

**DISCRIMINATION AND MODERN PAGANISM: A STUDY OF RELIGION AND  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CLIMATE**

By

Elizabeth Hoadley

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This thesis was presented

by

Elizabeth Hoadley

It was defended on

May 17, 2016

and approved by

Dr. Michael Bobick, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology

Dr. Amy Murray Twynning, Lecturer, Department of English

Dr. S. Zoreh Kermani

Thesis Director: Dr. Hannah Johnson, Associate Professor, Department of English

# **DISCRIMINATION AND MODERN PAGANISM: A STUDY OF RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CLIMATE**

Elizabeth Hoadley, BPhil

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This work investigates attitudes of religious discrimination against Paganism and how the faith is lived as a culture. It closely examines how discriminatory attitudes against Paganism are translated into actions and how they have affect Pagan lives on an individual basis. This project also investigates the origins of discriminatory attitudes for non-Pagans, in order to better understand them. The research problem includes two basic parts: distinguishing discriminative actions and attitudes, and observing their effects on Pagans' daily lives. The cycle of action and information involved in discrimination against Pagans is discussed in detail, including an analysis of the defense mechanisms employed by Pagans to mitigate the adverse effects of discrimination in their lives. The goal of this research is to add to current understandings of religious discrimination and how it can greatly influence Pagan practice and culture. The use of the results of this research will include but not be limited to: further studies on the cultural power of religious discrimination, the formation of greater public understanding of nontraditional religions and how they are affected by modern social climates, and the addition of a seldom heard voice into current conversations surrounding religious tensions in the modern world.

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## 1.0 CHAPTER ONE

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1994, three teenage boys from a small town in Tennessee were convicted of the first-degree murder of three children based on false accusations of participation in a satanic ritual. The main suspect, Damien Echols, had an interest in Wicca and unbeknownst to him, his religious curiosity would be the downfall of his entire case. Soon after the mangled bodies of the three young boys were found, rumors began circulating that the killings might have been the work of devil worshipers. Even before receiving any information on the case, the West Memphis Police Department assigned the case number 93-05-0 666 to the file, the last three digits a number historically associated with the devil, (Echols v. State, 1996). Two days after finding the bodies, investigators interviewed the “troubled local teenager,” Damien Echols. Damien “wrote dark poems, wore long hair, had a tattoo on his upper arm, and was a self-described Wiccan.”<sup>1</sup> With a history of psychological problems such as depression and aggression, Damien presented the investigators with an easy target. When searching his home, investigators testified at trial that they found “eleven black t-shirts and the book *Never on a Broomstick*.”<sup>2</sup> While owning a lot of black t-shirts and a (rather informative and well-rounded) book on the history and origin of Wicca does not seem, today, to prove his participation in a ritual murder of three young boys, this interest in Wicca was the pinnacle of the prosecution’s case. In addition to the book, investigators also

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<sup>1</sup> This is a direct quote from the investigative report included in the Echols v. State (1996) case file.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

obtained Damien's private notebook full of musings on the religion from which Damien was asked to read during his trial.

In the investigative report published on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1993 outlining Damien's statements to the police, he echoes the thoughts and experiences of many other Wiccans. Damien came across a community online and met a person "who he considered to be a priestess."<sup>3</sup> He described his religion as a "white witch group," that believed "there was a Goddess and not a God," and that worked together towards "a divine light" (Echols v. State). Despite testifying repeatedly that he "was not a Satanist," and "didn't believe in human sacrifice," Damien Echols was convicted of murdering all three children during a satanic ritual and was sentenced to death that same year at the age of 18 (Echols v. State). After many years of arbitration Echols has recently been released from prison, but the scars of such a grave misunderstanding remain. Echols, who was wrongly understood as a Satanist, was in reality just a troubled boy who had an interest in Paganism, a nature-based religion that believes in doing no harm and the significance of the cycles of life (Linder).

This case represents the consequences that may arise from misinformation which is the focus of this study. Although throughout history, elements of animal sacrifice have been included in some traditions, the nature of the religions included within the Pagan label is not in any way centered on things such as devil worship and human sacrifice. In fact, the Wiccan Rede, or the Wiccan moral code, requires that a witch harm none, and Wiccans firmly believe that whatever they put out into the world, positive or negative, will come back to them in life three-fold; thus making it very important to act with positivity towards

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<sup>3</sup> Even the language within this report gives way to the pre-existing attitudes that the prosecution held. Phrases like "who he considered to be," show their lack of faith in the validity of his statement and suspicion surrounding the religion itself.



others (Walker). Wiccans regard the Rede as an age-old tradition passed down orally, the contents of which is the code by which all Wiccans identify themselves and their values (Walker). Paganism, like most other religions, has its main focus on personal growth, and the creation of a community. They seek to enlighten themselves with the aspects of a better, more whole self, which they find in nature. Paganism, a precise definition of which will be discussed further on, is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of nature-based religions including Wicca, the definitions of each just as deep and tangled as history itself. The word *Paganism* functions much like the term *Christianity*: under the umbrella of Christianity and its various denominations and sects, one finds highly variable beliefs and practices that are all united by a small set of core, universal beliefs. The same is true for Paganism. Even though the reaches of paganism are wide and diverse, each sect celebrates such diversity in a respectful way and all identify as a larger community as well as individual branches. For someone to be sentenced to death simply because members of law enforcement were not familiar with Wicca and did not inform themselves depicts the level of ignorance surrounding Paganism and the consequences that can come from such misunderstanding. It seems acutely human to be carried away by what is exciting and dramatic as can be seen in non-Pagans' definition of words such as *witchcraft*, which relates to the practice of Wicca and other Pagan groups but has been redefined by pop cultural imagery. What naturally sticks in one's mind is not the mundane or benign, but rather what is exciting and unfamiliar. This is perhaps the reason why pop culture understandings of *witchcraft* are quickly attached to Pagan religions. The deep historical tension and modern cultural spectacle attached to the word *Witch*, is where this discrimination and misunderstanding grows roots. Noting the importance of such

influences, my research aims to further investigate the origins and extent of these potentially discriminatory attitudes.

When introduced to the topic of my research, many in my audience struggle to place the word *Paganism* into a context in which it is easily understood. While *witch* and *witchcraft* are terms that are exceedingly familiar within popular culture, *Paganism* is a word seldom heard in mainstream society. Whether they consider it a dead, ancient religion, or have been acquainted with the term in a derogatory way through their own religious background, all of my informants outside of Pagan culture found it much more difficult to explain the word *Paganism* than words like *witch* and *witchcraft*. While the latter two words are inevitably connected in their minds, Paganism, the technical umbrella term for a variety of reclaimed ancient religions, is much more unfamiliar to most of modern America than the term *witch*, which is used as an insider designation mainly by Wiccans and as a derogatory statement by some non-Pagans. When one thinks of a modern witch, most people immediately picture some form of devil worship or evildoer—an image popularized by films, television, and the media. Unfortunately for Damien Echols, his outward appearance of what many labeled as “gothic,” fit this bill perfectly (Linder). While the gothic subculture is unrelated to the actual practice of Paganism entirely, this image rooted in entertainment is then transferred onto mainstream society’s ideas of the religion of Paganism as the pop culture “witch” is often their only link between understanding and unfamiliarity. The case of the West Memphis Three, for example, is a testament to the negative stigma that the Wiccan religion receives as a result of this ideological connection.

Although the witch-hunts of the past may seem archaic, the sad reality is that even in America today religiously motivated hate crimes make up about one fifth of all hate crimes committed (United States Department of Justice). These include violence,

vandalism, and threats among others. However, in the case of Paganism what seem to be more detrimental are the less blatant, systemic consequences of misunderstanding and ignorance, such as that which brought the death penalty upon Damien Echols in the West Memphis Three case. Damien was not beaten up by a stranger, nor was his home vandalized, but because the members of law enforcement in charge of his case immediately wrote off the Wiccan religion as devil worship, the consequences quickly spiraled out of control. Even beyond the legal and publicly visible realm is an entire level of discrimination that nearly always goes unreported. The consequences of these circumstances are echoed in the accounts of many of my Pagan informants. One man, for instance, had his Pagan flag torn completely down by one of his neighbors. While this was indeed an act of vandalism and could be considered a hate crime, what Jeff<sup>4</sup>, a 50-year-old man from the quiet countryside just outside of Pittsburgh, considered to be more detrimental was the loss of his peace of mind and place in the community. Jeff has been a member of the community for many years and lives in a fairly rural area that is heavy with Christian churches. While he was aware that his neighbors were Christian, he never imagined that they would go so far as to walk onto his property and physically vandalize his flag:

It was just a nice little flag I picked up at one of the esoteric stores I went to once, and I didn't think it would offend anyone. It had a pentacle on it, but I'm not embarrassed of that. Satanism inverts the pentacle for evil just like they invert the cross. But one of my neighbors, a middle aged man in the house over, walked up to my house and tore my flag down. Now, I knew he was a Christian and I could guess why he did it, but to actually rip my flag down? That was surprising to me. I felt pretty uncomfortable after that, and I felt like I needed to speak with him about it. When I confronted him about it later, he claimed that my flag had offended him and he didn't want his children seeing it. But, I said, the witch decorations he puts up around Halloween offend me and provides a bad example for his kids too. The crappy part is that doesn't even register to him, even after I talked to him about it. He was still just as angry about his children seeing my flag, and didn't see anything wrong with tearing it down. It was like I didn't even count as a person (P 203).

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms have been assigned to all informants in order to protect their anonymity.

For Jeff, this instance was more than just an act of vandalism on his property but a dehumanizing act that made him feel ostracized from his community. While this small event was not something that Jeff felt could be reported in a way that would solve any issues, it is the dehumanizing and demoralizing consequences of the ignorance of mainstream society that causes much greater detriment to the Pagan community. As Jeff explained, "I can replace my flag, that wasn't the issue. The issue was the way it made me feel unsafe and unwanted in my own community" (P 203). While this feeling is often the result of hate crimes, what is unique about Paganism is that this ostracization and discrimination most often comes from much smaller and covert events that fly under the radar of any real consequence for the discriminator. Many of my Pagan informants described similar issues resulting from misunderstanding and prejudice associated with Paganism, such as Janet, who was fired from her office job shortly after she started telling people about her religion, or John, whose own family no longer associates with him because of his religion (P 236) (P 222). Almost every other informant described the fear that exists in their lives as a result of hearing the stories of others. I argue that it is this exact system of information surrounding experiences with the broader community that leads Pagans to perpetuate the cycle of discrimination by using defense techniques to guard themselves from any possible discomfort.

Fear and anxiety leads many Pagans to remain quiet about their beliefs even with their closest friends. In this work I argue that while remaining silent decreases their risk of discrimination, it conversely increases the probability that discrimination will continue to exist. Because they are not presenting a clear, visible image of the Pagan population to the community at large, the secrecy and compartmentalization cements in place a feedback

loop of ignorance and thus discrimination. If the goal of the community is to be respected and understood, this cycle of ignorance and secrecy cannot continue. However, the ease with which a Pagan is able to guard his or her beliefs makes the alternative—dealing with the possible consequences that may first come with making their community visible—all the more unappealing to many. While an African American cannot guard himself against the conjectures of a racist, a Pagan has the ability to blend in and remain under the radar of anyone with strong prejudices against them. This fact leads many members of the community to take precautions in their lives when allowing anyone to know their religion, and thus inadvertently promotes a skewed popular understanding of the scope of the religion.

## **1.2 COMMUNITY SCOPE NATIONALLY AND REGIONALLY**

According to recent Pew Research Center studies on the religious landscape of the U.S., Paganism makes up .3% of the population. While this number does not seem like a large portion of the population, it amounts to 956,700 Pagans, given the current U.S. population of 318.9 million people (Pew Research Center). This lies far beyond what many would estimate the population of Pagans to be in the U.S. based on their visibility alone. When one non-Pagan informant was asked what he would estimate the total population of Pagans within the U.S. to be, he answered “20,000” (NP 123). This estimate is 2% of the actual population in the U.S. who identify as Pagan or Wiccan. It is not just the secrecy of Pagans that causes this underestimate, but also the ways in which Pagans practice. Pew estimates that nearly 60% of all Pagans choose to practice on their own (Pew Research Center). Being a solitary practitioner is a popular choice nationally, as the practice of the religion easily

allows small, individual ceremonies that can be done inside one's own home. Solitary practitioners still may function as a part of the broader Pagan community, but perform most religious rituals by themselves. This way, the practitioner is allowed to choose exactly how they want to practice and what they want to believe. Because the beliefs encompassed in paganism vary widely, it is often more productive for each member to perform rituals on their own. However, 40% of the population is involved in group worship, which although it accounts for a smaller percentage of the population, is still a notable amount. The true detriment to visibility, however, is the lack of any established churches. Although the Pluralism Project from Harvard University recorded nearly 400 Pagan organizations within the U.S., only about one fourth of all of the communities listed actually had a building that could be easily identified by an outsider as a place of worship (Eck). For almost one million followers, there are only around 100 estimated centers of worship listed on the website with their own buildings. For a large majority of Pagans, their preferred setting for rituals is outside, in public parks or private land. Many others practice in groups in their leaders' homes. This causes a gap in perceived community size nationally for those who are not involved in the Pagan community.

This trend is echoed within the smaller sample size of Pennsylvania and within Pittsburgh as well. Pew Research Center projects a similar distribution among religious affiliations within Pennsylvania as those presented nationally. A group of .3% of the population residing within Pennsylvania who identify as Pagans would amount to 38,370 people, given the most recent state census population record of 12.79 million people (U.S. Census Bureau). Even state-wide, the population of Pagans exceeds the national estimate of the non-Pagan informant mentioned above. Again, this underestimate is not shocking, as only 5 out of the 400 total Pagan religious organizations listed in The Pluralism Project's

database are in Pennsylvania, and none are in Pittsburgh (Eck). Based on my own research and interaction with the Pagan community, this is estimate of the number of religious organizations is inaccurate. During my time interacting with the community, I have personally come in contact with more than 10 different organizations centered on Paganism just within Pittsburgh and represented among my 38 informants. This leads to the conclusion that there are perhaps many more religious centers nationally than are listed on The Pluralism Project's website. While I have interviewed a total of 38 members of the Pagan community, I would estimate that there are around 1,000 in the surrounding Pittsburgh area, based on attendance at events such as Pagan Pride Festival, and the estimated number of religious groups. However, any estimate of the number of Pagans is subject to inaccuracies as there is a portion of practitioners who do not interact with the community at all and are thus relatively unreachable and unidentifiable.

In general, according to The Association of Religion Data Archive (or the ARDA), Pittsburgh's most popular religion is Catholicism, accounting for 460,672 people out of a total population of 740,979 in their 2010 report. This lends itself to a moderately religious atmosphere through the city and its outskirts, and many of my informants have stated that they feel Pittsburgh is a very religious city. Out of 25 non-Pagans who were interviewed, all but one stated that they didn't feel that Pittsburgh would be a particularly welcoming city to Paganism, and over half mentioned Pittsburgh's strong Catholic background. When Pagans were asked the same question, they were generally more optimistic: on a scale from 1 to 10, 25 out of 38 rated the city between a 5 and a 7. This difference is perhaps because the non-Pagans are virtually unaware of any sort of Pagan population within Pittsburgh, and therefore are ignorant of the ways in which the Pagan community is already functioning easily and peacefully within the city's limits. In sum, it seems that my

informants generally feel that Pittsburgh is neither the worst (1) nor the best area (10) of the U.S. for a Pagan population in terms of possible discrimination but rather somewhere in the middle.

### **1.3 RESEARCHING DISCRIMINATION**

My project has investigated attitudes of religious discrimination against Paganism, how the faith is lived as a culture, and how discrimination affects this experience. I have closely examined how discriminatory attitudes are experienced and understood by both non-Pagans and Pagans alike, as well as how they have agency over Pagan lives on an individual basis. The research problem initially involved two basic points of action: first, identifying acts of discrimination that do indeed exist, and then observing the ways in which such acts affect Pagans' daily lives. With the goal being to add to current understandings of religious discrimination and how it can greatly influence Pagan practice and culture, I expected to see clear, concrete examples of cause and effect moving from the discrimination exhibited by non-Pagans to the detrimental effects in Pagans lives. What I initially had expected to find was a large community of Pagans who were miserable keeping their religious identities a secret and wished for a way to make themselves known to the larger community, as well as a strong non-Pagan force of blatant, outward discrimination. However, instead of discovering what I previously thought would be a cut and dry linear path from discrimination to detriment, what I found was that there is a deeply ingrained cycle of feedback between Pagans and non-Pagans: Pagans continue to practice in secret, keeping their community just outside the lines of mainstream culture, and thus non-Pagans continue to be ignorant about the religion due to a lack of accurate



information presented to them. Simultaneously, instead of finding a very clear and outward representation of discrimination against Pagans in my research with the non-Pagan community, I found that many simply had no idea what the religion actually was, and substituted information they thought relevant from earlier life experiences to create a viable sense of understanding for themselves. Moreover, it seems that my Pagan informants do not see keeping their religion a secret as a burden. Secrecy is ingrained within the traditions of Paganism, and doesn't present any immediate self-perceived barriers to their well-being. As secrecy and compartmentalization guard them from any emotional harm or societal struggle, they have little motivation to stop this behavior.

With secrecy and mystery at the center of the religion, it is no wonder that members outside of the community have no other understanding of anything even close to the topic besides what is presented to them in literature and popular culture of witchcraft. This ignorance and concurrent substitution, I argue, is the root of the majority of the discriminatory attitudes, and could seemingly be remedied if the Pagan community were to be more open and visible to its surrounding society. There is comparatively little current ethnographic information on the subject of Paganism compared to most other religions, and nearly half of those who *do* study it are members of the community themselves. This further insulates the community into itself. Ethnographers like Sarah Pike and Tanya Luhrmann in their books *Earthly Bodies*, *Magical Selves*, and *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* respectively, provide useful insights into how Paganism functions as a culture and acknowledge that discrimination inevitably exists, yet what is not developed in current works is any analysis of the exact consequences of religious discrimination.

However, the consistent lack of visible information for the majority of the public is a problem that must be remedied if the Pagan community hopes to gain respect and

acceptance as a religion. I address this gap in knowledge by presenting a research project that is not rooted solely within the Pagan community. Simply by interviewing non-Pagans, my research allows an outlet for my informants to ask questions after the interview has been concluded, and all 25 asked for more information about the religion and its practices. In total, 38 Pagans and 25 non-Pagans were interviewed over the course of this study, with interviews ranging from 20 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes. The research was conducted using standard anthropological fieldwork methods, including participant observation and both formal and informal interviews. Informants were gathered using a snowball technique, which involves asking the current interviewee for contact recommendations for further interviews. Informal, anonymous online surveys were used as well and were administered through email in order to gauge a better general sense for the social climate surrounding these issues. The anonymous surveys were useful in providing me with an outlet for understanding what members from the same geographical demographic would say if their reputation or social respect were not on the line. Thus, these surveys allowed me to control for social desirability bias within the interview setting which will be addressed in further chapters. A uniform set of questions, which are available in the appendix, were employed during these interviews so as to provide a stronger basis for comparison, but unplanned speech also took place and was encouraged. Four small lunar cycle rituals were observed, and all of the seasonal Sabbats over the span of a year were observed as well. In interviewing both Pagans and non-Pagans, this research provides a more complete view of the cycle of discrimination, as has not been thoroughly approached before. The use of the results of this research include but are not limited to: further studies on the cultural power of religious discrimination, the formation of greater public understanding of nontraditional religions and how they are affected by modern social

climates, and the addition of a seldom heard voice into current conversations surrounding religious tensions in the modern world.

Throughout this work, my larger argument is that both non-Pagans and Pagans exhibit behavior that has become a cycle of misinformation and discrimination. Pagans, who exhibit three main defensive techniques: compartmentalization, secret keeping, and downplaying emotional responses, use these strategies to protect themselves from possible discrimination. Fueled by stories they have heard from others, or personal experiences, Pagans attempt to create a safe environment free from the threat of discrimination and its effects. By using techniques like secret keeping and compartmentalization, they are essentially living in hiding. If non-Pagans are unable to identify them as Pagans, then they are unable to discriminate against them personally and thus Pagans effectively safeguard themselves from hardship or discomfort. In downplaying any emotional response one may have towards acts of discrimination against them, they also minimize the effect—or perceived effect—that discrimination has on their emotional well being. However, these techniques, which are meant to safeguard from discrimination, in actuality serve to increase the probability that discrimination exists. Discrimination against Paganism is fueled in large part by a lack of information and understanding surrounding the topic. When non-Pagans lack relevant and accurate information about Paganism, they fill this gap with knowledge they have gleaned from other sources such as their own religious background and the media. This process is the exact reason why many people attribute such inaccurate negative images and practices to the religion of Paganism. The defense strategies that Pagans use thus increase this lack of understanding by not allowing positive and accurate information to be visible. By keeping to themselves and staying away from the

public eye, Pagans are guarding themselves from discomfort and simultaneously fortifying the outlets of their discomfort as well.

In the following chapters, I will discuss this argument in detail, analyzing the topic from both the non-Pagan and Pagan perspectives. In order to form a contextual basis for my argument, the rest of this chapter will create a better sense of how to define Paganism and its constituents. Combining a discussion of historical origins and former scholarly definitions, I outline the definition that I reference for the remainder of this work. Chapter 2 contains a further discussion of previous scholarly work, and an analysis of the trends within the field. In Chapter 3, I discuss the non-Pagan perspective on this issue, using information from my own informants. It includes an analysis of not only how discrimination functions but also where its origins lie. The following chapter mirrors Chapter 3, with a discussion of the Pagan perspective and the effects of discrimination on their lives and will close this work with a discussion of my conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## **1.4 PAGAN ORIGINS AND PRACTICE**

### **1.4.1 Historical Origins**

Before touching on any analysis included within this work, however, an understanding of what exactly it is that I am studying must be clear. It is best to begin with the historical origins of the religion and the terms associated with it. To attempt to create a comprehensive and stable definition of Paganism would be to fight against some of the

most important aspects of such a religion. Paganism—which is widely prized among its followers for its fluidity and ability to adapt—has a definition that is not only changing from tradition to tradition, but also from person to person. Paganism contains a clear example of how the balance between individual and community agency may exist, and to force the religion into absolute, universal parameters would do the essence of this religion an injustice. Within this work, I will take a more productive approach and describe Paganism through its historical origins, the basic similarities among traditions which lie under the umbrella of Paganism (touching on its various branches and nuances), and its meaning from the perspective of its followers. Using this approach, it is possible to create a more accurate depiction that stays true to the principles of Paganism.

Just as the majority of its followers place a huge emphasis on historical origins and the “Old Religion,” so too will this work emphasize a few of the most important historical influences that continue to affect the modern Pagan movement today. This can be better explained through an understanding of the origin of the word pagan. Stemming from the post-classical Latin word *pagus* which meant a rural district outside of the town, and thus *paganus* meaning a dweller of such districts; Pagan began to be used by Christians as a term for those who were not of the Christian faith, as these people in the outskirts of society were typically the last to embrace the new Christian way of life and hold onto their old religions and customs (Adler 9). This, interestingly, could point to a more conservative image of early Paganism, as they resisted religious change or modern innovation. The word pagan was used in a somewhat similar way as contemporary Americans use the word hick and the word was even used by Shakespeare in 1600 to mean prostitute (Oxford English Dictionary). Therefore, the term Pagan from its very beginnings encompassed a wide array of different beliefs and customs (and insults) that have formed through a long strain of

complex evolution into the religion today, and the contemporary use of the word to describe the religion itself is contested within the academic world. Because scholars disagree about the religion's origins, they have coined other terms to describe it, such as nature religions, polytheists, or neo-pagans. However, due to the nature of this work, I will be referring to the religion in the words used by its followers, and that is typically Pagan. Today, Pagans reclaim this word from its previous definition—much like Wiccans reclaim the word witch—taking something that was once negative and redefining it for their own use.

There are a few historical strains of Paganism that remain focal points for Pagans today, including the revival of the Norse traditions from northern Europe, and Celtic traditions from Britain. However other widely practiced traditions include the Alexandrian, Anglo-Saxon, Dianic, Druidic, Faery, Shamanic, Strega, and Wiccan practices, simply to name a few. Many paths are intentionally reconstructionist, attempting to revive ancient traditions in the world today. Based on my research, many modern Pagans' choices about which path to study stem from the places in which their ancestors resided, and use their family history as a means to stake claim on their beliefs. One informant, Matt, stated when asked what brought him to the religion, that one side of his family was extremely Catholic, while the other side was

more of like the Pagan family. My grandmother on my dad's side never talked about religion really but it was like this discord of the fact that we're descendants of the Salem Witch Trials. My 9th-great-grandmother was tried on the Salem Witch Trials, but was never hanged... she was actually the last one to be tried before they ended (P 210).

In being able to trace his family history back to the Salem Witch Trials, Matt finds pride and purpose in his path of Wicca. Another informant, Maggie, stated that she was initially drawn to Gardinarian Wicca because of her strong Celtic background: "I liked the way it

honored my past in a way that I haven't been able to with anything else. I feel connected to my ancestors when I practice Celtic traditions" (P 204).

Generally, many Pagans in the area of Pittsburgh who trace their familial line back to Italy practice the Strega tradition which comes from a quasi-Catholic oriented sorcery found in common Italian folk traditions. The same is true for many members of the faith in the area who trace their ancestry back to Britain who practice the various Celtic traditions like Maggie. However, there are some followers who do not practice according to their ancestry. This emphasis on ancestry and personal origin parallels ancient Pagans' worship of their ancestors (and other world religions as well) before 3000 BC, as they would bury them in long barrows and perform rituals centered around them to influence the mundane world such as the weather or harvest. As the climate changed radically around 3000 BC, the religion turned away from their ancestors and towards nature as the primary focus, thus creating origins for the nature religion that exists today (Gibson 173). As Graham Harvey explains in *Contemporary Paganism: Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists*, Paganism has "created and developed an identity from many threads which it has woven into patterns at once original and familiar" (Harvey 172). Harvey claims that across the wider span of the movement, history is an important source of identity and self-understanding just as I have seen within my own research. Intriguingly, this sense of legitimacy and authority based in history perhaps, according to Harvey, is a response to non-Pagans' critiques of the validity of the religion. It is easy to see this attitude when analyzing my own responses from non-Pagans, many of them making claims similar to those of an aging professor:

I just don't see Paganism as a religion, and I know many others who don't as well. Whenever I've come across the idea of Paganism, it's almost approached as a sort of antithesis for religion. Like the opposite of religion. As far as I know, there isn't any

sort of religious dogma, there are no churches, it doesn't have a solid basis throughout time. It just doesn't satisfy what I would qualify as a religion (NP 120).

This comment, coming after a discussion of Pagan rituals, seems to allude to the prevalent idea that Paganism consists of not much more than casting spells and doing stage magic. Many non-Pagans are of the opinion that there is no historical background for the Pagan traditions, and are in many cases predisposed by popular naming classifications like "New Age," and "neo-Pagan," to believe that it is a religion that has been fabricated in the recent past. It is partly in response to this that we see Pagans legitimizing their faith through history.

## **1.5 RECONSTRUCTING A DEFINITION**

### **1.5.1 Animism**

Through all of what we know of these various Pagan perspectives, there persist several main themes that have been carried through to today. One of the most visible themes from the "global Pagan perspective... is respect for the environment as a spiritual entity" (Davies 10). The Pagan divine, as many Pagans have been eager to tell me, is thought to be encompassed in all things. This sentiment is a version of what scholars have termed animism. "The Goddess is in everything, she's in the trees, the rocks, animals, and every human being. We are all a part of the Goddess, like it or not," one informant claimed (P 204). Another explained, that although "Wicca... is often what the participant desires to be, at its heart it is a respect for—a worship of—nature" (P 218). The destruction of such



things, like cutting down trees or polluting the environment, are thought to be acts of desecration (Davies 11). According to “Living Witchcraft,” a pagan describes the unifying principle of the religion as such:

Wicca sees no discontinuity between the self and other, between humans and the divine, between the spiritual and the natural. Rather, each of us acts as the center of cosmic forces; each of us reflect the entire macrocosm; each of us—plant, element, animal, or god—is divine (Scarboro, Campbell and Stave 42).

Reading a passage like this one, it is easy see the ways in which a religious movement of this kind can gain momentum in a society that is becoming increasingly obsessed with the sustainability of the environment and eco-friendly practices. In fact, many Pagan groups explicitly encourage environmental involvement, like the Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids, who explicitly encourage “Personal Environmental Responsibility” (Harvey 125). It is through an understanding of animism that a non-Pagan may begin to grasp why something like doing harm to nature would be so severe to a Pagan. Each aspect of the world “contains a spark of intelligence,” and every aspect is sacred as is encompassed in the idea of animism. The sacred may have different meanings amongst them, “to some it means all parts of the universe are precious, and worthy of respect and careful handling. To others it implies a feeling of kinship, of connection...” nearly all would agree that nature is precious and must be protected as one would protect a brother or sister (J. Higginbotham and R. Higginbotham 53). Joyce and River Higginbotham also describe this kinship to nature in *Paganism, An Introduction to Earth-Centered Religions*, as a “cosmic brother- or sisterhood” (J. Higginbotham and R. Higginbotham 40). An easy way to understand the complicated ideals encompassed within animism is to view the world as a “radically interconnected living system.” Not only are the various pieces of nature connected as a whole, but the entirety of “nature... is alive, ensouled” (Harvey 87).

### **1.5.2 Individual and Community**

However, although Paganism's strong focus on the communal, interconnectivity of experience seems to be clear, individualism plays just as significant a role. Paganism lives within the dichotomy of individualism versus community oriented functioning, presenting modern America with a way in which the two ideas may work together without being mutually exclusive. As a fundamental part of their spiritual growth, or what Pagans refer to as their spiritual "path," there is a profound empowerment of the self, which breeds an acceptance of individuality and solidarity. Members of covens and groups do not need to believe exactly the same things, or practice in exactly the same way, and are not thought to be any less alike in camaraderie. When interviewing members of a local coven of Wiccans, one stated that even though she and another member of her coven differed on some seemingly fundamental elements of the religion, such as whether or not one should worship a male God as well as a female Goddess, she believed that these differences did not hinder the growth or functioning of their coven, but rather enhanced it with diversity (P 220). Almost every large public event that I have attended over the course of this study has included a member of the community speaking publicly about the beauty of the Pittsburgh community's diversity and the strength that they find within it. There seems to be a constant mantra behind every Pagan Pride Day or festival that you can hear echoed in the opening and closing ritual: their diversity is what makes them stronger as a whole. This seems to go against the negativity of what many other modern religions such as Islam and Christianity would believe as an outcome of a diversity of beliefs. When speaking with Cathy, a middle-aged administrative director at a local university, about the fundamental

aspects of Paganism after I had exhausted my script of questions, she made the claim that “that kind of diversity in, like, fundamental beliefs just wouldn’t work in a church like mine. I don’t think I would like it either. I really enjoy being able to know that everyone believes exactly what I believe when I step into my church. It’s kind of strengthening, which I don’t think you could really get if not everyone believed the same thing” (NP 113). While Paganism would not be a perfect fit for Cathy, many others enjoy being involved in the religions specifically for its diversity of thought. Because Paganism does not have a clear “10 commandments,” or set of rules or dogmas, the religion allows for multiple interpretations of the universe and the divine, all without contradicting each other. This is what caused tension for the elderly professor in defining Paganism as a religion as mentioned above. While a Christian who says “God isn’t the only divine being, I believe that there is a goddess as well and I want to worship her too,” would arguably not be a Christian anymore as he would be in conflict with some of the fundamental ideals of the religion, a Pagan can say this and still consider himself just as much a part of the same religion as the person next to him that only believes in one Goddess.

This perhaps stems from the idea that the true divine is what underlies all aspects of life, as Pagans simply see this as finding different labels for the same thing as one person calls a glass of water half full and another calls it half empty. Both definitions of said glass are, in the end, accurately describing the same thing just from differing perspectives. It is interesting that Pagans are able to not only believe things that are in conflict with other Pagans’ beliefs, but that they are also able to worship different versions of their deity in the same rituals. For the previously mentioned Wiccan who disagrees with her fellow coven member about the representation of the divine as a male god as well as a female goddess, she is able to attend the same rituals, go through the same motions, and recite the same

incantations without either of them feeling as if they are compromising a fundamental part of their personal worship.

### 1.5.3 Magic

Another unifying aspect of the religion is the practice of spiritual magic. Although there are many different forms and ways to practice, the underlying objective of both personal and communal ritual is in some part to invoke the power of magic. Traditionally, in the words of Aleister Crowley in his book *Magick in Theory and Practice*, magic is “the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will” (Crowley xii). However, this definition does not illuminate the way in which magic works for Pagans in all its complexity. While many different people can explain it in many different ways, a general idea of it would be the act of “stepping into the universal flow and choosing to participate with it in a deliberate fashion” (Higginbotham and Higginbotham 163). The essence of magic is both natural and rational. One informant described Pagan magic succinctly as “focused intention with prayer” (P 205). According to Pagan philosophy, one may not use magic to evoke a response in the universe that is neither natural nor beyond the confines of rational thinking, and it is generally looked down upon to use magic for trivial personal gain. For example, one informant stated:

I would never perform a spell for something little or trivial... that’s a waste of time and energy. Magic is for big things—the true tasks of life. I would never ask the goddess for strength to, you know, get up and water my garden. Isn’t that a little insulting to myself? As if I’m incapable of doing that on my own. It’s only for things that you wouldn’t be able to accomplish without a little divine help (P 201).

Thus, with a religion so firmly rooted in individual strength and identity, it seems unnatural to ask for something that one would be capable of doing oneself.

A more appropriate use of magic can be better illustrated in one Wiccan's endeavors. Maggie, a local Wiccan High Priestess mentioned previously, had fallen on some tough economic times. She found herself unable to provide for her family and was feeling hopeless about her economic pursuits. Seeking a way to remedy her unhappiness, Maggie set up an altar in her home, connected to the fostering of economic stability through its symbols and elemental pieces. Every day, Maggie devoted some time to focus on her goal, with her thoughts devoted to this idea of stability and prosperity. She claims that after a month or so of this focusing of energy, she began to see changes in her economic situation. Her home was approved to be refinanced; her piece of land in southwestern Pennsylvania suddenly began to produce gas royalties, just to name a few. Maggie believes that it was her focused energy, in tune with the goddess, that brought about these economic changes.

In many ways, Pagan magic is not unlike typical Christian Prayer. In the same way that a Christian would sit down every night and focus a certain amount of energy on a goal or desire, the Pagan focuses their thoughts and thus their energy on a given goal or desire. One informant reiterated this sentiment in saying, "our idea of magic really just reminds me of a form of prayer. We devote a large amount of energy to focus on asking the universe for help" (P 206). Many times, the prayer and magical act both entail asking the divine to emotionally fortify them. While a Christian would ask God for the strength to stand up for herself at work the next day, a Wiccan might ask the powers of fire to instill her with the passion necessary to be able to defend herself. S. Zohreh Kermani describes a similar sentiment in the book *Pagan Family Values, Childhood and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary American Paganism*, in citing a couple who "discuss[ed] the similarities between magic and prayer, noting that 'magic is a form of prayer' that can be manifested through visualization and incantation" (Kermani 39). However, Pagan magic tends to bear

a more individual responsibility; most of the burden of making this event happen is on the practitioner. As Pagans believe that the divine is within everything, most believe that they have enough power within themselves to carry out their own magical endeavors. Kermani again describes this in recounting the statements of a Pagan interviewed for *Pagan Family Values*: “Pagans invest their own energy into the change they want to make and ask only for guidance and support from their [deity]” (Kermani 40). It is clear, then, that magic goes one step beyond prayer and instead of hoping and asking for the event to happen, Pagans assume agency in the achievement of this goal.

#### **1.5.4 Ritual**

As these communities do not have any sort of concrete doctrine for the ways in which they ought to practice and instead rely on traditions passed through generations or traditions that are recreated from ancient texts, they typically do not see ritual as stable, unchanging, and inflexible. While in many traditions there is a natural framework that is followed including purification, circle-forming, and eating and drinking together, there is no set of opening remarks, songs, or prayers that are recited in every ritual as a universal symbol of leaving behind the mundane realm and entering the spiritual mindset. While a Muslim may hear the same call to prayer every day, no matter what city they are in, and associate this with a time to leave behind their everyday life for a short period, Pagans do not have any such prayer or call to action that is said at every ritual, or every prayer. Pagans, across the board, do not even have a specific set of opening and closing remarks for magical endeavors, like Christians typically employ in prayer such as “amen,”—although I have witnessed in various Wiccan rituals several repeated phrases such as “blessed be.” This

aids in the fluidity of ritual and magical acts, as there is no framework or prerequisite phrasing for anything to be considered a viable religious endeavor. Catholic mass, one of the most stable and unchanging religious rituals, is rife with patterned phrasing and habitual actions in a way that can be directly contrasted with Pagan ritual. Although there are a few interesting similarities between the actions of Catholic mass and Pagan ritual such as the burning of incense and the ringing of bells, the absence of any solid basis of words, songs, or prayers across the board of Paganism aids in asserting a sense of variation from ritual to ritual.

For many scholars of the anthropology of religion such as Durkheim, these symbols of leaving the mundane realm, the most powerful way of which is in the form of words, phrasing, and song, are imperative for the practice of religion. However, I would argue that uniform actions take the place of uniform phrasing for the Pagan traditions. The typical ritual format, in the opening and closing of the circle, and the partaking in food and drink together spans not only various traditions but also connects pagans across the world. As I stood on Primrose Hill in London with a group of Druids observing their ritual, eating scotch eggs and drinking mead, I couldn't help but be transported in my mind back to America and the rituals I have attended there. It seemed to me that this notion of sharing the most basic essence of what gives us life spans further and more powerfully than any word or song. Actions such as this transcend cultural difference and history and touch on some of the most basic aspects of what makes us all human. While these common ritual actions connect the movement on a wider scale, each tradition inevitably has its own myths, its own connection with ancient people, and its own ritual focus. Each ritual acts out the myths of their ancestors, and it is in this religious action that their beliefs take on visible forms.

### 1.5.5 A Working Definition

Across its time as a focus of scholarly attention, there have been several “official” definitions of the religion. Sabrina Magliocco, the author of *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*, claims that the Neo-Pagan movement was revitalized by Tim “Oberon” Zell in 1971, which could be defined as an attempt to “revive, revitalize, and experiment with aspects of pre-Christian polytheism” (Magliocco 4). This pre-Christian polytheism involved in the origin of the very word “pagan,” involves connection to nature, and a deep belief in animism as defined previously. Something Magliocco brings up that I don’t necessarily see as an integral piece in the definition is the goal of a deep connection “with community.” While I think this is very true in some cases, there are also many others who might disagree. From my observations thus far I have seen many practicing witches who are solitary, meaning that they practice alone and have little to no connection to the community at large. The ability to practice by oneself is a unique aspect of Paganism that should not be ignored within its definition as I have discussed above.

For Michael York, the author of *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, the definition of Paganism is nearly impossible to pin down. York claims that drawing up a “definitive list of necessary characteristics for any given practice to be assessed as pagan” would not only be exceedingly difficult, but it would also be unnecessary (York 13). At



best, York states, we may determine a “range of possibilities” that we might be able to identify in any given pagan example. For York, these “possibilities” include,

polytheism, animism, idolatry, corospirituality, local emphasis, recognitions of geosacred concentrations, perceptions of soul duality, and either nature worship or nature as a chief metaphorical register expressive of the divine (York 13).

York then goes on to describe a list of five common traits that he believes any version of Paganism would include (contradicting his previous statement slightly), narrowing down his previous list of possibilities to consist of (1) having both male and female gods, (2) involving some aspect of magic, (3) emphasizing ritual efficacy, (4) a sense that the body is a source of wisdom which should be listened to, and (5) the placing of gods and humans on the same level of codependency and importance (York 14). While I feel that these points are valid and panoramic in scope, I think that York does not emphasize the importance of nature sufficiently within his definition. I also do not believe that having such restrictive parameters for a religion like Paganism is productive. Its fluidity is one of the most important aspects of the religion, and trying to shove it into a cookie cutter of the “five simple steps to paganism,” is doing the religion and its followers a disservice. I argue that employing a less rigid set of parameters for a definition of Paganism that I have given above more easily represents the fluidity and variation amongst its various branches.

However, some scholars like Ronald Hutton in *Pagan Britain*, describe Paganism as simply “the pre-Christian religions of Europe and the Near East,” which is far too broad of a definition and gives the reader no true direction in which to think about the topic (Hutton vii). In using this wide-spanning definition he is allowing the reader to assume that all of these religions must have a concrete underlying commonality, while not really even touching on what this commonality even is. Going forward, I would prefer to combine and modify the definitions of these three scholars that adequately represent the scholarly basis

thusly: Paganism, which traces its origins to the pre-Christian religions of Europe and the Near East, encompasses a deep connection to nature, animism, and both male and female deities, with many pagan religions also including aspects of local emphasis, ritual worship, and magic.

## 2.0 CHAPTER TWO

### 2.1 SCHOLARLY ROOTS OF THE FIELD

In the current scholarly environment, Paganism is a growing subfield of interest. Anthropologists, scholars of religion, and practitioners alike have begun to bring the topic into the forefront of religious anthropology, beginning most notably with Ronald Hutton and Margot Adler in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Within the last two decades, there has been a wide range of authors working and studying a diverse array topics relating to the field. These works span from examining the history of Paganism like Ronald Hutton's comprehensive work, *Triumph of the Moon*, quantitative research done to outline the demographic of people who are involved in New Religious Movements by Lorne Dawson in 2003, studies on how the internet affects the construction of Feminist Wicca by Constance Wise in 2008, to studies of secret-keeping inherent to the religion such as Kimberly Kirners' work on Pagans' interactions in the health care system in 2014. While each work makes strong, valuable additions to the growing field, what seems to be missing is a focused discourse on discrimination. Throughout the last 40 years that Pagan scholarly work has been published, only one other publically available work has focused on discrimination: *Contemporary Paganism, Minority Religions in Majoritarian America* by Carol Barner-Barry which will be addressed in detail further on in the chapter. Scholars across the span of Contemporary Paganism have investigated a wide range of ideas and aspects of the community and religion itself, moving more recently to surveys and data collection that revolve around Paganism as it is practiced, rather than descriptions of its belief system. Within my research I focus on the religion as it is *lived*—meaning not just

what Pagan beliefs are, or how they perform rituals and practice religious ceremonies but rather the way Pagans function outside of the context of religious situations. I am not so much interested in how a Pagan experiences ritual as how a Pagan experiences the rest of their lives besides that which is directly related to their religion. A foundation of definition and practice has been sufficiently established, allowing me, like many other scholars in the last 15 years, to move towards an emphasis on analysis rather than description.

Many earlier works, such as Sarah Pike's *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, and Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, provide scholars of Pagan studies with illuminating accounts of how Paganism is practiced and what Pagans believe, but do not move much past description. This "definition work," as I call it, was necessary to form a baseline upon which other scholars may build. Adler's work focuses on defining the individual Pagans and Pike focuses on defining the community, serving as useful tools for the foundation of Pagan Studies. With Paganism as a relatively new study focus (only being properly developed in the mid-1980s), the trend among its scholars seems to move from forming a foundation of scholarly understanding to more intricate analysis of the religion's complexities. Scholars like Ronald Hutton, Michael York, Loretta Orion, Lorne Dawson, and Joyce and River Higginbotham all provide an insightful foundation for understanding the religion, and delve deeply into the act of understanding what exactly Paganism is on levels even beyond what the believe and how they practice. Jorgensen and Russell's work "American Neopaganism: The Participants' Social Identities," which looks at Pagan identities outside of the religious setting is a good example of this as the work goes beyond the typical description work and looks at Pagans outside of a religious context. While the lines certainly blur between what can be labeled "definition" and what can be thought of as an "intricate analysis of the complexities of the religion," what is clear within these early works is the perceived need to

create a clear picture of *who* a Pagan is and *what* a Pagan does. It is natural for the members of a field to first feel an overwhelming need to describe what exactly it is that they're studying in order to form a groundwork for future scholars. A sense of totality of understanding must first be achieved in order to move on to broader analysis.

There are three periods which I have endeavored to understand and examine within the study of the religion which I will discuss in detail. These periods, which I will call "Definition and Synthesis," "Consolidation and Community," and "Analysis and Evolution," which move from the broad topics of how to define the religion as a whole, how the religion works as a large scale community, and finally how the religion functions internally. Starting from 1979 when Adler's first version of *Drawing Down the Moon* was published, to 2013 with Kermani's *Pagan Family Values*, I will examine the ways in which scholarly approaches have evolved in their interests.

## **2.2 DEFINITION AND SYNTHESIS (1980-1995):**

Margot Adler, (1979). *Drawing Down the Moon*

Margot Adler, a journalist by occupation, Wiccan by choice, started out her journey to the Pagan faith through a journalistic effort investigating the history of the Druids in England. According to her biography included in her published books, Adler spent many years devoted to Wicca and eventually became a High Priestess within Covenant of the Goddess, a popular sect of Wicca. Adler is one of the first, along with scholars like Ronald Hutton, to do what may be called Public Relations work. In light of the public first becoming familiar with New Religious Movements in the 60s and 70s, there was a need to create an accessible outlet for accurate information in an attempt to redirect any misinformation or

misunderstanding that might arise. Adler's book served as an outlet through which members of the community as a whole may better understand Paganism and its constituents. Many of the books published during this time, such as *Living Witchcraft: A Contemporary American Coven*, seem to be written for and marketed to people who place themselves firmly outside the community and aim to dispel misconceptions (Scarboro, Campbell and Stave). However, these books during this time period also served as a doorway into the world of Paganism for people who were interested in becoming a member of the community. Works such as Eugene Gallagher's *A Religion Without Converts? Becoming a Neo-Pagan*, highlight this fact. Adler and others during this era provide later scholars of the field with a strong basis of definition and understanding which did not previously exist. In using works such as Adler's, I am able to move far beyond definition and use this foundation as means to build my own argument in directions that were not previously attainable.

Adler's approach to Paganism itself has been one that is emulated and frequently discussed. As both a researcher of Paganism and a Pagan herself, the lines blurred between what was academic and what was personal in Adler's work, a criticism noted by quite a few scholars of the field such as Markus Davidsen in his article, "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?" What started out as a relatively unbiased journalistic enquiry ended up being the focus of the rest of her religious experiences. Yet, it is perhaps precisely because of this connection to the inner workings of the religion that being a member affords her that her studies have proven to be particularly panoramic and insightful. Thus, Margot Adler occupies, among many others who participate in the study of Paganism<sup>5</sup>, the space between

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<sup>5</sup> Notable scholars of the field who identify as being involved personally with Paganism include, among others, Ronald Hutton, Aleister Crowley, Helen Berger, Michael York, and Vivianne Crowley.

the outsider and insider point of view, or rather the emic and the etic point of view. As I have my own personal connections to Paganism, although I am not a practitioner myself, my research was similarly enhanced by the range of contacts I was able to amass and the trust that was more easily built between my Pagan informants and I.

Adler's study, *Drawing Down the Moon*, was first published in 1979, and then was republished several times until its final copy was published in 2006, just 8 years before her death. Margot Adler's early work serves within my analysis to help chart the beginnings of the study, and provide an example of how the focus of study is handled by someone who is explicitly a member of the tradition. *Drawing Down the Moon* provides a strong sense of the origins, holidays, and beliefs of Paganism, all while including a wide array of opinions and responses from Pagans in order to form a diverse and well-rounded idea of each topic. Her work provides scholars like myself with a comprehensive foundation to understanding how the religion functions as a whole and how its members conceptualize the world around them. Furthermore, Adler exemplifies a productive way to tackle the widely varying and often contradictory narratives surrounding Paganism within her work without favoring one view over the other.

However, it is within the chapter "The Craft Today," that I found work that resonated most strongly with my own. In this chapter, Adler takes time to discuss the formation of a definition of Paganism, and *who* is allowed to define it—a particular discussion that continues to this day<sup>6</sup>. Adler comes to the decision that "no single definition applies to all Wiccans,"—a concept I have become exceedingly familiar with through my own research (Adler 97). Adler emphasizes this point by including four differing answers

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<sup>6</sup> See again "What is Wrong With Pagan Studies?" by Markus Davidsen (2012)

to the seemingly simple question, “What is a witch?” Within my own research, I have rarely found two Pagans who wholly agree on any given topic—even those as straightforward as what Paganism is. Based on her approach, Adler seems to believe that the true and accepted definition of Paganism—or at least Wicca—should be defined by the members of the religion themselves.

Within this chapter, “The Craft Today,” Adler also includes instances of perceived persecution, such as a woman losing custody of her child in a divorce hearing after admitting to practicing witchcraft, and another woman who was “set up” by a police informer and arrested for performing divination. She also touches on something which is the root of my interest in discrimination: that the more subtle form of this discrimination comes from images portrayed in television shows and in films like *Rosemary’s Baby* and *The Exorcist*,<sup>7</sup> although television and films today provide a much wider array of material. Thus, Adler provides one of the first looks into the way discrimination is materialized in regard to Paganism, however Adler goes little further than simply stating that these instances exist. This is yet another reason why Adler’s work is particularly pertinent to my study, as Adler lays the groundwork for thinking about representations in various forms of media that become misinformation for those who are not familiar with Paganism or Wicca.

Adler’s approach to definition work lies at the forefront of Pagan Studies scholarship, specifically in its ability to encompass a diverse range of opinions. A common theme for Adler and other members of the field at this time can be summarized as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Which she mentions directly in the subsection “Witches and Persecution Today,” of the chapter 5, “The Craft Today.”



an emphasis on definition, origin, and mechanics.<sup>8</sup> Adler seems to be interested, based on the topics covered in *Drawing Down the Moon*, in the ways in which Paganism *functions*: how it is joined, how its members define themselves, and how its members function in society. Her focus is on the definition of these aspects, and the act of forming a greater understanding of the religion itself. Adler, much like the historian Ronald Hutton, who writes later, works to help scholars who have not focused on the subject previously understand the foundation of the religion. The root of the work that scholars of this time are producing, is acting as somewhat of a public liaison. What is pertinent to recognize here is that these public relations efforts are clearly still needed. While the works of Adler, Scarboro, Gallagher and many others are undoubtedly well constructed efforts to create greater visibility and understanding of the religion, Paganism remains today a highly misunderstood topic as revealed in my own research. While the definition work of Adler and her peers may be left in the past, public relations work is ongoing and remains at the forefront of necessity.

### **2.3 CONSOLIDATION AND COMMUNITY (1995-2005):**

Sarah Pike (2000). *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*

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<sup>8</sup> See "Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived," Loretta Orion (1995); "A Religion Without Converts? Becoming a Neo-Pagan," Eugene Gallagher (1994); "Living Witchcraft: A Contemporary American Coven," Scarboro, Campbell, and Stave (1994)

Sarah Pike, a professor in the Religious Studies department at California State University, Chico, represents the involvement of a purely scholarly interest in the subject, unmotivated by any profound personal connection to the religion that is apparent within the work. It is in the absence of any such connection to the subject that Pike's book takes a clearly more scientific approach to the study of the religion. However, as the study is ethnography-based, emotions and opinions of members of the group still form the basis of this narrative's argument, as most ethnographic material does. Pike uses a participant observer approach to create the ideal amount of interpersonal connections and the simultaneous ability to maintain the distance that is necessary to perform unbiased analysis. My research uses a similar ethnographic approach, blending the aspects insider connection present in Adler's work, with elements of participant observation found in Pike's work. Like others during this time period, Pike's work specifically allows for further understanding of the fluidity of the religion, and provides a basis of understanding how Paganism works as a community rather than just individuals. Other works published during this time such as "Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion," by Michael York, "Finding a Folklore," by Ronald Hutton, and "the Status of Witchcraft in the Modern World," by Wilhelm Mannhardt parallel the work of Pike to form a greater sense Paganism in a larger context and as a community. In discussing Paganism as it connects to other religions and its borrowing techniques that are described in Pike's work and others', provide the field as a whole with a better and more well rounded understanding of the fluidity of Paganism and its many definitions. As the attainment of an immobile and concrete definition proves to be inappropriate for this topic, scholars thus move to attempt to better understand the ways in which the religion moves outside of a stable delineation.

Pike moves beyond the groundwork laid out before her by scholars such as Adler in that she introduces an analysis of how some of the complexities of the religion function and introduces new and interesting ways to look at the formation of modern Paganism. Pike conducted observations and interviews during several large Pagan festivals in Western America, providing insights into how Pagans interact as a community as they come together for various events. Contrasting Adler's approach of emphasizing the differences that exist within the religion, Pike allows the readers to understand the ways in which Pagans form a community and act within it. The practice of grounding her ethnographic research in the attendance of festivals has occasionally been criticized because "Quiet, everyday practices and beliefs may not be revealed in the heightened circumstances of these bounded events" (Noonan 98). It is in this way that Pike's particular approach would not be adequate for a study such as mine, which examines the nuances of interaction and information-flow between Pagans and the outside community. However, I would argue that for Pike's specific research topic, that of how Pagans form a community, the idea of focusing on festivals seems apt and pointed. With so many Pagans practicing as solitaires and other covens proving difficult to contact as I have outlined in Chapter 1, festivals seem to be the perfect place to reach many of these previously unreachable correspondents, as they have been for my own research as well. Other works during this era also explore this idea, and attempt to better understand the religion through aspects such as the way they form communities rather than simply their belief systems such as "Civil Religion Aspects of Neo-Paganism," an article by Michael York published in the *Pomegranate*, a peer-reviewed journal focused on Pagan studies, and "A Modest Look at Ritual Nudity," by Ronald Hutton. These works and other during this time move toward understanding the religion on larger societal scale by connecting aspects of the religion to other aspects of society such as Civil

Religion and Modesty. These works also seem less interested in spending a lot of time participating in the public relations work of the previous era.

Pike, like Adler, mentions the inevitable persecution stories that crop up when speaking about Paganism, but likewise does not move forward beyond the mere assertion that these instances exist. While admittedly it was not her purported goal to do so, Pike does not take much of a stance on *why* these instances occur and in what ways the community responds. In order to create a more comprehensive view of the community, I believe it is important to understand how they are affected by adversity and stress just as much as it is important to understand how they function in times without this tension. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, Pagans form communal ties and find solidarity in sharing stories of discrimination and use the experiences of others to form opinions on how one should behave as a Pagan—for example, whether it is necessary to keep their religion a secret or not.

This book and other works of this time show an evolution (while in no way linear) of the scholarly attention in the field. They provide us with an insight into how the study developed from a basis of definition work to beginning to feel comfortable moving onto larger, more panoramic topics such as community formation which is discussed in Pike's work. However, Pike still remains within the category of definition in that she seems to be only peripherally concerned with societal implications of her findings and is focused more adamantly on attempting to form a solid outline of the Pagan community as a whole. Prior to this era, scholars had been focused primarily on the definition of what an individual Pagan might be and how he or she might function. *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* takes this understanding of Pagans as individuals and builds upon it by forming a foundation of knowledge of how Pagans may be defined and understood to function as a community.

Moving beyond solely foundation-forming definition work, scholars now show interest in the various ways Paganism functions as a societal microcosm. This interest continues into the next era, in which scholars not only look at Paganism *as* a microcosm, but also the microcosms *within* Paganism.

#### **2.4 ANALYSIS AND EVOLUTION (2005 – Present):**

S. Zohreh Kermani, (2013). *Pagan Family Values, childhood and the religious imagination in contemporary American Paganism*

S. Zohreh Kermani represents what I would call a third wave of study within the scholarly world of Pagan Studies of which this study itself is a part. After over three decades of ceaseless efforts to define not only Pagans as individuals, the community of Pagans at various levels, and even the study of Paganism itself, the field emerges with a visibly increased sense of confidence in its legitimacy and rigor. It is during this time that one may see, through various outlets, the introduction of works focused entirely on the implications of various religious complexities and inspection of smaller details of Pagan life. While Kermani and I work on very different topics, we share a sense of necessity to get into the everyday experiences of Pagans and how their experiences affects them, as well as forming a better understanding of the ways they manage their identities in the non-Pagan world. Other works published around this time echo both my own and Kermani's approach to Pagan studies, such as "Becoming a Virtual Pagan: 'Conversion' or Identity Construction?" by James R. Lewis, "Pagan Prayer and Worship: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions," by Janet Goodall, Emyr Williams, and Catherin Goodall. Scholars at this point during the development of the field are more confident in its legitimacy and do not have to do as much

groundwork and foundation building as someone like Ronald Hutton or Margot Adler who began studying the religion in the 1970s. With Kermani, the field also shows a heightened interest from graduates of elite universities, which represents a significant change in its status within the academic world.

In *Pagan Family Values*, the “first ethnographic study of the everyday lives of contemporary Pagan families,” Kermani brings another side of the conversation to light (back cover). While Pike was able to approach Paganism as a societal microcosm, Kermani lays significant groundwork for approaching the layers of experience within Paganism itself—such as childhood within the religion and how Pagan families function. In observing the way that Pagan families live and function as a unit, Kermani allows room for examination of the ways in which Paganism is passed down and inculcated into family life and the lives of young children. For many decades, Paganism was referred to time and time again as the “religion of converts,” meaning that nearly all of the members of the religion were not born into it but rather came to it on their own (Kermani 8). Now, after nearly the fifth decade of Paganism’s modern popularity, scholars are starting to notice the ways in which the religion is passed on to children as the foundations and ties of the religion strengthen with the passing of time.

Kermani takes the accepted difficulties of the religion, such as its varying definitions among its members, and inspects how these function on a familial level, and how it is explained to and understood by children. Kermani uses the group SpiralScouts, a troop similar to a Boy Scout troop but for children from Pagan families, to examine how they approach the definition of Paganism. Although “the diversity of approaches to religion was evident...” the troop leaders reconcile the aforementioned tension of varying definitions described by Adler by using simple analogies to explain these concepts and do so rather

fruitfully—explaining the elements and their concepts with ideas with which children are familiar (Kermani 128). The existence of such a group also brings into the conversation the idea that these groups are becoming more publically acceptable, signaling the changing landscape of how people both enter and live within the religion.

Kermani explores the common ideal that Paganism is the root of all other religions, using the personal testimonies of Pagans as the majority of scholars before her have done. Kermani cites one Pagan mother, explaining: “I believe Paganism is the oldest faith, reaching to the dawn of civilization when humans realized there were powers greater than themselves,” whose sentiment is echoed within my own observations, hearing many times the idea that the historical roots of Paganism outlast those of any other religion (Kermani 32). This seems to be a root of legitimization, and a productive one at that. With a religion that is so historically and personally recent, it is understood by the scholarly community that this legitimization within history is necessary for many practitioners.<sup>9</sup>

Kermani also portrays the field’s recent change from using terms such as “Neo-pagan” or “New Age,” to refer to the Pagan religion. This is most likely the result of dissent from practitioners of the religion, claiming that this idea of the newness of the religion illegitimizes their sense of identity and importance within the religious world. Informants of my own have stated that they “hate the idea of calling it ‘Neo-paganism’ because it’s not new. It’s actually the oldest religion in the world,” reaffirming the idea of pride in its historical presence, and their firm assertions that the religion which they practice today is one and the same (P 201).

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<sup>9</sup> Barner-Barry references this idea in her work during this period, citing a lack of legitimization as a possible source of discrimination.

Kermani and her peers in Pagan Studies during this era, such as Carol Barner-Barry, Peg Alio, and Hannah Johnston, provide my study with a basis from which I may form my own approach to the complexities and implications of various aspects of Paganism. In the same way that Kermani uses the lens of familial constructs through which to analyze essential parts of Paganism (such as the field's first topic; its definition), I analyze reactions to discrimination as a way to further understand the religion and its followers as a whole. Her work, along with the scholars' mentioned above, has provided me a clear perspective on how Pagan identities are formed and how they interact with the non-Pagan world outside of the terms of discrimination. In order to comprehend the ways in which discrimination affects the Pagan identity, I must also understand it within other contexts, such as the context of Pagan families and children which Kermani provides. This work and other from this era provide me with the tools necessary to perform my analysis more thoroughly and accurately.

## **2.5 Previous Work on Discrimination**

While there have been few in depth inquiries into instances of discrimination within Paganism and how they manifest themselves, the only major existing study in this area is presented in Carol Barner-Barry's 2005 publication, *Contemporary Paganism, Minority Religions in Majoritarian America*, which focuses on the ways in which lesser-practiced religions function in a society dominated by Christianity. Barner-Barry centers her analysis on Paganism and claims that these ideas can be applied to a broader range of religions as "all non-Christian groups in America have these experiences [of discrimination and



subjugation] in one way or another,” due to the dominating nature of Christianity within American society (Barner-Barry ix). She works with the idea that larger, majoritarian communities function in a way that the creation of minorities is inevitable. There are always both members of a community, and those who do not qualify as a part of it. Barner-Barry uses American mainstream Christianity in order to examine the ways in which Paganism forms a societal “other.” While this approach is useful and clearly fruitful, I would argue that looking at discrimination simply from the Christian perspective is limiting and does not provide an adequately encompassing view of the problem as there are many other cultural aspects that lead to the discrimination of Paganism which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

*Contemporary Paganism, Minority Religions in Majoritarian America*, like virtually every one of its predecessors, begins the discussion with a definition of its terms: what discrimination means in this context and what actions are considered discrimination. In the first chapter, Barner-Barry lays out the terms of her study, which is often necessary to get a diverse audience, like the audience of Pagan publications, on the same page. She reaffirms the covert ideas of many authors before her such as Adler, Pike, and York, in citing a need to find legitimacy within Paganism. Asserting that a lack of legitimacy, along with a lack of understanding and lack of group-wide organization leads to discrimination, Barner-Barry further explains this idea in terms of Christianity. This work provides my research with a basis for better identifying these discriminatory actions within the community I am studying and also recognizing how they affect the Pagan community. According to her, there are three main ways that religious discrimination gets carried out by Christians:

- (1) “harmful actions that are taken through disinterest and lack of understanding,”
- (2) “attempts to convert or force Christianity on people espousing minority religions,” and

(3) “outright and malicious attempts to try to drive minority religious people and their organizations from communities” (Barner-Barry 5).

This outline is pertinent to my study, specifically in that it provides me with a concrete basis according to which I may qualify acts as discriminatory although they may not directly be physically or emotionally harmful. Specifically, initial disinterest and/or lack of understanding color almost all discriminatory attitudes of non-Pagans. With her work, I am thus able to better understand how these acts of discrimination can be rooted within the culture of Christianity, which is a main focus in my analysis.

What is particularly unique about this work, however, is its emphasis on creating a legal basis for what is being said. Barner-Barry devotes an entire chapter to the discussion of a legal foundation that has fostered an environment abundant with religious discrimination that is interestingly placed between the two beginning chapters focusing on definition. It is clear that Barner-Barry feels that a discussion of this legal realm is integral in a discussion of identity and public understanding. She spends an entire chapter—the first of the work—discussing the legal background of religious discrimination against Paganism (Barner-Barry 9-29). In fact, she finds a way to incorporate legal cases into every topic she brings to light, including whether or not Paganism qualifies as a religion, and the topic of accusations of devil-worship.

From a legal standpoint, the reader is provided with a slew of policies, amendments, appeals, and the like, in order to better understand how minority religions are accepted or not accepted within American society. Moving from the historical basis of religious freedom, citing the narrow scope of the first amendment which applied only to various forms of Christianity, to the Religious Freedom Restoration Acts that began in 1993, Barner-Barry shows that as the scholarly community surrounding Paganism has changed

and evolved over the years, so too has the legal discourse surrounding the topic—albeit on a much longer time scale (Barner-Barry 19). Constantly qualifying her choice of study, Barner-Barry again asserts that she specifically chose to study Pagans as they “represent an extreme example of the kinds of situations that will continue to arise as more and more Americans practice religions that their fellow citizens do not understand and may even fear,” (Barner-Barry 27).

Throughout her work, Barner-Barry is also able to analyze accusations of Satanism, which is the basis of discrimination for many misinformed Christians. Without working in a viable framework to extensively discuss this, many scholars before her have ignored the topic all together. Barner-Barry cites the words used by Pagans to describe their practices as particularly condemning, such as *witch*, and *witchcraft*, which have overtly negative connotations, thus leading the word “pagan” to carry “vaguely negative overtones,” as well (Barner-Barry 58). Barner-Barry moves further than simply claiming that these accusations exist as was the typical trend in studies before hers, and explains how Pagans respond to these accusations, citing that “within the mainstream of contemporary Pagans, there is an insistence that Satan is not even relevant to Paganism,” and that “Satanists usually turn the pentagram upside down, but (as Pagans point out) this is no different from Satanists’ tendency to invert the cross” (Barner-Barry 60). This comparison to the inversion of the Christian cross is a statement that I have heard, verbatim, in several interviews.

Barner-Barry also includes an entire chapter focused on “outward discrimination,” something that has, in most cases before her, been less adequately addressed (Barner-Barry 147). However, as I have reiterated many times within this work, Barner-Barry does not go further than to state instances of discrimination against Pagans, rather than

analyzing how these instances affect the practice of Paganism as a whole. Barner-Barry also focuses on these instances from more of a legal standpoint rather than that of a cultural analysis. This approach is invaluable to my own research as well as the field as a whole in forming a better understanding of the types of discrimination at stake. However, the broader cultural sphere is where real changes in attitude and their affects may be observed, and thus it is equally important—if not more so—to examine the processes at work in that realm as well.

Her overall emphasis on legal issues brings up, again, the topic of legitimization. Is Barner-Barry herself trying to legitimize the study of Paganism and religious discrimination through a discourse of legal action? Throughout the book, there are many instances where it seems as if Barner-Barry feels the need to qualify her choice of studying Paganism, suggesting possible anxiety surrounding the perception of legitimacy of such a choice by her peers. It seems perhaps more likely that this need to legitimize a study such as this stems from a phenomenon I've already mentioned—namely that the majority of the population seems unaware of Paganism as a religion and thus equally unaware of the problem at stake.

I build off of this foundation and take my understanding of the field in a direction not previously emphasized: that of the effects of discrimination. There is relatively little close ethnographic examination of the discrimination against Paganism, and even less discussion of this issue as a serious problem for Pagans. Ethnographers like Sarah Pike and Tanya Luhrmann in their books *Earthly Bodies*, *Magical Selves*, and *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, respectively, provide useful insights into how Paganism functions as a culture and acknowledge that discrimination inevitably exists, yet what is not developed in many current works is any analysis of the exact consequences of religious discrimination.

Barner-Barry's study is a step in the right direction, but scholars in this field have not yet adequately addressed how exactly current discrimination has affected the way in which Paganism is practiced and functions in a society of diverse religions, they merely prove that this discrimination and community exist, while currently expanding on other focuses of analysis such as conversion and family values, how to study the topic, and the effects of the internet. My study addresses this topic in a way that has not yet been approached. Building off of the foundation these scholars have laid before me, this research goes beyond description to uncover the hidden inner workings of systems of discrimination and misinformation. As I have stated previously, a cycle of secrecy and misunderstanding firmly links non-Pagans and Pagans within the cultural community of Pittsburgh and on a larger scale as well. In analyzing the words and actions of both parts of the community, I am able to better understand the origins of discrimination and ways in which the cycle may be addressed to foster a greater sense of religious tolerance within the community at large.

### **3.0 CHAPTER THREE**

#### **3.1 DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE: THE NON-PAGAN VIEW**

##### **3.1.1 Conceptualizing the Unfamiliar**

During the time that I have spent studying this topic and the people involved in it, I have interviewed people across varying age ranges and socioeconomic backgrounds. My diverse pool of informants includes members of the non-Pagan community as old as 67 and as young as 18, with 23 other informants evenly dispersed between those ages. Their occupations vary, but due to residing in a heavily university-oriented area, there is some stratification towards careers in academic fields or students. My informants' occupations range from an Emeritus Professor, an Administrative Director, a newly hired member of the health profession, and a first year college student. Of the 25 informants, 21 identified with an abrahamic religion—the other 4 identifying as agnostic or atheist. All of my informants have High School diplomas, and 19 have, or are working towards some level of higher education such as an associates degree, a technical certificate, or a doctorate. While the diversity of my informants is clear, what is intriguing is that despite their different backgrounds, experiences, and religions, a common non-Pagan narrative appears to exist regarding their understanding of Paganism. Regardless of the fact that only one person who did not identify with the Pagan community had ever actually met a Pagan, each informant had a clear idea of what they thought witchcraft would be. These ideas have similar origins, most notably from religious and popular culture sources. In lieu of any

easily accessed, accurate information, the polarized, fantastical images found in the media and in religious depictions color the opinions of non-Pagans in a highly detrimental way.

Keeping in mind any possible inaccuracies based on the influence of the interview process which will be addressed below, it remains clear that there are three main touchstones on which the informants base their ideas of and subsequent reaction to Paganism: references found in popular culture, religious doctrine, and their ideas of normativity. In the absence of any real familiarity with the religion, the informants look back to points in their experience where they have come across something related to the words being used (like “witch” or “witchcraft”) and draw upon these to supplement their understanding of the unfamiliar. From images they’ve seen in movies, things they’ve been told in religious settings, or simply recognizing something as lying outside their idea of “normal,” they form inferences about what the religion of Paganism is, what a real witch might be, and discern whether or not it is something that should be taken seriously. As these patchwork opinions result from a gap in knowledge, the true root of discrimination in the case of Paganism is almost undoubtedly ignorance. Because there is a lack of visible and accurate information regarding the religion and how it is practiced, people outside of the community simply don’t have an outlet to replace the false images presented to them in the sources mentioned above. However, before delving too deeply into this analysis it is important to address what seems to be lost in translation.

### **3.1.2 Translating Fictional Imagery into Reality**

What is striking, when speaking to the non-Pagan subjects, is that they seem to be talking about almost a completely separate topic all together. When a non-Pagan hears the word *witch*, the majority do not think of religion in any way, shape, or form. To them, religion is placed firmly in churches and in the hands of well established and advertised belief systems—all things that the Pagan religion does not include. When asked what they thought a witch might be, 23 out of 25 informants referenced popular images fabricated solely for television and entertainment that had no bearing on the Pagan religion at all. It is in attempting to translate their knowledge of the word “witch” to real life that the potential for discrimination exists.

The way a Pagan talks about witchcraft or witches, has little similarity to the ways in which a non-Pagan explains the same topic. It is specifically within the words *witch* and *witchcraft* and their charged history that there seems to be a disconnect between reality and perception. One Pagan, a 48-year-old who has been practicing for 20 years would explain her worship or “witchcraft” as “focusing all their energy on achieving a goal and asking the Goddess and elements for the strength to do so,” much like praying, echoing the sentiments of the majority of other Pagans with whom I spoke (P 201). Simultaneously, almost all non-Pagans referenced some sort of “black magic,” which barely even exists in the Pagan world, and many non-Pagans use words like “manipulation,” “other worldly powers,” “potions, spells and magic,” and even “demon stuff” (NP 113) (NP 115) (NP 114) (NP 101). Such language demonstrates the strongly polarized feelings and ideas surrounding the word “witchcraft” which thus becomes equated with Paganism by association. This idea of black magic and devil worship has no real bearing within Pagan ideology, and implies a large gap between reality and misinformation. One informant, John,



a 28-year-old employee at a local restaurant who identifies as Catholic, explained this sentiment clearly:

When I hear the word 'witchcraft,' I almost immediately get this fear in my stomach. I think of people raising the dead, putting curses on people, that kind of stuff. Using things like toads and rats to make green potions in a big cauldron and also stuff I've seen on T.V. I associate it with evil (NP 125).

Another informant, Rick, a recent graduate of college and newly hired healthcare worker defensively echoed this sentiment of evil: "I mean, historically it's always been portrayed as evil. So, it's not like it's wrong to see it that way because that's how it's always been portrayed" (NP 123). Rick exemplifies the common justification of mass discrimination by rooting his opinions in the opinion of the majority. Although Paganism itself is not a religion based on evil, the fact that others before him have thought this way (an extremely powerful social force) allows him justification for his unfounded opinion. The ideal of conformity that exists within Rick's statement sheds light on why showing negative portrayals of witchcraft in the media might serve to reify discriminatory opinions.

Juxtaposing these definitions and key words, a Pagan offers an entirely different set of descriptions such as "connection," "focus," and "energy work" (P 212) (P 213). One Pagan references a popular occult author Dion Fortune to better explain to me the way she conceptualizes witchcraft:

I take a highly psychological and spiritual view of witchcraft, best summed up by Dion Fortune's definition of magic as 'the art of causing changes in consciousness in accordance with the will.'<sup>10</sup> Philosophically, for me, this does not necessarily mean that magic is all in your head, although I do believe that certain quirks of human psychology contribute to 'magical thinking.' Instead, I believe that changes in consciousness facilitate a magical mindset, providing the awareness, openness, sensitivity, focus, and receptivity necessary to experience magic, if it is to happen (P 227).

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<sup>10</sup> This quote is originally attributed to Aleister Crowley, and has been adapted many times by various Pagan authors.

This explanation is miles away from the opinions and conceptions of the non-Pagans above. Because words like witch and witchcraft have such an inaccurate and negative meaning for members outside of the religion, this breeds ideas that have almost nothing to do with the real religion and which seem to be the source of the nature of the prejudice at stake. What further complicates this idea is the fact that Pagans consciously choose to reclaim words such as *witch* and *witchcraft* and the word *Pagan* itself is thought to be a reclaimed derogatory term. Thus, the modern Pagan community consciously chooses to grapple with these preconceived images and ideas.

### **3.1.3 “Witchcraft? Like Cauldrons and Flying Broomsticks and Pointy Hats and Stuff?”**

Throughout the majority of interviews, reference to popular culture is often brought up without prompting, as is already evident from the quotes above. When asked the sources for their ideas of Paganism and witchcraft, 18 out of 25 cited a combination of film, books, T.V., or simply “the media.” A portion of these informants even cite particular works from which their ideas stem, such as the popular T.V. show *Supernatural*, the classic film *The Wizard of Oz*, or the popular book series *Harry Potter*. All three have been explicitly referenced by many of my informants and all feature varying degrees of interpretation of the idea of witchcraft.

These works of popular culture are alike in that each one includes a strong connection between witches and dark magic. Sarah, a 20-year-old student at a local university who identifies as loosely Christian explained witchcraft’s presence in the popular television series *Supernatural* when asked what she thought the practice of

witchcraft might be, making the link between fiction and her real ideas of Paganism apparent:

I'd probably guess that witchcraft is a negative thing. In the show *Supernatural*, witches are tied heavily to being evil, and even though there are witches on the show who are less evil than others, they are only less evil because they don't practice the rituals.

*So in the show, good rituals don't exist?*

Yeah. The only way a good witch can be good is if they don't practice rituals. The spell books, incantations, and all of that are all just used for negative things like necromancy. So I guess the root of witchcraft is evil. There's always a sort of spookiness around those scenes (NP 101).

For Sarah, the most memorable and important image of witchcraft that she has experienced is that which portrays the practice of witchcraft as inherently evil. As Sarah immediately brought this up when asked about her real-life opinions about the topic, the connection between fiction and reality for her seems to be blurred. When asked what she thought a real-life witch might be like, Sarah responded "Wait... do they actually exist?" (NP 101). Because the words *witch* and *witchcraft* have never been anything other than objects of fiction to her, understanding their place in reality is difficult. This difficulty stems directly from the lack of a source of viable information on the religion itself.

In the *Wizard of Oz*, there is again the idea of the "bad witch," this time portrayed to an even more ridiculous extent complete with flying monkeys. *Harry Potter* is a more intriguingly neutral portrayal of witchcraft, however the fantasticality of the story falls far from reality. What is interesting, however, is that these three examples that were cited include positive portrayals of witchcraft, but for the most part the images that stick in the viewers' memories are the negative ones. For example, Jacob, a professor at a local university, echoed this sentiment directly when asked if the *Wizard of Oz* includes a benevolent witch as well: "yes, but does anyone remember that one?" (NP 117). Rick, the recent graduate mentioned previously, also mentioned the problem of memorability in

terms of the negative stereotypes. When asked about the positive portrayal of a witch in the *Wizard of Oz*, he stated that

Galinda isn't the image that sticks with you at all. Looking back in my memory to the movie, I can hardly remember what she even looked like whereas I could draw you a picture of the bad one pretty accurately, facial features and all. Galinda didn't do anything exciting in the movie, but the Wicked Witch had all the intense moments (NP 123).

It seems that the reason these negative portrayals become so popular is because that is what is exciting and/or disturbing and fearful. The reality of Paganism and its practices may not quite live up to these fantastical images of witchcraft and thus is nearly never shown in the media—especially not for a show whose goal is to be exciting, eye-catching, and mysterious like the *Wizard of Oz* or *Supernatural*. What makes a successful movie, television show, or book is including things that engage the audience's attention. Judging by multiple informants' reactions to Galinda the Good Witch in the *Wizard of Oz* as opposed to the Wicked Witch of the West, benevolent magic doesn't provide the potential for creating moments that excite the audience as easily as dark magic does.

Beyond simply portraying witchcraft as negative, the majority of these works of popular culture that include witchcraft are also marketed to either children or young adults. Films such as *Hocus Pocus*, which was mentioned by 5 informants between the ages of 19 and 25-years-old, was produced by Walt Disney Pictures and was originally seen by the majority of those who mentioned it on the popular children's television channel, The Disney Channel (NP 102) (NP 103) (NP 115) (NP 118) (NP 121). *Hocus Pocus*, as I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 4, includes the popular trope of children being stolen by witches which is most notably included in the fairy tales *Rapunzel* and *Hansel and Gretel*. It is no surprise that the people who grew up watching these kinds of films and television shows now describe witchcraft using words like "devil's practice," or describing it as

“naughty” (NP 112) (NP 107). These common witch-tropes that are found in popular media like the film *Hocus Pocus* and the *Wizard of Oz* seem to be, for the most part, most commonly recycled ideas from children’s fairytales. Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, are all house-hold stories told to children over and over again, are made and re-made into full-length films and story books, and all include witchcraft and magic as a central theme—whether it’s the wicked old witch, or the fairy godmother. It is from these stories that the popular description of the hideous old woman, as well as the idea of the beautiful, “bewitching” version is brought into the minds of children very early on. Images from these stories show the type of fantasies that existed surrounding various aspects of “witches,” whether it be the terrifying old woman who wanted to cook and eat children from Hansel and Gretel or the stunning and evil woman who would perform any magic she could to maintain her youth and beauty from Snow White. With the indoctrination of such ideas early on in childhood, it is no surprise that the majority of non-Pagans would describe witches the way that they have: “Creepy old woman,” “spooky, evil,” “naughty, in a whimsical way,” all resonate with the imagery of these fairytale villains and with almost every depiction in popular culture today (NP 101) (NP 104). This imagery has been repeated and replicated throughout the course of our modern history, ingraining itself into the minds of the majority of American culture. There are only a few movies that Pagans are willing to cite as more accurate portrayals of their religion, with the film *Practical Magic* being among them. With just a few films among a sea of thousands of inaccurate portrayals, it is no surprise that the majority of non-Pagans have minimal understanding of the religion, and often ascribe aspects they see in popular cultures portrayal of witches and witchcraft to the real religion itself. Thus, a pattern of association occurs that is clear in every informant. *Witch*, first and foremost, regardless of

the level of their familiarity with the religion, calls to their minds the image that has been fixed into their psyche through popular culture's repetition.

While the imagery found in the media clearly promotes misinformation and sensationalization, Carol Barner-Barry disagrees with the polarity of my statement. In fact, Barner-Barry cites this sort of media presence and the Harry Potter series itself as part of the reason why it is easier to be a Pagan today than it once was. The "formidable" media presence, "[has] increased the number of people who are curious and open to more accurate information about Pagans, particularly about Witches and Wiccans" (Barner-Barry 4). While in some respects this is indeed possible, I have found that without any actual visibly accessible source of information, this "curiosity" does little to advance the status of Paganism within the social world today as Barner-Barry suggests. Although every non-Pagan informant displayed this curiosity by asking follow-up questions after the interview had ended, none of them mentioned being drawn to know more about Paganism based on what they saw on television. In short, this curiosity does not necessarily lead to action. As I have explained previously, the presence of such images contributes to the level of discrimination that occurs for Pagans, particularly in attributing these negative values to the Pagan identity in reality. As the aforementioned statement made by Rick attempting to justify the negative portrayal of Paganism exemplifies, the presence of such strong negative images attributed to witches reinforces these opinions in real life. Thus I would argue that the media presence does far more harm than good.

#### **3.1.4 "I'm Pretty Sure It's Devil Worship."**

Alongside popular culture, many informants, like the one quoted above, relate Paganism to the antithesis of Christianity (NP 103). Many directly cite their own religious backgrounds as origins for their ideas of Paganism, stating that they've "touched on it during bible school," or "read about it in the bible" (NP 108) (NP 124). As 21 out of 25 informants identified as followers of Abrahamic religions such as Judaism and various sects of Christianity, many connect ideas of witchcraft with "worshipping evil," and attempt to explain the idea within their own religious terms such as it may relate to the Devil, which (as most pagans will be eager to tell you) does not even exist as a relevant topic in the Pagan religion. A Pagan informant who was previously a Christian minister explained this connection through her experience training to become a minister:

We were taught in ministerial school about things like child sacrifice that the Israelites fought back in the day, and warned against the demonic acts of witchcraft, channeling, working with the dead and all that, but none of it was ever spoken about in detail. Even things like meditation and yoga were considered demonic (P 216).

This, perhaps, again stems from the history of the word "witchcraft," which was originally used to refer to members of society who went against the church of the time, or those who went against majoritarian society. Additionally, as I have stated previously, the origin of the word *Pagan* is directly related to Christianity, as it was meant as an insult for someone who was slow to accept the new religion and its ways of life.

In *Contemporary Paganism: Minority Religion in Majoritarian Society*, Carol Barner-Barry cites the proselytizing aspect of Christianity as a source of hegemony and conflict with Paganism. As Christians spend a sizable amount of time and money attempting to win over those who do not share their religious beliefs, it seems obvious that anyone who does not follow the religion is a target in many ways. As most Abrahamic religions hold the firm belief that their religion is the "One True Religion," it is natural then that anyone who

believes anything else is thought to be either an innocent, uninformed person waiting for someone to show them “the light,” or someone who is directly against that for which they stand. What Barner-Barry terms the “Christian proselytizing imperative,” comes from a source of genuine concern that can quickly turn to anger when this “gift that is being offered,” is refused. The people who refused the “gift” of Christianity were the first people to be named *Pagans*. And even today, for moderate and liberal Christians alike, the word *Pagan* “carries vaguely negative overtones” (Barner-Barry 58). She also discusses the difference between *witch* and *Pagan*, but does not quite reach a proper explanation of why Christians react more negatively to the term *witch* than they do *Pagan*, except for the bible verse “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exod. 22:18). I argue that this difference is thanks to the constant verification found within popular culture that the word *witch* is negative, and a much smaller presence of any verification for the word *Pagan*. For instance, Cathy, a 49-year-old administrative director stated that while “the word *witch* conjures up a clear image in my head and I feel like I know what it means, the word *Pagan* is a lot less familiar to me and doesn’t come with a concrete image or idea of what exactly it is” (NP 113). The image of which she speaks is the image found in the media, and thus causes her to feel more strongly about one word over the other.

The formidable link to Satanism that is displayed in the media and through religious outlets can be strongly felt in the responses of my non-Pagan informants with their references to “devil worship,” “black magic,” and “devil’s practice” (NP 103) (NP 110) (NP 112). This connection is further discussed in Barner-Barry’s work, as well as several other articles. She discusses the “stunning... power of words” in that “If you are a pagan/witch, you, therefore, must worship Satan, kill babies, hold Black Masses, use spells to harm Christians, and so on” (Barner-Barry 60). Because of the association that many Christians



see between “witch” and “devil worshiper,” and thus violence and evil, in their eyes he or she is therefore required to be such. This connection has been the source of much persecution throughout history, as well as the source of much of the discrimination that my Pagan informants have experienced. Judy, a member of the Pagan community in Pittsburgh, astutely explains the irony that comes with these accusations of violence, devil worship, and evil: “Magic, Paganism, traditional pre-Christian beliefs of Europe and the world are *not* evil, are *not* of the devil, we *do not* hurt people. However, the Christian or Abrahamic reaction to witchcraft and Paganism is extremely violent and well documented” (P 211). While this argument does not mean that there is no such thing as Satanism, the point has been made time and time again by Pagans across the U.S. that Satan is a Judeo-Christian construct that has no bearing on Paganism whatsoever. The article “Satanism and Witchcraft,” by James T. Richardson in “New Religious Movements and Religious Liberty in America,” also discusses the mass confusion surrounding the topic. Richardson cites the historically strong link between the two words, *Witchcraft* and *Satanism*, stating:

this claim [of a connection between witchcraft and Satanism] is made and has been made for centuries, first as a part of the conflict between early Christianity and Paganism, a conflict eventually won by Christianity. Later in the history of the West, claims linking Satan and allegations of witchcraft were made, to devastating effect (Davis and Hankins 79).

The authority with which Christianity wields terms like witchcraft and devil-worship has had a detrimental effect for Pagans, specifically within the Judeo-Christian-centric society of contemporary America. These ties are seen not only within contemporary responses to the ideas of witchcraft, but also historically through the actions of persecution and hysteria across time.

It is in this way that these non-Pagan informants are not intentionally malicious in associating the two ideas, however the lack of modern knowledge of the religious

movement is problematic. This is widely due to the cycle of misunderstanding that is cemented in place by the defensive strategies employed by Pagans who shield themselves from public recognition. There persists a lack of accurate information readily available and visible to the community outside of Pagans which in turn causes a reinforcement of these negative ideas.

### **3.1.5 “They’re Just a Bunch of Weirdos.”**

It is important, while discussing this topic, to remember that ignorance does not necessarily mean bad intentions. Although many of these informants willingly admit ignorance about the topic and seem to be humoring me by even attempting to form some sort of opinion about it, this does not mean that each one actively and consciously discriminates against Pagans. I would argue, though, that although one may not actively discriminate against a group, subconscious discrimination is still possible and is visible in their answers. Even the act of labeling the group as “weird” and “crazy,” could be considered covert discrimination. One of the most widely seen reactions to Paganism in public is to treat them as spectacles of idiosyncrasy. Because the religion is not a part of mainstream culture, the thought thus follows that the members of this religion must also reside outside of mainstream culture. One Pagan explained that she once heard the religion explained as “mentally ill people dressing up funny in parks” (P 210). This opinion was paralleled by a non-Pagan’s experience stumbling upon a Pagan ritual whilst on a bike ride with his wife in the English countryside:

My wife and I were taking a vacation in England and were staying in Oxford when we decided to take a bike ride through the countryside. As we were riding along we ended up near one of those mini stonehenge type structures and saw that there was

some kind of ritual going on. We knew it was a ritual because they were all standing in somewhat of a circle, and there was a guy dressed in white that seemed to be leading everything. But other than that it didn't seem very organized. We stayed for awhile by the road and watched the ceremony, but it wasn't that impressive. There wasn't really much organization going on, and no one seemed to really know what they were doing. One of them looked kind of drunk, and it didn't look that impassioned to me like I would have thought a Pagan ritual would be. Mostly it just looked like a very odd group of people (NP 118).

When asked how or why these people would be considered weird he explained that "it's just the way they were dressed, the way they conducted themselves. They all looked pretty... well... weird. You could tell they were the people on the outskirts of society" (NP 118). You even hear similar sentiments from Pagans themselves, surprisingly enough: "the people who will claim that they are discriminated against are not really discriminated against because they're Pagans, per se, but they're just weird people. This religion attracts the 'weirdies,' sometimes" (P 210). This seems to almost be a justification of discrimination in some ways. It is as if being weird or non-normative is an acceptable reason to be thought of in a negative way. The justification has been inculcated into some of the Pagans' thoughts and ideas of why the group may be discriminated against as almost a way of saying "it's not the religion that's weird, or negative, it's the people who sometimes try to practice it that give us a bad name." Just as with any religion, there are varying degrees of commitment and devotion. While some are leaders within the Pagan community and take their religion and its image with the utmost seriousness, there are also people who show up to an open ritual or two because they are drawn in by the negative activities they see portrayed on television.

In making the religion into a spectacle of idiosyncrasy, the members outside of the Pagan community minimize the importance and power that the Pagan religion may have. It takes away any viability of their beliefs and practices by insinuating that they are mentally

ill, or doing it for attention. This makes a non-Pagan more comfortable with the idea that real Pagans even exist outside of fiction. Instead of some scary, powerful group of witches chanting around a huge fire in the middle of the night, they perhaps imagine misfit adults, awkwardly going about an unorganized ceremony. It is easy to see, then, how much of a comfort that may be to an outsider. For people outside of the community, ridiculing the community is a lot more comfortable than being afraid. Thus, just as Pagans themselves ridicule the ignorance of non-Pagans as a way to defend themselves against emotional harm, non-Pagans ridicule members of the religion as a way to defend themselves against fear.

### **3.2 MASKING DISCRIMINATION**

Throughout my work within Pittsburgh, it has become increasingly obvious that the act of ethnographic interviewing presents both ethnographer and the informant with a complex system of previous assumptions, protocols, and relationships. When someone takes on the role of someone who is being interviewed, there are certain expectations and assumptions that come with this brief social identity. These assumptions include, among many: that they have valuable information that the interviewer is interested in, that they are going to be honest, and that they will be in a somewhat professional setting. Even when these interviews are done in living rooms or coffee shops, the act of interviewing and being interviewed is lifted from casual conversation. It has become apparent within my research that the act of interviewing, and an inability to fulfill the roles included, causes anxiety and discomfort for each party and thus facilitates a need for what many ethnographers have understood as deceitful avoidances

### 3.2.1 Performances and How to Spot Them

With its roles, objectives, and protocol, the act of interviewing could be explained as an act of performance. If a performance is defined as “an activity that a person or group does to entertain an audience,” the activity of being interviewed can certainly fit into these confines. While “entertain” may be a loose fit in this situation, the roles of the speech act are much the same: there is a “performer” who is the conveyor of information to the “audience” who are the receivers. This information conveyed to the audience is for the audience’s pleasure and the audience typically decides if the performance is successful. This is particularly important in terms of my research because of the topic which we are discussing. Discrimination is not a desirable action, and part of having a successful performance is portraying himself or herself in a positive and desirable way. This is called the social desirability bias, which will be discussed in further detail later.

Bauman, in his work *Disclaimers of Performance*, uses this comparison in order to understand more fully the ways folk narratives are conveyed during interviews. Within the first few paragraphs, Bauman introduces his definition of performance which I will refer to throughout the remainder of this section. “In order to understand the dynamics of performance in all its complexity,” Bauman claims, “we must extend our investigations to performances that are hedged, ambiguous, negotiating, shifting, or partial—instances where speakers may not wish to take full responsibility to their audience for a display of communicative competence” (Bauman 183). Bauman spends the rest of his work explaining what exactly he believes there is to be gained from extending our analysis to these ambiguous examples of performance, in which he explains that it is within these

instances that one may begin to understand the true metalinguistic and metacommunicative aspects of interviewing and how these can be used to better understand the subject that is being researched. These metacommunicative aspects are relevant to my research as well, which will be discussed in further detail below.

Bauman bases his analysis on the example of Mr. Bush, an elderly man from the La Have islands, from which the tradition of telling “yarns” originates. A “yarn” is an orally performed narrative whose effectiveness is valued for its basis in true events, much like the opinions and experiences my informants are asked to convey. Narrators of “yarns” use things such as personal experience and eyewitness accounts to create an air of credibility surrounding these stories which at times include instances of magic or the supernatural. During Mr. Bush’s interviews, he was asked to relate various stories that have been told over the centuries as “yarns.” During his retellings, Mr. Bush runs into several metanarrative complications that affect his stories which include the inability to “sustain the narrative line and the flow of narration,” and his lack of “knowledge concerning the outcome” of the story which he was relating to Bauman. These instances can also be seen among my informants and their lack of knowledge on the topic of Paganism. These hiccups in narrational flow are marked by Mr. Bush’s deviation from his marked story line. In the first hiccup, Mr. Bush acknowledges mid-sentence that he is “worked up,” and nervous, and has to take an eleven second break. Mr. Bush then continues to relate a piece of back information about the situation he was describing that he realized Bauman would not be familiar with. “The problem, apparently, lay in constructing an adequate narration for [Bauman], the outsider” (Bauman 189).

The next instance of metanarrational speech is one that rests even more closely to my own work. When Mr. Bush comes to the end of the story, he realizes he doesn’t actually

know how it ends. In anxiety about his performance, Mr. Bush “fulfills the need he feels for more detail by speculating.” In both cases, the reader can see that these “disclaimers of performance,” excuse him from “full competence and thus full responsibility in recounting the tale” (Bauman 191). What is perhaps most interesting about Bauman’s work, however, is not that he acknowledges that these disclaimers of performance exist, but rather that he cites the source of this discord as an “emergent product of [his] casting [Mr. Bush] in the role of oral narrative performer, and [Mr. Bush’s] own ambivalence about assuming that responsibility” (Bauman 191). Within my own research it can be seen simply in the words many of the interviewees use to code their responses, such as the modifying and equivocating terms, “I’m pretty sure,” “I think,” “Probably,” “Personally,” and “I guess” (NP 101) (NP 104) (NP 115) (NP 106) (NP 108). Others, like Sam, a student at a local university, who claim to understand some semblance of seriousness surrounding the religion while not fully grasping the basis of what it is as we can see from his statements such as “Paganism is a faith that believes that you can communicate with spirits after physical death I’m pretty sure,” are a bit more honest when asked questions about how they would picture a typical witch: “the term [...] definitely conjures up images of cartoons for me. Not one specific one but just the image of the pointy hat and the black dress and all of that, ya’ know?” (NP 111). Within his response we see a lack of modifying terms and negation, in a way that creates a sense of a lack of deceit. In this way, the act of interviewing itself, and a disagreement about the roles each will play, made these interactions somewhat unsuccessful. I cast my informants in the role of primary informer, whether or not they feel that they possess enough knowledge to be up to the task.

However, many other scholars in the field of Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, and Anthropology, address the situation differently. For instance, Katherine Ewing, a Cultural

Anthropologist and Religious Studies scholar claims that only “identifying underlying patterns, semantic connections, and regularities that play a significant role in the negotiation of meaning... ignores key aspects of the interactive process,” (Ewing 90). Ewing argues for a more personal analysis of these instances of discordance within speech acts, claiming that the main focal point around which any act is performed is to create, sustain, or disrupt relationships. When something like an interview is performed, the metalanguage of what is being said revolves around the relationship between the speaker and hearer.

Ewing argues for a more psychoanalytic approach, in which even the thoughts and feelings of the interviewer are taken into account. This, I believe, is a more advantageous approach for the type of research which I conduct. Regardless of the level of familiarity with the topic or situation, Ewing claims that there is a level of contextualization and an understanding of metacommunication that is intuitive. This “metacommunication” or communication *about* communication, works to manage the roles, expectations, and feelings of both parties during an interview. For example, when Bauman’s Mr. Bush claims that he can’t remember the ending of his story but goes on to speculate, Mr. Bush is performing an instance of metacommunication in order to manage the expectations he feels Bauman has. Contextualization, which is the understanding of subtexts and background information involved with either party or the situation at hand, further works to alter the landscape of the performance of interviews. Mr. Bush understood that Bauman was a Folklorist and that Bauman’s goal was to understand these stories and the ways that they were told. While this is not overtly said, this is a contextualization of his interviewer that affects the way he acts within the situation (Bauman 187).

These instances of contextualization and metacommunication, however, can fog the lens of the true thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the interviewer. To Ewing,



“interaction is always a process of negotiation, [therefore] data gathering involves managing mistrust, disinformation, blind spots, [and] politics” (Ewing 90). While anthropologists today, according to Ewing, certainly recognize this and understand knowledge to be “constructed and positional,” she claims, as Antonius Robben does, that anthropologists simply don’t have a theory of concealment. This theory of concealment, if it existed, would “transform these obstructions into a deeper cultural insight” (Ewing 91) (Robben 74). While I do not purport to construct a general theory of concealment, throughout this analysis I form a better understanding of the ways in which this concealment has functioned within my own research.

While Bauman primarily associates this form of analysis with the performance of Folklore, I would argue that this approach can be extremely useful in regards to the analysis of interview work, specifically in the role of the hearer and socially constructed reality. This idea is also a salient one in terms of whether or not these avoidances can be accurately termed deceitful. While there are varying definitions, Steven Nachman, in his article “Lies My Informants Have Told Me,” describes a lie as a “false statement or action,” and anything that is “meant to give a false impression” (Nachman 536). Under these outlines, these defensive tendencies of informants to speculate, avoid, and embellish would certainly qualify as lies, however I am still left feeling that the term doesn’t fit. Perhaps this is because of the colloquial understanding that most lies are told with the intent to tell such a lie, whereas the speech acts involved in interviews such as disclaimers of performance are not intended to deceive the listener but rather are in an attempt to be more accurate. For instance, James, the local university professor mentioned above claimed early on in the interview that he had no real knowledge of the religion, and yet in actuality was much more informed than any other informant I came across (NP 118). This, does not mean that he

consciously lied to me in order to perform a deceitful action. It is highly plausible that James did not feel that the information he *did* possess was enough to constitute “real knowledge,” or that he simply was unsure of how accurate what he had experienced before was. Clearly then, the term lie seems like too negative a term for what is really going on behind the surface.

Miall, Pawluch, and Shaffir outline a helpful set of criteria in their work *Doing Ethnography: Studying Everyday Life* in which an interviewer may be able to know when a face-saving deception act is occurring. This resonates again with Bauman’s aforementioned work in the La Have islands. “Accounts,” the section details, “are likely to be deceptive when... the speaker demonstrates a lack of conviction about his or her own assertions by using a variety of techniques” (Miall, et al. 81). The techniques, which can be seen in my own research which I will outline, include “modifying or equivocating terms, denial or negations, abjuration, weakened assertions, and stalling.” For example, a modifying or equivocating term would be something along the lines of, “I guess,” “I think,” “I’m not sure, but...” “Apparently,” and “Maybe.” The use of these terms allow the speaker to “evade the risk” of commitment. Denial and negation are also seen in the “defensive mechanism that disavows or denies thoughts, feelings, wishes, or needs that cause anxiety” (Miall, et al. 82).

### **3.2.2 My Own “Liars”**

Examples of these methods within my research on Paganism are seen regardless of informants’ knowledge of the subject, age, gender, or socioeconomic background. Despite the fact that only one of my non-Pagan informants had been acquainted with a practicing Pagan, each informant conveyed to me a clear idea of what they thought witchcraft would

be. While they used the techniques outlined by Miall, Pawluch, and Shaffir to avoid responsibility and discomfort, it is important to acknowledge the shortcomings of this kind of interview, which deals with a sensitive topic. Religion is perhaps one of the few things in this world that a person is allowed to believe without having to provide a logical basis for that belief. Belief of this kind lies outside of explanation, and the people who hold such beliefs typically do not feel obligated to explain the exact reasons of why they do.

Furthermore, Religion is typically connected to highly personal experiences, and is widely understood as a personal choice by most religions. At the same time, religion is the basis for quite a few popularly discriminatory views (like homophobia), and these feelings can be extremely personal and difficult for them to explain. It would be naïve of me—like Bleek explained—to assume that I can meet with a person I have never met before and expect them to be completely open and forthright about a sensitive topic like discrimination for both non-Pagans and Pagans alike.

Transparency of the ethnographer is essential surrounding the topic of deceitful informants, as they are “themselves liars when they do not tell the whole truth about the way in which they collected the lies from their informants” (Bleek). It may very well be that the ways in which I questioned my informants was the very thing that caused them to fabricate their responses. As I typically used phrasing like “how would you understand...” and “if you were to picture...” this left room for interpretation about the level to which they were expected to tell the truth and the level to which fabrication was acceptable.

Regardless, the informants made the choice to disclaim their performances regularly as a way to lessen their responsibility, which is not related to these question prompts.

Inaccuracy of reporting is a common problem dealt with in many research projects that deal with sensitive topics such as religion and personal opinions as can be seen from my

work above. Regardless of whether or not I am researching the topic of religion scientifically, it remains a typically unscientific, personal, and emotional experience for many that may be difficult to relate in this setting.

However, despite these set backs, one of the biggest inferences I have been able to make through the inspection of my research is the affect of social desirability bias on my informants. Social desirability is basically understood as the tendency of interviewees to report inaccurately on sensitive subjects in order to portray themselves in a more positive light (Fisher 303). This is a concise and clear explanation of the face work that is involved in disclaimers of performance and how it functions within a larger context. Specifically relating to my research, Social desirability bias affects my informants because being discriminatory in today's society is generally looked down upon. As I am clearly conducting research on the discrimination against Pagans, it seems that the subjects may have a tendency to underplay their feelings about the subject (denial), or form ideas where none truly existed previously (fabrication) just as Mr. Bush fabricated the ending of his story for Bauman (Bauman 189). In an effort to lessen any anxiety about providing valuable information to me, as the interviewer, it is quite possible that these subjects may be fabricating opinions and embellishing on attitudes that previously were not as strong or concretely felt. For example, although one non-Pagan claims that she has never heard of Paganism before this interview, she still attempts to articulate her opinions on the religion, by saying things such as "magic is definitely related to devil worship and stuff. I wouldn't relate it to anything good really, but I don't believe in it so it's hard to say," and "when I think of a witch I picture a creepy old lady with a long nose, warts, maybe green skin. She'd have a pointy hat and ride a broom stick, and she'd be ugly, for sure" (NP 102). It is not clear from where this particular person gets her opinions, or how they are fabricated, but it

is interesting that although she claims to know little to nothing about the subject, she still related rather strong and detrimental opinions, such as those related in to devil worship.

This, however, could work the other way around. Perhaps it is not that she knows nothing about the subject and holds no opinions surrounding the topic, but rather that she uses the disclaimer of knowing little about the subject as a defense mechanism for any questions that are asked in the future that may stump her. Instead of inaccurately reporting opinions, it is possible that the interviewee inaccurately reports the extent to which they are familiar with the subject as a disclaimer of performance. As I mentioned above, James used a similar tactic. When originally introduced to the topic that we would be discussing, he claimed that he “didn’t know too much about it at all” but as the conversation progressed it turned out that he was actually well versed in the Pagan holidays, knew generally what they did, knew the exact date of a few of them such as Ostara and the summer solstice, and had even met a Pagan in his personal life (NP 118). The defense mechanism utilized has been outlined by the scholars mentioned previously, and is employed in order to lessen the responsibility that the informant has within this performance and to lessen the informant’s responsibility to perform his or her role.

The fact that they feel the need to lie at all may provide valuable insights into how they conceptualize the topic and how they understand their relationship to me, the interviewer. Whereas a close friend might be able to say to me in conversation “I really have no idea what that is,” during an interview this kind of response would most likely be seen as their inability to fulfill the role as information-giver. In order to keep their ego, confidence, and sense of self intact, these instances of self-editing, modification, equivocation, and denial are necessary. As they cannot rely on me, as the interviewer seeking information, to assist in the maintenance of their “face,” a greater amount of

pressure is felt to decrease the possibility of embarrassment. It is in these ways that I have formed an understanding of the interview as an act of performance, as well as the disclaimers of performance involved within the act. Blending Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics, and Anthropology is extremely intellectually rewarding, and further work could be done, if I were qualified, through psychoanalysis of my informants surrounding their anxieties of role fulfillment, inadequacy, and discrimination.

This approach can be also applied to my research conducted with members of the Pagan community. Their responses, which will be discussed in the following chapter, mimic this sense of desire to fulfill a performance and reactions to social pressures. While instead of needing to present a version of themselves that is socially desirable in that they do not discriminate, Pagans are affected in that they may feel a need to seem like a viable source of information and a respected informant by providing me with relevant, powerful experiences and opinions. However, before delving too deeply, I must first discuss *what* exactly it is that these Pagans are saying and how their responses fit into a larger picture.

## 4.0 CHAPTER FOUR

### 4.1 UNCOVERING THE CYCLE OF DISCRIMINATION

Over the course of this project, at coffee shops, esoteric stores, Pagan Pride Festival, public parks, rituals, and painting classes, I have been able to interact with and better understand an impressively wide array of Pagans and the intricacies of their experiences. My informants have ranged in age, socioeconomic statuses, and beliefs, from the 20-year-old student who practices eclectic Paganism, to the 59-year-old nurse and local storeowner who practices Faery Wicca. This diversity is one of the community's proudest features, as I have mentioned previously, and it is where they locate one of the community's greatest strengths: adaptability and openness. For many of my informants, the discrimination they described to me was not something that could be reported to the police, or taken up with a human resources representative, but rather smaller, more ordinary occurrences that made their lives more difficult or unsatisfying. Because of these instances, or hearing of such instances from their peers, my informants tailored their behavior to avoid such occurrences and thus seemingly make their lives easier. They modify their behavior in work environments, with their family, and on the Internet in order to avoid being bothered by the inconvenience of religious discrimination. The discrimination many of them feel is not something to be actively addressed but rather to be dealt with quietly.

Through my conversations with members of the community, it has become clear that just as there are multiple fuels for discrimination, there are also multiple ways in which these Pagans respond to and experience these attitudes. This contributes to the cycle of mutual reinforcement for this kind of destructive relationship of secrecy and ignorance

between Pagans and non-Pagans. Pagans perform various preemptive strategies as a buffer from experiencing outward, violent, and disruptive discrimination. These strategies include secret keeping, downplay of emotional responses to events, and compartmentalization. Each of these strategies typically work in tandem with one another, and are visible in nearly all of my informants. One informant, a 40-year-old business owner, described the tension that comes with being a member of a minority culture which leads to secret keeping. “Although the people who I *have* told have been very supportive, I still live my life at the cost of a certain paranoia. No one at my old job knew what I got up to during full moons, even when they engaged me in religious conversations. I was a public agnostic and a private pagan. My family also remains ignorant for harmony’s sake” (P 227). Many other informants continue the insular secrecy by only socializing with Pagans. This is a type of compartmentalization in which they keep their social and religious identity completely separate from their career, family, and even roommates. Informants like Karen, a 49-year-old artist with a PhD in art history, maintain completely separate Facebook profiles, “one for family and art history friends and another for all of my pagan friends who I associate with more often” (P 220). Nine other informants mentioned the use of a separate Facebook profile to connect only with Pagans as well (P 201) (P 211) (P212) (P 221) (P 222) (P 225) (P 226) (P 227) (P 230). A gap such as this, between one’s Pagan identity and one’s “everyday life” creates a bifurcated reality within her life and many others—the Pagan half of their lives and the rest of it, in some cases, never coming into contact with each other. This idea of a bifurcated sense of reality creates the potential for feelings of unfulfillment and serious tensions of identity. In addition to, these secret keeping and compartmentalization strategies, informants also exhibit a minimization of their emotional responses to instances of discrimination which they have experienced, in which they use



phrases such as “I wasn’t surprised, really,” “They seem to find me threatening for some reason,” and even describing their aggressors as “Batshit crazy evangelical types” (P 201) (P215) (P219). In diminishing their outward emotional vulnerability to the acts of discrimination against them, they are rejecting any validation of such opinions as well as attempting to protect themselves psychologically. Like secret keeping and compartmentalization, down playing emotional responses makes living the life of a Pagan a little easier.

#### **4.1.1 Interviewing and Effects**

These responses and strategies, as I mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, are affected in many of the same ways within the interview process as non-Pagans are. Just as non-Pagans were likely to be affected by the roles that are inculcated into the process of interviewing, it is almost inevitable that Pagans would be likely affected as well. While non-Pagans felt pressure to provide me with detailed, knowledgeable answers, and to present themselves as non-discriminatory, Pagans perhaps felt even more pressured to provide me with valuable material as it was clear that their community was the main focus of this research. It seems that within my idea of the three core defense strategies (mainly downplaying), pressures to produce an image of a community that is strong, and an outlook that is mature certainly come into play. It is highly likely that many of my informants felt, in some way, the need to present to me a community that was secure and developed, and in this way many of the negative attitudes and less resilient responses towards being discriminated against were underrepresented. Moreover, many of my informants presented a level of self-deceit that contradicted itself within the span of a few sentences,

as I will address in greater detail later in the chapter. The fact that a person in one sentence can be explaining that they don't think the discrimination is that bad, and the next relate a story that includes a blatant act of prejudice is surprising, although understandable. In order to deal with topics such as discrimination, members of the community often find ways to either avoid encountering the idea all together (by creating separate Facebook pages, keeping their religion a secret, etc.) or ways to make it seem outwardly like they are not affected emotionally. In saying things like "it's none of their business," "all of these ignorant people know nothing about [Paganism]," and "I gave up on pop culture's opinions ages ago," they are placing themselves above the "uninformed and unintelligent" masses (P 204) (P 206) (P 220). This form of confidence and pride can be considered not only a coping mechanism but also a form of self-comfort and deceit. In convincing themselves that the people who discriminate against them are neither as sophisticated or nor as enlightened as they are, they place themselves outside of the discriminators realm of influence.

As we will see further in the chapter, these defense mechanisms against discrimination offer insights into how Pagans conceptualize their relationship with the world around them, and also how they conceptualize their own identities. Looking at how self-deceit comes into play provides a deeper outlet for analysis that may not be initially visible. In more fully understanding the process of interviewing and its effects on my informants I am able to not only get a better sense of what lies beneath the surface, but also what kind of social pressures may affect the situation at large.

#### **4.1.2 Creating a Cycle of Ignorance**

Unbeknownst to many members of the Pagan community, these strategies that are intended to buffer discrimination can inadvertently end up fueling the kind of discrimination that I am particularly interested in: the non-legal, cultural attitudes that affect their everyday lives. Because these discriminatory attitudes are fueled by ignorance, the space of which is filled by inferences and attitudes derived from popular culture and religious references I have outlined previously, these preemptive strategies help to maintain the level of ignorance which is rooted in mainstream society which largely does not offer any positive, visible examples of the religion of Paganism. These strategies can be seen in almost every informant that I have spoken with, whether or not they are actively aware that they are involved in them. While it seems easy to remedy the situation by saying “just tell everyone, then!” this answer is a lot more complicated than it may seem at first glance. In fact, most Pagans seem to be comfortable with the fact that they live part of their lives in secret, stating that it’s easier, and not anyone else’s business. Another problem that one may run into when addressing a solution to the cycle of discrimination is that there simply isn’t a big enough community to warrant any mass attention to the religion as a whole.

While it is undeniable that the Pagan presence in the Pittsburgh area is strong, given the attendance at events such as Pagan Pride Festival and various public rituals that I have attended, of the 38 informants that I interviewed, 13 prefer a solitary practice rather than as a part of a group. Unlike the way in which one can walk down Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh and in the span of one mile see five churches, the type of Pagan presence within the city limits is nearly invisible due to the ways in which Pagans prefer to practice.

Simultaneously, what *are* seen are the various esoteric shops around the city, boasting names like “Hocus Pocus,” a store just off of the same Fifth Avenue that is teeming with

churches. While many passersby will never set foot in these establishments, the judgment is made on storefronts alone. One only has to hear the name of the local store “Hocus Pocus,” to conjure up images of the 1993 children’s film of the same name featuring three dubious and ugly witches who are burned alive in the film. It is in these inadvertent ways that the absence of positive, religious-oriented material for the general public becomes a serious problem.

Regardless of their age, occupation, or socioeconomic status, this attitude seems to persist. The occupations of my informants, while heavily weighted toward the healthcare field, also include a member of the Army, a traffic control crew leader, a professional engineer, several teachers in various levels of education, two members of the finance and accounting profession, an author, and a PhD holder in art history—among many other eclectic livelihoods. Out of the 38 informants I interviewed, 12 identified as being a member of the health-care profession including behavioral health therapy, nursing, mental health therapy, and medical social work. After inquiring about the stratification towards health-care occupations, one woman named Maggie (a 53-year-old behavioral health therapist, working for a social work company) stated that it was because of her background in Wicca that she felt such a strong pull towards being a part of the healing process of others. Maggie, who started off as a psychotherapist and moved towards the social work side of the occupation, said that while her spirituality makes her more sensitive to being affected by the negative energies that come with this kind of work, her acute ability to be in-tune with others’ emotions that she derives from her Pagan roots makes her the therapist that she is today. Others have expressed similar feelings surrounding the care of others and its connection to fundamental aspects of Paganism.

However, in healthcare, an industry that seems naturally tailored to the nurturers and healers of the Pagan community, the members of this profession have felt the strongest pushback from their colleagues regarding religion. In fact, an insightful study done by Kimberly Kirner titled “Healing Community: Pagan Cultural Models and Experiences in Seeking Well-Being,” outlines very clearly the barriers that are presented to Pagans within the healthcare field (Kirner). In my opinion, however, this is not surprising. Barring retail workers, cashiers, and food service personnel, registered nurses made up the largest percentage of workers in the United States according to national employment projections from 2012-2022 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). With employment numbers nearing 3 million, it is no surprise to me that tensions would be present for a minority culture based on the statistically inevitable diversity of backgrounds found within the profession. Although diversity leads to a higher degree of tolerance in many cases, tolerance must first be preceded by a least some level of understanding, which the Pagan community is typically not afforded.

## **4.2 THE PAGAN PERSPECTIVE**

### **4.2.1 Lisa and Tara**

One long time member of the Pagan community, Lisa, who has been in the healthcare profession as a nurse for the last 20 years and a member of the Pagan community for just as long, stated in response to the question of how she thinks her co-workers would react to

her being open about her religion that, “they would suffer me to die. They would probably sprinkle holy water on me. At the very least, I would risk being ostracized in my small, religious workplace,” (P 201). In contrast, her daughter Tara who is also a member of the Pagan religion, who was previously a teacher and is now enlisted in the military, stated that her experience was different: “at my civilian job [as an elementary school teacher], they wouldn’t care, I don’t think. They would—and have in the past—just brush off the vague comments I make as ‘Oh, that’s just Tara being weird again, with all her tattoos.’ Whereas in the military, I believe their attitudes are more on the lines of ‘whatever, I don’t really know what that is but good for you.’ One Sergeant Major, though, once made a comment when going through the religious tolerance spiel when we joined about sacrificing chickens when talking about Paganism in a very derogatory way,” (P 202, 2015). Tara’s response presents a clear example of the type of downplaying that exists in many Pagans responses to discriminatory attitudes. Tara described her idea of the attitudes towards Paganism within the military as very nonchalant, even though *directly* after this she provided a clear example of a time when a high ranking official made a derogatory remark against the religion. Even in the face of a direct discriminatory remark, Tara maintains the attitude that discrimination is more of a non-issue within her career. The attitude of the Sergeant Major is a perfect example of the sort of sensationalist views of Paganism that exist in almost every corner of American society. Intriguingly, this attitude comes to the surface even in the midst of a conversation that occurs due to the fact that the military recognizes Paganism as a respected religion. This further proves my argument that while moves can be made on a larger, legal scale, these changes in no way reduce everyday instances of discrimination that go under the radar of legal action and continue to diminish the quality of life for members of the religion.

Both women touched on the idea of the visibility of their religion, and while Tara felt comfortable with having tattoos of broomsticks and cauldrons on her body (playing the pop culture images against their real symbolic meaning), Lisa felt on guard at work wearing a small pentacle ring. Although, according to Lisa, the hospital she works for officially recognizes Paganism as a religion and thus she would be safe from discrimination within the legal realm, it is the smaller, everyday tensions of discrimination that continue to affect her regardless of acknowledgement in the fine print of legal paperwork. Sitting with these two women and listening to their stories in conversation with one another at the very beginning of my research made it apparent that there were very different types of reactions to discrimination at play, even just within their work environments. While the question certainly allowed for speculation, Lisa's fear, and the strong words that she used should not be underestimated. Tara's attitude surrounding her Pagan tattoos and idiosyncratic style choices was highlighted in a single sentence: "I make the choice to present myself that way so I'm making the choice to allow [those reactions]," (P 202, 2015). It seems that Tara, in accepting her identity as a Pagan, is inherently accepting the discrimination that it presents. Perhaps this is part of the reason why many Pagans seem, on the whole, relatively unperturbed with the discrimination they face in their daily lives as they have already come to accept that it "comes with the territory."

#### **4.2.2 Matt**

Another informant, Matt, a 26-year-old who is pursuing a degree in criminal justice while working on a local university campus, has experienced discrimination and practiced avoidance techniques in ways unlike his peers. For Matt, his most salient experiences with

discrimination have been within the realm of his family's and hometown community's extreme religious background. The area in northeastern Pennsylvania in which Matt grew up was made up of an extremely high percentage of Catholics, and Matt himself was forced to attend Catholic Church and Catechism until the age of 18.

As a homosexual teenager, this environment was destructive to his sense of self, and he still lives with its effects today. Growing up in such an environment cultivated a strong will within him to push back against these kinds of attitudes, beginning with homophobia he experienced in high school, and recently involving discrimination against Paganism in his Spiritualist church. When I asked whether or not he feels that the views he accepted previously affect him today, he went on to explain his first outward act of rebellion against his religious peers. His upbringing, he says "opened my eyes to true hatred, to brainwashing... it opened my eyes to a lot and it made me a lot stronger" (P 210). When Matt began to be confronted by his devoutly religious peers in high school for being gay, he decided to embrace the accusations and use their fears as his defense, turning "gothic," and playing into his peers' rumors that he was possessed by the devil. "I thought it was so funny, and I would go up to people and be like 'the devil said he hates you.' [Laughter]" Instead of passive avoidance techniques, Matt used the exact opposite behavior to reclaim his identity despite the judgment of his peers. Although he never believed he was evil like his peers said, he used this as fuel to reaffirm his sense of power in the situation at hand and shift his agency in the situation from passive to active.

This sort of behavior can be seen again when he is confronted with a similar situation at his Spiritualist church in Pittsburgh. Spiritualism, as Matt explained to me, is "more of a philosophy. It's about communing with people who have passed over to the other side. It deals heavily with medium-ship and talked to dead people." Although this



seems like a community similar to Paganism in its embrace of the mystical and magical, “it’s become Christian-based and a lot of people in the community are Christians,” according to Matt. Initially held back from opening up to this community about his Pagan leanings by their strong Christian ties because he didn’t “want to ruffle feathers,” he quickly added that he decided “we *should* ruffle feathers” (P 210). Thus, he went to the pastor of the church to explain that he had been attending Wiccan rituals and taking classes on the subject. His pastor was welcoming and open-minded, inviting Matt to host an event at the church to introduce the members of the church to his religion. After the event, Matt received strong backlash within the community for his Pagan beliefs:

This woman comes up to me and says ‘So, what are you?’ and I was like, ‘What do you mean?’ and she says ‘Well, are you a Christian?’ and I explained ‘Well I think that saying that I’m a Christian would be very limiting, I’m a child of the earth, I identify with aspects of every religion. I just identify a little bit more with paganism. So I would say that I am, if you want to put terms on it, I’m a Pagan.’ And she looks at me and she goes, ‘Well you can’t be a Pagan and a Spiritualist.’ and I was like “Oh really? According to who? According to you? Okay, that’s fine I respect your opinion, but here’s a list of pagan spiritualist...” and I gave her a list... and she responded, ‘Well I just don’t think that you can do this. Everyone here is Christian.’ And I’m like ‘Well that’s fine, but you have to understand that we live in a pluralistic society and I wouldn’t join a group if they were strictly Christian. I talked to the pastor about it and she said ‘it’s fine that you’re like this and we accept everyone.’ But, there’s still this like, conservative wave... It’s so limiting and I was like shocked. I don’t like to fight with people over stuff like that. It’s way too hard and you can’t convince people to change their behavior. The perspective definitely changed [after that]. The dynamic definitely changed and I mean people were talking about me, calling me ‘dark’ (P 210).

Throughout the description, Matt spoke confidently and animatedly, pausing only to find ways to elaborate on the situation further. After this incident, Matt was inspired to take a more diplomatic stance as Pagan within his community, explaining that he would never want to make anyone feel “pushed out or crucified in a sense.” When I inquired about whether that was similar to the way he was made to feel by the Spiritualist community, he explained that he didn’t, and explained that, “Even if I did, I wouldn’t care. I’m very strong

in what I believe in and I'm able to have these conversations and these arguments in a political and diplomatic way... because I've researched this and I'm not going to back down from it" (P 210). It seems that Matt's upbringing made him fearless in some aspects of his experience as a Pagan and in fighting the discrimination against it within his religious life as both a Spiritualist and a Pagan. However, it is quite possible that these instances affected him much more than he let on. Although he claimed that he was "shocked," at the woman's response, he goes on to say that he was not affected in any way. This perhaps presents an instance of self-deceit by downplaying his emotional response.

Interestingly, despite his purported fearlessness, Matt was one of the most adamant of my informants about being completely anonymous due to fears about his future job prospects which may reaffirm my aforementioned claim of self-deceit. It seems counterintuitive that someone with such a strong sense of identity and will to fight against misunderstanding would be so adamant about keeping his secrecy in regard to his job. It seems that for Matt, there are some realms of life that are "untouchable" in terms of negotiating and mitigating discrimination. For him, his job in criminal justice was a non-negotiable area of his life where he could not, and would not put himself in the position, to be transparent about his religious beliefs. While many other informants enthusiastically encouraged me to include their real names and personal data, Matt was hesitant, even inquiring about where I kept my information and how safely it was stored. While this meticulousness could simply be a symptom of his criminal justice background, it also shows just how differently he handles these situations from his religious life to his occupational life. Instead of facing all accusations head on, and even using them against his accusers as he has in the past, he chooses to go to all measures to avoid even the possibility of such a situation in relation to his professional life. Perhaps this is because Matt holds the

widely accepted belief that one shouldn't bring their religion into the work place, however if that were so, there wouldn't be such a need to hide his identity rather than a need for him simply not to bring it up in the work place. As background checks are typically required for members of the criminal justice system, this suggests that as someone who was going to be entering the field as a full-time member soon, he felt this would be detrimental to his chances at securing a position. However, work and religious life are two very different realms, and thus it is not surprising that Matt would feel more comfortable opening up about something to his peers within his religious community, as it seems more appropriate to him.

Matt provides an example of the ways in which the compartmentalization of his Pagan identity has affected his life. Even when he decides to break down the wall between his Spiritualist identity and his Pagan identity, the repercussions he experienced serve as another reason why the Pagan community will continue this practice. Matt, in telling his story of discrimination to his Pagan peers, undoubtedly reinforces their reasoning about why compartmentalization is useful. One of the main goals of many Pagans seems to be to avoid this sort of backlash from their peers in other parts of their lives, and compartmentalization achieves this goal.

### **4.2.3 Janet**

While the experiences of Lisa, Tara, and Matt have all exemplified the ways in which discrimination may be seen on a mundane level, Janet (a middle-age real estate worker) experienced more detrimental consequences. When Janet first began to identify as a Pagan, she decidedly stayed "in the broom closet," a common expression among Pagans for

keeping one's religious identity largely secret. Her family is fundamentalist Christian, and many of her friends outside of the Pagan community are Christian as well. However, as time went on, Janet began to feel more comfortable living with her Pagan identity and decided that it was time to start accepting herself publicly. To her surprise, her immediate family accepted her, even defending her against the discrimination of other members of their fundamentalist community:

When I told my mom, she was pretty accepting. She was really upset, you know, because she probably feels that I'm going to hell, but her ultimate response was that of love, not of hate. I really appreciate her for that. The other members of her community found out somehow though, and one woman showed up on my mom's doorstep the day after talking about how I was "with the devil," and accusing my mom of housing evil. The woman wouldn't even cross the doorway she was so afraid of me (P 236).

Although her mother defended her, Janet explained that there was also a lot of shame that being a Pagan brought her parents. After this, she decided to keep her religious identity private, in part due to the backlash against her parents, and in part due to the fear that one day someone might show up at *her* doorstep, not her mother's.

As time went on, that moment began to feel far away to Janet, and she began to feel more comfortable being open about her religious identity. "As I grew up more, I felt that I was surrounded by a more open minded community within Pittsburgh, and I felt more comfortable posting things on Facebook and being an active member of the community" (P 236). It took a lot of courage to decide that she would be open with her peers about her religion—something many members of the community could not do—and she was proud to be able to do so. In her confidence, however, came one of the most damaging acts of discrimination the community has felt. Having an established career working in a local real estate office, Janet began to be open with her peers whenever the subject of religion came up. Their reactions, Janet explained, were varied, but for the most part no one had said

anything directly derogatory to her. "I could tell they were talking about me behind my back though. Things got awkward after that, but I never expected what was eventually coming." One day, as Janet was using the copier at work to make copies of a flier for an upcoming event in the Pagan community, her boss walked by and asked her about what it was.

The next day, without any warning, he called me into his office and fired me for 'improper use of office facilities.' Now, this guy is a super Christian, and I know for a fact that it was more than just using the copier. People in the office use the copier for small personal stuff all the time, and no one has ever even gotten written up for it. Looking back, I wish I had had the confidence to do something about it, but at the time I was just so beaten down and shocked by it that I just picked up my stuff and left (P 236).

When asked whether or not she reported the incident to human resources, Janet explained that her immediate reaction was simply to not to call any further attention to herself. "I didn't think anyone was going to give me the time of day about it, because no one really respected that part of me in the first place" (P 236). Janet's experience and subsequent reaction is the amalgamation of decades of inadvertent discrimination and suppression of Pagan identity. Following this event, Janet reverted to her old ways of secrecy, "after that, I tend to keep my religious preferences to myself. I love myself and my identity as a Pagan but it is not worth it to me to experience such backlash and loss when I could just avoid it altogether by not saying anything" (P 236). Even when she began to answer questions when we first met in a back corner of a local coffee shop, her responses were hushed and self-conscious. There was visible tension for her in relating these events to a stranger and she seemed to be conscious of being overheard. Her story is another that fuels the desire not only for herself, but for the broader Pagan community in Pittsburgh as well, to keep their religious life private, unfortunately contributing to the cycle of ignorance and subsequent prejudice.

### 4.3 A COMMUNAL RESPONSE

These stories of discrimination cycle through the community, and eventually become a part of the communal narrative surrounding discrimination and the ways in which one should address it. Stories such as Janet's and Matt's reinforce the desire to compartmentalize themselves and justifies secret keeping. As the community of Pagans within Pittsburgh is relatively small, it is inevitable that stories such as these are widely known, and have been referenced by several other informants not including the informants discussed above (P 201) (P 204) (P 221). Several Pagans make reference to these instances as reinforcement and explanation when asked about why they prefer to keep their religious identity private. Maggie, the middle aged health care worker mentioned above, mentioned not just one but both Matt's and Janet's stories when explaining why she felt the need to keep her religious life private. "I heard [Janet's] story and I was just appalled. I can't image what I would do in her situation. Even hearing her story makes me afraid for something like that to happen to me." Another informant used Matt's story as a way to explain Christianity's hold on mainstream culture:

Christian criticisms shouldn't affect him in those situations because as an American his freedom of religion is guaranteed. But they're so often treated as valid by society. Obviously, their criticisms of Paganism are at best uninformed, but the realities of American society mean we have to deal with these criticisms head on like [Matt] did, even if its unfair. Our society is so biased, we are at odds with a powerful and vocal segment that makes their spiritual and theological criticisms of us something we do have to answer, against our will. We are *not* Christians, or even monotheists. That should not be a problem. But we are occasionally forced to act like it *is* one, and that it's our responsibility to accommodate (P 227).

This informant astutely echoes the stakes of such discrimination discussed in Barner-Barry's work as well as my own and how it is understood and dealt with by a Pagan. It also

outlines the beginnings of the processes of downplaying emotional responses. It is clear that not only do other Pagans use these stories as reinforcement for their avoidance behavior, but they are also serve as a touchstone from which others define and understand their own viewpoints on discrimination even when they have not experienced any directly themselves. It is thus that not every member of the Pagan community must experience an act of outward discrimination in order to feel the need to use the defense strategies considered earlier and maintain the cycle of misinformation and prejudice.

The deep irony within this system of cause and effect is that often it is their avoidance strategies that they consider most detrimental to their well being. On one hand they do not want to have to keep their lives secret nor feel that, in a perfect world, they should; and on the other it is exactly the perpetuation of keeping their existence a secret that sustains the ignorance that fuels discrimination surrounding Paganism. It seems that there is no way to “win” for many Pagans in the Pittsburgh area. If they do not want to face immediate outward discrimination and ostracization in their daily lives, they must keep their religion a secret; however, in doing this they are directly fueling further discrimination whether they are aware of it or not. Since ignorance and misinformation are, far and away, the most pertinent fuel of modern discrimination against Paganism and the cause of such a tense social climate surrounding living as a Pagan, the inevitable solution seems to be information. Contrarily, however, multiple informants, like Matt, have described situations in which they attempted to inform those who discriminate against them, only to come head to head with the seemingly unarguable trump card of religious ideology (P 203) (P 227) (P 236) (P 238). Matt provides a direct example of exactly how and why providing information to the masses doesn’t always solve the problem of discrimination. The roots of religious and cultural ideology grow much deeper than

knowledge, and often are impervious to new information and ways of thinking. It is for this reason that many Pagans like Lisa, Tara, Matt, and Janet, now avoid the idea of informing the masses to create greater tolerance in favor of a quieter existence. Stories such as these enforce this ideology within the community and thus cement the cycle of ignorance in its place.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

The experiences of both non-Pagans and Pagans have provided invaluable insights into what lies beneath outward discrimination and how it affects each community. Initially, when I began this study, I had no idea that there even was an “underneath,” of which to speak. Before truly starting to understand the delicate balance and cycle that lie in front of me, I expected to see a cut-and-dry path from media sources and religious imagery to misunderstanding to discrimination and thus to the severe detriment of Pagans at large. However, what became apparent shortly after speaking with several Pagans in the Pittsburgh community, was that they were performing actions that actually *increased* misunderstanding and the prevalence of misinformation. The tangled web of action and reaction anchor the cycle of discrimination in place. While my assumptions about the sources of misinformation for non-Pagans had been partially correct, what I could not have understood before conducting this research was that an equally large source of misinformation was Pagans themselves.

While television shows, movies, books, as well as religious outlets such as religious texts and religious instruction, remain at the forefront of sources for misguided opinions regarding Paganism, what allows these outlets to maintain their strength are the defensive



mechanisms of the Pagan community. Religious influences and media imagery are what initiate the misinformation and thus discrimination, however the cycle of discrimination uncovered in this study is what perpetuates this climate of misunderstanding. Pagans; actions such as having separate Facebook accounts for their Pagan identity, keeping their religious preferences a secret, and outwardly minimizing any emotional effect that instances of discrimination may have, all contribute to promoting a cycle of misunderstanding and misinformation that cements the discrimination of non-Pagans in its place. As Barner-Barry lays out in her work, in order for a religion to be respected and avoid discrimination, it must—at the very least—be both visible and understood. Due to the defense mechanisms of Pagans, these prerequisites cannot be fulfilled leading to the cycle that remains in place today of secrecy and misinformation. The cycle is further cemented in place by the fact that most Pagans hesitate to recognize their defense mechanisms as detrimental to their well-being and lifestyle. Actions such as having two separate Facebook profiles or keeping their families unaware of their religious preferences are not considered extremely stressful or harmful, but rather are most often seen as a something that makes life *easier*.

Uncovering this “cycle of discrimination,” however, does not mean that I have by any means solved the problem. The biggest obstacle to a solution lies in the fact that many Pagans find a notable amount of comfort in being able to perceivably guard themselves from the discrimination of others as I mentioned above. As being a Pagan is easily concealed, the ease of creating this comfort does not often outweigh the discomfort of putting oneself into harm’s way. Furthermore, many perceive the religious tolerance climate of their area to be of little immediate concern. There are no modern witch hunts, there is no protesting at local Pagan festivals and events—in fact some Pagans may never

face any sort of outward discrimination themselves if they perform these defense mechanisms well enough. Perhaps if the Pagan community as a whole felt more immediately threatened by the possibility of discrimination, this cycle would be more readily addressed. Many Pagans are even ignorant of the polarized opinions of members of the Pittsburgh community at large, thinking instead that because there may be few people who discriminate against Paganism outwardly in their daily lives, that there must thus be relatively little negatively polarized opinions surrounding the topic. However, because many non-Pagans do not even know that Paganism and Witches exist in reality, they do not take the topic seriously and thus do not realize they are discriminating against a real group of people that exist within their city when they hold these ideas and prejudices. I am also left with the question of whether or not the non-Pagan community can be even said to be actively discriminating, as one could argue that they are not even talking about the religion at all, but rather a source of fiction. My immediate solution is to understand these actions not necessarily as immediately outwardly discriminatory, but rather possessing the distinct potential for discrimination—the kind that sentenced Damien Echols to death. The disconnect between the grave misunderstandings of non-Pagans and the complacency of the Pagan community will be a difficult obstacle to traverse should the desire to end this cycle come to be. These defense mechanisms, coupled with the natural element of secrecy and decreased visibility that is inherent to the religion, make any improvements in the reputation of Paganism within the community of Pittsburgh extremely difficult. However, this does not mean that the cycle could not be ended if significant effort was exerted towards a greater sense of understanding and tolerance. Certainly, with efforts to make the community more visible and to educate members outside of the Pagan community, a greater sense of respect would be fostered. Unfortunately, however, it is inevitable that

some discrimination would still exist, because unlike simple misinformation that may be easily remedied like that which is caused by the media, the discrimination rooted in religious beliefs such as Christianity are so deeply ingrained that educational efforts could not totally rectify the situation.

In further studies of this topic, I feel that an understanding of the cycle and its effects would be increased with a more developed psychoanalytical approach, in terms of both analyzing the process of interviewing and how it affects responses from informants, as well as how the cycle maintains itself and affects the community as a whole. Further research needs to be done to uncover how Pagans understand this cycle and how they conceptualize both their defensive techniques and the comfort they provide. Comparative studies should be done to discern how much our national culture comes into play within the context of discrimination, religious tolerance, and the particular cycle of discrimination in question. Although a dire need to end such a cycle may never present itself, an awareness of the effects of each group's actions would be beneficial to both parties in that it allows them to better understand the ideological world within which they live and the consequences their actions cause. While this system of reinforced ignorance may not seem immediately harmful to many, this exact ignorance is what sentenced Damien Echols to death in 1994. While some progress has been made since Damien's verdict was reached some 20 years ago, as his appeal was accepted and he was released from prison in the last 10 years, my research shows that the roots of such discrimination remain in the non-Pagan community at full force. However, a movement to gain greater visibility and respect for Paganism and its many forms within the larger community could be exactly what is needed to break the cycle. With greater awareness and understanding of Paganism as a religion, it is possible that a fate such as Damien's may never occur again.



## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE PAGAN INTERVIEW MATERIAL

**Statement:** You were chosen as a participant in this interview based on your involvement in the greater Pagan community of Pittsburgh. Your thoughts and opinions are incredibly valuable in conducting this study and I thank you for volunteering your time. Please make sure you read over the consent form carefully, and ask any questions that you might have. After you have read and signed the consent form we will begin. I have a few questions in particular I would like to ask over the course of this interview, but free speech is also highly encouraged. Please do not feel obliged to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. I understand that religion is a sensitive topic for many people.

- Q: Can you tell me briefly about your background, and how long you have resided in Pittsburgh?
- Q: How long have you identified with the Pagan Community?
- Q: How were you first introduced to this religious movement?
- Q: Did you have any preconceived notions about the religion?
- Q: Do you feel that these notions were inaccurate? To what degree?
- Q: How do you perceive Pagan representation in popular culture?
- Q: Are you satisfied with how your religion is represented by popular television shows, movies, literature, and news channels?
- Q: Do you have a particular example that bothered you, if any?
- Q: Do you believe that these representations have affected the general attitudes towards Paganism?
- Q: Do you think these attitudes have gotten more or less accepting, or remained the same over the time that you have been a Pagan?
- Q: Can you briefly tell me your understanding of any historical tensions that exist for the religion?
- Q: Do you feel that this historical context affects the Pittsburgh community? If so, in what ways?
- Q: Have you personally experienced any discrimination based on religion, either in your work place, in your social life, or otherwise?
- Q: If yes, did you report these instances to the proper authorities?
- Q: Have you changed the way in which you practice your religion due to any tension you may have experienced based on your involvement?
- Q: Do you generally feel comfortable telling your acquaintances that you are a member of the Pagan community? How about your coworkers, friends or family?
- Q: Based on your personal knowledge, do you feel that Pittsburgh and its various communities are accepting of Paganism? If no, why?
- Q: Do you know anyone else in the Pagan community who might be willing to speak with me? Would you feel comfortable providing me with information to contact them?

## APPENDIX B

## **SAMPLE NON-PAGAN INTERVIEW MATERIAL**

**Statement:** You were chosen as a participant in this interview based on your involvement in the Pittsburgh community. Your thoughts and opinions are incredibly valuable in conducting this study and I thank you for volunteering your time. Please make sure you read over the consent form carefully, and ask any questions that you might have. After you have read and signed the consent form we will begin. I have a few questions in particular I would like to ask over the course of this interview, but free speech is also highly encouraged. Please do not feel obliged to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. I understand that religion is a sensitive topic for many people.

- Q:** Can you tell me briefly about your background, and how long you have resided in Pittsburgh?
- Q:** Do you identify with any religious community in Pittsburgh?
- Q:** If you're comfortable, would you mind telling me which community with which you are involved.
- Q:** Have you ever been acquainted with the idea of Paganism?
- Q:** To what degree do you feel you have knowledge of Paganism?
- Q:** What is your understanding of the word "witchcraft?"
- Q:** If you were to guess, what might be a typical witch?
- Q:** Based on your personal knowledge, how would you describe the practice of Witchcraft or Paganism?
- Q:** Do you feel that witchcraft is generally benevolent, harmful, or neutral?
- Q:** Do you believe that the Pittsburgh community would be accepting of this religion? Why or why not?
- Q:** Can you briefly tell me your understanding of any historical tensions that exist for the religion?
- Q:** How much of your ideas of witchcraft and Paganism do you think come from its portrayal in the media like TV shows, movies, or news media?
- Q:** If a friend or family member identified with Paganism, do you feel that would negatively affect your attitudes towards them?
- Q:** Do you know anyone else in the Pittsburgh community who might be willing to speak with me? Would you feel comfortable providing me with information to contact them?

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