

Journal Article Review – “The Pagan Explosion Revisited: A Statistical Postmortem on the Teen Witch Fad” by James R Lewis

Harry Potter (2001-2011) and Sabrina the Teen Witch (1996-2003) captivated millions, contributing to what some called the Teen Witch Fad. Though they were fiction, there are in fact thousands of people who call themselves witches in the world. Some authors felt that the Teen Witch Fad was essentially a commercial creation, without any real understanding of real witchcraft.¹ James R Lewis in his article “The Pagan Explosion Revisited: A Statistical Postmortem on the Teen Witch Fad”, discusses how the Teen Witch Fad affected the numbers of people who became witches, and who adopted “Paganism”. In a 2007 article Lewis wrote that the Fad had led to “explosive” growth in Paganism, in which he included Pagans, Witches, Druids, Pantheists, Animists, Heathens, Asatrus, Celtic Pagans, and other practitioners of Witchcraft. At the time he also believed that the more readily available information on paganism on the Internet made a difference in numbers. By 2012, when he wrote the article I am reviewing today, Lewis doubted the enduring effect of the Teen Witch Fad, but was convinced that the Internet had had a lasting impact.

Lewis begins by noting the difficulty of counting pagans. Since the movement is countercultural, adherents sometimes hesitate to “come out of the broom closet”. He then describes his sources, from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) in the United States to census data in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. In Australia there were 10,053 pagans in 1996, 24,151 in 2001, 29,395 in 2006 and 32,083 in 2011. This suggests rapid growth in the numbers of pagans during the beginning of the Teen Witch Fad (1996-2001), and continued but much slower expansion during the Harry Potter Age (2001-

¹ Cush, Denise, “Consumer witchcraft: are teenage witches a creation of commercial interests?,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 28, no. 1 (April 2007): 45.

2011). In fact, from 2006-2011, pagan growth was only 9%, just above the Australian national growth of 8.3%.

The Canadian census lumps all of the categories into “Pagan”. In 1991 there were 5,530 and in 2001 there were 21,085. This four-fold growth was at the height of the Teen Witch Fad. Based on the recent slowed growth of Paganism in Australia, Lewis predicts that growth in Canada would slow markedly as well. It has. In the data from the 2011 Canadian National Household Survey (NHS), not available until 8 May 2013, 25,495 Canadians self-identified as Pagan.² Unfortunately, the NHS was a voluntary household survey, not a census, and so the results are probably less reliable.

The New Zealand census’ primary category was “Nature and Earthbound Religions”, of which two identified groups were Druids and Wiccans. There were 1,722 people in this category in 1996, 5,862 in 2001, and 7,122 in 2006. This is consistent with the pattern in Australia and Canada; rapid growth in the late 1990s and early 2000s with a marked tapering later. Data from the United Kingdom (UK) are only available in 2001 and 2011, offering the categories of Pagans, Witches, Druids, Pantheists, Animists, Heathens, Asatrus, Celtic Pagans, and other practitioners of Witchcraft . In total 42,336 people identified themselves in one of these categories in 2001 rising to 78,566 in 2011. Did the UK follow the same pattern as Australia, New Zealand and Canada? We cannot tell but Lewis thinks so.

Data from the United States differ. US Census data does not include numbers on religion, and so investigators were forced to rely on a voluntary survey, the National Survey of Religious

² Statistics Canada, *2011 Canadian National Household Survey: Data tables*, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=1&PID=105399&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0&VNAMEF>.

Identification (NSRI), and later the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). These surveys sampled 113,723 and 50,000 people, respectively, and extrapolated to reach their conclusions. In 2001, an estimated 307,000 Americans claimed to be Wiccan, Druid or Pagan. In 2008, 711,000 made these claims. As with Great Britain, it is impossible to tell the slope of the growth; was growth even throughout or did it accelerate at the beginning, middle or end? To address this question in the US, Lewis cites the Pagan Census Revisited, a non-scientific internet based survey which asked respondents “How long have you been a practicing pagan?” Results were consistent with the other Anglophone countries; the number of new pagans rose from 1975 to 1999 and dropped off slightly from 2000 to 2009.

Overall, Lewis concludes that the Teen Witch Fad of the late 1990s and early 2000s, as reflected in *Sabrina the Teen Witch* and *Harry Potter*, has played out. He believes that Pagan populations are consolidating, though perhaps not dwindling, in the English-speaking world.

“The Pagan Explosion Revisited: A Statistical Postmortem on the Teen Witch Fad”, by James R. Lewis, is an important article for understanding the most basic demography of Paganism among Anglophone nations. Estimates for the growth of paganism vary widely, with some sources claiming a 3700% growth from 2001-2006.³ Accurate numbers are hard to get. Some people may hesitate to identify with Paganism, while sympathetic researchers may overestimate their numbers to make paganism seem more plausible and thus attract more adherents. Given the available data, Lewis has made a reasonable estimate.

Lewis’ asked “How did the Teen Witch Fad, accompanied by the rise of the Internet, affect numbers of Pagans in English-speaking nations?” His answer was that the impact of the

³ Hamilton, Jennifer L., and Jeffery P. Levine, “Neo-Pagan Patients’ Preferences Regarding Physician Discussion of Spirituality,” *Family Medicine* 38, no. 2 (Feb 2006): 83, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www.stfm.org/fmhub/fm2006/February/Jennifer83.pdf>.

Teen Witch Fad is fading but that of the Internet endures. From the perspective of this reviewer, these conclusions are reasonable.

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