Reformation's espousal of the "freedom to dissent" (1998: 28).

The concept of modernity thus sheds substantial light on the origins of modern 'cultic' spirituality, and therefore, on Paganism. However, more complexity and nuance is needed for a fuller picture, and so it is necessary at this juncture to return once more to the growing corpus of Pagan studies.

ordered creation, and it emphasised individual human responsibilities and prerogatives in matters of faith and practice." (Gilbert 1980: 28) It thus effectively devolved the sphere of religious belief and expression away from established institutions such as priestly offices and "monastic communities" (the traditional preserves of what Weber referred to as "virtuoso religion") towards "the idea of the 'priesthood of all believers'" (1980: 29). Thus, rather than functioning through a separate (albeit powerful and wealthy) ecclesiastical stratum, Protestant Christianity decreed a far more complex and (potentially) problematic type of involvement with the temporal realm – to which good Christians were expected to remain simultaneously 'aloof' and 'engaged' – which, in effect, proposed that "an asceticism of the masses had to function within the 'world'" (1980: 29).

4. Paganism as the 'Romantic Rationalist's Religion'

This was the phrase chosen by Tanya Luhrmann to convey what she regards as the primary reason for Paganism's growing popularity. As explained earlier⁹, Luhrmann argues that westerners find magical notions appealing because these help provide an 'emotive and imaginative' dimension to existence. However (as was also noted), Luhrmann believes that contemporary and magical sensibilities are hard, if not impossible, to reconcile. To explain this apparent contradiction, she proposes that those living "in a modern context" are 'forced' to adopt a strategy of 'interpretative drift', which means that they must "argue for their practice [and so] learn to talk about [it] in ways that make sense of and reinforce their own commitment to it" (Luhrmann 1989: 314). In short, Pagans have to train themselves to 'suspend their disbelief' in magic, thus quieting any overbearing rationalist assumptions on their part.

But for Luhrmann, interpretative drift is also aided by the (to her) now prevalent cultural sense that modernity has to a significant extent undermined its very own foundations. This is due to the "relativistic" nature of modern discourse, in which the "supposedly self-confident rationalism" (1989: 343) of the west has given way to the "reflexive" questioning of these very precepts in a manner which, paradoxically, suggests that they are nevertheless "obviously accepted" (1989: 344). Thus, 'modern magic' may on the whole be considered an "expression of... ambivalence" towards hitherto unassailable concepts such as "logic, objectivity and demonstrability", albeit one that ironically stems from "the platform of a confident faith in scientific validity" (1989: 344).

In effect, then, modern Pagans remain hidebound by rationalism, being ultimately unable truly to commit to a belief in the supernatural dimensions which supposedly define their worldviews. Accordingly, Paganism highlights the general cultural and cognitive ambivalence that now prevails – in other words, it is "simply a more flamboyant instance of the conceptual cacophony of contemporary culture" (1989: 344).

⁹ See chapter one.

Some parts of Lurhmann's argument – specifically, the idea that it is attractive to modern individuals because it provides them with a sense of 'meaning' *via* the invocation and application of imaginably potent symbols and narratives – are persuasive. There is, however, a problem with her basic premise – that, for all their efforts, Pagans are unable to bypass the influence of a cultural environment that has become little more than a plateau of substantively arbitrary or 'directionless' signs. In fact, Lurhmann's supposition is not quite as self-evident as she assumes. Certainly, if anything, the interviewee evidence appears in the main to suggest that these individuals have been able to cultivate 'fully-fledged' magical mentalities – involving the perception of contact with often vividly conceived Otherworld 'realities' – without, moreover, experiencing any serious cognitive or institutional impediments along the way (DM's claims of having 'drifted into' magic being especially, and, given its superficial similarity to the concept of 'interpretative drift', ironically, telling)¹⁰.

It is perhaps significant, then, that her position has been contested on a number of occasions. For instance, while discussing Lurhmann's study, Hutton states that modern western magic was itself "the product of a period imbued with notions of evolution, progress, and sequential scientific discovery" (Hutton 1999b: 395). Accordingly, far from being 'wrong-footed' by scientific propositions, it should come as no surprise that (as suggested previously¹¹) some of his respondents are capable of "[rationalising] the operation of magic" in terms of modern scientific paradigms such as "quantum physics, chaos mathematics, or electronic particle theory" (although Hutton also acknowledges that others "have not the least idea of why their spells and ritual workings appear to be effective and are happy to

¹⁰ Of course, this could just be the result of the very same 'interpretative drift' that Lurhmann is talking about, meaning that such accounts could simply have been part of an attempt by the interviewees to convince themselves of the 'reality' of such experiences. On the other hand, in their respective accounts the interviewees give no sign of being anything other than committed to or convinced by their adopted worldviews, which would suggest that Lurhmann is perhaps overly confident in her assumption that, ultimately, Pagans are too in thrall of rationalism for them to be truly capable of seeing magical principles as valid.

¹¹ See chapter eight.

leave the matter open”¹² (Hutton 1999b: 395). Somewhat more accusingly, Greenwood challenges Luhrmann by writing that “people who decide to become magicians are not usually sceptical of magic in the first place... but [see] the process of becoming engaged in magical practice as learning the language of another mode of reality” (Greenwood 2000b: 49). And indeed, of all the studies of Paganism assessed so far, Luhrmann’s seems to be the only one that presumes from the off that Pagans are, in effect, ultimately being disingenuous in their pursuit of magical ‘power’.

5. ‘Personal Myths’

It is thus conceivable that magical mentalities are far less of an anachronism than Luhrmann suggests in her typification of modern life as an overly rationalised, symbolical void. In this light, it could be proposed that a more persuasive account of how modern individuals might cultivate Pagan worldviews is provided by Kenneth Rees’ analysis of Pagan ‘development’ in terms of ‘personal myths’. Citing Feinstein and Krippner, he argues that such myths serve to “explain one’s world to oneself, guide personal development, provide social direction and address spiritual longings”, and so, to “organise one’s sense of reality and guide one’s actions” (Rees 1996: 17). Thus, writes Rees, the idea is invaluable because it “implies a formative tension between the growth of individual identity and wider cultural forms and processes” (1996: 17). That is to say, while relating to personal inclinations and perceptions, such ‘myths’ also directly ‘connect’ individuals to broader social and environmental contexts. Accordingly, they will, in turn, “inform an individual’s expectations on the point of entry of a defined segment of the magical subculture” (by which he means distinctive traditions such as Wicca or Druidry) (1996: 18). Crucially, these ‘expectations’ are, explains Rees, “typically an amalgam of images and stereotypes derived from the mass

¹² During the same discussion, Hutton also writes that Pagan Witches can and often do “have a deep personal interest and invest powerful emotions” in magical workings (Hutton 1999b: 396), which seems to contradict Luhrmann’s assumption that they are ultimately incapable of ‘truly’ committing to such beliefs.

media, one's friends and acquaintances, in some cases popular books read on the subject plus, on occasion, distinct fantasy projections and wish-fulfilments"¹³ (1996: 18). He concludes:

'Wicca, and the new paganism more generally, represents an example of mythic restoration (and transformation) and functions as an arena within which the production of a modern identity can be forged via willed action on the part of the seeker in exchange with the range of representations available to him or her within the magical subculture.' (1996: 29)

Rees' is thus suggesting that formal Pagan beliefs and identities are to a substantial extent already prefigured by a diffuse yet potent set of 'meanings' that those with such proclivities have managed to accrue over the course of their lives. Thus, the 'discovery' and formulation of individual Pagan 'paths' can be regarded as a process whereby these 'expectations' and meanings are allowed to crystallise into something altogether more cohesive and focused (the interview testimonies cited in the 'coming home' discussion¹⁴ being particularly illustrative of this process, perhaps).

Also useful are his suggestions as to how Pagan identities might develop over time. Rees argues that an individual's level of attachment to a particular esoteric system or tradition depends on the "degree of synchrony" (understood in both normative and symbolical terms) that occurs between personal and 'formal' myths (the latter primarily belonging to the sector of the Pagan subculture to which she has 'attached' herself, such as, say, Wicca) (1996: 19). However, while their affinity with these immediate mythic "frameworks" is potentially total (or "synonymous with that grouping's collective outlook"), it may also eventually wane, such as when Pagans

¹³ According to Rees, such 'wish-fulfilment' might revolve around a vision of, for example, "the past as desired in the case of the ancient Druids, the present as hoped for in regard to the presumed sabbatical orgies of modern witchcraft, the future ideal for an earth undefiled in respect to eco-paganism and so on" (Rees 1996: 18-9), although he adds that the "specific configuration will vary with the seeker concerned" (1996: 19).

¹⁴ See chapter seven.

“become disillusioned” or “find a new myth” (1996: 19). Rees’s account, it could thus be argued, is redolent of the way that Pagans tend to ‘hone’ their paths into ever more personal shapes, and is especially significant, perhaps, when applied to those testimonies (such as from SW and SL) which describe the development of increasingly idiosyncratic magical systems from a comparatively ‘conventional’ start point, like (as appears most commonly to be the case) Wicca.

However, it should not be assumed from all this that only those with Pagan proclivities are affected by ‘personal myths’, the urge for individuals to ‘explain their world to themselves’ being (presumably) a universal condition. Thus, while Rees’ thesis might help to explain the apparent ease with which the transition from non-Pagan to Pagan identities can occur, the question remains as to what it is that is so appealing about Paganism in particular to certain individuals. By far the most common explanation to be proffered in studies of the phenomenon is that Pagans consider it to be the consummate remedy for the problems of a world that is becoming increasingly depleted of magic and ‘meaning’.

6. Paganism as a Means of ‘Re-enchanting the World’

In her (predominantly) American survey, Adler writes that becoming a Pagan allows modern individuals to “reenter the primeval world view, to participate in nature in a way that is not possible for most westerners after childhood” due to the “common urban and suburban experience of our culture as ‘impersonal,’ ‘neutral,’ or ‘dead’” (Adler 1986: 25). That is, it offers an alternative vision of life for a world that has been “denuded of religious and mythic variety” (1986: 11-2). Accordingly, Paganism is the antithesis of “the totalistic religious and political views that dominate our society” and so maintain this ‘de-spirited’ environment (1986: *viii*).

Likewise, in their ethnographic study (from 1995) of an Atlanta-based coven, Scarboro *et al.* suggest that the group in question “offers... an antidote to the materialism, misogyny, and anomie of mainstream America” (*cited in* Bamberger 1997: 88). Echoing both these studies, Lewis proposes

that Pagans often “become involved [in the religion] out of a revolt against some other aspect of their environment”, including, not just “traditional Christianity”, but also the “impersonal worldview of modern secularism” (Lewis 1996: 3). They are, he writes, usually attracted to the phenomenon because it proffers a “romanticized view of the past” as “a kind of paradise, uncomplicated by pollution, instruments of mass destruction, political oppression, etc”, and seek to ‘recreate’ this vision through ritual (1996: 4). Similarly, Harvey explains that Paganism may reintroduce modern westerners to such qualities as “imagination, spirituality, emotion, subjectivity and sensuality” after the “disenchanted world” by the Enlightenment and its attendant cult of “Reason” (Harvey 1997: 190).

A congruent, albeit more complex, argument, which also serves to extend this basic presumption even further backwards in history, is the religious studies scholar Richard Roberts’ notion of the ‘chthonic imperative’. Roberts outlines this conception with detailed reference to the work of the feminist authors Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, and presents the Pagan upsurge as a fundamentally anti-capitalist trend founded upon an “earth-centred vision”, which he describes as a sort of “megalithic idealism”, of the sort necessary to “[shift] the focus of human identity... away from the received and dominant mediations and identifications associated with the long-unfolding, male-specific compact of western thought as a whole” (Roberts 1998: 57). Thus, Paganism is a potential curative to problems that have been caused by the “interconnected mediations of the western identity [as historically expressed] through God, Christ, church, capitalism, denatured nature [etc.]”, which Roberts considers to be now enshrined in the “virtual aura of a globalised world system” (1998: 58). Similarly, Beyer writes that a belief in the “divinity of nature” on the part of Pagans equates with a “critical stand with respect to the dominance and negatively judged effects of the globalised instrumental systems” (Beyer 1998: 16-7), and that such creeds therefore equate with cultures which “represent themselves precisely as the forgotten or suppressed religion of the marginal, of the weak and of the oppressed” worldwide (1998: 18-9). In summary, then, this line of reasoning suggests that modernity is the product and culmination of deeply ingrained cultural attitudes and assumptions, chiefly stemming from Christian (or

rather, 'Judeo-Christian') religion. *Ergo*, Paganism offers a consummate ideological, moral and existential redress for contemporary woes because it challenges a longstanding socio-cultural reliance on the tenets and structures of modernity – such as technological and scientific rationalism, and capitalist economics – and conventional religion equally.

Moreover (as may be inferred, for example, from Scarboro and colleagues' talk of 'anomie'¹⁵, and from Adler's references to 'alienation'¹⁶), it is not uncommon for such readings to describe the relationship between modernity and Paganism in terms of psychological processes, with the latter phenomenon thus being portrayed as a palliative to the dysfunction that is thought to arise, either wholly or in part, from the former. This is implied, for instance, in Simes' assertion that Paganism might "heal all the wounds of modernity" (Simes 1995: 444). It also features prominently in Siân Reid's 1996 sociological account of modern Witchcraft (based on a study by Stella Rabinovitch of Canadian Wiccans), in which she claims that there is a "prevalence [among Witches] of an upbringing that was perceived to have been unusually difficult or disturbed" (Reid 1996: 147). Thus, modern individuals who adopt Wicca tend to be "survivors who are in the process of rebuilding their lives" from the psychological rubble left by "trauma and abuse" (1996: 147). In particular, it serves to offset feelings of "low self-esteem" by helping these individuals to cultivate a sense of "power and control" through magic (1996: 147), and so – crucially – also to bypass the "default assumptions of contemporary Western society" (1996: 150).

Similarly, Greenwood argues that Paganism offers the prospect of "re-enchantment" by counteracting the "effects of a fragmented rationalist and materialist world" (Greenwood 2000b: 121). She suggests that the "process" of Pagan magic "involves various psychotherapies", which are used "as forms of healing to restore a sense of wholeness" (2000b: 117). Citing Levi-

¹⁵ The term 'anomie' was originally invoked for sociological purposes by Durkheim, who used it "to describe a condition where an individual had lost his [sic.] traditional moorings and was prone to disorientation or psychic disorder" as a consequence of "the disintegration of a commonly accepted normative code" (The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought 1999: 33).

¹⁶ See chapter one.

Strauss, Greenwood argues that in this respect modern magic is very much akin to traditional magical practices, and in particular to those found in shamanic cultures, in which the 'curing' of a patient "[represents] the ordering of the psychic universe into a meaningful system" (2000b: 117). Accordingly, "Western magicians, like indigenous shamans, order their psychic universes by working on their own healing; and in the process their worldview is changed" (2000b: 117). In modern contexts, such processes are a "way of uniting mind and body and healing the splits of mind/body and the social fragmentation resulting from the pervasive cultural acceptance of this dualism" (2000b: 121).

Greenwood concludes that "[p]eople are often attracted to magic by their feelings of powerlessness, and see in occultism a means to become powerful" (2000b: 137). Moreover, like Reid, she is similarly convinced (based, in her case, on an "impression") that "there are many magicians who are survivors of abuse as children, and that this is a significant factor in their attraction to magic as a form of self-empowerment" (2000b: 137). Accordingly, the magician is able in theory to shift from a state of social and psychological 'fragmentation' to one of enhanced "power" (2000b: 135), "status" and "identity" (2000b: 136), through the "ritual experience" of the Otherworld¹⁷ (2000b: 135).

7. The Notion of 'Disenchantment'

But what exactly is meant when such terms as 'impersonal' and 'disenchanted' are used to describe the modern world? Sociologically speaking, these accord very closely with the Weberian notion of *Entzauberung der Welt*. Weber's term is usually translated as the 'disenchantment of the world', and denotes the view that culture and society (particularly within the west) have been subject to the progressive

¹⁷ Greenwood cites the image of "the wizard, with his flowing robes and magical staff" as an example of the sort of mythic ideas she believes Pagans may 'magically' identify and 'work' with in order to offset such supposedly endemic feelings (Greenwood 2000b: 136).

“marginalization of magical beliefs and explanations” (*cited in* Spierenburg 1991: 9).

According to Weber, this process was (roughly) twofold. Firstly, “magical beliefs and customs” in their ‘pure’ form were displaced by religion – and in particular by ‘universalising’ or monotheistic creeds such as Christianity – through the latter’s imposition of a “systematic doctrine which sees the cosmos as a structured unity” (1991: 9). This was the culmination of a process whereby supernatural agencies were rendered ever more ‘abstract’ in relation to human experience, thus becoming “further and further removed from this world”, to manifest eventually in “a more transcendental conception of deities”¹⁸ (*cited in* Hamilton 1995: 139).

Secondly, religion itself was successfully challenged by what Weber referred to as the “scientific-mathematical view of the world“, so that “supernatural events [were] increasingly denied instead of being systematized” (Spierenburg 1991: 9). Weber associated this latter shift with the rise of the “modern industrial world” (*cited in* Beckford 1989: 32), the “basic processes of which”, he presumed, rely on “a strictly functional rationality requiring no transcendental warrant” (1989: 33). While stressing that this was “more of a tendency rather than an established fact”, and that “the search for value... would continue” in one form or another (1989: 35), Weber was darkly pessimistic about the modern world’s future prospects, writing: “Not summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness.” (*Quoted in* Gilbert 1980: 14) In summary, Weber thought that by “making the world less magical and more intelligible, [modernity] paradoxically makes personal life less meaningful” (*cited in*

¹⁸ The Protestant Reformation is thought to have been highly influential in this regard, as it substantially ‘rationalised’ (or at least simplified) the theologically convoluted relationship between God and humanity outlined in Catholic doctrine. Gilbert writes: “[The Reformation] pronounced anathema upon magical and superstitious beliefs and rituals which seemed to demean God’s sovereignty... [R]eformers and puritans consumed with ideas of divine transcendence and Christian individualism, cast aside much of the cultic paraphernalia of medieval Catholicism. They stripped churches of sacred pictures and relics, and abandoned sacramental practices implying the need for mediation between a believer and his God. It was idolatry, they believed, to invoke and revere the saints of Catholic tradition.” (Gilbert 1980: 28-9)

Turner 1991: 193). Weber's model of modernity thus depicted it as the final stage and brute epitome of a centuries-long process of erosion *vis-à-vis* magical assumptions and worldviews¹⁹.

This is not to say, however, that the interpretations of Paganism cited in the previous section all explicitly refer to Weber (in fact, most of them do not). Nevertheless, their indebtedness to his premise is underlined by the fact that a number of them use explicitly Weberian terminology (namely, in references to 'disenchantment', not to mention 're-enchantment') in their depiction of magical cosmologies as being not only fundamental to the question of 'meaning' and existential fulfilment, but also – conversely, and almost by definition – as incommensurate with the prevailing structures and *mores* of modern life.

8. Questioning the 'Paganism as Re-enchantment' Thesis

A. Paganism as a 'revolt' against the 'mainstream'

It is now appropriate to consider whether Paganism can really be thought to offer the substantive ideological and cultural alternative to the 'status quo' that is suggested by the studies mentioned so far in this discussion.

Certainly, as noted on a number of previous occasions in this study, Pagan discourse is frequently roundly critical of what is regarded as 'mainstream' policy and opinion, especially where this concerns nature and the environment. However, the idea that Paganism is at loggerheads with the non-Pagan world is not quite as self-evident as is often supposed. For a start, there is a significant philosophical objection to this premise, which is that, if the modern world is 'void' of 'enchantment', from where do Pagans acquire the 'magical' and mythic frames of reference required to establish such worldviews? Or as Campbell and Mclver saliently put it, if magical

¹⁹ Or as the sociologists H Gerth and C Wright Mills put it, "[the] extent and direction of 'rationalization' is... measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency". (*Cited in Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 322*)

notions were really so antithetical to the mainstream, “it is... extremely difficult to envisage how individuals manage to make a successful transition [from] a conventional to an occult position” in the first place (Campbell and Mclver 1987: 43).

Moreover, Paganism’s broadly integrative ethos, along with the seemingly attendant tendency of its adherents not to ‘openly challenge the wider culture’²⁰, calls into question the accuracy of portrayals of the phenomenon as representing a predominantly rejective moral and ideological stance on the part of Pagan individuals towards their socio-cultural backgrounds and environments.

Indeed, such an interpretation is hardly supported by the interview testimony. DM, for example, expressed a noticeable degree of irritation towards the suggestion that the term ‘Pagan’ is simply shorthand for a rejection of “Christianity or Catholicism or whatever”²¹ (DM: 2). And generally speaking, the apparently seamless manner in which, as suggested previously, the interviewees typically regard themselves as having come to identify themselves as Pagans²² would seem to indicate that, in all, they do not see this process as having been significantly obstructed by ‘anti-magical’ forces, so to speak.

Attitudes to family and parental authority appear to be notable examples of such – a point (again) neatly illustrated by DM, who, while claiming to regard many of his parent’s opinions as “dubious”, is nevertheless dismissive of the idea that his adoption of Paganism therefore constituted a ‘rebellion’ against his upbringing²³ (DM: 2). Revealingly, what parental influence there was seems to have done little to curtail a strong individualistic streak. He comments: “[By] the time I’d got into secondary school... it was fairly obvious that I wasn’t going to do exactly what they

²⁰ See chapters eight and nine.

²¹ It was at this point in the interview that DM spoke of ‘drifting into more interest in magic’, adding, “the fact that it didn’t really interest my parents was irrelevant” (DM: 2).

²² See chapter seven.

²³ To quote his exact words, when asked if he saw himself as having rebelled against his parents in any way, he replied, “Not really, no” (DM: 2), which assertion was followed by his comment on ‘drifting into magic’.

wanted any more; but they've more or less given up now and leave whatever I want to do up to me." (DM: 2) Thus, DM's apparently precociously youthful introduction to Paganism²⁴ could conceivably be understood far more as a pursuit of positively defined goals than as a reaction against parental authority or cultural background; indeed, it even suggests that 'magical' concepts were, in some respects, no less representative of his upbringing than ostensibly more 'conventional' features. SL paints a similar picture of her childhood relationship with her parents, commenting:

'My parents knew I was reading heavily [about] magic and occult [subjects], and even [about] historical and anthropological [subjects] and all that kind of thing. They knew I was very heavily into that, but they didn't say anything. The only thing that they *did* say [was], "[We don't] want any candles in the house and no bits of regalia or anything like that".' (SL: 4)

Moreover, even among those interviewees whose parents seem to have encouraged them to adopt orthodox religious viewpoints (namely CC, JH and JW), the idea that any incipient Paganism might have arisen as a direct reaction to their respective backgrounds should not be taken as read. CC, for example, avers that her sense of connection with Pagan themes took place independently of any 'rebellion' on her part against what she describes as a strict Methodist upbringing, having been more akin to a "slow realisation that *'this exists'*" (CC: 6). Certain parts of CC's testimony are particularly revealing in this respect. Her formal adoption of Paganism took place in the 1980s, prior to which she had been a long-time member of the atheistic British Humanist Association (BHA), which organisation she claims to have gravitated towards because of its "free-thinking" stance (CC: 4). Interestingly, however, CC also asserts that up until when she decided to leave the BHA (due, she asserts, to annoyance with its "anti-occult" stance) (CC: 4), she had been quite able (through a process of "disassociation") to reconcile support for the organisation with her longstanding interest in magical and

²⁴ See chapter seven.

esoteric subjects such as “astrology” (CC: 4). But what seems particularly significant is that, while claiming that her allegiance to the BHA was partly the result of a conscious and “emotional” rejection of her Methodist background (CC: 4), she does not say the same for her occult interests. As CC herself puts it, “I realised that in being so angry about Christianity I’d completely closed my mind to anything that was super-normal and non-materialistic, while at the same time a part of me had always recognised this by way of [my interest in] the divination, the astrology etc.” (CC: 6)

The discussion will return to the subject of cultural and religious upbringing in due course²⁵. At this point, it is necessary once more to raise Snow and Machalek’s caution (*cited in* Batson *et al.* [1993])²⁶ regarding recollections of past experiences – in other words, to consider whether the memories of the interviewees might have been ‘refracted’ somewhat in accordance with those individuals’ current worldviews. However, the response mooted earlier to this problem of interpretation – that such accounts nevertheless seem to portray a peculiarly ‘positive’, Pagan-type of spiritual ‘progress’ and overall orientation²⁷ – is again applicable, perhaps. In addition, it could be pointed out that all the accounts are consistent with Rees’ thesis that the key element in the development of Pagan ‘identities’ involves the accumulation and subsequent formalisation and refinement of personal ‘myths’ and ‘meanings’ that may be acquired from sources that are readily available within the broader cultural environment. As such, the testimony could be thought to illustrate how Rees’ proposition fits in with descriptions of Pagan development as typically involving an ongoing process of cultural and ‘magical’ ‘personalisation’ or ‘customisation’²⁸ (or, to use Simes’ favoured term, ‘bricolage’²⁹). In all, then, the testimony might

²⁵ See chapter eleven.

²⁶ See chapter one.

²⁷ See chapter seven.

²⁸ The author is indebted to Colin Campbell for suggesting this particular term to him.

²⁹ Deriving from the French word for ‘handy-man’ (‘bricoleur’), the term was originally coined by the French anthropologist Levi-Strauss, and specifically refers to the way individuals may “[deal] with intellectual problems by manipulating a series of pre-existing examples” (*quoted in* Simes 1995: 334).

conceivably be interpreted as suggesting that an antipathy to supposed 'anti-magical' forces operating in parental, peer or background cultural milieux could generally be thought less significant a factor in the adoption of a Pagan 'path' than a 'positive' interest in subjects relating to magical or 'mythic' worldviews, the latter being by no means necessarily conditional on the former.

It could also be argued that 'oppositional' variables such as antagonism towards the status quo are by themselves ultimately insufficient to explain why it should be that certain modern individuals are attracted specifically to Paganism rather than to some other ostensibly 'subversive' ideology or milieu such as, say, environmental activism. Jorgensen and Russell make this point very lucidly (albeit with specific reference to US contexts) when they write:

'All of the reasons Neopagans cite for their interest in this movement, especially their frequently mentioned rejection of traditional religions, strongly indicates a certain disaffection from mainstream American culture. However, their ecological concerns, feminism and dissatisfaction with traditional religion all are common enough among other Americans, especially the better educated, professional middle classes. None of these factors... explain why some Americans who share these interests and concerns remain in traditional religions while others become political activists, socially and politically estranged, or join new religions.' (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 334)

B. A 'religion without converts'?

Adler famously uses the phrase 'a religion without converts' to denote what she sees as one of the key distinctions between Paganism and non-Pagan spiritualities. She writes that "entry into [modern Paganism] differs from the conversion process so familiar in many religions" (Adler 1986: *xii*), since "no

once *converts* to Paganism or Wicca”³⁰ (1986: x³¹). To illustrate her point, she adds, “[you] will find no one handing you Pagan leaflets on the street or shouting at you from a corner” (1986: x). This is because “Neo-Pagans rarely proselytize” (1986: 14), as they are more likely to find their “entry point” through more “selective” means, such as (as mentioned earlier³²) “a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article” (1986: 14). Adler thus paints a vivid picture of modern Paganism as standing alone against the vanguard of voracious evangelising that she evidently regards as being largely indicative of mainstream religion.

But – as will perhaps become apparent in due course – Adler’s portrayal bears little resemblance to any of the (British) interviewees’ stated experience of religion, and even those who admit to having been brought up in strongly religious households were clearly born into their respective creeds as opposed to having converted to them. Moreover, a discussion of Adler’s argument by the American sociologist Eugene Gallagher reveals that her conception of a ‘religion without converts’ has serious problems even when considered in the light of the US contexts to which she is (mainly) referring. While acknowledging that the concept of religious conversion may be “a useful tool” for the analysis of Pagan attitudes (Gallagher 1994: 851), Gallagher takes issue with Adler’s general assumption on two counts. Firstly, he accuses her of misinterpreting the concept of conversion; secondly, he argues that this misapprehension furnishes an “interpretative context” for Paganism that serves an “*apologetic*” rather than “*analytical*” purpose³³ (1994: 851). Gallagher asserts that Adler’s basic argument pivots upon an understanding of conventional religion as dealing primarily with a “*passive*” understanding of the ‘self’³⁴ (1994: 852) – as implied in her portrayal of hapless individuals being browbeaten into ideological submission by “aggressive huckstering” (1994: 852) – which Adler takes to be integral to

³⁰ Adler’s argument is now widely accepted among Pagans, to the extent that her phrase may be found in unaccredited form elsewhere (e.g. Harvey 1997: 192).

³¹ Adler’s italics.

³² See chapter seven.

³³ Gallagher’s italics.

³⁴ Gallagher’s italics.

the process of religious conversion. This contrasts with the idea of an “*active self*”³⁵, which she assumes to be definitive of Paganism (1994: 853), and associates with the qualities of “autonomy, familiarity, and even intimacy” (1994: 852).

Gallagher counters Adler’s argument by suggesting that conversion experiences are far less uniform than she surmises, and in some cases are even “compatible with neo-Pagan theology”, since “[not] all models of the conversion process depend on an image of the passive self” (1994: 852). Of most relevance to the current discussion is his reference to John Lofland’s studies which show that religious conversion need not involve “passive experiences of social forces” (1994: 853), but may instead be a “reflexive” process “[presupposing] an active, decision-making self”³⁶ (1994: 854). Thus, for all her peerless contribution to the general understanding of Paganism, Adler’s view of the phenomenon’s ‘uniqueness’ is nevertheless based in some respects on an erroneous, even caricatured, portrayal of ‘mainstream’ religion.

It is evident, then, that some of the ideas and attitudes that many see as serving to distinguish Paganism from the religious, social and political mainstream are actually far less definitively ‘Pagan’ than such portrayals suggest. And all said, it could be argued that the monolithic view of ‘modern’ society that is typically proffered in such accounts is something of a ‘straw man’ that, by default, conveys a potent yet misleading impression of the phenomenon’s relationship to the ‘wider culture’.

C. Paganism as the ‘disembedding’ of tradition

The relationship between Paganism and non-Pagan milieux is thus clearly more complex than is often thought to be the case. A more subtle reading, perhaps, is contained in the American sociologist Helen Berger’s recent

³⁵ Gallagher’s italics.

³⁶ Such a view is, of course, entirely consistent with Davis and Robinson’s notion of theological individualism.

survey of American Witchcraft (1999). While proposing a general incompatibility or dissonance between the respective conventions of Paganism and modernity, Berger frames this relationship in less starkly oppositional terms. Basing her analysis on Giddens' structuration theory, Berger writes that modernity is, in effect, imploding, since the "methodological doubt and the reflectivity of knowledge that are embedded in the tenets of science [have resulted] in scepticism toward all knowledge claims", including those of scientific rationalism itself, which broad shift has therefore served to "[make] the practice of magic among even scientifically educated Witches seem both reasonable and appropriate" (Berger 1999: 6). This line of reasoning bears many similarities with Luhmann's account. However, unlike Luhmann, and in line with Giddens' assessment, Berger challenges the assumption (often associated with postmodern theory³⁷) that "all knowledge claims are equal" – which is to say, equally arbitrary – as a consequence of the "evaporation of subjectivity into an empty universe of signs" (1999: 7). Rather, culture continues to revolve around "social practices", with all the capacity for moral and existential judgements such a behavioural context entails (1999: 7).

Furthermore, the 'universalisation' of culture that has occurred under modernity (through the implementation of such innovations as "global time zones, calendars, and maps" [1999: 7]) has ensured that traditional interpretative and communicative frameworks are eroded, such that "social institutions, expert systems³⁸, and symbolic tokens all become removed from immediate social relationships and their local context" (1999: 7), and "tradition recedes as an organizing principle" (1999: 8). This "disembedding of symbolic systems from time and space" thus enables modern individuals to radically reinterpret traditional symbol and knowledge systems in their own, personal terms, for the vital purpose (given the heralded demise of traditional socio-cultural contexts) of "self-definition" (1999: 8). Accordingly, it is this 'late' stage of modernity "that provides the context in which Witches

³⁷ This will be the subject of a later discussion (see chapter eleven).

³⁸ By this term, Berger is referring to the bodies of knowledge that are connected with such fields of inquiry as "medicine, psychology, or mechanics" (Berger 2000: 7).

can borrow rituals, deities, and magical practices from around the globe” (1999: 7).

And moreover, adds Berger, the type of “lifestyle choice” this personalisation of cultural systems represents has accrued an important political dimension, which Giddens terms “life politics”, this referring to the way that, in his opinion, “repressed existential issues, related not just to nature but to the moral parameter of existence as such, press themselves back on the agenda” (1999: 8). In Wiccan terms, writes Berger, this is understood as meaning that “the spiritual is political”, the beliefs of Witches being particularly bound up with moral questions involving “feminism and ecological concerns” (1999: 8).

In her argument, Berger usefully articulates the way that Pagans typically seem able to use their own sense of judgement and discrimination to ‘dissemble’ established cultural systems, in order to ‘pick out’ those elements they regard as personally appropriate or resonant, and to question ‘received wisdom’ when this clashes with individual sensibilities. Furthermore, Pagan spiritualities do indeed appear often to combine notions of ‘self-definition’ (or as adherents are perhaps more likely to call it, ‘self-fulfilment’ or ‘self-development’) with political and ethical concerns, manifesting in what SW, for instance, refers to as a “strong ecologically conscious and socially conscious thread” (SW: 14).

There are, however, significant problems with Berger’s reading. Firstly, even granting that certain ‘universalising’ cultural currents might be at work within contemporary societies, her emphasis on the ‘disembedding’ of symbols and knowledge ‘systems’ underplays the seemingly pivotal importance of ‘rootedness’ – or their subsequent ‘re-embedding’ within notionally ‘traditional’ and locative frameworks – to Pagan culture. Conversely, she also ignores the perennial, as opposed to exclusively ‘modern’, role such mechanisms have arguably played in the dissemination of cultural traditions as expressions and manifestations of a ‘desired continuity’³⁹.

³⁹ See chapter seven.

Secondly, although, being so representative of the trend towards epistemological individualism, cultic spirituality admittedly is a predominantly 'modern' phenomenon, the very fact that, as Campbell points out, it has been a consistent sociological feature of modernity means that it actually predates Giddens' notional phase of 'late modernity' by a matter of centuries. This further undermines Berger's assumption that the 'disembedding' of traditions for the purposes of personal self-definition can solely be identified with socio-cultural trends of the past few decades. In turn, it calls into question her assumption (which, for all her subtlety, she shares, more or less, with all those who regard Paganism as primarily fulfilling a 'disenchantment' to 're-enchantment' dynamic) that modern individuals are only able to accommodate magical notions because the prevailing tenets of what could be termed 'classic' modernity are no longer deemed tenable or persuasive.

And in fact, there is much evidence to suggest that the 'modern world' is not – and furthermore, has never been – anywhere near as 'disenchanted' as is often assumed. This will be the topic of discussion in the following section.

D. Magic and the 'mainstream'

Indeed, some now suggest that theories which uphold the idea that modernity denotes a 'dispirited' and 'impersonal' cultural condition may actually be reinforcing negative stereotypes that have long featured in western representations of the non-western world. Thus, Grimes, for instance, has recently argued that such accounts depend on an antithetic view of 'traditional' societies that is all too often sustained "not just by facts but also by images, traditions of interpretation, moral commitments, and biases" (Grimes 2000: 110). In some cases, this type of model may reveal a certain "naïveté" (2000: 112), and at worst, "rampant ethnocentrism" (2000: 114), by reinforcing an impression of tribal societies as 'exotic' – a "fantasy" interpretation of traditional ways (2000: 111) in which "[t]hings ancient and tribal are set in opposition to things modern" (2000: 115). In short, such views imply that "[o]thers' are primitive, therefore inferior to 'us.' 'They' are 'mystical,' therefore superior to us" (2000: 111).

In their article from 1987, Campbell and Mclver offer a number of arguments that paint a less culturally 'loaded' picture of western magical contexts. Their stated intention was to critique the (at the time) prevalent sociological portrayal of occultism (famously associated with scholars such as Marcello Truzzi and Edward Tiryakian) as existing in a "relationship of separation from, if not actual apposition to, normal or widely accepted culture" (Campbell and Mclver 1987: 42). Such interpretations are, they argue, "not appropriate" (1987: 42), for by casting occultism as the adverse of "established or conventional cultural consensus" they do little justice to the historical and sociological complexity of this relationship (1987: 42), tending instead to either downplay or ignore the "significant interconnections" that the authors regard as having long existed between the two realms (1987: 41).

Not least, describing magical culture in such "oppositional", or even – in some cases – "deviant" terms unhelpfully and implausibly implies that the type of 'knowledge' that is associated with the 'conventional' cultural pole is both "homogeneous" and "integrated" (1987: 41), since its purportedly representative worldviews cannot actually "be sensibly aggregated together to comprise an 'accepted' body of knowledge with which to contrast the 'rejected' world of the occult" (1987: 57). For example, occult beliefs have gained what Campbell and Mclver call significant "cultural *lebensraum*" by virtue of the fact that, while the supposed "gatekeepers" of culture such as "scientists" (1987: 48) and "clergy" (1987: 47) may wield a not insignificant influence, their respective pronouncements upon what is and is not 'true' have always been strikingly inconsistent⁴⁰. They also make the pertinent point that the "institutionalised" bodies of knowledge that are represented

⁴⁰ Campbell and Mclver write that scientists often find themselves in competition with religionists in this regard, as both tend "to define the other as 'rejected knowledge'" (Campbell and Mclver 1987: 49). Thus, for example, "prayer is an occult practice from a scientific viewpoint, whilst the underlying materialism of science is an atheistic heresy from the perspective of revealed religion." (1987: 49) Moreover, scientists may even find themselves contesting each other's 'knowledge claims', the reason being that "science, like religion, is not a single unified entity, but a composite phenomenon" spanning numerous "disciplines, research methodologies and techniques", and is also informed by "competing traditions of thought" (1987: 51).

either by ecclesiastical or scientific 'truths' are hardly more reflective of modern life than the more diffuse (but no less important) category of "commonsense" knowledge, which term refers to the way individuals 'actually' understand their day-to-day environments in a normative sense (1987: 43). Thus, for instance, beliefs centring upon "such forces as fate and luck", while remaining beyond the remit of "'official' knowledge", have consistently featured strongly within "popular culture", in which context "they are considered to be quite in accord with common-sense experience" (1987: 43), with the consequence that superstitions like these have remained "widespread in modern societies"⁴¹ (1987: 45).

Moreover, this point extends beyond the matter of diffuse superstition to the more cohesive (and similarly "deeply embedded" [1987: 46]) realm of "folk religion", in which, they write, can be found traces of "pre-Christian folk religious 'residues'" (1987: 45). They argue that such traditions are still much in evidence, and that while these are mainly associated with "remote or isolated areas", they can also be found in more urbane milieux, most notably in the form of popular festivals such as Easter, Halloween and Christmas⁴² (1987: 45).

⁴¹ Campbell and Mclver add that although such notions are undeniably still popular, they are often framed in terms of what they call 'belief distance'. The authors explain that in order to appease the "cultural gatekeepers", it seems that "for all but a minority, confession of such beliefs and performance is accompanied by a certain embarrassment", the result being that "individuals feel the need to distance themselves from the suggestion that they have any real occult commitment" (Campbell and Mclver 1987: 47). This, however, is not to say that the beliefs themselves are not sincerely held. Thus, in short, "the official attitude of condemnation may do little to prevent people holding occult beliefs... but it does prompt them to manifest 'belief distance'." (1987: 47)

⁴² As suggested in chapter two, in recent years historians and folklorists have tended to pour cold water on theories suggesting that the folk or mythic traditions of the Celtic world may offer a glimpse of ancient pagan ways. Nevertheless, as the authors suggest, it is perhaps significant that such 'folkish' traditions are still hugely popular within modern contexts. And either way, it could be argued that the rise of a less doctrinaire, 'looser-limbed' Pagan culture conceivably illustrates how notional continuity with the ancient pagan world is conceivably less important than the apparent ease with which modern Pagan individuals have been able to attach religious or spiritual significance to such customs.

Campbell and McIver also point out that magical themes are notably evident within the artistic sphere – which, while not especially concerned with epistemological ‘truths’, nevertheless proffers “meaningful accounts of human experience” (1987: 54) – and in particular that of literature. This is to no small extent a result of the potent influence of Romanticism, which as well as “plundering... the world’s storehouse of occult themes and ideas” also encouraged the view of artists as being in touch with ‘mysterious’ forces (which they associated with the concept of individual “genius”), thus in effect changing their perceived function “from that of [a] craftsman to something akin to a seer, prophet or magician” (1987: 55).

In all, then, it is apparent that, notwithstanding the “efforts” of cultural ‘gatekeepers’ (1987: 55), not only does the serious study of “science, religion and the arts” hardly preclude “contact with ‘occult’ material”, but may also in some cases actually serve as an introduction to such subjects (1987: 56).

Furthermore (and as might also be inferred at least in part from previous discussions, not least those concerning, respectively, modern esoteric history and the rise of epistemological individualism⁴³), Campbell and McIver also suggest that the occult is far more representative of the prevailing ethos and “structural features of modern life” than is often acknowledged (1987: 57). Thus, “[v]alues such as individualism, [scepticism], free inquiry, tolerance, empiricism, pluralism and even self-fulfilment” are all characteristic features of our age that may also serve “to give acceptable justifications for exploring the occult” (1987: 57).

In addition, the rise of cultic spirituality as a popular phenomenon has occurred in tandem with the evolution of a “mass media” infrastructure, or more specifically, a “commercialised ‘mass’ market” dedicated to feeding the public’s appetite for interesting and lurid diversions (1987: 46) – a development which commenced in the 1700s with the popular craze for “astrological almanacks, ghost stories and gothic horror novels” (1987: 46). Thus, the “so-called ‘occult revival’” of recent decades “represents nothing novel in this respect”, aside from the conceivable possibility that the “guardians of orthodoxy” are becoming increasingly unable to “hold such

⁴³ See chapters two and seven especially.

interests in check” (1987: 46). Moreover, during the ‘modern’ era, occult and magical ideas have periodically shifted from the cultic hinterland to become “part of the dominant value structure of society”, and although this was chiefly the case in “the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”⁴⁴, there is, as the authors (citing Galbraith) suggest, no reason to assume that such a shift will not reoccur (1987: 42).

Finally, there is the vast corpus of fairy tales, which genre, according to Campbell and McIver, occupies a “secure and highly approved position within the culture of contemporary society, a place where not only is it not condemned but where it is heavily endorsed.” (1987: 58) That is to say, the “official rejection of occultism” in fact serves to ‘ghettoise’ it within the “culture of childhood”, which means that, even within these comparatively ‘safe’ confines, such narratives may therefore serve as an introduction to subject matter of an “occult” nature (1987: 58). Accordingly, “[o]ccultism is thus a central part of the world-view which [children] inherit”, and while this is something “they must subsequently learn to reject”, it is “hardly surprising” that “some fail to do so” (1987: 58).

Despite being introduced by Campbell and McIver almost as an afterthought, this final point is especially interesting, given the vital role apparently played by Otherworld narratives and the ‘vivid imaginative worlds’ of childhood in the formation of Pagan worldviews (although, as might be gathered from previous discussions, it could also be extended to include more ‘interactive’ narrative sources such as role-playing games⁴⁵, and to less ‘traditional’ literary genres like science fiction⁴⁶). In turn, this arguably reaffirms the possibility raised earlier⁴⁷ that ethical and ideological issues

⁴⁴ Romanticism aside, Campbell and McIver are also presumably referring here to other influential ‘occult’ or quasi-occult movements such as Freemasonry (see chapter two).

⁴⁵ See chapters four and five.

⁴⁶ See chapters three and four especially. In fact, Campbell and McIver do point out the potent influence of science fiction literature, along with “its burgeoning successor, science fantasy”, in contemporary magical circles (Campbell and McIver 1987: 53), and go on to explain that such genres may be thought of as “an [artistic] presentation of the possibilities contained in [scientific] theories and speculations” (1987: 53).

⁴⁷ See chapter three.

dealing with such matters as the environment fulfil a peripheral and exegetical rather than foundational role in such a process. Or in other words, it suggests that the phenomenon's appeal is rooted more deeply in the rather less didactic or 'adult', but no less 'meaningful', world of fantasy, 'make-believe', and imaginative 'engrossment', although the former type of discourse may, it appears, be easily conjoined with the latter once a connection has been made in this regard.

The relevance of Campbell and Mclver's arguments to the present discussion might therefore be summarised by stating that the tendency of some academics (not to mention Pagans) to depict modern life as characteristically "mundane and utilitarian" (1987: 55) – which is to say, as dour and 'disenchanted' – drastically underplays the amount of leeway modern westerners (and not just immediate, purportedly 'late modern', contemporaries) have normally had with regard to the accommodation of magical or occult ideas and assumptions. Thus, Campbell and Mclver's study, like Rees', plausibly suggests that magical beliefs and the broader contexts of modern societies are far more congruent than they are often given credit for. Moreover, the two accounts neatly complement each other, as Rees' sheds some light on the sort of processes that might occur when an individual formally adopts a Pagan path, whereas Campbell and Mclver's shows in greater detail the broader contexts through which personal 'myths' and meaning structures can come to resemble and even synchronise with magical 'bodies of knowledge' specifically.

Combining the two accounts, it might thus be possible to propose the following. Firstly, many modern individuals seem quite capable of interpreting any 'source material' they deem to be personally 'meaningful' in terms of 'magical' assumptions, without this eliciting any sense of cognitive or creedal dissonance. Secondly, such sensibilities have actually long been an integral, representative, and sometimes even prominent, feature of modern culture and society⁴⁸. In this light, interpretations of the phenomenon as, primarily, a

⁴⁸ This is not to say that modern individuals will necessarily share such 'magical' outlooks equally. For example, Hanegraaff's previously cited account of the New Age (see chapter nine) suggests that the sort of rationalistic presumptions that are commonly associated with modernity are perhaps more evident within such circles than in Paganism. The point is,

conduit for 're-enchantment' in a 'disenchanted' world are difficult to sustain. It is thus appropriate at this point to consider whether the associated idea of Paganism as a much-needed salve to modern sociological and psychological dysfunction is any more tenable.

E. Paganism as 'healing'

As is consummately stated in Reid and Greenwood's respective appraisals (and might also perhaps be inferred from the general 'tone' of most of the accounts mentioned so far in this chapter), this particular proposition puts forward the idea that Paganism may 'heal' the sense of personal psychological fragmentation, alienation and 'meaninglessness' that is purportedly part and parcel of the modern world (as opposed to existence in general).

And since Paganism's broadly critical outlook on modernity appears in many respects to dovetail neatly with similarly critical academic accounts, it is perhaps not surprising that some Pagans also seem to conflate assumed psychological dysfunction with what they regard as prevailing sociological and environmental ills. Thus, for example, Shan Jayran from the House of the Goddess writes that the Craft allows individuals to transcend the west's "excessive reliance on the masculine discriminating principle", which "leads away from relatedness to despair and a loss of meaning" (Jayran 1996: 214-5). Also notably concise is the Druid Priestess Emma Restall-Orr's previously cited assertion that Paganism 'gives us a sense of belonging', and 'takes away our alienation from our land and community'⁴⁹, her explanation being that "[it] finds a sanctity in the natural world and a deep connection with the earth"⁵⁰.

What could perhaps be regarded as a contradiction between such views of modernity and broader (or more 'fundamental') Pagan theodical

however, that it nevertheless seems unrealistic to regard the former outlook as monolithically or ubiquitously representative of modern culture and society.

⁴⁹ See chapter three.

⁵⁰ Quoted in 'Pagans gather for the solstice' (The Guardian: June 20, 1997)

notions⁵¹ will be considered in general terms in due course. For now, the discussion will deal with a number of more specific problems with this psychologically informed type of interpretation of Paganism, as represented *par excellence* by the respective readings of Reid and Greenwood, upon which the following discussion will focus. Firstly, the two authors make too much, perhaps, of the assumption that magical 'power' is attractive primarily because it compensates for a lack of control over actual circumstances. Rather, it could be proposed that, as suggested elsewhere in this study⁵², the imaginal and existential *frisson* upon which Pagan worldviews depend arguably stems as much from a sense of 'uncertainty' as one of control, the former being equally intrinsic to the notion of a magical and 'power-charged' cosmos, it seems.

The second problem specifically concerns Greenwood's assertions about the prevalence of 'charismatic authority' in Wiccan covens. Even disregarding the questionable nature of this assumption (as discussed earlier⁵³), it would still be susceptible to a significant contradiction in her account – namely, between her claim that magic on the one hand "gives power to the powerless" (Greenwood 2000b: 117), and on the other, that it can and frequently does actually have the opposite effect (that is, causes a 'loss of personal will and identity'). Thus, rather than conferring 'power', and thereby healing individuals, magical culture, according to Greenwood's explanation, may actually – and in complete contrast – serve to reinforce their sense of powerlessness and vulnerability, which contradiction she it at a loss to explain to any adequate degree⁵⁴.

⁵¹ See chapter eight.

⁵² See chapters four and eight.

⁵³ See chapter nine.

⁵⁴ This point very much relates to Greenwood's assessment that it is 'difficult to make generalisations' on the subject of magical relationships (see chapter one). This, she writes, is "because the power dynamics of any magical group are dependent on the individuals concerned and the particular psycho-social issues that they bring" (Greenwood 2000b: 177). Such an assessment, however, portrays an odd, and hardly tenable, Catch-22 type situation in which the only individuals who can expect to achieve 'empowerment' or 'healing' through magical ritual – which is the underlying point of such procedures, in her opinion – are those who are the least in need of it, as anyone else will presumably have too much emotional

Finally, and most importantly, there is a problem with Greenwood and Reid's respective suggestions (the former being perhaps the most relevant here, given its British focus) that Pagans characteristically bear the scars of traumatic and abusive upbringings. It is interesting to note, for example, that the interviewees gave little indication (in the form either of 'impressions' or specific responses) of having suffered anything like the trauma and dysfunction that Greenwood and Reid claim is so typical of Pagan individuals. This is not to say they uniformly or characteristically describe their respective upbringings as entirely 'happy' or trouble-free. SW, for instance, describes as "a hell" the specialist boarding school he was obliged to attend on account of his dyslexia (SW: 2). For others, religion had been something of a bugbear. CC, for instance, describes her childhood in the West Yorkshire town of Keighley as involving a very "dour chapel type" of upbringing (CC: 2), which she apparently "hated" (CC: 3).

But if anything, on the whole the interview testimony describing emotional background portrayed this very personal criterion in terms ranging from the positive to the decidedly lacklustre, rather than the dysfunctional *per se*. AM, for instance, sees himself as having had "a fairly sheltered upbringing, and certainly with middle-class values", having been "sent to a good school and encouraged to do well" (AM: 2). GM claims to have had a "typical '60s upbringing", and to have attended a "good school" in Bramley, West Yorkshire (GM: 1). WS describes her family background as "[r]eally, really, *really* normal" – even "too normal: greenhouse, swing in the garden, all that sort of stuff" (WS: 2). SL comments that her parents were "lovely people" but similarly adds, "you know how sometimes [your parents] can be too lovely and you get blanketed?" (SL: 4) For JW, childhood is most vividly evoked, not by any thought of trauma or abuse, but in marked contrast by very lyrical memories of her family's allotment, which, she reports, prompted her to appreciate the "growing side of things" from an early age⁵⁵ (JW: 12).

'baggage' to utilise their Otherworld 'contacts' effectively (namely, in a manner untainted by negative 'issues').

⁵⁵ JW comments: "I can still see it – walking through the gate, smelling the golden rod, picking the bluebells from the hedgerows... That to me was my childhood." (JW: 12)

Nevertheless, a number of the interviewees appear also to regard themselves as having not quite 'fitted in' with the rest of society. DM's previous comments on his early attitudes towards parental authority are a case in point; he also claims to have been "a long way ahead of everyone else" educationally at his school (DM: 2). CC likewise describes herself as having "always felt like an outsider", an impression she attributes to the fact (as she sees it) that certain individuals are simply "born" that way (CC: 8). SL makes similar claims to having been regarded as "different" by her peers in school (SL: 2), while SW states that as a child of a "middle class, middle England family", he had "always had the strong feeling that there was *something else*" to life (SW: 2).

However, the unsettling feeling of dislocation – which is also implied in Pagan talk of 'coming home' – is by no means necessarily indicative of the deep-seated psychological upset reported by Greenwood and Reid. Indeed, some interviewees seem to have interpreted the sense of being 'different' as a positive indication of 'innate' (or as CC would have it, 'inborn') magical proclivities. Thus, for example, while discussing her 'experience' of 'supernatural realms', SL comments: "[This is] something which sets you apart from other people and I've never been frightened of it. I've [never been] frightened of anything that's Otherworldly." (SL: 6)

Tellingly, she adds:

'I thought that it was great because in every other area I was picked on at school as I was getting older and to me it was [such spiritual experiences] that made me special, and I like being special. I'm a bit of a megalomaniac, really - I admit that!' (SL: 6)

In a similar vein, WS asserts:

'You know when you're a child and you know that you're different? You just can't communicate with other people about things. [So] you see things like a witch on television, wearing black and with a pointed hat, and you go, "Right, that's what I'm going to be!" And when [I was] playing games and

my friends all wanted to be princesses and fairies, I'd say, "I want to be the witch – I'm *going* to be the witch!" [Laughs] It may sound a bit sad, but that's all I wanted to be: I *wanted* to be the witch.'

(WS: 4)

Such testimonies do little to suggest the type of shattered and (in the cases of those purportedly submitting to 'charismatic leaders') impressionable psyches that Reid and Greenwood portray as being characteristic of those coming into the Pagan 'scene', especially when considered in the light of the markedly individualistic and independent-minded attitudes that are seemingly so evident among them (in apparent reflection, moreover, of Pagans in general). In all, then, the testimony seems to convey the impression, if anything, of strong feelings of individual 'resolve' on the part of the interviewees, and even, for some at least, of a 'positive' sense of 'difference' from 'conventional' milieux that an individual might aspire to build upon, rather than seek to suppress or negate.

Again, however, it is necessary to stress that such highly 'personal' accounts should be approached somewhat judiciously rather than at 'face value'. But it could also be thought appropriate to refer once more to the seemingly anomalous tendency of Pagans (such as the interviewees) to discuss their spiritual 'progress' in broadly 'positive' terms, when compared with the sort of 'crisis-ridden' terminology that, it seems, is used to describe spiritual 'transformations' on a more generic level⁵⁶. That is, the fact that they

⁵⁶ Given Batson *et al.*'s association of this process with 'existential crisis' (see chapter seven, *n.* 34), it is interesting to note some of Possamaï's findings, which indicate that, unlike Pagans, New Agers are also inclined to use such terms when describing instances of spiritual 'discovery'. He reveals that 59 per cent of his respondents report having undergone a period of "crisis" (akin to what one of them resonantly describes as "[s]piritual vertigo" [Possamaï 2000: 373]) immediately prior to becoming involved in the New Age (2000: 374). Possamaï breaks this figure down into two categories. Firstly, there are those for whom "alternation to NAS" (New Age Spirituality) was prompted by "everyday life crises" (2000: 374). The second category consists of those for whom this is catalysed by intense sensations of a 'spiritual nature' (or "mystico-pneumatic experiences") (2000: 374), which he also identifies as a "specific type of crisis" (2000: 373). Crucially, Possamaï asserts that his interpretation complements Kellehear's argument that such experiences are often connected

(and, it seems, Pagans generally) portray their 'transition' to Paganism in a way that does not emphasise or dwell upon 'traumatic' experiences might possibly indicate that, even when viewed in purely narrative or cognitive terms, such testimony could still plausibly be thought broadly supportive of the idea that such individuals typically function on something of a psychological 'even-keel'⁵⁷.

Such an impression also, of course, accords with Carpenter's assertion (mentioned earlier on a number of occasions⁵⁸) that the 'bulk' of Pagans seem to 'display typical patterns of psychological adjustment'. Interestingly, while this assessment admittedly draws mainly from American surveys, some recent British studies have said much the same thing, and even go further by suggesting that Pagans might actually exhibit greater than average levels of mental and emotional stability. Gosselin, for instance, has, as also reported previously⁵⁹, argued that the general psychological profile of Pagans is significantly more "emotionally-stable" and "tough-minded" than that of non-Pagans (Gosselin 1998: 41), although he adds that the latter trait is more apparent in the male section of the Pagan population than it is the female. He also surmises that this feature of the typical Pagan psychological make-up is closely associated with another significant characteristic, namely "open-mindedness", which, he speculates, might possibly "[give them] more strategies for mental and/or spiritual survival" (1998: 41).

Nor should it be presumed that Gosselin's findings necessarily indicate that such individuals might usually acquire these characteristics as a consequence of adopting a Pagan 'path', and thereby, in effect, 'healing themselves' in the manner that Reid and Greenwood both suggest. Rather, it

with "time[s] of disturbance, such as the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the fear of death, or severe bodily injury" (2000: 373). Moreover, such accounts could, perhaps, be regarded as strongly according with New Age worldviews generally, and most notably the axiom, 'your lives do not work'.

⁵⁷ A discussion that could be considered broadly relevant to this point – in this case regarding the possible influence of religious backgrounds on individual Pagans – will take place in the following chapter.

⁵⁸ See chapters one and eight.

⁵⁹ See chapter one.

seems more likely that Gosselin is referring to Paganism itself as epitomising the sort of 'strategy' that he believes might result from such a tendency, by implying that 'open-mindedness' (along, presumably, with the 'emotional stability' that he regards as complementing this quality) is one of the conditions that is conducive in the first place to the cultivation of formal Pagan worldviews. Or as he puts in a later article (citing Louis Wolpert, the Professor of Biology at the University of London), "the more options we have, the more chance there is that one of those options will enable us to live better and more happily than those with no such potentials"⁶⁰ (1999: 87).

More recently, Hutton has made the following comparison:

'Some religions, including several which have recently appeared in the West, place an emphasis upon recruiting people who have suffered disabling misfortune, or drug or alcohol abuse, or depression, and giving them a new purpose in life. To judge by the representatives whom I have known, pagan witchcraft looks for people who have already found their purpose in life and wish to enhance and fulfil it. It seeks individuals who combine vivid imagination and high creative power with stability and stamina, and on the whole it finds them.' (Hutton 1999b: 403-4)

Elsewhere, he makes this additional observation:

'Modern witches are not people who have lost anything or been left in a situation of relative disadvantage. Rather, they have impressed me as people who have an unusual degree of enterprise

⁶⁰ The paragraph in full is: "People who believe in magic... or who believe in a god or gods, *even if their beliefs are totally unfounded*, are better off in terms of their psychological survival than those who have no such beliefs. The reason for this is that a belief in things beyond conventional reality gives them more options as to how to live. And the more options we have, the more chance there is that one of those options will enable us to live better and more happily than those with no such potentials." (Gosselin 1999: 87 [Italics from original text; text mistakenly does not feature proper punctuation to signify end of quote.]

and of control over their own lives, and demand even more from them, extending this pattern by asking more of religious life than most people do.' (1999b: 403)

Thus, although it may well be the case that, in Greenwood's own words, "[i]ndividuals' experiences and expectations of the otherworld are often arbitrary and unstructured until they are shaped by the process of engaging with a specific magical tradition" (Greenwood 2000b: 33), it should not automatically be assumed (as Greenwood herself does) that they normally feel compelled to make this transition because of any psychological damage or emotional impoverishment on their part. And although it is hardly likely that troubled or traumatic backgrounds are nowhere to be found among Pagans, it might nevertheless be argued – as was similarly proposed in the earlier discussion on 'charismatic authority'⁶¹ – that the weight of evidence can hardly be seen to support the view that states of psychological and emotional fragility are somehow characteristic of or endemic within the phenomenon.

In summary, then, it could be suggested, perhaps, that appraisals of Paganism which prioritise its 'healing' aspects are significantly dependant on problematic assumptions concerning both the function and dynamics of magical methodologies. But as suggested above, there appears to be a more general problem with the view that Paganism by definition regards the modern world as 'dispiriting', which is that this seems to jar somewhat with the general theodical picture (of an inherently 'magical' cosmos) that underpins the phenomenon. In addressing this seeming disjunction, it could be argued that, as was pointed out in the discussion of Pagan attitudes towards 'nature'⁶², the critical rhetoric that so often features in such discourse arguably plays a less significant role with regard to their worldviews than do actual magical notions, which seem to provide a more defining (indeed, theodical) 'logic'. Moreover (and ironically, perhaps), it might also be suggested that what appears on the surface to be a contradiction actually

⁶¹ See chapter nine.

⁶² See chapter three.

seems much less significant when seen in the light of Greenwood's own 'internal morality' concept⁶³, which, in Pagan terms, ultimately places the 'blame' for existential imbalance upon the (necessary) choices and actions of individuals, rather than on their situation *per se* as inhabitants of 'the world'. Further – as was also suggested earlier⁶⁴ – it could be argued that among followers, the broad acknowledgement of humanity's potential for 'ill-will' tends to be assuaged by a positive and integrative view of existence overall, rather than exacerbated by a predominantly negative and condemnatory view of earthly living.

On a final note, it should be pointed out that, with some notable exceptions, the predominant 'tone' of the studies discussed in this chapter raises the question of the 'legitimising agenda' that Pike is so concerned about in her survey of sociological literature on the phenomenon⁶⁵. That is to say, they tend to go beyond the task of objectively delineating and interpreting Pagan opinions and activities on an objective level by seeking to justify or 'validate' Paganism in – mainly oppositional – relation to the prevailing contexts and tenets of modernity (often in the process unhelpfully 'dovetailing' with Pagan rhetoric in some key respects, moreover). The next chapter will thus attempt a more analytically neutral appraisal of Paganism's sociological significance, with regard both to its basic appeal and relationship to the socio-cultural mainstream.

⁶³ See chapters one and eight.

⁶⁴ See chapter eight.

⁶⁵ See chapter one.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXTS PT II: SUGGESTIONS AS TO THE POSSIBLE SIGNIFICANCE OF PAGANISM

1. 'Tough-Minded, Intuitive, and Bent as Corkscrews'

To begin this chapter, it is worth looking at the sort of personal or psychological characteristics that studies would seem to suggest might be somehow representative of Pagans (particularly given the propensity of some scholars to base their accounts at least partially upon such criteria). For example, the 'personality traits' identified towards the end of the previous chapter could perhaps be cautiously interpreted as, if not a defining feature of the phenomenon, then at least as an indication of the sort of 'microcosmic' criteria that might conceivably be conducive to Pagan worldviews. However, while the sort of appraisals which presume a typically emotionally fragile, unstable or traumatised background on the part of Pagans are by no means incontestable, their existence alongside accounts proposing the exact opposite shows how problematic attempts to make generalisations based largely on 'impressionistic' data can be. Nevertheless, accounts which portray Pagans as generally well-adjusted, resourceful and independent-minded characters might, perhaps, more convincingly help explain Paganism's characteristic combination of individualism and willingness to accommodate, even embrace, the contingencies and disruptions of everyday life.

There is, however, one further quality that arguably appears to feature particularly noticeably and explicitly among Pagans, this being a preoccupation with 'world' of the imagination. This was certainly abundantly evident in the interviewee testimony, particularly where this reports a love of magical, mythic or fantastic literature, an enthusiasm for role-playing games, or experiences of direct 'contact' with Otherworld 'forces'. And as revealed previously¹, this trait has been noted in a substantial number of studies, such that the recognition of which could even be regarded, perhaps, as the sole area of substantive consensus amongst them.

¹ See chapters one and four.

Given the focus of the present study, it might therefore be appropriate to cite a number of recent British studies. Thus, (as noted earlier²) Gosselin, for example, proposes that Pagans demonstrate a “significantly greater” tendency towards “‘fantasy activity’” than is normal³ (Gosselin 1998: 41), while Greenwood herself writes of the typically “[i]ntense imaginative capacity” of Pagan individuals (Greenwood 2000b: 25). While – again – acknowledging the impressionistic nature of such data, the apparent ubiquity of that particular impression among those studying the phenomenon, combined with the overt ontological and methodological centrality of the imagination within Paganism, not to mention the seemingly pivotal role of the ‘vivid imaginative worlds’ of childhood among Pagans generally⁴, could possibly be taken to indicate that there might be a significant correlation or connection in this regard. That is, it would perhaps be surprising (especially if the interview testimony is anything to go by) if a strong interest in or affinity with mythic fantasy were not characteristically a precondition for involvement in Paganism. In other words, it seems likely that, as Adler has suggested, Paganism is attractive to its adherents precisely because it is so “[f]ueled by romantic vision, fantasy, and visionary activities”⁵ (Adler 1986: 4). In addition,

² See chapter one.

³ Gosselin speculates that this possibly indicates comparatively high levels of activity on the “right side of the brain” (this being the cerebral hemisphere that deals with symbolisation), which, he suggests, “might [explain] why many of us [i.e. Pagans] are interested in the myriad symbols we use in our work, magical and otherwise” (Gosselin 1998: 41). Gosselin thus seems to be suggesting (yet again) that imaginative tendencies should perhaps be regarded as more of a precondition than a consequence of formal magical affinities.

⁴ See chapters four and five.

⁵ Possamaï writes that certain forms of fantasy literature – specifically “science-fiction books” – are also popular within New Age circles (Possamaï 2000: 372), which might indicate that at least some New Agers are likewise possessed of a strong imaginative ‘bent’. However, it is perhaps significant that whereas Pagan studies tend explicitly to state this presumed connection, studies of the New Age seem – as, indeed, Possamaï’s appears to illustrate – to require a certain amount of ‘reading between the lines’ in this regard, which, arguably, might in turn indicate that such criteria are not generally accorded quite the same level of importance within the latter phenomenon. For example, more or less the only relevant references in Heelas’ extensive mid-nineties study seem to be brief mentions of the subject of using ‘creative visualisation’ to create financial prosperity (Heelas 1996b: 66-7), and of the

it might make sense to assume that a strong tendency to identify with or become absorbed within 'mythic' or imaginal 'realms' could reasonably be thought, perhaps, to be one of the reasons why (to paraphrase Campbell and Mclver) some modern individuals will 'fail' to reject the sort of intense connection with such narrative 'worlds' that is typically to be found in childhood, thereby enabling – in certain cases, at least – the adoption of fully-fledged magical worldviews as a conduit for more 'mature' preoccupations in adolescence or adulthood.

Moreover, among these studies, Gosselin's psychological account could be thought to have especial significance for the present discussion, as it also implies that the respective 'well-adjusted' and imaginative traits that he regards as characteristic of Pagan psychological profiles are complementary features, and even that this combination of qualities could be thought conducive to the sort of magical methodologies and outlooks that are favoured by such individuals⁶. In all, Gosselin's argument thus poses a

"fascinating" topic of "New Age aesthetics" and "artistic expression" (1996b: 99). Moreover, the fact that Heelas considers the latter to be somewhat "ill-studied" (1996b: 99) may also be telling, as it suggests that such areas really are generally regarded by academics as more peripheral to New Age ideology and practice than others, which status might also conceivably reflect the overall degree of prominence that is generally attributed to them by New Agers themselves. In the light of this – admittedly, tentatively proposed – distinction, it might be appropriate here to refer to the marked difference between the types of 'emphases' that appear to define the two 'camps'. That is, the New Age tends to dwell upon the more-or-less abstract concept of the 'Higher Self', whereas Paganism focuses far more on the Otherworld – a concept that is, of course, intrinsically bound up with the notion of 'vivid imaginative worlds', and which furthermore is accorded its own 'ontological positivity'. In all, then, this suggests that the concept of the imagination plays a much more significant role among Pagans than it does New Agers.

⁶ Gosselin explains that it is the "intuitive" nature of Pagans (which he associates both with 'fantasy' and 'psychic' types of activity) that encourages the adoption of magical systems (rather than *vice versa*), which in turn, he supposes, might aid individuals when it comes to "sussing out what [they] really want and helping them psychologically to get it for themselves" (Gosselin 1998: 41). Thus, Gosselin seems to be suggesting that, like the qualities of 'open-mindedness' and 'emotional stability' he sees as being so typical of Pagans, a strong imaginative faculty is also useful for the development of effective psycho-emotive 'strategies' for living.

further direct challenge to assumptions that psychological well-being among Pagans tends only to arise as a consequence of the artful and deliberate utilisation of magical ‘techniques’ (as implied in the idea that Pagan ritual activity is typically employed to assuage feelings of personal ‘powerlessness’, ‘fragmentation’ or alienation).

Hutton makes much the same point in the previous comment on what he regards as the tendency of Pagan Witchcraft to attract those who ‘combine vivid imagination and high creative power with stability and stamina’⁷, as it implies that it is this fusion of qualities that impelled them to take up Witchcraft in the first place. While – again – the methodological limitations of such surveys have to be taken into account, what seems plausible about them, perhaps, is their suggestion that individuals who tend towards Pagan spiritualities usually do so because of ‘positive’ character traits that they already possess, rather than any perceived personal deficiency in this regard. In all, then, this picture of the average Pagan ‘make-up’ – as succinctly, albeit jocularly, expressed in Gosselin’s statement, “emotionally stable and tough-minded we [Pagans] may be, but pretty intuitive, into sci-fi and bent as corkscrews⁸ into the bargain” (Gosselin 1998: 41) – might arguably be thought to denote a pattern of attitudes, proclivities and behaviours that, generally speaking, could be thought of as more of a constant in the biographies of individual Pagans than a direct or desired consequence of Pagan activities or affiliations.

But however useful or informative this sort of ‘microcosmic’ portrayal might be, it is necessary to look further afield in order to understand the ‘complexity and interrelatedness of the factors and reasons underlying the current growth of interest in Paganism’, as Carpenter puts it⁹ – that is, to place the phenomenon in broader social, cultural and historical context. That said, it could be argued (as with Campbell and McIver, and Rees’ appraisals) that even in these limited terms, such profiles are useful because they

⁷ See chapter ten.

⁸ As revealed in chapter one, Gosselin cites a fondness for “kinky sex” as the other notable characteristic of Pagan personalities (Gosselin 1998: 41), although this could also arguably be seen as indicative of a certain imaginative ‘bent’.

⁹ See chapter one.

undermine depictions of modern culture as an impediment to Pagan sensibilities, by suggesting that such 'paths' are, by and large, an organic extension on the part of adherents of proclivities and attitudes that the fact of living during that notional period has manifestly not prevented them from acquiring.

Indeed, there are a number of reasons for assuming that, if anything, it might even be possible to regard modernity as having been somewhat conducive to the development of such orientations – or rather, to the channelling of existent inclinations or 'expectations' along explicitly Pagan lines. Not least, there is the longstanding epistemologically individualistic 'logic' and trajectory that is both a (even the) defining characteristic of modernity and an intrinsic feature of Pagan culture. But there is another (albeit interlinked) key, positive factor that could conceivably be invoked to show how modernity might have encouraged such heterodoxy – namely, its pivotal role in the popularisation of 'cultic', occult or otherwise 'fantastic' themes, images and narratives. And what seems particularly interesting, not to mention ironic, about the rise of cultic spirituality, Paganism included, is that for all the oppositional, counter-cultural rhetoric that has tended to accrue around such currents, it has been inextricably connected with the historical growth of consumerism, the two trends being closely aligned in terms of overall ideational imperatives *via* the auspices and influence of the Romantic movement.

2. Romanticism, Consumerism and the Rise of Cultic Spirituality

As mentioned previously¹⁰, modern Paganism inherited much of its ethos and impetus, not to mention many of its symbols and 'icons' (such as the Great God Pan, for example) from Romanticism. Campbell, however, paints a rather more complex picture of the latter movement's historical and cultural significance than might on the surface appear to be the case. Initially a highbrow revolt against the perceived "cold-hearted utilitarian philistinism of

¹⁰ See chapter two.

the *nouveaux riches*” (whose historical rise in fortune had attended the growth of industrial capitalism) (Campbell 1987: 179), Romanticism, he argues, affirmed the supposedly liberating powers of art and “the faculty of imagination” (1987: 178). Thus, in all,

‘The romantics asserted a philosophy of ‘dynamic organicism’ with the metaphor of growth substituted for that of the machine, and the values of change, diversity, individuality and imagination, for those of uniformitarianism, universalism and rationalism.’ (1987: 181)

But what complicates matters is that, for all their avowed contempt for the bourgeois classes and the market forces they were held to represent, the Romantics were themselves instrumental in the establishment of the capitalist economy, having tacitly encouraged the growth of consumer culture. Campbell explains:

‘The romantic ideal of character, together with its associated theory of moral renewal through art, functioned to stimulate and legitimate that form of autonomous, self-illusory hedonism which underlies modern consumer behaviour. At the same time, [it] served to ensure that a continuous supply of novel and stimulating cultural products would be forthcoming, and that... the limits to prevailing taste would repeatedly be tested and overthrown.’ (1987: 201)

Thus, in Slater’s words, Campbell’s argument reveals Romanticism’s “double and ironic relation to consumer culture” (Slater 1997: 95); that is, the way that the movement provided a “critique of the material civilization which produces consumers”, while simultaneously encouraging the “feeling, imaginative desiring and longing” that sustain the consumer ‘drive’ itself (1997: 95).

The intention here is not to suggest that the ‘desires and longings’ of Pagans are all cynically created or manipulated by capitalism, but rather that Pagan culture has undeniably benefited from the way the consumer

economy has continuously furnished popular culture with a broad variety of imaginably 'engrossing' – and often explicitly esoteric or 'cultic' – products. The irony of this relationship has not gone entirely unnoticed, however. The Scottish sociologist Marian Bowman, for example, argues that "there is undoubtedly a commodification angle to the current pagan Celtic scene" as it makes it "possible to buy a huge variety of Celtic or quasi-Celtic consumer goods", and explains that purchasers are "attracted to such merchandise because they find it visually pleasing, and use it to express their affinity with things Celtic"¹¹ (Bowman 1996: 249).

But while this may well be true in some cases, it is again important also to acknowledge (as much of the interview testimony seems to attest) the sincere and committed way that many Pagans appear to pursue their chosen 'paths'. Rees, for one, regards as unfair the idea that evidence for consumerism within Pagan culture is necessarily indicative of 'spiritual' or ethical compromise. Instead, he argues that, "[in] the case of temporary or provisional [Pagan] identity we often have window shopping phenomena where individuals look at the goods from a certain, safe distance and then decide whether or not to get any closer." (Rees 1996: 21)

It is conceivable, then, that Paganism's debt to the Romantic imperative underlines the possibility that consumer culture might operate as something of a 'double-edged sword' within such a milieu, and that, overall, the phenomenon could perhaps more accurately be regarded as indicative of the practical and idiosyncratic negotiation of, rather than blanket detachment from – or, for that matter, tacit approval of – the commercially-orientated contexts and structures of modernity. In turn, this impression could perhaps also be thought to reinforce previous suggestions made in the present study regarding Paganism's simultaneously critical and accommodating orientation towards 'modern life'.

There is, however, one other factor which, while having been touched upon already in this study on a number of occasions, must be considered in

¹¹ According to Bowman, "consumer choice" also extends to "people's brand of Paganism, in their brand of Celticity (e.g. Welsh, Irish, Scottish [etc.]), and in the practical ways they choose to acquire and express Celticity (e.g. as Celtic shaman or Druid/Druidess [etc.])" (Bowman 1996: 249-50)

more substantial detail when assessing the phenomenon's sociological significance. Indeed, it might even be regarded as the key to understanding Paganism's place within the broad sweep of modernity, drawing together as it does all the integral strands of the discussion of modernity so far, namely those of epistemological individualism, the 'cultic milieu', and notions of 'disenchantment'. This is secularisation.

3. Secularisation

Gilbert explains that, although it has always been used to designate "the 'world'", in direct and specific contrast to "the 'Church'", this term was originally intended merely to distinguish between "clergy living and working in the wider medieval world [and] 'religious' clergy who lived in monastic seclusion" (Gilbert 1994: 503). During the Enlightenment the term's significance became broader, as a consequence of the steady redistribution of ecclesiastical interests to non-religious bodies and of the intellectual espousal of 'Reason', which both occurred during that period. Thus, it came to mean "the social or cultural reduction of religion", although at that point in history this was not thought to constitute a "general social or cultural trend" (1994: 504). However, as a result of the perceived changes that would come to be identified under the umbrella term 'modernity', by the nineteenth century the displacement of religious tenets by 'worldly' interests was seen as more of a "spreading epidemic" involving a "crisis of faith" – a trend towards what the contemporary thinker and essayist Malcolm Arnold called "spiritual inertness" (1994: 505).

In other words, it had come to be regarded as a force that was affecting people's individual and cultural assumptions and opinions just as much as it was broader institutional structures. Subsequently, the notion of a direct correlation between "secularization and modernization" (1994: 506) (namely, the "understanding of modern society as intrinsically counter-religious, but also in the basic cognitive processes through which knowledge and opinion were fashioned and evaluated" [1994: 505]) became

“entrenched” as a virtual truism for most of the twentieth century¹² (1994: 506).

As might be inferred from an earlier discussion of the concept of modernity¹³, this was to no small extent a consequence of sociological discourse. In these circles, such accounts came eventually to be generically referred to as ‘secularisation theory’, the basic thrust of which is peerlessly expressed in Bryan Wilson’s axiom that secularisation denotes “the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance” (Wilson 1966: *xiv*). Broadly speaking, then, twentieth century secularisation theory can be seen as an outgrowth of the ‘classic’ sociological assumption that change in the direction of modernity by definition occurs to the overall detriment of ‘traditional’ structures and mindsets – a trend to which religion, being supposedly the central ‘strut’ of tradition, is therefore held to be especially vulnerable¹⁴. Furthermore, those predicting the ‘death’ of religion within the west could argue that such claims appeared to be supported by statistical evidence relating to ‘formal’ indicators of religiosity such as regular

¹² To illustrate this point, Gilbert quotes T S Eliot’s poignant assessment that “Men have left God not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before.” (Gilbert 1994: 509)

¹³ See chapter ten.

¹⁴ Of all the ‘classic’ accounts to which twentieth century secularisation theories are indebted, Weber’s notion of rationalisation leading to ‘disenchantment’ has, perhaps, exerted the most obvious influence. Thus, for instance, in their highly regarded study from 1974, Peter Berger and colleagues wrote, “[at] least to the extent that mystery, magic and authority have been important for human religiosity, [...] the modern rationalization of consciousness has undermined the plausibility of religious definitions of reality.” (Berger, Berger and Kellner 1974: 44) According to Woodhead’s helpful summary, other popular sociological explanations include the following: the increasing encroachment of secular institutions or “agencies” upon the sort of key public functions and services (such as “education and welfare”) that were once monopolised by church authorities; the dispersal or dilution of established communities due to radical demographic shifts (resulting from, say, “urbanization”) and developments in communications technologies (which eroded customary social patterns and relationships); and pluralisation, meaning the ‘coming into view’ of unfamiliar or ‘challenging’ cultures and ideas that serve to undermine “once taken-for-granted beliefs and practices and their claims to absolute and exclusive truth” (Woodhead 2002: 10).

worship and church membership¹⁵. By extension, it was also presumed that secularising trends would eventually 'go global' – in other words, as modernisation spread throughout the world, so too would secularisation.

Interestingly, though, while such assumptions were once commonly regarded as (in Berger's own words) "among the safest of sociological generalizations" (*quoted in Gilbert 1994: 503*), this is now no longer the case. Firstly, many sociologists have questioned whether secularisation has really become anything like the global force that was anticipated in such accounts. Berger himself, for example, has recently revised many of his earlier theories, claiming that the "world today is massively religious, is *anything but* the secularized world that had been predicted... by so many analysts of modernity" (*cited in Woodhead and Heelas 2000: 436 [Berger's italics]*) and even that it is currently "bubbling with religious passions" (Berger 2001: 445).

Nevertheless, there remains a small 'hard-core' of sociologists who regard such developments as largely incidental to the central 'logic' outlined in secularisation theory. Chief among these is Steve Bruce, who correctly points out that this ferment is predominantly taking place in developing rather than 'fully' modernised, democratic societies¹⁶.

¹⁵ Regarding British trends, for instance, Gilbert refers to a survey conducted in 1979 which showed that "in an adult population growing by 0.5 per cent per annum, church membership was falling by 0.4 per cent annually while church attendance was also declining." (Gilbert 1994: 512) This meant (in "absolute terms") that "46,000 fewer Anglicans and 108,000 fewer Catholics were attending church in 1979 than had done so four years before" (1994: 512). Another study indicated that in the early 'eighties, "the Methodist Church lost almost 30,000 members, 6 per cent of the total, in the three years after 1981" (1994: 513). Since then, argues Gilbert, there has been much evidence to suggest that neither Catholic nor Protestant churches within the UK have been able to prevent themselves from haemorrhaging both "clergy" and "membership" at an alarming rate (1994: 514). Such figures, he concludes, can only be interpreted as testifying to the "continuation of a century-long decline" of British Christianity as a national religious force (1994: 514).

¹⁶ This prompts Bruce also to wonder "why Berger thinks that religious vitality in the Third World has any bearing on his [earlier] work on secularization" (Bruce 2001: 92). Bruce then goes on to make the rather sardonic suggestion that any religious upsurges currently taking place within the developing world are liable to have occurred because such societies lack the political or socio-cultural inclination to "become increasingly neutral on matters of faith" in

A more pertinent challenge to secularisation theory, perhaps, has come from studies which depict the USA as something of an anomaly in this regard, since, although it is supposedly the epitome of 'modern society', these indicate that it is generally speaking much too religious a country to be regarded as exemplary of such predictions¹⁷. Others have suggested that many individuals continue to maintain strong spiritual affiliations even in those regions where religious institutions appear to be in decline, such as Britain. Notable, not to mention pioneering, in this respect is the British sociologist David Martin, who has argued that western religion continues to serve as "the still point in a turning world" (*quoted in Krausz 1971: 205*). Similarly, Grace Davie claims that the UK has retained a "deeply rooted Christian tradition", regardless of any general religious subsidence that may otherwise have occurred on a structural or institutional level¹⁸ (Davie 1994: 198).

But as Gilbert has pointed out, if the notion of secularisation is disputed on "*a priori* grounds", there is a risk of "defining 'religion' so inclusively as to make the very notion of decline meaningless" (Gilbert 1994: 509), and so of rendering the task of discerning and interpreting modern religious trends unreasonably difficult. His implication is that, clearly, something must have happened that can only realistically be interpreted as a downturn in the status and general 'health' of religion, both in institutional and cultural respects, as religious trends within (much of) the western world do indeed appear to show¹⁹.

the manner of western democracies, preferring instead, he claims, to "murder or expel the deviants" (2001: 92).

¹⁷ Hamilton, for example, points out that despite being the world's "most advanced capitalist country", the US has perhaps the highest proportions of "church affiliation and membership" among the western nations (Hamilton 1995: 86).

¹⁸ Davie describes this situation as a case of – to use her celebrated phrase – 'believing without belonging', which means that while "[membership] figures for religious institutions" show a sharp decrease, "statistics relating to patterns of religious belief" indicate that this aspect of British Christian culture is comparatively robust (Davie 1990: 455).

¹⁹ Peter Berger illustrates this point by referring to the French sociologist Gabriel LeBras' pioneering study from the nineteen thirties. This concerned "the effect on their religion as people migrated from Brittany (then the most Catholic region of France) to Paris", LeBras'

The UK (or to be more precise, England) is an interesting case in point, as, in addition to being markedly secular on an institutional level²⁰, it is also (according, interestingly enough, to Martin and Davie, among others) home to what, culturally speaking, appears to be the most irreligious population on earth²¹. Thus, Martin, for example, has commented on the “remarkable extent of sheer apathy” toward formal religion that is evident within Britain (Martin 1981: 44), while Davie herself has written that British culture is characterised by a peculiarly “low-key approach to religiosity”²²

conclusion being that this had had “a quite devastating effect” (Berger 2002: 292). Berger adds that it is possible to trace the speedy rise of the “constellation” of definitive secularising trends within the twentieth century (based upon observable changes relating to “people’s participation in church life”, the “influence of religion in public life”, the “number of people choosing religious vocations”, and “the number of people who profess traditional religious beliefs”) from its ‘sixties ‘heartland’ in “Northern Europe” into the Mediterranean lands of Portugal, Italy and Spain, and subsequently as far afield as Greece, Poland and the Irish Republic (2002: 294).

²⁰ The sociologist Colin Crouch, for instance, writes that in terms of institutional religious influence and resilience the UK may be regarded as the “secular extreme contrast with the American case” (Crouch 1999: 280).

²¹ The reasons for emphasising the specifically English nature of the conditions described here concerns the not insignificant differences between England and the ‘Celtic fringe’ with regard to religious orientations, the latter seemingly being markedly more ‘devout’, both generally and historically speaking. According to Gilbert, this is in no small part due to the latter countries having been subject to a more convoluted secularising trajectory than that of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ realms. As he put it, “there is a sense in which the impact of secularization has been delayed, in most non-English areas of the British Isles”, a condition he attributes to “an understandable Celtic reaction against English cultural imperialism”, as encouraged, for example, by intensely Protestant sects such as Presbyterianism (Gilbert 1980: 145). This discrepancy is strikingly illustrated by statistics showing that Ireland (both North and South) still has, in Tomasi’s words, “the highest percentages of Christian faith and practice in Europe, probably in the entire Christian world, and certainly among islands or nations with populations of more than 5 million” (Tomasi 1999: 36).

²² By way of recent corroboration of such assertions, a “50,000 person” Gallup opinion poll conducted in 2000 revealed that UK subjects were the “least religious” population out of the sixty countries surveyed (the most religious being “West Africans, followed by North America, Latin America and South-East Asia”). The survey reported that “[in] the UK less than half pray, meditate or ‘do something like that’”, while only “one in ten attend church other than for weddings, christenings and funerals” (Pagan Dawn [136] 2000: 14).

(Davie 1994: 69). Taken together, the overall picture of the UK presented here can hardly be thought to challenge Wilson's definition of secularisation²³; that is, Britain's could be regarded as an undeniably secular culture in so far as the term is thought to denote a predominantly disinterested or non-committal attitude toward religion.

On the other hand, it also appears that, as noted previously, the world is arguably nowhere near as 'disenchanted' as has often been presumed by sociologists, the capacity for 'magical' beliefs and mindsets being (as Campbell and McIver attest) still apparently greatly in evidence among modern westerners²⁴. With regard to secularisation theory, this seems particularly ironic, since, in Weberian terms at least, magical precepts are held to take precedence even over those of religion (in so far as it is possible to differentiate between the two) as impediments to modernity.

Furthermore, it could be argued, perhaps, that for the notion of secularisation to make sense there has to be a recognition of the fundamental importance to religion of a belief in 'supernatural' dimensions, the reason being that this is perhaps the only clear-cut way of distinguishing religious from non-religious categories of thought²⁵. It is thus significant that in his recent study of modern western afterlife beliefs, the sociologist Tony Walter persuasively points out that these have by no means faded into irrelevance. Walter argues that although overly literal, medieval "pictures of heaven, hell and purgatory" have lost their moral and psychological force (Walter 1996: 193), by looking past the secularised "public stage" (1996: 191) it is possible to see much evidence to suggest that, even within the western world, "personal belief in life after death... still remains popular"

²³ Britain's – or to be more precise, England's – peculiarly secular climate appears, moreover, to be fairly well established in historical terms. Thus, Hutton, for instance, writes of "the greater secularity of English culture" in the nineteenth century compared with continental Europe (Hutton 1999a: 18).

²⁴ See chapter ten.

²⁵ For example, Krausz (citing Louis Schneider) defines religion as "an institutional aspect of society based on beliefs in a superhuman or supernatural realm" (Krausz 1971: 211). Gilbert similarly writes that "a proper definition of 'religion' gives centrality to the idea of the supernatural mainly because only by so doing does it capture the authentic cultural meaning of the concept" (Gilbert 1994: 516).

(1996: 192). Moreover, laying bare the pervasive influence of epistemological individualism upon such notions, he writes of “the considerable detachment of religious experience from formal” – which is to say, institutional – “religion” that is indicated by studies of this sort (1996: 45). With specific reference to English religious sensibilities (and citing Davie in the process), he interprets this as showing that there is therefore “a high level of belief in God combined with considerable ignorance, unorthodoxy and diversity in specifics”²⁶ (1996: 35). So in this one vital respect, religion – or at least what appears to be an essential component of this – seems largely to have survived the secularisation onslaught within the west, albeit, it seems, in a predominantly diffuse, inchoate and idiosyncratic form (although it is perhaps unwise uniformly to identify what are clearly often confused and residual beliefs as in themselves constituting ‘religious’ or even particularly ‘spiritual’ viewpoints *per se*).

In all, then, the picture of western religious trends is, on the surface, evidently rather confusing. Helpfully, the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger has provided a qualified overview of secularisation patterns based on recent sociological appraisals. Firstly, she writes that secularisation now tends to be regarded as a distinctly localised phenomenon centring upon “western Europe”, as this is the “only geo-cultural area [to which] the ideal-typical model of secularization implying the expulsion of religion can be applied in contrast with the rest of the world” (Hervieu-Léger 2001: 116), the US included²⁷.

²⁶ Even more pithily, Walter writes: “What seems to be very common is a basic trust in God, combined with agnosticism as to exactly what He, She or It has in store for us” (Walter 1996: 34).

²⁷ In a recent article, Berger writes that, as yet, it is difficult to say exactly why America and Europe are so different with regard to secularisation patterns. Significantly, as one of the original exponents of the idea that pluralisation necessarily leads to religious decline, he now disputes that assumption, arguing that although the US is “a ‘lead society’ of modern pluralism”, it is “lagging far behind Europe in the matter of secularization” (Berger 2002: 296). He concludes that although “[m]odernity pluralizes the life-worlds of individuals and consequently undermines all taken-for-granted certainties”, such a process “may or may not be secularising, depending on other facts in a given situation” (2002: 296).

Secondly – and more pertinently to the present discussion, perhaps – the demise of institutional religion is nowadays not automatically interpreted as a sign of declining religious or spiritual sensibilities. That is, it is generally thought that while the “political constitution” and “normative and axiological organization” of western societies are no longer dependent on religious beliefs and structures, this should “in no sense be equated with the renunciation of belief” (2001: 119). As such, the notion of secularisation merely denotes the “the movement by which the elements of belief break free of the structures prescribed by religious institutions”, rather than the “end of belief” *per se* (2001: 119) (although, as also noted above, such ‘belief’ may often manifest in a decidedly ‘non-committal’ or residual fashion).

It might therefore be appropriate to distinguish between what could be referred to as social and cultural secularising ‘currents’²⁸, with these being seen as semi-independent variables operating respectively, and roughly, upon the levels of institution and ‘sensitivity’²⁹. Accordingly, modern individuals may still commonly harbour spiritual, or, at least, supernatural notions, but tend to lack the sort of definitive or ‘official’ creedal and institutional framework to tell them precisely what to believe and how to express such affinities.

4. Background Religious ‘Intensity’

Typically, when discussing background religion, academic or ethnographic investigations of Paganism have only been concerned with nominal affiliations. Carpenter’s assessment that Pagans are ‘frequently either Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish’³⁰ is a case in point. More recently, Jorgensen and Russell have written that “American Neopagans are somewhat less

²⁸ The author is (again) indebted to Colin Campbell for this idea.

²⁹ By ‘semi-independent’, it is meant that, while there is undoubtedly some sort of causal relationship between these variables, this does not manifest as an exact correlation between institutional religious ‘strength’ and the capacity for sustaining ‘belief’, as presumed in ‘classic’ secularisation theory.

³⁰ See chapter one.

likely to be former Protestants, as likely to be former Catholics, and more likely to be former Jews or something else, than might be expected if their previous religious backgrounds mirrored the religious affiliations of the larger population.” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 332) However, such findings do not reveal the gravity of importance accorded to these former affiliations by the informants, which information could, perhaps, have provided rather more insight into their backgrounds, and more broadly, into the bearing that the relationship between individual sensibilities and broader religious currents might have on the adoption of Pagan spiritualities. In other words, it would be interesting to find out what – if any – sort of light the acknowledgement of such a variable as the ‘intensity’ of individual religious backgrounds might shed upon this phenomenon.

Regarding the interviewees, it appears that the great majority of them regard their respective upbringings as having been decidedly non-committal, in religious terms. For example, on being asked whether his parents (who were members of the Church of England) had sought to raise him as a Christian, DM replied:

‘I’ve got no idea - they didn’t really try to instil any Christian values into me at all. They tried to make me behave well when I was a kid, as most parents should, but they didn’t really do this from a religious basis, they used to just go to church every now and again.’ (DM: 1)

Similarly, when asked whether she had ever been encouraged to believe in concepts like Heaven and Hell by her Catholic parents, WS replied:

‘They didn’t bring me up as a Catholic, they just showed me things [such as images and crucifixes]. Nothing is imprinted on my mind about being a Catholic at all. They just took me along and they didn’t preach to me, ever. I can never, ever remember anyone preaching to me at all.’ (WS: 1)

Later on in the interview, WS says of her mother:

'She didn't want to impress any religion onto me because she went to a Catholic school, and she was really persuaded into being a Catholic, even though she doesn't really practice as a Catholic now. She always says [this] to me, even though she wanted me to be christened a Catholic' (WS: 2).

When asked, 'Do your parents have any sort of religious views themselves?' SL replied:

'No, not really. My dad's the sort of person that believes when you're dead, you're dead. [He's] more of an agnostic, really, you know? He doesn't know what to believe so he thinks it comfortable not to believe in anything. My mum? Well, because she'd been baptised [she thinks that] you ought to believe in Jesus, [but] they weren't churchgoers or anything like that.'³¹ (SL: 5)

Similarly, the question, 'Did you have any sort of religious element in your upbringing?' elicited the following response from GM:

'Oh, no. I was in the choir, but simply for money. We never went to church as a family except for marriages, births and deaths. It's not a religious family. I was christened, but I didn't go to Sunday school or owt like that.' (GM: 3)

AM says much the same thing. He was raised in England by Scottish parents, and was baptised into the Church of Scotland (which he jokingly refers to as "that nefarious cult" [AM: 2]), but adds: "[My family] don't go to church except for births, weddings and deaths. [...] Christmas is a family festival for them, not a religious one." (AM: 2) On being asked whether religion had featured significantly in his upbringing, he simply replied, "No."

³¹ SL had been baptised herself, but when asked whether this was into the Church of England she replied, "[p]robably, yeah... most likely!" (SL: 5), which comment could be thought amply to illustrate the negligible status that church institutions and doctrines seem to have held for her during her formative years.

(AM: 2) SW's family seem to have been equally non-committal. He describes his background accordingly: "Anglican on Sunday, that sort of thing, but not seriously as we were never really into the church, so I suppose you could say that I grew up in a spiritual vacuum." (SW: 2)

Born into a working class Liverpudlian family with Irish connections, PM's childhood experience of religion (in this case Catholicism) was, according to his testimony, rather more formal, and resulted in him having his first communion "around the age of nine or ten" (PM: 2). He also avers, however, that while his grandparents insisted on taking him to church on a regular basis "for confession and suchlike" (PM: 2), his parents were less concerned with such matters. As PM himself puts it, "[my upbringing] was strict in some ways, but not necessarily in a religious sense" (although he adds, "every now and again my mum got this religious 'twang'") (PM: 2). In conclusion, he comments: "[Religion] didn't mean anything to me. I mean, all this stuff about 'God up there', and about 'God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, yadda, yadda, yadda'. I didn't have much of an attachment to it." (PM: 2)

Like PM, SJ also claims to have a "devout" Catholic family heritage, on his father's side at least (his mother's family being of North Welsh Methodist stock) (SJ: 3). And as with PM, his account suggests that any capacity for religious devotion his family might once have had had all but dissipated by the time his parents' generation came to the fore. SJ reports that, unlike his grandparents, his parents "weren't particularly strict" (SJ: 3), the impression being that, as with PM, the Catholic part of his upbringing was rather perfunctory³². He goes on to comment that as a consequence of this relative laxity he "stopped going to mass at the age of 12" (SJ: 3) – a decision which, he claims, greatly "upset" his grandmother (SJ: 3) – having become "fed up" with Catholicism by this point (SJ: 2).

Again, it is necessary to raise the *caveat* that the respondents' recollections might possibly be 'skewed' or 'refracted' somewhat in the light

³² SJ explains that he and his sister were "brought up as Catholics" simply because the Church requires this of any children born subsequently to those wishing to get married in a Catholic church (SJ: 2).

of their subsequent Pagan experiences. That said, it is also worth bearing in mind that the miniscule levels of background religious commitment reported here would hardly be untypical of the 'low-key' and 'apathetic' British religious culture that is so often depicted in sociological surveys and literature³³. It is also interesting to note that the broad impression provided by the respondent pool conforms remarkably well with Hutton's survey on Witchcraft, as it appears that a substantial majority of his informants (approximately two thirds) had had upbringings that were notable for what he describes as a "tepid level of religious commitment", as opposed to strong or "devout"³⁴ (Hutton 1999b: 405). Accordingly, it could also perhaps be seen to reaffirm what seems to be implied in Hutton's findings in this regard, which is not only that a 'low-key' or non-committal religious upbringing or environment need not preclude the cultivation of strong spiritual orientations in later life, but also, that such backgrounds may even be typical of British Pagans to some extent.

³³ It could also be added that the fact that the interviewees in question give such a strong impression that very little in the way of religion has been 'imprinted' upon them, or that a negligible amount has registered aside from 'christenings, marriages and deaths', could be interpreted as suggesting that religious considerations had not exerted much of a formative influence on an emotional or cognitive level. Furthermore, given Paganism's generally critical rhetoric regarding 'mainstream' culture and religion, if the interviewees really were given to 'altering' their perception of the past, subconsciously or otherwise, to coincide with their current worldviews, it would surely make more sense for them to emphasise or exaggerate the influence that religion had exerted over them during this time, rather than underplay it.

³⁴ Given the broader social and religious contexts summarised above by Hervieu-Léger, it might also be significant that, according to Hutton, the "overwhelming majority" of his informants in this category were "agnostics" rather than "atheists" (Hutton 1999b: 405).

5. 'Tepid' Religion and Paganism: A Speculative Comparison

But is this profile simply reflecting broader religious contexts, or does such a correlation suggest that a non-committal religious background might actually be conducive – in 'mainstream' religious terms, at least – to Paganism in some way?

Given all that has already been said about the affinity between Paganism and epistemological individualism, it is perhaps not unreasonable to assume that, historically-speaking, the current rise of magic-based spiritualities could be regarded as exemplifying the latest stage in an ongoing cultural development that has continued apace since its emergence in attendance with the rise of Protestantism and subsequent secularising trends. Campbell and McIver explain this relationship accordingly:

'The Reformation and the ensuing progressive separation of church and state, together with an increasingly secular cultural atmosphere, created circumstances in which sections of the educated upper and middle classes were free to indulge their cultural interests relatively unhindered' (Campbell and McIver 1987: 55).

Campbell and McIver are specifically referring here to the "context" in which "romantic artists... were drawn to the occult" (1987: 55). But aside from the slightly more diverse class base that is evident in contemporary Pagan circles³⁵, this is arguably no less descriptive of the way that, freed from the impositions of orthodox religious culture, modern Pagans have seemingly been able to develop rich and complex cultural and spiritual lives in accordance with, to use Rees' terminology, their own personal 'myths' and 'expectations'. The above quote thus neatly encapsulates the longstanding sociological dynamic that could be thought to connect the phenomena of secularisation, cultic spirituality and Paganism.

Moreover, such a religiously 'non-committal' background could perhaps be regarded as more compatible with the phenomenon's broadly integrative ethos than are 'devout' or morally 'black-and-white' religious

³⁵ See chapter one.

upbringings. This is because the sort of soteriological emphasis on transcendentalist expectations and eschatological forebodings that so informs the latter is likely to be largely absent, thus, in effect, doing away with the 'point' of actively rebelling against such structures. Accordingly, it might therefore help to explain the apparently characteristic ability of adherents to dismiss the more 'orthodox' aspects of mainstream religions without rejecting out of hand some of the intrinsic features of religion *per se* – namely, its 'theistic, polytheistic, and traditionalised' aspects – and so to tread a 'middle ground' between religious orthodoxy on the one hand, and on the other, radical 'disbelief', atheism or 'anti-traditionalism'.

Take ritual, for example. As already mentioned on a number of occasions in this study, this is a key element of Pagan spiritualities; to that extent, it illustrates important procedural and, in some cases, even symbolical congruencies with 'mainstream' religion³⁶. More generally, it is also possible that the existence of a ritualistic element in a person's religious upbringing, however residual or diffuse, might enable her to experience something of the 'sense' or 'meaning' of religious ritual even in the absence of the sort of accompanying moral or creedal strictures that are imposed through conventional religiosity.

An interesting possible example of such is the following comment by WS:

'[A]pparently my christening [in a Catholic church] was really beautiful. That's probably why I've got a lot of candles [now], 'cos apparently everyone held a candle, and it was gorgeous. But to me, it sounds like a Pagan festival... The ceremony was fantastic, apparently.' (WS: 2)

³⁶ The striking resemblance of certain key Pagan rites to standard Christian ceremonial is an interesting case in point. This is notably evident in the use of ritual foodstuffs (such as 'cakes and wine' in Wicca), which procedure, as noted in chapter two, has very strong Eucharistic connotations. That is to say, it is very similar to the ceremonial partaking by Christians of "bread and wine", which The Wordsworth Encyclopedia of World Religions describes as the "chief sacrament and central act of Christian worship (also called Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, and Mass)." (1999: 386-7)

This is not to suggest that WS may have actually retained some memory of that event, but rather to show that she is nevertheless inclined to envisage it in terms that seem appreciative of its formal ritualistic aspects, yet unconcerned with the moral and eschatological provisos or injunctions that are normally associated the more doctrinaire aspects of Catholicism. It is therefore just this sort of ambiguity that might in turn have enabled her to interpret these features in a more personally 'meaningful' or resonant manner in later life. Similar sentiments are expressed by PM, who comments:

'The only time Catholic ceremony has ever meant anything to me was when I experienced a requiem mass for a relative. I was well into Paganism and magic at the time, and I just thought, "God, this is beautiful!" It was an aesthetic thing more than anything.' (PM: 2)

Thus, although PM is suggesting that he had already established an affinity with Paganism by that time, it is also conceivable that his religious background, characterised as this was (if his above testimony is anything to go by) by a sense of overall detachment from his Catholic heritage, might thus have helped him to detect, even if only begrudgingly, a sort of 'common ground' between Pagan and more 'conventional' religious manifestations³⁷.

Aside from ritual, and on a more general level of interpretation, Pagan worldviews could also be regarded as, not only depicting a vivid and 'full-blooded' version of the 'supernatural' dimensions that some see as still

³⁷ Again, caution must be employed when assessing such testimony on face value. But having said that, it nevertheless seems significant that these accounts are so consistent with the previously cited testimony relating to WS and PM's respective religious upbringings. WS's anecdote, for example, closely accords with her claims that Catholic doctrine had left a negligible 'imprint' upon her during her formative years. As such, it conceivably suggests that the experiences they describe here might not be especially atypical or unlikely on a personal level. Moreover, as will be discussed later on, whatever its inherent 'validity' as reportage, testimony describing or implying secularising 'shifts' within families, such as that quoted from WS and PM in this chapter, takes on an interesting extra resonance when regarded in the light of certain contemporaneous religious trends that have occurred (and, indeed, are clearly still occurring) within the wider culture.

residing at the root of contemporary religious understandings, but also as presenting these in a more accessible and approachable light than is definitively the case within more orthodox religious cultures³⁸. In all, then, it might not be implausible to suggest that Paganism could be thought to highlight the potential for such predominantly 'low-key' or inchoate affinities as seem to characterise modern, and especially British, religious culture to resurface as intensively heterodox spiritual orientations, even to the extent of exhibiting some of the 'hallmarks' of 'conventional' religion³⁹.

Admittedly, this discussion has so far been largely a matter of supposition; it should also be stressed that it is by no means the intention to suggest that those with 'devout' religious backgrounds are unable subsequently to embrace Pagan worldviews. Interestingly, however, there is evidence to support something like the converse of the basic proposition being made here – namely, that strongly religious backgrounds might actually be more congruent with certain other forms of 'alternative' spirituality than they are with Paganism. This is neatly explained in the following discussion by Martin, who points to a significant correlation in this regard between NRMs and 'devout' upbringings. This is, writes Martin, that the

³⁸ The constituent elements of this point have already been touched upon elsewhere in this study, most notably in the discussion of Pagan theodicy (see chapter eight). But given the current discussion, it is worth drawing attention both to the similarities and the differences between Pagan Underworld notions and the orthodox Christian conception of Hell, which might be thought rather neatly to illustrate this nexus between Paganistic and 'conventional' religious worldviews. On the one hand, the two frameworks are clearly related (the Christian term 'Hell' in fact derives from the figure of *Hel*, the "ruler" of the subterranean "land of death" in Nordic mythology [Davidson 1964: 29]). The differences, however, are saliently indicated in the following comments by R J Stewart, who writes, concerning the purportedly 'infernal' netherworld dimensions: "The orthodox Hell is merely a rather childish subterfuge, a mask to disguise the true nature of the UnderWorld and to frighten the seeker from looking beyond dogmatic external appearances. The nature of the [Underworld] Guardian is not to capture souls for damnation, but to liberate them from self-imposed restrictions." (Stewart 1985: 115) In other words, and in complete contrast to Christian doctrine, Pagans are actually encouraged to enter, rather than to avoid, the Underworld 'dimensions'.

³⁹ Making just such a point, Hutton writes that such Pagan spiritualities constitute a "striking fulfilment of that very common element of religiosity, a yearning for integration with the divine, with the rest of the cosmos, and with oneself" (Hutton 1999b: 391).

former “tend to come from good families where there is some Christian background”, and so “draw on a deposit which is already there” (Martin 1981: 56). He elaborates that this is because these two distinct milieux offer a broadly similar approach to and experience of the ‘divine’. Accordingly, as is also typically the case for those who strongly identify with conventional religious currents, the “neophyte in the new religious movement feels he has lighted on *the* key and that all his experiences make sense”⁴⁰ (1981: 56).

Thus,

‘Once [the neophyte] takes hold of the key he enters into a personal devotional discipline which offers secure markers and boundaries. One such marker is that between good and evil, black and white.’ (1981: 56)

Significantly, though, such affiliations are likely to arise because “the convert... has precisely this tendency to see in terms of black and white” in the first place. Thus,

‘Where the Christian Church itself offers such markers the new religious movement makes little headway. A born-again Christian or an adolescent of vigorous evangelical faith is not normally a convert to a new religion. It is where the definition is lacking, the markers removed, and the sense of meaning evacuated that a new religious movement can make some impact.’ (1981: 56-7)

Accordingly, although the two categories do not tend to co-exist locally, this seems to be due as much if not more to their similarities as their differences. In other words, the attitudes and orientations of those brought up within a devoutly religious milieu can be expected to exhibit a certain compatibility with NRM spiritualities, which under certain circumstances may lead to formal involvement with an organisation of the latter type⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Martin's italics.

⁴¹ According to Martin, this ‘transition’ is usually prompted or accompanied by a sense of disillusionment with the ‘traditional’ church. That is, “members of the new movements report a sense of something missing, and a feeling that the conventional bodies do not match up to

Martin's article draws primarily from the "British context", which he regards as "exceptional" in only one respect, this being the previously mentioned tendency towards religious 'apathy' on the part of the UK population (1981: 44), although his intention is to extrapolate from this a more general portrayal of western religious trends. Whichever way, it seems reasonable to infer from Martin's findings that individuals who have experienced a non-committal or apathetic religious upbringing might therefore be considered comparatively resistant to the sort of 'black-and-white' moral and eschatological overviews that are associated with orthodox creeds and new religious movements alike. As such, it might therefore also follow that they will be more likely to feel an affinity with Paganism, at least in part, due to its general eschewal of rigidly-defined moral or soteriological frameworks⁴².

their *religious* expectations" (Martin 1981: 56 [Martin's italics]) – that is, they do not 'practice what they preach'. Accordingly, writes Martin, "they offer no confident hope for the world; and they appear suffused with 'hypocrisy'. Such hope as the old churches have is part and parcel of the liberal fragmentation. The theology which they have to offer no longer offers a comprehensive explanation." (1981: 56)

⁴² It might even be possible, albeit very tentatively perhaps, to propose that a 'low-key' religious background is less compatible with the New Age than with Paganism to some extent. The reason for such an assertion is that, although it might not appear salvational in the 'classic' theodical sense, the former nevertheless seems to be far more concerned with what Heelas refers to as "the perfect life" (Heelas 1996b: 19), a symptom of which being its concerted future-focused, even quasi-'Gnostic' sensibility (see chapter nine).

It is thus interesting to note that some scholars regard the New Age as being peculiarly symptomatic of American culture and history for the reason that the US as a whole appears also to be uniquely possessed by just such an orientation. For instance, in her pioneering 'insider' commentary on the New Age, Marilyn Ferguson writes: "[T]here have always been two 'bodies' of the American Dream. One, the dream of tangibles, focuses on material well-being and practical, everyday freedoms. The other, like an etheric body extending from the material dream, seeds psychological liberation – a goal at once more essential and more elusive. The proponents of the latter dream have nearly always come from the comfortable social classes. Having achieved the first measure of freedom, they hunger for the second." Thus, "[p]ersonal transformation, in effect, is an enactment of the original American dream." (Ferguson 1981: 134) Hanegraaff echoes Ferguson's sentiments in his description of the New Age 'quest for a *New Paradigm*' as "an American phenomenon" (Hanegraaff 1996: 98 [Hanegraaff's italics]). While these interpretations do not link this

6. Paganism and 'Mainstream' British Religion

However, even if Martin is correct, this does not explain what it is that makes some individuals who have experienced more orthodox religious backgrounds choose to become Pagans. Certainly, although most of the interviewees claim to have had the benefit (from a Pagan point of view, at least) of being born into a religiously apathetic family, others tell of how they had to develop their own Pagan 'paths' in the face of 'devoutly' religious upbringings. Quite how they managed to do so is not always clear, but a detailed consideration of their testimony might shed some light.

The accounts of two of the interviewees in this category – JH and CC – seem particularly telling. Firstly, both exhibited a strong love of 'fantasy worlds', even to the extent of believing themselves to have frequently come into contact with Otherworldly realms and characters during childhood⁴³. Secondly, the two same individuals give the plausible impression of having been rather independent-minded during this period. JH, for example, was the daughter of devout Anglicans, but was "mostly brought up" in Lancashire by her grandmother (her parents having been "horrendously busy" throughout most of her childhood), whom she describes as a "very remarkable working-class woman" (JH: 2), and who, she claims, instilled in her a "feminist viewpoint" that she found hard to reconcile with the "idea of the Christian church" (JH: 3). CC's independent streak is more difficult to account for, but seems nonetheless to have manifested from an early age, if her testimony is anything to go by. She comments, for instance, on how she remembers "at the age of five being told at Sunday school that we were all miserable sinners, and thinking to myself rebelliously, 'Not me, I haven't had chance yet!'" (CC: 2); she also claims to have treated the religious part of her sixth-form education with "derision"⁴⁴ (CC: 2). Both these factors could possibly

cultural outlook to religious understandings *per se*, it might nevertheless be cautiously suggested that, when assessed in the light of other studies in that area, they reveal a certain degree of convergence between the 'American Dream', New Age spirituality, and the USA's status as perhaps the most religious nation in the western world.

⁴³ See chapter four.

⁴⁴ In response to Snow and Machalek's caution (as articulated by Batson *et al.*), it could be argued that bearing Martin's comments on background religion in mind, a questioning (as

help to explain why these interviewees were seemingly able to withstand any substantive pressure they might have experienced (either from religious or any other types of 'authority') to 'reject' the 'fantasy worlds' that informed their childhoods, and indeed, to maintain a keener sense of affinity with these than with their nominal religious cultures.

Another factor seems to be that, by virtue of having grown up within the UK, JH and CC were both able eventually to 'escape' the restrictions of orthodox backgrounds by virtue of the sort of freedoms that could be expected to be much less evident in religiously more 'traditional' or 'devout' cultures. Most significantly, perhaps, they were able to move well away from the parental influence upon reaching adulthood. What makes this particularly pertinent, moreover, is that both relocated to London while the counter-cultural ferment of the 'sixties and early 'seventies was in full swing, and describe themselves as having become enthusiastic participants in the city's prodigious "sex, drugs and rock and roll" scene of the time (JH: 6; CC: 5⁴⁵).

Interestingly, though, their testimonies suggest that these bouts of rebellious non-conformity do not appear to have involved any significant engagement with Pagan ideas or pursuits⁴⁶. Rather, JH and CC both seem to regard these periods as interludes between the stages in their lives that they now believe were genuinely informed by Otherworld connections. JH, for example, claims that her interest in such matters did not really

opposed to orthodox or accepting) attitude towards religion in the course of their respective upbringings on the part of the two interviewees in question might perhaps be thought more consistent with their present-day, strongly independent-minded attitudes than would a more deferential or subservient attitude.

⁴⁵ To be fair, CC actually comments, "I didn't do the drugs, but I certainly did the sex and the rock and roll!" (CC: 5)

⁴⁶ JH, for instance, claims that she "didn't really consider things spiritual a lot" during that period of her life (JH: 6). She relates that the closest she came to this was when she "broke into Highgate cemetery at night with the late Viv Stanshall" – a famous British musician and eccentric – "and attempted to revive Karl Marx", which escapade she puts down to the fact that "certain people [at the time] had various fascinations with Crowley and things like that" (JH: 5). However, JH does not consider such episodes to have had much to do with Paganism *per se*. As she puts it: "I was exploring different avenues, but they weren't the same awareness, if you know what I mean" (JH: 5).

recommence until after having left London. She comments: "I got involved with some Buddhists – I spent a time living in a Buddhist colony – and although I eventually decided that it wasn't for me, the experience re-awoke something. It re-orientated me spiritually." (JH: 6) And as has already been noted, CC asserts that until reviving her interest in magical matters she was involved in the British Humanist Association, but regarded the two enthusiasms as entirely separate. For her, the point is that "[most] of the '70s was really just a loosening up from this terribly dull, north country chapel upbringing – just learning to play with ideas."⁴⁷ (CC: 5)

In summary, despite having apparently grown up within piously Christian milieux, both JH and CC nevertheless seem to have been able, with the aid of a broadly, and, moreover, increasingly, secular and 'open-minded' cultural environment, to convert longstanding independent-minded tendencies on their part into full-blown epistemological individualism. In turn, this appears to have enabled the 'magical' and imaginative sensibilities that they regard as having so informed their childhoods to come once again to the fore, albeit this time within explicitly spiritual and esoteric interpretive frameworks. Accordingly, both testimonies reaffirm the earlier suggestion⁴⁸ that the capacity for 'rebelliousness' among Pagans could perhaps be regarded as, in general, the expression of a free-spirited and questioning temperament on the part of these individuals, which helps them to maintain, consolidate and elaborate upon existing proclivities towards imaginably-resonant or 'cultic' subjects and ideas, rather than the principal cause of such tendencies.

⁴⁷ In line with Snow and Machalek's *caveat*, it could perhaps be that the two individuals here might for some reason be 'playing-down' the influence the counter-culture had on their development as Pagans. However, given the importance they both currently attribute to magical sensibilities and 'experiences' during the other phases of their lives (including childhood), it is hard to see why they should do so, particularly given the counter-culture's undeniable associations with the upsurge in 'alternative' spirituality generally. It could also be pointed out that their portrayals of the hippy 'era' as a time of personal experimentation and 'loosening-up' are exactly in accord with certain sociological interpretations of that period's significance (see below).

⁴⁸ See chapter seven.

Turning to JW, it seems that her account differs from the other representatives of this category in this regard primarily by indicating that she had felt far less antipathy towards her parental religion⁴⁹. Even so, like JH and CC, she gives the impression of having somehow managed to acquire a sceptical and epistemologically individualistic attitude towards religion even during her formative years. Thus, for instance, upon leaving school JW reports having taken it upon herself to do something that, as a once devout Catholic, she had “never been brought up to do” – that is, to “[study] the Bible” (JW: 2). As she puts it: “I still had a [spiritual] belief [but] I think that what I was questioning was the basis of where that belief was coming from”, a trait that, according to her account, became even more pronounced with her discovery of ‘cultic’ books like Erich von Däniken’s ‘Chariots Of The Gods’⁵⁰ (JW: 2). Moreover, she also claims to have become involved in the notably secular world of union politics, and that this, along with the burgeoning “feminist bandwagon” of the time (i.e. the late ‘sixties), encouraged her to campaign for equal pay on behalf of female workers at the factory where she was then working (JW: 2). This, JW reports, in turn prompted her to ask “[ask] questions like: ‘What right has a man who’s supposedly celibate [i.e. The Pope] to dictate to me, a woman, and tell me that my body is no more than a baby-producing machine?’” (JW: 2), and culminated eventually in her making a “clean break from the Church” (JW: 2).

JW claims that after doing so she went on to develop an “interest in alternative thinking, such as Buddhism” and “yoga” (JW: 2). Soon after, she started attending “spiritualist churches”⁵¹ (JW: 3). She continues:

⁴⁹ She claims, for example, to have remained a “practicing Catholic” until school-leaving age (JW: 1-2).

⁵⁰ All of von Däniken’s books deal with what he calls his “gods=astronauts” theory, which states that human evolution and the development of civilisation can be directly attributed to contact with extraterrestrials, and that myths are actually descriptions of these encounters (Däniken 1980: 218).

⁵¹ JW comments: “[My] first impression [was] that it was just like going along to a normal church, but you had this person stood on a platform saying things like ‘Johnny, I’ve got your granddad here!’ So some of it was a bit twee, shall we say!” (JW: 3)

'[Then] I started studying spiritualism as a form of meditation, and started going along to [Spiritualist Development] Open Circles... [And] that developed my psychic intuition... Although I don't particularly share spiritualist beliefs, I did find the Spiritualist Development Circles very helpful.'⁵²

(JW: 3)

As with CC and JH, then, JW seems to be suggesting that this sort of spiritual 'experimentation' led, not to her becoming directly involved in magical pursuits, but rather to a period of personal spiritual 're-adjustment', which she appears nevertheless to regard as having been ultimately necessary for such an affiliation subsequently to take place⁵³. Thus, the respective testimonies from these three individuals might possibly help to explain why some individuals who have experienced an orthodox religious upbringing should choose to affiliate themselves with Paganism when transferring their allegiance to an 'alternative' spiritual orientation, rather than, say (as Martin would suggest is more typical of those with such a background), to NRMs.

In summary, then, it could be that, rather than simply 'crossing over' from devout to Pagan religious sensibilities, it is perhaps more likely that such individuals will have already exhibited a tendency to challenge parental religious assumptions, which attitude might conceivably have prevented them from being overly influenced by orthodox worldviews and injunctions. Moreover, it could also be proposed (albeit even more tentatively, perhaps) that the adoption of formal Pagan 'paths' by such characters is more liable to occur in cases where a period of 'experimentation' has led to a sort of

⁵² JW reports that she later joined "a parapsychologist society based in Preston", her reason for this being that, although she is "not a scientist", she "wanted to study it from a scientific approach" (JW: 3).

⁵³ That said, perhaps because of her seemingly comparatively positive experiences of 'conventional' religion, JW appears far more inclined than CC and JH to acknowledge parallels between her parental and adopted religions – as seems evident, for instance, in her use of the term 'Lady' to denote both the Catholic Madonna and the Wiccan Goddess (JW: 1, 6).

'transitional' stage of spiritual involvement, characterised by an open-minded yet comparatively disengaged type of outlook. With regard to the interviewee testimony, this is exemplified by CC's period of 'loosening-up', JH's flirtation with Buddhism, and JW's involvement with Spiritualism; more generally, such a stage could perhaps be thought to approximate to some degree the sort of residual or 'tepid' religious orientations that seem to be more typical of individual religious orientations prior to formal and intensive affiliation with Paganism. Whichever way, the three interviewees discussed here ultimately all seem to exemplify how even the most ostensibly inhospitable background milieux may prove insufficient to prevent at least some modern individuals from developing 'fully-fledged' magical worldviews.

In all, then, it might be possible to argue that the experiences of all the interviewees in this regard could be interpreted as illustrating just how important a questioning, independent-minded, and therefore, more-or-less culturally 'secular', attitude towards religion during formative years might be for the subsequent cultivation of strong yet predominantly non-soteriological Pagan affinities – the adoption of which, as suggested previously⁵⁴, moreover seems by no means necessarily to signal the curtailing of such individualistic sensibilities later on.

What might also be significant, however, is how the interview testimony seems to illustrate striking differences in the ways that this tendency manifests on a generational scale. Firstly, there are those who report having been brought up in families who exhibited little if any commitment to religion (DM, AM, SL, SW and GM). Of these, all were members of the Church of England, save for AM, who, as noted above, was baptised into the Church of Scotland. Secondly, there are those whose grandparents were 'devout', but whose parents were significantly less religious, with the result that they themselves were accorded substantial leeway with respect to religious belief and worship (WS, PM and SJ). Significantly, perhaps, the devout representatives in these interviewees' backgrounds were all Roman Catholic, which possibly indicates that, having maintained an anomalous level of orthodoxy in comparison with the more

⁵⁴ See chapter seven.

mainstream (in English contexts, at least), Anglican form of worship, that creed has also been substantially affected by the UK's lukewarm religious climate.

Finally, there are those who claim to have grown up within devoutly religious milieux (JW, CC and JH, who were Catholic, Methodist and Anglican respectively). Their respective testimonies on this subject give the overall impression that, by virtue of strong personal feelings and opinions on their part, combined with the pervasively secular contexts of British society, they were able significantly to offset the influence had upon them by their respective parental creeds, which factor arguably seems to have greatly facilitated the development of Pagan 'paths' among them in later life.

Again, a note of caution must be introduced when assessing such highly subjective data. All said, though, when taken together the interviewee evidence paints a fairly cohesive, vivid and, it could perhaps be argued, persuasive picture of a modern British religious environment where orthodox religious outlooks and affinities are very hard to sustain, and where even devout family sensibilities can simply bleed away over the course of a mere two generations. And as such, the testimony appears strikingly consistent with a recent portrayal of religious trends by the sociologist Callum Brown. Brown's basic thesis – that 'mainstream' religion has all but collapsed within the UK in recent decades – is hardly controversial. But what is particularly interesting about his account is the chronological, statistical and analytical detail he applies when describing this trend. In brief, Brown argues that "from 1956 all indices of religiosity in Britain start[ed] to decline, and from 1963 most enter[ed] free fall" (Brown 2001: 188), and explains that at the beginning of this period, "[a]cross the board, the British people started to reject the role of religion in their lives"⁵⁵ (2001: 190). He continues:

⁵⁵ The nub of Brown's argument is that this period saw the sudden demise of the "overwhelmingly discursive" approach to Christianity that emphasised "personal moral worth" and was associated most closely with the evangelical movement, which characterised British religious life after the "fading of coercive religion" at the onset of the nineteenth century (Brown 2001: 195). Brown himself regards his appraisal of secularisation as being much more nuanced than is usually the case in sociological literature, which, he surmises, has an undue "focus on 'structures' such as churches and social classes, to the neglect of 'the

'The next generation, which came to adulthood in the 1970s, exhibited even more marked disaffiliation from church connection of any sort, and *their* children were raised in a domestic routine largely free from the intrusions of organised religion.'⁵⁶ (2001: 190)

For Brown, this signals the final stages of Christianity's status as a 'mainstream' force within the UK⁵⁷ (2001: 196). Be that as it may, the fact that many Pagans, including the interviewees themselves, appear to have been able to cultivate complex and committed spiritual paths (of the sort Brown rather unfairly dismisses as "minor cults" [2001: 196]) should not be underestimated. Specifically, it reinforces the many studies which suggest that secularising trends have not uniformly resulted in the terminal or substantive diminishment of the capacity for spiritual or 'supernatural' belief and expression, and even raises the possibility that such notions may re-emerge in altogether more robust and cohesive forms than is now predominantly the case.

It might thus be possible to view the composite picture that is presented by the interviewees as illustrating the complex socio-historical dynamic that has underpinned the 'modern' trend towards secularisation and epistemological individualism. Arguably, this can be seen to have unfurled by way of a multi-layered developmental arc, whereby traditional religious orthodoxy is displaced, *via* secularisation, by a questioning and often residual or non-committal yet broadly open-minded type of engagement with religious and spiritual matters. And in so doing, it may conceivably have provided potentially fertile conditions for the cultivation of a characteristically

personal' in piety" (2001: 195). It is nevertheless consistent with the prevalent sociological view that secularisation has involved a rise in both the status of individual sensibilities and the degree of moral weight that is attributed to these, to the overall detriment of institutional religious prescriptions and contexts.

⁵⁶ Brown's italics.

⁵⁷ Brown suggests that "[for] the generations growing up since the 1960s, new [i.e. non-religious] ethical concerns have emerged to dominate their moral culture – environmentalism, gender and racial equality, nuclear weapons and power, vegetarianism, the well-being of body and mind – issues which Christianity and the Bible in particular are perceived as being wholly unconcerned" (Brown 2001: 190).

idiosyncratic and non-soteriological, Pagan form of spiritual heterodoxy, for some at least.

That said, it is likely that American commentators, such as Alder, Lewis, and Jorgensen and Russell, are less inclined to acknowledge the marked differences that may be evident with respect to background religious 'levels' because of the comparatively strong influence that conventional religious beliefs and institutions still appear to exert within the USA. Even so, it could still perhaps be suggested that however commendable, or even important, such studies might otherwise be, by not acknowledging this variable they are nevertheless ignoring a factor that may prove important, even vital, for a proper understanding of the socio-cultural and historical contexts within which Paganism has arisen, on both 'macrocosmic' and 'microcosmic' levels⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ In addition to shedding light on the adoption of Pagan spiritualities *per se*, this variable might also possibly help to explain some of the differences that appear to exist between national Pagan cultures (so to speak), especially now that substantially more data is being generated on Paganism in the UK as well as the USA. Possible significant differences have been suggested by Tom Hope (a former research student at York University), who has recently successfully completed a study of organisational patterns within British Wiccan covens. In a paper he has co-written with the author of the present study (copy available), Hope has drawn from his own fieldwork to identify what he sees as an important discrepancy between American Pagan culture (as described in a recent study by Sarah Pike [2001]), and its British counterpart, this being that the latter appears significantly more "informal" than the former (Hope and Jones 2004: 6).

He illustrates this thesis by referring to one of the focal points of modern Pagan 'communities', namely festivals. According to Hope, whereas in the US such events are usually populous and organised around magical activities, British festivals (which are more commonly referred to as "camps") operate on a far smaller "scale", and are "based around the 'outward bound' ideal of camping in the open in an informal, recreational manner" (2004: 9). Thus, whereas American Pagan festivals seem to function as designated arenas where a "unified body of knowledge can be developed", for British Pagans their significance is more that of "spaces where individuals can meet others of a relatively like mind" (2004: 9).

The relevance of Hope's observations to the present discussion is thus that British Pagan culture gives the impression, on the whole, of being much less intensive – that is to say, more inclined to tread a 'middle ground' – than its American counterpart with respect to organisational and socio-cultural criteria, and so could perhaps be construed as reflecting, in some respects at least, the UK's comparatively 'low-key' religious culture, although this is

Having suggested a hopefully more nuanced view of modernity's influence upon the individual and social experience of religion, and in turn, its relationship to Paganism, it is thus appropriate to consider once more the latter's broader sociological significance.

7. What Might Have Prompted the Emergence of Paganism?

As noted previously⁵⁹, studies of Paganism have tended to portray the phenomenon as symptomatic of a profound and, according to some, even necessary shift from a definitively rationalistic and 'impersonal' modernity to an altogether different mode of social organisation and cultural expression. This is evident, for example, in those readings (such as Luhrmann's and Berger's) that attempt to explain Paganism in terms of a presumed epistemological and normative collapse on the part of 'classic' modernity. More usually, however, the phenomenon is depicted as representing a shift from a prevailing state of cultural 'disenchantment' to one of 're-enchantment'. This is in no way to suggest that studies proposing such interpretations should be summarily dismissed, as much valuable, even vital, information on the subject may be drawn from them. However, it is also important to acknowledge that they are effectively reprising a popular and long-standing, but contestable, assumption that the 'modern world' is characterised above all by (in Crouch's words) "functionalism and rationalism" (Crouch 1999: 41). This type of position has also given rise to an attendant but equally questionable presumption that the challenging or eschewal of these supposed imperatives, along with the monolithic religious orthodoxies with which they are often conflated, is therefore an intrinsically subversive and even salutary activity that cannot but emanate from the cultural 'margins'.

not to say that British Pagans are necessarily any less committed when it comes to actual magical beliefs or activities.

⁵⁹ See chapter ten.

Such portrayals of Paganism are, moreover, also very much informed by Weber's sociological conception of modern life, with its depiction of the structures and overall ethos of modernity as antithetical to religious and, more fundamentally, magical worldviews. *Ergo*, the rise of Paganism represents a substantive challenge not only to those elements that most characterise the 'modernised' world, such as capitalism, urbanism and industrialisation, but also the debilitating sense of existential 'meaninglessness' that is supposedly part-and-parcel of these conditions. Accordingly, it is seen as a redress to the psycho-somatic 'wounds' caused by modernity; symptomatic of a 'chthonic imperative' in favour of an 'earth-centered vision'; or a means of bringing 'meaning' back into a 'dead' and 'impersonal' world.

However, such overviews cannot really be said to hold water on a sociological level. Substantially, this is because, as noted in the preceding chapter, magical beliefs and mindsets have, it seems, always been far more prevalent within the modern western world than is often presumed. To raise another, related point, it is important to counterbalance some of the negative, rationalistic or utilitarian associations that modernity has accrued over the centuries with what might be called a 'Romantic imperative', which also seems to have emerged during that period. The significance of this development relates to the fact that Romanticism was anything but a marginal phenomenon, but rather, as Campbell has explained, could more accurately be understood as "a general cultural movement, on a par with... the immediately preceding Enlightenment" (Campbell 1987: 180). In other words, the 'penchant for reverie and dreaming' and 'celebration of the irrational' that was instilled within western culture as a consequence of the former⁶⁰ cannot really be regarded as any less illustrative of modernity than the image of a prevailing and "overly narrow rationalism" to which the emergence of these romantic sensibilities was initially a reaction (1987: 182).

Moreover, the historical importance of Romanticism to modern attitudes underlines the fact that for all the rhetoric it was as much an outgrowth as a critique of the Enlightenment, as is consummately illustrated

⁶⁰ See chapter two.

by the pivotal influence of individualism within both movements. That is, the Romantic Movement attached the notion of a “unique, ‘creative’ genius” to the definitive Enlightenment espousal of “the right of each individual to self-determination” (1987: 183). In all then, Romanticism can be thought to have given rise to a paradoxical situation whereby its adherents’ views of themselves as ‘outsiders’ *vis-à-vis* social and moral conventions, and ideology of aloof disdain towards the purportedly bourgeois ‘mainstream’, became entrenched as almost a normative value (in its more ‘bohemian’ sectors, at least), and certainly as a popular feature of the ‘modern’ era they were criticising.

Paganism could therefore plausibly be regarded as one of the more recent manifestations of this historical paradox. However, this in itself is insufficient to explain the reasons for Paganism’s emergence, since, as Jorgensen and Russell would aver⁶¹, such an account does not specify exactly what it is that differentiates Pagans from the (many) others in society who also express a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the socio-cultural mainstream. Thus, in order properly to assess the possible reasons for the catalysis and subsequent growth of the phenomenon, it is necessary to look beyond Paganism’s ‘romantic’ and oppositional rhetoric (which, in any case, seems in the main to mask a fairly accommodating or integrative day-to-day orientation towards the ‘wider culture’).

One explanation is that the phenomenon was ‘sparked’ by the ‘counter-cultural’ ferment of the late ‘sixties and early ‘seventies, when occurred, as Heelas puts it, “the most significant turn to inner spirituality to have taken place during modernity”⁶² (Heelas: 1996b: 50) (thus encouraging the ‘flowering of alternative religions’ referred to earlier⁶³). Heelas writes that this phenomenon may be regarded “in terms of three main orientations” – namely, “that directed at changing the mainstream”, “that directed at rejecting

⁶¹ See chapter ten.

⁶² Heelas also states that this counter-cultural trend “really got underway during the 1950s with the ‘beats’ or ‘beatniks’” (Heelas 1996b: 49), but adds that the “movement... remained small” up until the ‘sixties. (1996b: 49)

⁶³ See chapter nine.

disciplines to live the hedonistic life”, and “that directed at finding ways of life which serve to nurture the authentic self”⁶⁴ (1996b: 61).

This clearly had a massive impact on Pagan culture. Most obviously, perhaps, it is evident in Paganism’s seamless incorporation of (once) counter-cultural currents such as feminism and environmentalism, such that these are now commonly (albeit not correctly, perhaps) regarded as integral, even defining features of it. More generally, it is unarguably the case that the acceptance of cultural heterodoxies that became *de rigueur* during this period cannot but have been broadly beneficial to the phenomenon⁶⁵.

However, it might perhaps be appropriate to show a degree of caution when assessing that movement’s overall significance with respect to Paganism. Specifically, even leaving aside the fact that the latter is not entirely an ‘inner’ spirituality as such, it is also the case that, as Hutton correctly points out, Paganism – or at least Pagan Witchcraft – “attained its enduring form in the 1950s” (Hutton 1999b: 411), which means that it actually predated the ‘flowering’ of the counter-culture by a decade or so. Thus, while it may well have been a vital contributory factor in the post-war growth of modern alternative and cultic spiritualities in general, it might be more accurate to regard the counter-culture as a complementary phenomenon to Paganism and a product of some of the same socio-historical forces that gave rise to it than as its progenitor or *sine qua non*⁶⁶.

⁶⁴ The first of these orientations was exemplified by “the political activists engaged in civil rights or anti-Vietnam demonstrations”; the second by “the ‘decadent’ world of ‘Sex, drugs and rock-and-roll’”; the third, by those “taking ‘the journey to the East’” (Heelas: 1996b: 51).

⁶⁵ Lewis, for example, wrote in 1996 that “the Neo-Pagan movement is populated by significant numbers of baby-boomers”, meaning “people who two decades earlier were participating in the phenomenon known as the counterculture” (Lewis 1996: 2-3).

⁶⁶ The previously cited testimonies of JH and CC – who were the only interviewees that seem to have properly engaged with the counter-culture, and, moreover, the only two (JW aside) arguably old enough to have done so – on the subject may also perhaps be significant here. Both characters portray their experiences during this time as having been largely beneficial, but only indirectly relevant to their subsequent adoption of Pagan ‘paths’. That is, both give the impression of having been too busy indulging in Heelas’ second, hedonistic counter-cultural orientation to have had time to engage with overtly Pagan pursuits – let alone protesting or discovering their ‘authentic selves’ – while also suggesting

Another, hitherto modish, explanation takes the form of what has come to be known as postmodern theory. This proposes that modernity is, in effect, folding in on itself – or, as Slater puts it, that it is possible to see “ruptures in [the] economic, social and cultural modes of carrying on” that are associated with that term (Slater 1997: 175). Specifically, this disruption has involved (according to “most accounts”) the “blurring and flattening of modernist distinctions”, not least as both consequence and reflection of “consumer culture” (1997: 196). This has mainly occurred because the unprecedented level of choice that is now accorded to modern individuals in this regard, and which also finds reflection in ideological and epistemological spheres, has effectively served to condense hitherto “different worlds and value systems” – revolving around such concepts as economic “need”, technological “progress”, and historical “metanarrative” – into a “single cultural space” consisting of “signs that are all equivalent to each other” (1997: 196). Individual ‘selves’ thus have nothing to ‘grab onto’ either ideologically or existentially, the “external anchors for meaning” having been “revealed, and indeed experienced, as being internal to the arbitrary game of culture and signification” (1997: 197). Illustrating its notional relevance to Paganism, Crouch writes that the concept of postmodernity “implies a fragmentation of forms rather than rational directedness, randomness, chaotic variety, an end to the unidirectional nature of ‘progress’ and (as part of this) a *rapprochement* between the modern and the traditional”; accordingly, it suggests that it is in this light that “the rise of fringe, magic-based religious cults” should be regarded, along with certain other purportedly substantive sociological changes⁶⁷ (Crouch 1999: 42).

Some, however, remain unconvinced by or cautious about such claims. Slater, for example, advises that postmodern theory should at present be regarded as a matter of “*debates, not facts*”⁶⁸ (Slater 1997: 209). And as Crouch himself argues, it is as yet too early to conclude whether the

that it nevertheless exerted a substantial and, in Pagan terms, complementary influence upon them in terms of a general ‘loosening up’ of attitudes.

⁶⁷ These include “the collapse of strongly articulated structures and apparently fixed identities of the mid-century period”, and “the rise of multiculturalism” (Crouch 1999: 42).

⁶⁸ Slater’s italics.

radical changes (such as “de-industrialization”) that currently appear to be happening within western society signal the “fragmentation of occupational identities, or of cultures, or the breakdown of organizations” *in perpetuum*, or merely illustrate “the loss of distinct form that *temporarily* accompanies change”, as previously occurred as a direct consequence of such processes as nineteenth century “urbanization”⁶⁹ (Crouch 1999: 42-3).

Certainly, with regard to religion, at least, postmodernist assumptions or predictions are by no means self-evident⁷⁰. With specific reference to Paganism, it is also useful here to refer to the way that adherents will, it seems, frequently frame strong individualistic sensibilities within broader organisational contexts, to constitute an (often) intensive and creative group dynamic, as most notably demonstrated, perhaps, by its ritual culture⁷¹. Accordingly, it might therefore be reasonable to concur with Jorgensen and Russell’s assessment that Paganism’s “highly fluid anarchism” is indicative neither of ephemerality nor of triviality, but rather “represents an innovative adaptation to modern life [that] is and will continue to be a highly effective organizational form” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999: 336, *n.* 9).

Heelas also makes some interesting points concerning the term’s supposed relevance to religious and cultural trends, albeit with specific regard to the New Age. He writes that the notion of “Self-religiosity” that is central to New Age philosophy “provides a powerful metanarrative”, which therefore not only challenges claims proposing the terminal demise of such cohesive overviews, but also “stands in sharp contrast to the ‘de-centred’ self theorized by advocates of the postmodern condition” (Heelas 1993: 110). Regarding Paganism itself, it could similarly be proposed that this too

⁶⁹ Crouch’s italics.

⁷⁰ Steve Bruce, for instance, disputes postmodern theory’s assumption that comparatively flexible institutional religious structures (such as are now to be found in Christian evangelical sects such as Pentecostalism and Independent Methodism, say) are symptomatic of a non-committal or vapid form of religiosity (Bruce 1998: 29). Bruce argues that the figure of the “sectarian seeker” that is characteristically identified with such sects actually exemplifies the committed approach of “classic sectarian” Christian religionists who “[suppose], at each stopping place, that this is the one unique, divinely ordained truth” (1998: 29).

⁷¹ See chapter six.

features a defining metanarrative – in this case, one which also affirms the importance of both the individual self and the notion of self-development, which it simultaneously frames in terms of an ‘enchanted’, ‘parallelist’ cosmos that is inhabited by all manner of other entities (human or otherwise), these various concepts being bound together by the idea of a ‘noetic’ or ‘controlled’ imagination.

Finally, it is worth mentioning Luhrmann’s study, which, despite not mentioning the term as such, is clearly informed by postmodern theory’s depiction of contemporary culture as being characterised by a ‘cacophony’ of signs. It is therefore quite relevant to the present discussion, the point being that (as explained previously⁷²) the growth of Paganism cannot really be said to support her assumption that modern individuals are unable to cultivate or sustain coherent, let alone truly ‘magical’, orientations and worldviews.

Another influential explanation has been Giddens’ theory of late modernity, which proposes that the comparatively fluid and ‘disembedded’ culture that western individuals are purportedly currently living in has enabled them to bypass rationalist conventions to rediscover a sense of existential ‘meaning’. However, as argued in the previous discussion of Berger’s study⁷³, the term (as Giddens employs it, at least) is problematic when applied to Pagan contexts, not least in its understatement of the extent to which magical assumptions and imperatives might already be thought ‘grounded’ within, or at least accommodated by, modernity.

Thus, if anything, it might arguably be more accurate to regard Paganism as illustrating, neither the demise nor the compromising of modernity, but rather its consolidation, as evidenced by what is perhaps the defining trend of this notional period, namely that towards epistemological individualism. To recap previous discussions, this appears to have manifested *vis-à-vis* Paganism on a number of overlapping levels. Firstly, its esoteric roots pertain to the intrinsically individualistic notion of gnosis, or ‘self-knowledge’, which has long been regarded in western esoteric circles as the key to existential and spiritual fulfilment. Secondly, the rise of Paganism,

⁷² See chapter ten.

⁷³ See chapter ten.

it could be argued, is testament to the status of cultic spirituality as, if not the only manifestation, then (as Campbell and others have suggested) as at least a barometer of epistemological individualism (being the spiritual category most likely benefit from a shift away from a 'commitment to specific doctrines and dogmas'). Thus, as Campbell and McIver have predicted, the peculiar affinity between epistemological individualism and the cultic milieu strongly suggests that any trend towards the former can therefore only make conditions more "favourable to the occult" (Campbell and McIver 1987: 51), and so, it follows, to Paganism.

Thirdly, even within Paganism itself it is evident that there has been a palpable shift in favour of greater epistemological individualism (or, as one of the interviewees saliently put it, 'free thought') away from 'dogmatism', especially (albeit by no means solely) with respect to its original and, for the most part, pre-eminent, Wiccan form. In purely Pagan terms, this could conceivably be regarded as being to no small degree the consequence of an unfolding, 'parallelist' logic involving the depiction of individually accessible spiritual realms, although it also seems to be linked to certain liberalising or 'counter-cultural' trends (such as feminism) evident within the wider culture, and an increasing awareness of the phenomenon's 'true' origins.

In addition, this trend seems inextricably linked to the other key feature of modernity, namely secularisation, which has provided – and, indeed, continues to provide to an ever greater extent – the sort of ideational and institutional 'space' that is arguably necessary to establish religiously or spiritually heterodox orientations on a popular scale. Moreover, it could also cautiously be suggested that secularisation might be especially conducive to Paganism where this results in a comparatively 'low-level' or 'lukewarm' type of religious environment in which soteriological considerations and 'black-and-white' moral overviews have effectively been sidelined.

Given this apparent convergence of trends, it is interesting to note that a number of speakers at a recent British academic conference came to the conclusion that Paganism appears to be "seeping into mainstream culture"⁷⁴

⁷⁴ This was the overall conclusion of the Open University Department of Religious Studies' Belief Beyond Boundaries conference of 2001. In his article on this apparent trend, Mark

(Pilkington 2002: 25). While as yet it is difficult to gauge to what extent Paganism really has found acceptance within the wider culture⁷⁵, such interpretations nevertheless give the impression that some degree of confluence might currently be taking place between Pagan and 'mainstream' milieux.

In summary, whether or not it is regarded as a marginal phenomenon, the rise of Paganism conceivably illustrates the increasing normative acceptance within the west of the 'core' features of modernity, namely epistemological individualism and secularism, which now seem so well-established that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish in substantive terms between the centre and the 'cultic' periphery of modern culture and society. As such, it might therefore seem reasonable to suggest that the 'significance' of Paganism with regard both to its inception and growth is that it demonstrates how the apparent trend in favour of the cultic 'margins' should perhaps be understood more as a 'changing of gears' involving the central dynamic of modernity than as evidence of an axiological shift. In that case, it could cautiously be suggested that it is possible to see the beginning of this phase as having occurred – in the UK, at least – in the mid-'fifties, this being when, in Brown's estimation, the modern collapse of 'mainstream' religion really commenced within that locale. And as such, it is perhaps significant – it would certainly seem ironic – that this also appears almost exactly to coincide with the point when, according to Hutton's

Pilkington writes how during that conference, speakers such as Joanne Pearson and Ronald Hutton averred that the burgeoning current popularity of the phenomenon has ensured that Pagan "motifs and ideas" are starting to encroach beyond the cultural 'margins' (cited in Pilkington 2002: 25).

⁷⁵ It is certainly conceivable that Paganism is presently regarded in a far more positive light by the UK population than used to be the case. This is illustrated in a recent article by Peter Jennings, the current president of the Pagan Federation (which according to its official charter has since its inception acted as a media 'watchdog' working to "[counter] inaccurate and defamatory portrayals of Paganism"), suggesting that since 1971, "[Pagans] have gone from a position of almost 100% negative press, to most articles and programmes today being either neutral or pro-Pagan" (Jennings 2000: 15).

appraisal, Pagan Witchcraft acquired its 'enduring form' (see above)⁷⁶. But even regardless of this striking synchronicity, it might not seem unreasonable to suggest that, overall, this historical 'gearshift may conceivably be regarded as having been especially conducive and beneficial to Pagan culture, given what could perhaps be seen as the broad and indirect affinity between that phenomenon and the sort of 'tepid' or 'low-level' background religiosity that, arguably, is quintessentially indicative of a secular cultural environment.

8. Is Paganism a Religion?

Ultimately, Paganism appears to show that increasing numbers of modern individuals seem quite capable of transposing the 'vivid imaginative worlds' which customarily inform childhood into terms that are quite congruent with the value-laden presumptions and expectations of adulthood, without experiencing any substantial sense of cognitive 'dissonance'. But however beguiling the thought of an 'enchanted', Pagan cosmos might be, or noticeable the phenomenon's current profile, it is nevertheless appropriate to question whether such notions are really capable of supporting valid religious orientations 'in this day and age'. For even if Pagan 'paths' really are circumscribed by the sort of magical cosmologies that, according to Weber, underpin 'traditional' societies, just how significant is this when only a relative handful of modern individuals truly ascribe to such notions, the "shared [i.e. socially cohesive] supernatural world-view" (in Bruce's words) having long since disappeared? (Bruce 2001: 100)

⁷⁶ Brown himself equates this period of unprecedented religious subsidence with the rise of "post-modernity", due to that term's ability to describe the "relativism" and unwillingness to deal with moral 'narratives' that he sees as having been endemic during that period (Brown 2001: 194). However, although Brown's overall discussion of the congruence between religious trends and broader changes with regard to the current 'make-up' of British society and its associated cultural expectations are persuasive, such a label is, for the reasons previously outlined (and for others raised by his blanket dismissal of 'post-Christian' spiritual manifestations as 'minor cults'), perhaps unhelpful.

But whatever doubts may arise from such considerations, it is appropriate to bear in mind Crouch's point that while the "tight and embracing world of the local community" that "gave strength to religion in past times" may well be no more, this does not in itself mean that religion in its general sense is necessarily a spent force (Crouch 1999: 281). This, he writes, is because even nominal religious affiliations may still provide individuals with a "residual form of identification – with some general idea of community, with their nation, or with some ultimate framework of meaning – which does not cease to be sociologically relevant just because it has become quiet and undemonstrative" (1999: 281-2).

Accordingly, given that reference points such as these are clearly so important within Paganism, it is at least conceivable that even when held in isolation, Pagan 'paths' might therefore furnish a semblance of the old 'shared worldviews'. Furthermore, by demonstrating just how easy it seems (for some individuals, at least) to pursue the inchoate 'supernaturalism' of mainstream culture to what could perhaps be regarded as its 'logical conclusion' – which is to say, a worldview incorporating fully-fledged magical 'dimensions' – Paganism arguably appears to demonstrate how Otherworld notions continue to lie in all their pulsating vivacity immediately beneath the surface of modern life.

On a more structural level, it is possible to detect a trend that could be thought to herald the future development of a 'solid' institutional dimension – what could even perhaps be referred to as a sort of 'civic' Paganism – in future. This is what seems to be an increasing willingness among Pagans to adopt the sort of pastoral roles hitherto exclusively associated with 'mainstream' religious establishments. A notable example is SL, who served as Pagan chaplain at a prominent British university in the mid- to late-nineties, and who describes her official duties during that period as simply "[acting] as a Pagan adviser to any Pagan student"⁷⁷ (SL: 23).

⁷⁷ Other individuals involved in this type of "community work" (much, although by no means all, of which appears to be organised by the Pagan Federation) include "some 150 Hospital Visitors", spanning "53 Health Authorities throughout the UK"; and "21 pagan Prison Ministers", the latter of whom are apparently now also "officially recognised by the Home Office" (Pagan Dawn [142] 2002: 10).

Whichever way, the fact that modern Paganism is as yet without any 'proper' social or institutional legitimacy or support is really by the by, as it also seems on the whole adequately to inform and 'guide' the thoughts and actions of adherents on a day-to-day basis. On the other hand, given the hitherto fragile nature of Paganism's social dimension, it might be appropriate to hesitate before describing it as a 'religious' phenomenon *per se*. In all, though, in fulfilling the broad, Weberian 'remit' of religion by providing a pervasive and integrative sense of 'enchantment' and 'meaning', and by encouraging the adoption and 'customisation' of some of the 'core' or 'traditional' features of religion in its broad sense, Paganism could perhaps be thought to furnish at least a blueprint for the future development of a proper religious category or 'movement'. And even if it currently falls short of such a status, this does not imply that its adherents might find it any less 'meaningful' for that; nor, importantly, should it automatically be assumed to be any more ephemeral, on either individual or cultural (if not organisational) levels.

9. Does Paganism Have a Future?

Given Paganism's seeming affinity with what are perhaps the governing trends of 'late' modernity, it follows that whichever way society might develop or 'mutate' in future it will very likely continue to feature a cultural stratum which is, to varying degrees, inclined to interpret contemporary discourse in explicitly magical, parallelist, or 'Paganistic' terms. Accordingly, while it is doubtful that such orientations will ever become completely dormant (especially given the phenomenon's current profile), the possibility that Paganism's status and significance will continue to grow – even, perhaps, to the point of breaking out of the cultural 'margins' – is conceivably becoming ever more likely.

But one further issue must be considered when discussing Paganism's future prospects, which concerns the population of 'second-generation' Pagans, meaning children born to Pagan parents. Estimates of

the broader Pagan population's current size and age profile⁷⁸ suggest that there may well be a considerable number of such individuals by now⁷⁹. But whether or not these figures are accurate, it is nevertheless the case that the subject of 'Pagan parenting' is becoming a matter for much debate within the 'scene'. For example, in a recent article published in a Pagan magazine, Lisa Bennett suggests that many Pagan parents are reluctant to draw attention to their adopted paths, due to what they see as a widespread attitude of suspicion towards Paganism and Witchcraft from the "outside world"⁸⁰ (Bennett 1996: 14). Nevertheless, the ongoing development of Pagan culture has resulted in some significant shifts in this area, perhaps the most notable example being the increasing occurrence and – to an extent – 'standardisation' of what adherents commonly refer to as 'child-blessings'⁸¹.

⁷⁸ See chapter one.

⁷⁹ Three such parents featured among the respondents – CC and SW, who both have daughters (the former's – then – a teenager, the latter's much younger), and JH, who was actually pregnant with her third child at the time of interview.

⁸⁰ Bennett also acknowledges what she perceives to be a common impression among Pagans that this type of attitude may even extend to official bodies such as social services, writing: "I don't think there is a Pagan parent who doesn't secretly fear that some 'well-meaning' social worker will disrupt their family, and so some of us hide our beliefs to protect ourselves and our children" (Bennett 1996: 14). She suggests that the public profile and status of Pagans will therefore not improve until such negative and defensive attitudes are replaced by a more confident approach – that is, Pagans "must be brave enough to 'come out' to their teachers, doctors and anyone who touches their lives" (1996: 15).

This would also appear very much to be the opinion of CC, who comments (on the 'ritual abuse' myths that were circulating during the late 'eighties and early 'nineties): "Now, at the time I was glad that I'd actually 'come out' [as a Pagan] at work because my colleagues, who were reasonably fair-minded people – lawyers tend to be – were asking me about it, and I was explaining that Satanism had nothing to with Paganism and that it [i.e. Satanism] was actually Christian etc. [...] And so I felt that those of us who were actually 'out' were able to make some kind of contribution in the face of general hysteria." (CC: 14)

⁸¹ Harvey explains: "As in other Pagan ceremonies, child-blessings or namings usually take place in a circle. Often the actual naming of the child is not a central part of the ceremony... More central are various blessings of children, who may be carried around the circle by a parent or guardian... so that they can be introduced to, and welcomed and blessed by the quarters, elements or other significant people such as deities, the Norns or ancestors." (Harvey 1997: 199)

However, it also appears that, while they might be keen for their children to be broadly appreciative of Paganism, many Pagans seem loath to 'enforce' their traditions upon them. CC, for example, comments:

'I've *talked* to [my daughter] about various things. [...] She's aware that I'm a Pagan and that my friends are also, and that all kinds of strange things happen here... But I'm afraid that if I made too much of it she would rebel against me, just as I rebelled against chapel.' (CC: 24)

Very similarly, when asked, 'Have you tried to raise your child as a Pagan?' SW replied:

'No, because to do that would be to force them away from developing their own way. I've presented her with the information on as many choices as I can, so it's up to her to choose where she goes. If she wants to go off and be Jewish that's fine!' (SW: 18)

Vivianne Crowley explains that "[Pagan parents] usually endeavour to teach their children the Pagan ethos and ethics and the myths and legends of the Pagan deities, but religious choice is often seen as something which can only be made in adolescence or adulthood"⁸² (Crowley 1995: 142). The idea that children should not be made to come unduly under the influence of adults in this regard might even be thought to carry an almost 'institutional' weight within Paganism (or, at least, Witchcraft), since, as Hutton points out, there is a "rule of initiating nobody under the age of eighteen" to which covens tend "firmly" to adhere (Hutton 1999b: 402).

Thus, while such strategies may stem at least in part from fear of misunderstanding or censure from the 'mainstream'⁸³, it could also be argued

⁸² Harvey's take on this is that child-blessings are usually not intended to 'set in stone' a child's spiritual affiliations, but rather to "strike a balance between the individuality of children who must make their own choices later in life and the community of life of which they are an integral part" (Harvey 1997: 200).

⁸³ It is Bennett's opinion, for instance, that Pagan parents face an "additional concern" when attempting to formulate an approach to such matters. Namely, as she puts it, "[we] must

that, on the whole, they are adopted mainly because Pagan parents are at least as keen to pass on an attitude of epistemological individualism as they are an affinity towards Paganism itself. However, while there might thus be no guarantee that children born within Pagan households will actually grow up to align themselves with Paganism, it might not be implausible to suggest that the sort of environment this would entail is perhaps not uncondusive to the cultivation of formal Pagan affinities in later life, for three main reasons. Firstly, the close affinity between epistemological individualism and the cultic milieu that has persuasively been identified by a number of academics suggests that such a background could nevertheless possibly be regarded as broadly or indirectly compatible with 'alternative' spiritual pathways like Paganism. Secondly, even within households where an 'unforced', 'background' form of Paganism is evident, a strong degree of contact with and normative acceptance of Pagan ideas, not to mention easy access to mythic, cultic or fantasy-oriented source material, could nevertheless be expected to feature, which factor might conceivably exert a powerful or formative influence on a child. Finally, it might also be the case that an 'informal' Pagan upbringing would presumably prevent a child from being overly influenced by the sort of robustly soteriological outlooks and 'black-and-white' moral frameworks that are associated with orthodox religion. Thus, by extension, such a background might under certain circumstances tacitly or indirectly encourage at least a positive attitude towards or, in some cases, even the formal adoption of similarly non-salvational perspectives – as consummately exemplified, perhaps, by Pagan traditions – in later life.

decide how to share our religion with our [children], and how to present our ideas" to a society "that [even] in the best of circumstances often [finds] our beliefs and ways laughable", but can also be downright hostile (Bennett 1996: 14). In addition, some Pagans believe that, due to the esoteric (and therefore, they presume, potentially powerful and unsettling) component of Pagan ritual, individuals should be discouraged from fully embarking upon such a course until they have reached a sufficient level of maturity. Thus, for example, in a recent letter to Pagan Dawn, 'Diarmid' wrote that "sometimes our religion can take us down paths that are dangerous, and can be harmful", which means that adults "have an obligation to [children] to try to help their search for the Divine along safe routes until they deem themselves able to meet the various challenges of their chosen Path" (Pagan Dawn [142] 2002: 47).

In conclusion, it may thus be the case that even the apparent tendency of Pagan parents to restrain themselves from raising the next generation 'within the fold' might not be enough to place much of a damper on the phenomenon's current development within the UK. Accordingly, it could be proposed that, barring the radical disruption of current trends by unforeseen circumstances, it hardly seems likely that this entrenchment will reverse to any significant extent, in the near future, at least. And if Paganism does indeed proceed to spill over into the mainstream, then this, too, should perhaps come as no surprise.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In line with the topics of discussion listed in the introduction, the present study suggested the following findings about Paganism. It is often regarded as a 'nature religion'. However, while Pagans do tend to exhibit feelings of respect or worship towards what they perceive as the 'natural world', this is nevertheless a problematic assumption, for a number of reasons. One of these is that it overstates the degree of ideological equivalence between Paganism and environmentalism. But more importantly, it falls prey to what is perhaps a more foundational aspect of the phenomenon, this being its intrinsic 'magical' component, the logic of which dictates that, in theory, it is possible to 'work magic' as much in urban or 'artificial' environments as it is 'natural' surroundings. Such an orientation is bound up with what is perhaps the defining Pagan notion, namely an adherence to 'parallelist' cosmologies, which depict phenomenal and spiritual 'worlds' as seamlessly and holistically co-existing in a state of ultimate cosmic 'balance' or synchrony while maintaining their own 'integrity'. Other significant features of Pagan worldviews are a tendency for these to manifest in a way that simultaneously affirms concepts of individual 'identity' and 'rootedness', and the idea that this type of 'connection' might constitute a viable and 'living' tradition (although such interpretations now tend to dwell more on notional rather than 'actual' continuities).

Pagan Otherworld conceptions mainly draw from 'substantive myth' and folklore, and particularly that of the Celtic and, to a lesser degree, Germanic worlds (along with 'tribal' and shamanic lore), but are also informed by a broad array of other, often more contemporary narrative sources such as science fiction novels and comics.

The other integral feature of Pagan worldviews is an emphasis on individual magical experience, which notion stems, to a substantial extent, at least, directly from western esoteric tradition. Although it has been 'recast' in terms derivative of Otherworld traditions, this esoteric component has been a major contributory factor in the emergence of a strongly individualistic emphasis within Paganism, which combines such cosmologies with an

intrinsic regard for notions of 'self-development', also encouraging a sense of intense personal absorption (or 'engrossment') within and identification with these magical 'worlds'. This ethos is notably evident, perhaps, in Paganism's ritual culture, which seems to tread a fine line between individuality and 'tradition', or innovation and notions of 'authenticity' (while also manifestly being a product of modern western discourse to some degree). More broadly, this approach underlines how Paganism seems to exemplify *par excellence* what is possibly the defining trend of modern society and culture, this being epistemological individualism, which is to say, the tendency to question 'given' or institutionally validated 'wisdom' in accordance with personal sensibilities. A key to understanding this trend in Pagan terms is the phrase 'coming home', although this should perhaps be regarded as denoting a more gradual process of magical 'customisation' and 'personalisation' than the instantaneous, even revelatory, occurrence it is sometimes interpreted as describing.

In some fundamental respects, Paganism is quite unlike the more 'conventional' religions of the world. Chiefly, this is because (due, it seems, to its foundational belief in immediately accessible spiritual worlds) it does not have much of a salvational impetus. That is to say, Pagans do not tend to dwell on 'afterlife' notions, or to problematise 'earthly' conditions to the extent that 'escape' from these seems necessary or desirable. Nor do they appear overly concerned with 'apocalyptic' scenarios, but rather, seem either to favour 'cosmic' explanations that do not involve specific 'alpha' or 'omega' points, or to interpret eschatological narratives in 'mythic' rather than literal terms. Conversely, they generally seem able to accept at least some scientific explanations without this undermining their belief in a 'magical' cosmos. But Paganism also differs from 'traditional' magical cultures in some important respects, and primarily, it could be argued, because of its epistemologically individualistic sensibility. Not least, this seems to allow Pagans to maintain the sense of 'uncertainty' that is integral to magical cosmologies without feeling themselves to be too 'in thrall' to deities or other 'supernatural' forces.

And while Paganism could perhaps be thought fundamentally less engaged with what – in modern western terms, at least – are identifiably or

didactically 'adult' subjects than with the 'vivid magical worlds' that are commonly associated with childhood, it nevertheless seems possible to discern a distinctly political dimension to the phenomenon, as a 'reform-based' tendency that is at once broadly questioning and accommodating of contemporary life. And all said, Paganism could be regarded as constituting a direct contrast to 'conventional' religions in its presentation of a 'positive' theodical overview, according to which the problematic or perplexing aspects of earthly existence have more to do with a lack of appreciation for the intrinsic and magical 'flux' of life than any supposed profound or inherent 'flaw' attending the 'human condition'.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge the features that appear to distinguish Paganism from the other major categories of 'alternative' spirituality. It is most markedly different, perhaps, from new religious movements, which are typically far more exclusive in nature and tend to discourage individual sensibilities among adherents in favour of dictates from dominant charismatic individuals. However, it is also possible to see substantive differences between Paganism and its fellow 'cultic' spiritual category, the New Age. Primarily, this is because, although both are closely identified with epistemological individualism, this tends to manifest within the latter as an emphasis upon the notion of an 'interior', divine 'Self', whereas Paganism seems to require that adherents see themselves as being more 'engaged' with 'external' forces, whether these be regarded as environmental, social or Otherworldly in nature.

The 'uniqueness' of Paganism, along with what has up until fairly recently been a tendency among sociologists to overlook this factor, has meant that inappropriate terms have often been employed to explain the phenomenon, that of 'cult' religion being perhaps the most obvious case in point. However, a number of useful theories are available that can help to locate Paganism within broader sociological and cultural contexts somewhat more successfully. The concept of epistemological individualism is, of course, useful here, as is the very similar notion of theological individualism. Of these, the former term is perhaps more generally descriptive, as it is also applicable to the other, non-religious walks of life where trends in favour of individualism seem to have taken hold. However, the 'cultic milieu' concept is

likewise very pertinent, as it suggests that the sphere of 'alternative' spirituality constitutes perhaps the most representative manifestation of this broader trend.

Much valuable information can also be gleaned from the increasing number of studies to have appeared that look at Paganism as a distinctive sociological phenomenon. However, many of these also try to explain it in terms deriving from what could be regarded as misleading and culturally hidebound readings of 'modern' life, which (indirectly or otherwise) draw substantially from certain 'classic' sociological accounts. Some of these even attempt to 'validate' Paganism by portraying it as a *riposte* or 'antidote' to modernity, which they cast as something of a *bête noire* in its supposed promotion of rationalism, 'disenchantment' and a detachment from 'nature', and therefore, by implication, of both social and psychological 'dysfunction'. However, such accounts overlook the extent to which modernity has traditionally given succour to ideas and sentiments that could be seen as compatible with or conducive to magical – and hence, Pagan – worldviews.

This type of explanation could also perhaps be regarded as, tacitly or otherwise, exaggerating the degree to which modernity, and, by extension, the 'mindsets' of individual Pagans prior to 'coming into the fold', can be identified with deleterious psychological states such as 'fragmentation', alienation and anomie. It seems more likely that adherents are attracted to the phenomenon because of 'positive' characteristics that they might already possess and seek to build upon – and which modernity does not seem to have prevented them from acquiring – such as independent-mindedness, a generally accommodating attitude towards everyday contingencies, and an affinity with 'vivid imaginative worlds'. But modernity could even be thought conducive to Pagan affinities in certain key respects. A case in point is its encouragement of individualism, not to mention the widespread provision of 'cultic', fantasy-based and otherwise 'engrossing' cultural product that has taken place under its (often commercial) auspices.

Another crucial, and related, factor is secularisation, which over the centuries has significantly loosened the hold of religious orthodoxy over western culture and society, and so has effectively granted (many) modern individuals *carte blanche* concerning spiritual matters. Arguably, however,

secularisation's contribution to the phenomenon may conceivably be most evident where it has resulted in a 'non-committal' or 'tepid' religious environment. This is because such backgrounds might encourage at least a semblance of 'supernatural' notions, together with a regard for some of the formal 'trappings' of religion, without imposing the sort of strict moral, eschatological and salvational frameworks that characterise more 'devout' upbringings.

All said, it might thus be possible to propose that the rise of Paganism signals, not a shift away from modernity, but rather the further normative establishment and 'intensification' of trends definitively associated with that notional period, involving what could tentatively be interpreted as the increasing 'blurring' of the boundaries between 'cultic' and 'mainstream' milieux. In British contexts, Paganism might even be regarded as perhaps the consummate barometer of this trend, having risen in seeming exact synchrony with what has arguably been the most relevant 'negative' indicator, namely, the effective 'implosion' of conventional religion within that country. And while as yet the growth and establishment of British Paganism has been overwhelmingly cultural, as opposed to institutional, in nature, it nevertheless seems to fulfil much of religion's *raison d'être* for its adherents (in Weberian terms, at least), by furnishing a potent and encompassing sense of moral and existential 'meaning'. Furthermore, there may even be signs that something akin to a 'social' or 'civic' stratum of Paganism is being established, as Pagans start to take on some of the 'pastoral' duties that were once exclusively associated with 'conventional' religion.

Finally, it seems that Pagan parents generally seem more concerned that their children make their own minds up on matters of spirituality. Partly, this could be seen as the result of fears among such individuals of public censure or misunderstanding. But what appears more important, however, is the seeming recognition among them of just how important an attitude of epistemological individualism and 'independent-mindedness' – in addition, perhaps, to 'low-level' religious and imaginably stimulating cultural environments – may be for the cultivation of Pagan worldviews, however ostensibly indirect the relationship. And overall, it is not inconceivable that this might bode well for the phenomenon's future prospects.

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(The End)

APPENDIX ONE

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. Background (class, educational, religious)
2. Current profession
3. Introduction to Paganism
4. Source material, texts studied
5. Opinions and beliefs concerning nature and the environment
6. Opinions and beliefs concerning the Otherworld
7. Opinions and beliefs concerning 'gnosis'
8. Individual practice (festivals, rituals, meditations, research)
9. How they see their practice developing
10. Attitudes towards 'mainstream' religions
11. Attitudes towards other 'alternative' spiritualities
12. How they see Paganism's standing in relation to the wider society

APPENDIX TWO

SCRIPT FOR SAMHAIN RITUAL, 1999¹

Traditionally samhain, the start of winter and the Celtic New Year was the time for honouring the dead, communicating with the spirits of our dear departed and looking back at our accomplishments over the past year as well as making plans for the coming year. It is with this final purpose in mind that this ritual will be performed.

The Ritual

1. Smudging

The incense is passed around clockwise and each Celebrant says:
“A hand of smoke to clear my head, a hand of smoke to clear my heart, a hand of smoke to clear my left side, a hand of smoke to clear my right. I pass the smoke around me, to clear the space in which I sit. To these charmed and holy places may love and delight enter in.”

2. Opening the Circle

East:

“O spirits of the East, powers of air come from the mountain tops on the wings of the birds and join our circle as we celebrate this feast of Samhain. We bid you Hail and Welcome.”

¹ The following text – which includes some introductory notes – has been copied verbatim from a printed handout given to the ritual participants (who included the author of the present study) prior to its performance in a secluded spot in Heslington, York, on the afternoon of November 1st of that year. The ritual is Wiccan-based, but also includes Aleister Crowley's 'Hymn to Pan', along with an invocation of the Cymric goddess Arianrhod that PM, who was the ritual's organiser, had unearthed on the internet.

And nymphs and satyrs for thy guards,
On a milk-white ass, come over the sea
To me, to me,
Come with Apollo in bridal dress
(Shepherdess and pythoness)
Come with Artemis, silken shod,
And wash thy white thigh, beautiful
God,
In the moon of the woods, on the marble mount,
The dimpled dawn of the amber found!
Dip the purple of passionate prayer
In the crimson shrine, the scarlet snare,
The soul that startles in the eyes of blue
To watch thy wantonness weeping
Through
The tangled grove, the gnarled bole
Of the living tree that is spirit and soul
And body and brain – come over the
Sea,
(Io Pan! Io Pan!)
Devil or god, to me, to me,
My man! My man!
Come with trumpets sounding shrill
Over the hill!
Come with drums low muttering
From the Spring!
Come with flute and come with pip!
Am I not ripe?
I, who wait and writhe and wrestle
With air that hath no boughs to nestle
My body, weary of empty clasp,
Strong as a lion and sharp as an asp –
Come, O come!
I am numb

With the lonely lust of devildom.
Thrust the sword through the galling fetter,
All-devourer, all-begetter;
Give me the sign of the Open Eye,
And the token erect of thorny thigh,
And the word of madness and mystery,
O Pan! Io Pan!
Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Pan Pan! Pan,
I am a man:
Do as thou wilt, as a great god can,
O Pan! Io Pan!
Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! I am awake
In the grip of the snake.
The eagle slashes with beak and claw;
The gods withdraw:
The great beasts come, Io Pan! I am
Borne
To death on the horn
Of the Unicorn.
I am Pan! Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Pan!
I am thy mate, I am thy man,
Goat of thy flock, I am gold, I am god, Flesh to thy bone, flower to thy rod.
With hoofs of steel I race on the rocks
Through solstice stubborn to equinox.
And I rave; and I rape and I rip and I rend
Everlasting, world without end,
Manikin, maiden, Maenad, man,
In the might of Pan.
Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Pan!

The Goddess:

While the Priestess reads the invocation the Celebrants will chant "*Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna.*"

Oh Arianrhod, You who are Maiden, Mother and Lover.
Lady of Initiation, You gave us our names, and gave us our weapons,
So that we may make our way through Life.
Lady of Incarnation and Keeper of Caer Silverwheel² – beyond the North
Wind –
From You did we come, and to You shall we return.
On this night of the full moon, we call on the Bright Lady to join us in our
circle.
We await her as in times of old and in the ancient way,
For now is the time of the Mother, the time of magick and mirth.
Bright Goddess, Arianrhod, Daughter of the Great Ancestress Don,
We call on You from the ancient wild places and the sacred springs.
We call on You to descend to us from Caer Arianrhod,
Your home among the stars.
We call on You, Great Goddess of the Silver Wheel,
Keeper of the Past, Present, and Future.
Join us as we stand in the flood tide of your power, as we see that
All paths lead back to You, Blessed Arianrhod.
We ask for Your presence and bid You Merry Meet and Blessed Be!
O Arianrhod of the Silver Wheel,
By all the many names men give to Thee –
We, all Thy hidden children, humbly kneel
Thy truth to hear, Thy countenance to see.
Here in the Circle, cast upon the Earth
Yet open to the stars – unseen, yet real –
Within our hearts five understanding birth,
Our wounds of loss and loneliness to heal.
Isis Unveiled, and Isis Veiled, Thou art;

² This is actually the English translation of the Welsh name 'Arianrhod'. 'Caer' is the Welsh word for 'fortress', and in this context refers to the goddess in question's Otherworld stronghold.

The Earth below our feet, the Moon on high.
In Thee, these two shall never be apart –
The magic of the Earth, and of the sky.

4. The Main Bit

The Priest Says:

“Death is but a doorway between this world and the next, and on this feast of Samhain let those of us who wish give to thanks for this years [sic.] harvests, or bring to an end those things we no longer need in preparation for the new year do so freely.”

Those of the Celebrants who desire may give thanks for this years [sic.] personal joys and accomplishments or voice their desire to end some aspect or influence in their lives they feel they no longer need.

5. The Feast (Cakes and Wine)

“Bless this food unto our bodies bestowing health, wealth and eternal happiness”

It is customary on the first pass of the food to say “May you never hunger” to the person you are giving the food to.

“Bless this wine so that we may know eternal ecstasy and bliss”

It is also customary to say “May you never thirst” on the first pass of the Chalice.

6. Closing

Banishing the God:

“Mighty Pan, Lord of all nature we thank you for bringing your bounty to this Feast of Samhain, and now we must ask you to return to those hallowed realms you come from.”

Banishing the Goddess:

“Arianrhod, Bright Lady of Initiation, your joy and your beauty has been a blessing at this feast and we give you thanks as we ask you to return to those bright and joyous lands you come from”

Spirits of the Place:

“O spirits of this place we thank you for you [sic.] presence in our rite and we are nearly ready to depart, we bid you Hail and Farewell”

The Quarters:

“O spirits of Air/Fire/Water/Earth we thank you for your presence as friend and guardian during our celebrations and we bid you Hail and Farewell”

~ Fin ~

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¹ After colons, capitals will mainly be used to transcribe initial letters where the words appear to be part of the main title. Lower-case initial letters will be used for subtitles, unless specified otherwise in the publication.

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