

## BOOK REVIEW OF *WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC*

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Berger, Helen A., ed. *Witchcraft and Magic*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 207 pages.

### Biographical and Historical Information

Helen A. Berger, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at West Chester University in Pennsylvania, has edited a helpful set of articles summarizing witchcraft and magic in contemporary North America. Her specialty in sociology is contemporary witchcraft and paganism, and she has published many books and book chapters on this topic. During her research she participated at a coven, the Circle of Light, weekly for two years. Ms. Berger is currently working at Brandeis University in the Women's Studies Research Center.

Historically the book comes at a time of great interest in witchcraft. Most modern pagan movements began in North America in the 1950s but surged with the women's movement of the 1960s. They surged again with the commercialization of witchcraft and paganism; exemplified by the Harry Potter books and movies. It is against this backdrop that Berger and her contributors write.

### Summary of the Book

Berger begins by defining religion as "involving the worship of and prayer to the divine, who can choose either to answer or deny those prayers." Magic, by contrast, "has been perceived as a series of techniques to control or manipulate the spirit world."<sup>1</sup> While she takes issue with

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<sup>1</sup> Berger, 1.

this definition of magic, and sees some "magical" elements in organized religion, the distinction is more useful in describing modern practices than in describing traditional ones.

Michael York leads off the line up discussing New Age and Magic. This chapter is valuable because the New Age movement is infrequently compared with the witchcraft and magic. New Age is essentially a reformulation of ancient Gnosticism as it developed through the American Spiritualism movement of the 19th century. It affirms positive reality, denying even the existence of evil, but devalues the material world as opposed to the spiritual one. The goal for New Age practitioners is to reunite with the primordial source. Paganism, by contrast, exalts the physical world. There are great similarities between New Age visualization and Pagan magic; for example, both focus on changing the consciousness rather than on changing the material world.

Berger herself wrote the chapter on Neopaganism, ranging from Wicca, which appeals primarily to white, middle class women, to Odinism, which appeals to men. All of these emphasize experience more than beliefs, and use combinations of dance, music, drums, and rituals to achieve the desired effect. Practitioners worship in robes or nude (Gardnerian witchcraft) and follow the goddess, with or without a god. Most believe in magic, justifying their beliefs with ideas ranging from quantum physics to postmodern philosophy. Neopagans often practice alone and combine many religious traditions. They often borrow from Native American spirituality and other traditions. Druidism is another current neopagan system.

In reaction to what many consider patriarchal mainstream religions, many neopagan traditions are feminist. Dianic Witches worship the goddess, while members of the Woman-Church are Catholic and Christian Feminists are Protestant. These arose with the rise of the Feminist Movement in the US during the 1960s. They draw inspiration from the belief that Europe originally worshipped the goddess, though evidence for this belief is lacking. The chapter

author, Wendy Griffin, promotes the pseudo-history of the Burning Times, undermining her credibility. Conversely, she makes the valid point that feminists want to change the names used for the divine because "the power of naming is not just an exercise in creativity. It is the power to define, to delineate, to create reality."<sup>2</sup>

Michael York's section on Shamanism and Magic begins with a valuable summary of traditional Shamanism in northeast Asia. Like the other religions highlighted in this book, experience trumps beliefs. Shamans served as intermediaries between the physical world and the spiritual (the other) world. During periods of ecstasy they would travel between worlds to heal disease, bring fertility, and otherwise serve their community. North American shamanism added a prophetic component, foretelling the demise of the European descendants in America in the Ghost Dance. New Age shamanism, on the other hand, is more focused on self-development and the acquisition of power than on the benefit of the community.<sup>3</sup> It tries to eliminate the individual shaman for a community and replaces it with the idea that everyone is their own shaman.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike other books on neopaganism, *Witchcraft and Magic* discusses some non-white majority traditions such as Lucumi, more commonly known as Santeria. Written by Ysamur M. Flores-Pena, it is a useful addition. Developing in Cuba during the slave trade, Lucumi combines Roman Catholic rituals and saints with African (Yoruba) hierarchies and Spanish influences. While it postulates the existence of one high god, it worships a multitude of other gods. Herbal and natural remedies are key in the practice of Lucumi. Trance possession and seance are important. Palo and Curanderismo are important other groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Berger, 73.

<sup>3</sup> Berger, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Berger, 91.

Stuart Wright's chapter on Satanic Cults focuses primarily on debunking satanist myths from the 1980s. It begins by mentioning some high profile cases of supposed satanist activities and attributing many of them to false memories implanted by therapists. The chapter covers albeit clumsily, the increase in Evangelical Christianity in the 1970s. For example, while Wright writes that "Fundamentalists have always taken a literalist view of Holy Scriptures and the Bible"<sup>5</sup>, in reality they take the view that the author's intent is of supreme importance. Revelation has always been taken as apocalypse and Psalms as poetry, not literally, by the Evangelical mainstream. Wright then mentions the role that the Church of Satan, the Temple of Set, and the Process as "Satanist" groups, feminism, child sexual abuse, and the rise of pornography had in the Satanist myths.

Tanice G Foltz penned the final chapter, discussing the commodification of witchcraft. She covers witchcraft as portrayed in the pre-Wiccan past, including the Wizard of Oz, I dream of Jeannie, and Bewitched. Then she compares modern portrayals such as The Witches of Eastwick, Harry Potter, and Charmed. Foltz concludes that earlier witchcraft portrayals had beautiful women using their powers to serve men but needing to be controlled by men. Later portrayals feature strong, but still young and beautiful, women, using their powers independently and competently. Books, magazines and music show a similar progression. The forces of evil are generally portrayed as male and often Christian.<sup>6</sup> Witchcraft in the media, however, makes money, and this "virtue" trumps all vices.

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<sup>5</sup> Berger, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Berger, 151.

## Critical Analysis

*Witchcraft and Magic* is not an objective source of information on the topic, and it does not claim to be. In fact, its authors would probably deny their ability, or anyone else's, to be objective about any topic. Be that as it may, a little objectivity goes a long way, and this book has a long way to go.

The author's theme is consistent. New Age, Magic, and the other practices covered in the book are valid and even desirable religious choices, at least for those choosing to practice them. This theme requires certain assumptions. First is a rejection of absolute truth, at least in the spiritual realm. Second is that the purpose of religion is individual fulfillment. Neither of these assumptions are stated but they are clearly present. Such assumptions align well with the postmodern worldview which denies the possibility of objective truth, or at least denies the possibility of our ever figuring out what truth is.

Of course, such assumptions are inherently contradictory. If there is no absolute truth then that statement itself, purporting to be absolute truth, is false. Further it is impossible to live without accepting objective truth. When I see a patient with a medical problem, the diagnosis is what the diagnosis is, whether I discover it or not. I once had a patient with copious bloody sputum. Since I was working in a tuberculosis clinic, the nurse reasoned that the patient must have tuberculosis. I was concerned; something just did not seem right. We sent the patient to the hospital and I asked the attending physician to get a CT scan. He did, and the patient had lung cancer. Regardless of the opinion of the nurse, or me, the patient had what he had. Truth was objective and absolute. Much as neopagans and other postmoderns may wish that truth is relative, the cold, hard reality of life demonstrates that it is not.

The second assumption is equally weak. If the purpose of religion is personal fulfillment, meaning that the focus of religion is ultimately on the individual, then no two pagans share the same religion. They may stand around the same circle, say the same words and use the same candles but their religions may be as different as night and day. While no Christian understands or practices the faith exactly as another one does, the Faith is still the Faith. Ultimately all believers are striving to become like Jesus; we are heading for the same point. Ultimately all pagans are heading away from each other. If religion is an organized system of beliefs, cultural systems and world views arranged to interact individually and corporately with something greater than oneself, in what sense is paganism a religion, when nothing is greater than oneself? The purpose of religion has never ultimately been about personal fulfillment, though some adherents may think that it is, or should be.

If Berger retorted that she was writing about a spiritual phenomenon, not a religion, there would still be a problem. If we replace the words “that the purpose of religion is individual fulfillment” with “that the purpose of the spiritual phenomena of paganism is individual fulfillment,” we face the reality that humans are communal creatures. Though she notes that many pagans practice alone,<sup>7</sup> the reason for the pagan festivals, covens, and many communal activities is to bring people together. Even at pagan festivals, participants are urged to help with communal needs such as child care, cleaning up, and overseeing parking.<sup>8</sup> Berger notes that pagans have a limited sense of community, an inevitably if the ultimate goal of paganism is personal fulfillment.<sup>9</sup> People seek a centripetal force, not a centrifugal one, vis a vis their fellow

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<sup>7</sup> Berger, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Berger, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Berger, 53.

man. From a medical standpoint, many behavioral health disorders, and physical disorders, are rooted in too little community, not too much. When personal needs are paramount, the individual is paramount. In real life, the astute observer realizes that the individual is not.

The greatest strength of *Witchcraft and Magic* is its scope. Berger and her authors do a good job of covering a wide swath of the movement. The information about shamanism was the highlight, presenting new information and placing this tradition in its historical context.<sup>10</sup>

Another strength of the book, and of paganism in general, is an appreciation of experience in personal spiritual development. Christians, especially Protestants, sometimes seem to forget that.

The greatest weakness of the book is that it fails to correct such bits of neopagan propaganda as "the Burning Times", noting that it was "exaggerated".<sup>11</sup> It makes no effort to understand the real views of evangelicals, instead making silly misrepresentations. These problems detract from an otherwise interesting book. Even more, they make reconciliation and understanding between groups even harder than it already is.

That Helen Berger is a woman is a critical variable that influences her opinion of paganism. She cites Cynthia Eller, who argues that "women were drawn to this spirituality because of relative deprivation, to feel good about themselves, and to reconcile themselves to being female."<sup>12</sup> The fact that Berger included this statement in her text suggests that she thought it worth talking about. Following the quote, Berger makes no attempt to refute it. A common refrain throughout all of the books on paganism that I have read is that pagans feel themselves to be different. Women make up a large percentage of the largest group, Wiccans.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Berger, 83.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, 80.

<sup>12</sup> Berger, 76.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, 28.

Another critical variable that shapes the author's argument is the pagans believe in reincarnation rather than the in resurrection or annihilation. The purpose of reincarnation is to reach ultimate personal fulfillment, however that is defined. It suggests that people have as many chances as they need to climb the ladder, and that everyone eventually will arrive at "perfection." Thus if you believe something incorrect now you can always fix it later.

### Conclusion

Ranging from the New Age movement to the Satanic cults, *Witchcraft and Magic* gives readers a taste of many alternative religious practices. *Witchcraft and Magic* is an interesting summary of neopaganism, magic, and other alternative religious practices. Berger's coverage of Shamanism and the New Age movement is extremely useful as these topics are absent in many other books. Her style is readable, as are the styles of her contributors. Though Berger's book makes no claim to objectivity and misrepresents Christianity, it reliably relates important facts in the field of paganism. It is a valuable part of any library on neopaganism.

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