

Book Review – Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft

Edited by James R. Lewis

In the fall of 2002 my family and I were living in Heidelberg Germany with the US Army. My in-laws, Richard and Susan Harding, had come to visit. Harry Potter was quite the rage, with millions raging for it and some, including evangelical Christians, raging against it. My oldest child, our six year old daughter Anna, was a huge fan; smitten with Platform 9 ¾, Diagon Alley, the Nimbus 2000, and Hogwarts. Richard was an American Baptist missionary pastor in Cordova, Alaska, and I asked his opinion.

“Honestly, Mark” he said, “I think that Harry Potter is about a group of specially gifted people and their struggles to use those gifts to do good instead of evil. In many ways, Christians are like the wizards in the books.” He and Susan ultimately read every book and saw every movie. More than once, Richard used lessons from Harry Potter to teach about Christ from the pulpit. He always was a man who was orthodox in the essentials but saw such things from a different perspective, often outside the mainstream of evangelical Christianity. He was a tremendous spiritual mentor. In light of Richard’s views, I more carefully considered my response to Harry Potter, and my willful ignorance of the pagan movement in general.

My purpose in this paper is to evaluate *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* from my point of view as an academic evangelical Christian.

Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft, edited by James R. Lewis, is an interesting but dated academic reference on the beliefs and practices of Neo-paganism, including Wicca, Druid, and other non-traditional belief systems, primarily in the English speaking world. The book is relatively academic, includes many articles from pagan practitioners, and is clearly sympathetic towards its subject. Nonetheless it is a quick read and a valuable overview of Neopaganism.

Neopaganism is an ill-defined religious movement based loosely on ritual practices taken from pre-Christian Europe. “Truth” comes from individual and corporate experience, and there is usually no priestly hierarchy, no sacred book, and no generally accepted dogma.¹ The term “neopagan” was coined by the Nazis in Germany, and some would argue combines with Deep Ecology, Goddess Spirituality, Native American, Hawaiian, Eastern Spirituality and other ancient teachings to comprise the modern “New Age Movement”.² Radical environmentalists, feminists, homosexuals (LGBT), and people disaffected from mainstream religion currently form large portions of the movement. Neopaganism is pantheistic in the assumption that the God/dess spirit imbues everything with spirit, people, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects.³ Everything is spiritually interconnected, and the Earth is the goddess, with rocks as her bones and plants as her flesh. A neopagan might believe that the goddess, the earth, is being destroyed in the modern world. Neopaganism specifically rejects Christianity and other “patriarchal religions”, as well as the modernism which raises man above the natural world.⁴ Finally, “magic” in Neopaganism involves using unseen forces in the world to awaken a deeper consciousness.⁵

Having a basic understanding of the belief systems of Neopaganism, we immediately ask about the size of the movement and how people become involved. James R. Lewis wrote a paper in 2012 entitled “The Pagan Explosion Revisited: A Statistical Postmortem on the Teen Witch Fad”, in which he used census and survey data to estimate how many pagans there were in the Anglophone world. He discovered a rapid growth in the number of pagans in Australia, Canada,

¹ James R. Lewis, ed., *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 36.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, during the Teen Witch Phenomenon of the late 1990s and 2000, and a tapering of growth since then.⁶ In *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, Lewis noted that people often come to paganism through comic books, science fiction, reenactor groups such as the Society for Creative Anachronism, vegetarian groups and ecology groups.⁷ More recently the internet has become a significant portal into paganism.

Throughout the reading I was impressed by how little the authors understood about genuine Christianity. Many of the things that are portrayed as revolutionary insights to the pagans are basic doctrine to Christians. For example, Judy Harrow said “you don’t become a pagan, you discover that you always were.”⁸ The Bible agrees with Judy; we all start out pagan, separated from God and rejecting Him in our vanity. Only those who accept Him move past their fundamental paganism into His goodness and love. Dennis Carpenter wrote that while polytheists such as pagans believe in an immanent god, monotheists believe in a transcendent one.⁹ Followers of Jesus, however, recognize that God is both transcendent and immanent. The smallest child recognizes this every time that she says “Jesus lives in my heart.” Pagans believe in the equality of the sexes, but so do Christians (Galatians 3:28). Pagans believe that Christians feel called to dominate the world, but we are actually called to care for it (Genesis 1:28, 2:15). The sensuality, defined as gratification of the senses, described in pagan worship can be excessive, but the Bible promotes singing, dancing, and other forms of sensuality in Christian

⁶ James R. Lewis, “The Pagan Explosion Revisited: A Statistical Postmortem on the Teen Witch Fad,” *The Pomegranate* 14,no.1 (2012): 139.

⁷ James R. Lewis, ed., *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 51-6.

worship.¹⁰ Magic is forbidden in Christianity, but controlling one's thoughts by focusing the will (Romans 12:1-3) and using ritual, visualization, meditation are certainly are not forbidden.¹¹ Far from externalizing evil, the Bible teaches that evil exists inside and outside us.¹²

Another important observation was that many pagan assumptions are opposite to those of Christians. Judy Harrow wrote that “the basis for all human created evil is a rip in the fabric of empathy.”¹³ This sounds erudite, but assumes that the fundamental state of humans and all creation is empathy. The Biblical weltanschauung holds that apathy and evil, not empathy, comprise the basic state of the universe since the Fall. Trusting in personal spiritual experience for insight is fine if man is inherently good, but deadly if man is inherently evil. If humans cannot be trusted, we need guidance from outside of us to answer the basic questions of life. The experience of Rev. Richard Kuykendall suggests that even ministers are not immune to misunderstanding the Christian faith enough to abandon it, or at least appear to.

Many of the historical “facts” noted in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* are misleading. Authors Morning Glory and Otter G'Zell wrote “for thousands of years, before there were any male gods, there was the goddess.”¹⁴ Actually, male and female deities have coexisted in all human mythology since at least the Gondwana myths (65,000 years ago) and a high God (Dios Otiosus) has existed in Pangean mythology since about 135,000 years ago.¹⁵

¹⁰ James R. Lewis, ed., *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 127.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹² *Ibid.*, 277.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵ E.J. Michael Witzel, *The Origins of the World's Mythologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 360.

In summary, *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* is a valuable resource to understanding Neopaganism and other similar movements in the English-speaking world. It reveals many of the beliefs and practices of its adherents, how they misunderstand Christianity, and how believers might share with them the hope of Christ. It reminds believers in Jesus of our own failures in teaching the truth of Scripture. Finally the book unintentionally provides a word of warning to those who go too far from the Word. Reverend Richard Harding, not Reverend Richard Kuykendall, is the example that followers of Christ need to follow as we interact with paganism across the world.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. There are many areas in which neopagans in the Anglophone world misunderstand Christianity and object not to the real faith but to their misunderstandings. What neopagan objections fall into this category?
2. What would be the best cognitive approach to reaching such people with the truth of Jesus Christ in the gospel? What intellectual arguments would move them towards real faith in Him?
3. What would be the best non-cognitive approaches to reaching neopagans? Hospitality, rituals in the church?

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