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Homogenization? Blessed Be!: Exploring Tensions Between the Individual and Their Neopagan Community

Jill Crenshaw

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In various scholarly works on Neopaganism¹, a significant change is noted as occurring due to internal reforms. This change often includes a shift in hierarchal structure or other configurations which allow for more stable, organized Neopagan communities. After a description of these modifications, there often follows ample dissatisfaction from Neopagans who state that the implementation of dues and other new factors in Neopagan communities are ruining the religious movement. Helen A. Berger wrote in A Community of Witches that, "... as the religion itself changes from a fluid structure emphasizing individual innovation and creativity to a more formalized religion, there is a growing schism between those who support work for structural modification of the religion and those who oppose these changes."² This tension,

¹ The term 'Neopagan' is controversial within the community in that some Neopagans believe it is redundant; to separate 'new paganism' from 'paganism' implies that the contemporary movement is not a continuation of the original religion. I will be using the term 'Neopaganism' in this work because I believe it accurately represents the religious practices of the practitioners from within the movement. Aside from reconstructionists, most Neopagan practices are not historically accurate nor completely true to the original faith. Even at its most faithful, most Neopagans recognize the disparity between their age and those of their ancestors, and the impossibility of their faith being identical to that of the original practitioners. For instance, there is no Pharoah in the modern world for Kemetics to incorporate into their faith. Even British Wicca, which places emphasis on the accuracy of its tradition, has changed from founder to founder and much more since its arrival in the United States. Also, the terms 'Neopagan' and 'Pagan' are interchangeable in the minds of most Neopagans, so both will be used.

² Helen A. Berger, A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the U.S.

(University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 100.

which Magliocco calls “a central leitmotif in American Pagan culture,”³ occurs between the countercultural desires of the individual and the conformative measures being taken by Neopagan communities; it has sparked debate throughout the United States. Although the most opposed to these changes are usually featured in said works, these developments continue to take place. It is reasonable to assume that these reforms are not stemming from a small group of leaders who force their decisions upon the masses, but rather are approved by the majority of pagans in the communities which are evolving. I propose that the desires and perspectives of the individual changes through their interaction with the community.

In order to explore the changing face of Neopaganism in America, it was essential to speak with those involved in making the choices which lead to the evolution of the religion. Summerland Grove is a Neopagan community based in Memphis, Tennessee which boasts nearly two hundred members and is considerably active in the Mid-South. I have attended several Summerland Grove events and conducted interviews with ten members, some of whom were interviewed on multiple occasions. Some members have chosen to be referred to by pseudonyms, while most are addressed by their first name only. Due to its location and vitality, a case study of Summerland Grove provides examples of how Neopagan communities interact with their surroundings and how they evolve over time.

Lenses

In her book Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America Magliocco writes about the appeal of “subdominance” when actively participating in identity formation. She writes: “Oppositionality is part of the process of identity creation [...] it involves adopting an

³ Sabina Magliocco, Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 60.

identity antithetical to that of some other individual or group in order to differentiate self from other.”⁴ Magliocco’s concept of oppositionality allows for Summerland Grove members’ contrasting identities to be examined through the lens of identity conflict.

Individual members, however, will not be the sole focus of this study. Summerland Grove, as a whole, will also be observed. In A Community of Witches, Berger presents a model which she describes as the best way to frame the routinization that is occurring in new religious movements.⁵ The model includes three types of isomorphism, or the act of entities from separate origins becoming similar in form: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism occurs when a group is pressured by other organizations on which they are dependent, or are forced to submit to government policy. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when a group is unsure of how to operate properly, so it models itself after other groups that are successful. Normative isomorphism is the spread of uniformity throughout organizations or even greater networks, limiting individuality in a profession through education. I am expanding the definition of normative isomorphism to include any similarities Summerland Grove might share with dominant American culture. These three forms of isomorphism will be referred to as the Berger model. This model will be used to categorize the different ways in which Summerland Grove is changing to fit a particular mold. This focus on the community will provide insight as to the collective wishes of individuals.

⁴ Sabina Magliocco, Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 185.

⁵ Helen A. Berger, A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the U.S. (University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 100.

The Individual

Various aspects of the Neopagan community are particularly attractive to those individuals who wish to create an oppositional identity. Paganism provides a means through which to express an identity previously repressed. The countercultural elements present within Paganism exist because of Paganism's "uncritical environment."⁶ A high percentage of those from non-Christian backgrounds as well as homosexuals and bisexuals belong to the Pagan community.⁷ Orion writes in her book Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived that marginalized communities such as women, homosexuals, and members of religious minorities groups are attracted to Paganism because of the possibilities of acceptance it offers.

However, one does not initially need to be part of a minority group. Paganism, with its polytheist theology and generally liberal views, is the perfect environment in which to create an oppositional identity, particularly in areas that place emphasis on Christian monotheism and conservative socio-political views.

In fact, all Summerland Grove members who were interviewed on personal matters said that they felt "odd" and or different from their peers. One member in particular, Brian, described himself as a "social outcast," clarifying: "I was not well-liked in school. I was the fat kid. [...] People just didn't like me for some reason. I was an easy target to pick on. I was fairly passive. I didn't like to fight." Other members related that they wore clothing different than that of their

⁶ Loretta Orion, Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived (Waveland Press, 1994) 62.

⁷ Loretta Orion, Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived (Waveland Press, 1994) 62.

schoolmates and acted in ways antithetical to those around them; one member, Jon, has spent several nights in jail for fighting, in direct opposition to both the law and respectable society. Summerland Grove members have differing opinions of Memphis, but regardless of their enjoyment of the city, all members do not feel they fit in. Brian shares: “Going back to my youth, I’ve always been a lone wolf. I have the incredible ability to feel alone in a crowd of people. [...] I don’t think I’d fit in anywhere. I tend to walk around the edges and fringes of society.”⁸ All members interviewed had experienced events which made them feel as if they were the ‘other’ to mainstream society. Rather than wallow in the uncertainty and self-loathing that can accompany this state of being different, although some members did for a period of time, the subjects wholeheartedly accepted their unique status. Brian insists that he has no desire to fit in, and Jon participates in fights when he feels compelled to defend his honor, regardless of the law. Another member has adorned their car with a bumper sticker that reads ‘Drowning in the Mainstream’ which pictures a hand emerging from a river. These members recognize themselves as diverging from homogenization, and therefore, embracing an oppositional lifestyle. One member commented: “I have never yet met a normal pagan. Never!”⁹

One prime example of a Summerland Grove member who has created an oppositional identity through Paganism is Kiya, a Kemetic Reconstructionist.¹⁰ Kiya was raised Muslim after her mother converted when she was three. Kiya described herself as pious and enthusiastic about her faith until she reached an age where, “in Islam the way girls and boys are treated starts to

⁸ Brian, Personal Interview, 15 July 2010.

⁹ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

¹⁰ Kemetic pagans worship the gods of Ancient Egypt and follow other religious concepts and mandates of Ancient Egyptian religion. Reconstructionists are Neopagans who use historical literary sources, anthropology, archaeology, and other academic research to accurately reconstruct their faith in reference to its historical context.

shift.” At ten years old, Kiya was studying the Qur’an and learning Arabic when she was told: “...you know, you’re getting kind of old. You need to switch what you’re doing and let the boys do this and you need to be doing something else.” As a child, she admits she “didn’t really have a choice” whether or not to follow Islam, but she did not appreciate the “insistence that just because I was a girl I couldn’t learn things anymore.” After her parents’ divorce which caused the Muslim community to ostracize her mother, Kiya came to view Islam as hypocritical. Her mother asked that she wait to uncover until Kiya no longer lived under her roof. At Kiya’s high school graduation, she received her diploma, walked across the stage, and removed her head piece. Kiya describes the symbolism of the event: “That was my official, in my mind, in everyone’s mind, that was the end of me being a Muslim. I was no longer Muslim at that point.” Once in college, Kiya “shed Islam” and asked herself, “What do I really believe? Me. Not my mom, not what other people think I should believe. What do I believe?”¹¹ This was the first time that Kiya had the opportunity to insert her individual ideas into her spirituality. After discovering that she believed in a universal spirit and nature’s important role in the web of energy that exists on another plane, she realized that she had Neopagan beliefs. She was then able to make the decision of how dedicated she wanted to be to Neopaganism and what Pagan path she wanted to follow.

Pike writes in Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves that it is a frustration with whatever factor was absent in the Christian culture in which they were raised that leads people to Neopaganism. By equating the disliked feature with the religion itself, many blame Christianity and Western attitudes for the destruction of the earth and abuse of women, looking “hopefully to non-

¹¹ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

Christian cultures to be in harmony with nature and treat women with respect.”¹² As is evident from Kiya’s experiences, all major religions are subject to Lewis’ theories on Christianity.

Feminism and gender equality are popular subjects within Paganism. Those involved in Paganism often view majority religions such as Christianity as placing too much emphasis on masculinity while ignoring positive feminine traits. In Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived, Orion writes that in Paganism the goddess contrasts the father-god of Judeo-Christian tradition.¹³ At the very least, Paganism has allowed several women in Summerland Grove to incorporate a feminine entity into their spiritual life. In fact, Summerland Grove members hold an annual Daughters of the Moon retreat in which female participants can “learn the ancient ways of women’s mysteries.”¹⁴ Kiya, as a former Muslim who worships both a god and a goddess, has incorporated religious ideas into her oppositional identity. One of the central reasons she left her mother religion were the limitations put on female adherents. She also revealed that given the choice to only worship one deity, it would be the goddess. Kiya described the accepting attitude she believes Paganism displays: “It’s understood that both genders matter. Both genders count. Both genders are not only important, but both genders have the rights and freedom to choose what they want to do. [...] one of the main things I love about paganism is

¹² Sarah M. Pike, Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community (University of California Press, 2001) 126.

¹³ Loretta Orion, Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived (Waveland Press, 1994) 62.

¹⁴ Daughters of the Moon, 18 July 2010. <<http://daughtersofthemoonretreat.com/index.html>>

that they tend to accept people for who they are. Paganism is one of the places where my race and my gender aren't a big deal."¹⁵

Others, such as Jessica, are not exclusively Pagan but appreciate the Pagan perspective on balance between the masculine and feminine. Jessica is Catholic and has come to realize through Summerland Grove that Mary, the mother of Christ who is worshipped but not dogmatically deified, "can be the goddess that I've been searching for." Jessica questioned the trinity at a young age: "As a little girl I was like, okay there is God and there is Christ, but what is Mary? She's the mother of God, how come she's not a goddess too? And I get the whole Christian beliefs of how this came to pass, but my feelings are you don't give birth to a deity or a half-deity without getting something in return. It just doesn't happen." Her contact with Summerland Grove, through her husband Brian, led to studying which revealed that there are small groups of Catholics who believe Mary is a deity and worship her as a goddess. Through exploring the pagan roots of Catholicism and redefining Mary within Catholicism, Jessica says she has become even more deeply Catholic and mass has a greater meaning. This incorporation of a female power has strengthened Jessica's confidence in herself. Instead of looking to an outside source she explains that she has found spirituality within herself, leading her to ask, "What can I do now?"¹⁶ Through finding a new way to change a stagnant religious identity to a developing, more fulfilling one, Jessica has accepted her role as a unique Catholic with oppositional views pertaining to the faith. Her marriage to a Neopagan of another race also contributes to the dissimilar identity she has created.

¹⁵ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

¹⁶ Jessica, Personal Interview, 19 June 2010.

For some members the inclusion of a female power is distinctly about opposition to traditional female roles in a society heavily reliant on Christianity. Angelia is a former Dominionist Christian. In accordance with Dominion theology, Christians should seek to control society for the betterment of those around them. One such strategy for creating a Christian world is, as Angelia describes it, to ‘outbreed the heathen.’ This creates a very defined role for Dominionist Christian women, who Angelia describes as: “a walking incubator, always pregnant or nursing, until she’s an at-home mom doing home-schooling and simple living. There are no other choices.” Feminism, on the other hand, offers those choices. Angelia explains feminism as being about “being a whole human being” and fundamentalism about “slavery to God and servitude to your husband.” Furthermore, Angelia depicts Dominionist culture as forcing women to accept that they are the cause of evil in the world, due to Eve’s temptation, and atonement is only obtainable through having as many “God-Warrior sons and Breeder daughters” as possible. If you cannot accept this worldview, you are “a rebellious harlot, possibly possessed by the spirit of Jezebel.”¹⁷ Claiming that she could not be a fundamentalist and “stay sane,” Paganism has provided a home for women like Angelia to refuse the identity given to them by their parents and explore a radically different one.

A dislike or mistrust of conventional religion, which often emerges from an aversion to homogenization, is also present within Summerland Grove and other Neopagan organizations. In this sense, oppositionality is encouraged as a tool for retaining the unique status of ‘otherness’ which draws many to Neopaganism. Oppositionality is also viewed as safeguard against the destruction of creativity and originality. Many believe that homogenization leads to mindlessness, which leads to a watering down of the faith and ultimately the destruction of the

¹⁷ Angelia, Personal Interview, 24 June 2010.

soul of the religion. Kiya talked about the hypocrisy she believes is present in Christianity: “I love Gandhi’s saying about Christians: ‘I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.’ If I meet Christians that are Christ-like, they are awesome people. Christians that aren’t very Christ-like...not so much. A lot of times I separate Christ from Christianity. I think Christ was an amazing person. I think he had some great ideas and was a revolutionary. I think if his ideas had not been warped by people seeking power, the world would be a very different place. So Christ and his message, I don’t really have issues with. Christianity, it’s a warped version in a lot of ways of his original message.”¹⁸

Some scholars have argued that it is a dislike of ethnic and cultural homogenization which draws many to Paganism. Pike discusses the European heritage of most Neopagans, pointing to genealogy as the cause to seek alternatives. In America in particular, due to the cultural pressures and socio-economic necessity for immigrants to assimilate, cultural tradition is often lost over time or becomes bastardized. This leads people feel a lack of connection with the well-defined traditions of their predecessors. In order to feel like an individual instead of one of the many in a white-washed, murky pool of faith, Pagans look to foreign gods as an exotic ‘other’ which overrules their past, mundane lives. Pike postulates in Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves that the “cultural diversity of Neopagan festivals and rituals masks the cultural uniformity of its members.” Most Pagans are “middle-class European Americans who are seeking alternatives to the Christianity, Judaism, or atheism of their parents.”¹⁹ Both Brian and Jon have

¹⁸ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

¹⁹ Sarah M. Pike, Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community (University of California Press, 2001) 123.

created oppositional identities through their Asatru²⁰ faith. Once a child who shied away from physical altercations, Brian insists that he is currently “so far from a pacifist,” noting that his spirituality is “that of the warrior.”²¹ Jon also calls himself a warrior and both cite concepts such as “honor, trustworthiness, and courage” and guiding their lives. Unable to extract meaningful morals and ethical ideas from the Christianity of their grandparents, Brian and Jon looked to an ancestral path in order to garner additional meaning to their everyday lives. They have willingly become ‘the other.’

The fictive kinship which Pike mentions in Earthly Bodies is present in Summerland Grove. Pike writes that Neopagans desire “family to replace the one they have rejected and a clear way to identify with chosen “families” is to separate their bodies from religious pasts.”²² Not only are there formal fictive kinship ties in Summerland Grove, such as siblings by oath, but when asked what Summerland Grove has afforded them, all members mentioned family. Brian’s wedding was attended by five blood relations and his friends from Summerland Grove, whom he referred to as “chosen kin.” He commented that the disparity between the number of genetic relations present and his friends showed him who he can count on. He also calls Summerland Grove a “home” and a “family.”²³ Jon and his partner Jessica B.²⁴ also stressed that they consider

²⁰ Asatru, or Norse Heathenism, is a Neopagan tradition based upon a religious movement present in Northern Europe as well as Iceland until approximately 1000 A.D. Contemporary followers of Asatru worship the Norse gods (Odin, Freya, etc.) and have their own holidays and rituals separate from those of other Neopagans.

²¹ Brian, Personal Interview, 15 July 2010.

²² Sarah M. Pike, Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community (University of California Press, 2001) 132.

²³ Brian, Personal Interview, 15 July 2010.

²⁴ The initial ‘B’ is not an indication of Jessica’s last name, but merely a way of differentiating between the two Jessicas discussed.

members from Summerland Grove with whom they worship family, even though they have only been participating in Summerland Grove events for two months.²⁵

Some members of Summerland Grove purposefully create situations in which they can be controlled by others and mimic the actions of others in order to feel accepted; it is not uncommon for novices to submit to conventionality when first approaching Neopaganism. Without any knowledge of how one is supposed to act in a Neopagan group, many new Pagans follow the lead of others in order to become more involved in the faith. Some Neopagans, such as Kiya, have been heavily influenced by others when developing their own spiritual path:

There was this one lady I met and she was a Celtic Reconstructionist. And she was really good at reconstructing her religion and saying: you know, I'm not living on a moor in 4th century Scotland so I have to adjust my religion. But before I adjust anything, I have to understand why they did it. And from there I can know what I need to do now and how I can adjust it so that it's still respectful, it's still in the spirit of the ancient faith, but it fits in my modern-day life. So she was definitely an inspiration for the kind of pagan I wanted to be.²⁶

In order to be a “successful” reconstructionist, Kiya followed the methods and techniques of another pagan.

Community

This act of creating or of merely openly representing oppositional identity at the individual level manifests itself in unexpected ways. Instead of creating an oppositional identity as a group, the community feels the need to homogenize. By implementing a ministry-training system, encouraging generational Neopaganism, and attempting to drive out flippant Pagans, Summerland Grove hopes to achieve their dream of “a united Pagan Community.” The benefits

²⁵ Jon and Jessica B., Personal Interview, 17 July 2010.

²⁶ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

of this, according to their website, is to “better educate the general public and foster tolerance for all religions.”²⁷ Summerland Grove recognizes the necessity of unity to gain the power to change the way Paganism is perceived in their community. Therefore, although individuality is tolerated and accepted, in certain respects homogenization is the ideal. Summerland Grove encourages the progression of Paganism in fields which lead to greater legitimacy and acceptance.

Summerland Grove is a family-friendly organization which hosts events aimed at children and provides on-site childcare at various gatherings. Although some Neopagans worry that an apathetic community will be the outcome of this new generation of children being raised within the religion, there are also numerous benefits. Children of Neopagans who are experiencing Neopaganism at a young age are forcing the religion to “confront its own process of maturation.”²⁸ The shift of Neopaganism from individual to generational could lend credibility in the eyes of outsiders. Instead of being made up solely of strangers from different backgrounds, Neopaganism could become a faith handed down from generation to generation. Brian explained the difference between non-Christian groups in the Mid-South. Neopaganism, for the most part, remains a religion of converts. While Brian admits that many Christians are “not necessarily happy about” those of other religions, Hindus are tolerated because they were born into the faith.²⁹ The ministry of Summerland Grove is aware of its growing youth population and is planning to assist in their spiritual growth. Brian is looking forward to leading a young adult

²⁷ "Who We Are." *Official Website of Summerland Grove*. 26 May 2009. Web. 18 July 2010. <<http://www.summerland.org/info.htm>>.

²⁸ Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the U.S.* (University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 86.

²⁹ Brian, Personal Interview, 19 June 2010.

group while another member will lead a children's group. As supported by the experiences of Summerland Grove members, some Christians that come in contact with Neopagans ask why someone would want to be Neopagan. This question becomes obsolete when children are raised within the faith. However, Neopaganism's oppositionality pertaining to its insistence that all members be consenting adults is challenged through this development. Summerland Grove is practicing mimetic isomorphism by mimicking the practices of mainstream religions in order to encourage a faith which is inherited.

While some members are still cautious about the participation of children, warning that beliefs, Pagan or not, should not be forced upon anyone and children have little understanding of what they are partaking in, the mothers of Summerland Grove believe their children have chosen a Pagan path. One such mother, Angelia, related how two of her four children are completely disinterested in Paganism and the third is only slightly involved. Her youngest child Olivia, however, has immersed herself more completely in Paganism. Olivia, who is ten years old, has an easier time understanding the male/female dynamic of Paganism as opposed to the wife-less God of Christianity. Olivia and her mother perform full moon rituals and Pagan crafts. Angelia gives her daughter the freedom to worship whomever she wishes, saying: "I am simply holding a lantern so she can see the path. She has to walk it."³⁰ Angelia is also published author who has been producing Pagan children's books, with Olivia's help, under the name Rowena Wishom. These books are designed to be a learning tool for young children interested in the basics of Paganism, such as the wheel of the year and ritual. The books also include crafts and other entertaining projects for children. While Angelia views these books as a combination of her love for writing, Paganism, and her daughter, she is also bringing Paganism into the mainstream by

³⁰ Angelia, Personal Interview, 24 June 2010.

suggesting that it is a child-friendly activity and equating it with other religious traditions. Step Into the Circle deliberately portrays Olivia as an average child who attends school and is a member of the Girl Scouts. Among her extracurricular activities are “moon school” and “Spiral Scouts.”³¹ A field, the sacred space of Pagan worship, is also shown along with a church, synagogue, and mosque. These juxtapositions of Paganism with mainstream behavior and religion are examples of mimetic isomorphism. In order to be accepted by the rest of society, Paganism must relate itself to normative faiths.

Thus far in Summerland Grove, younger members of the group have required the creation of coming-of-age rituals as well as influenced the types of rituals and rules which the church abides by. While other large festivals and groups may allow nudity or encourage sexual activity, which Summerland Grove mothers have mentioned as an obstacle when considering bringing children to other Pagan events, Summerland Grove prides itself on its no-nudity policy and generally tame atmosphere. Although state park regulations were the original source for some of these policies, Summerland Grove’s president Grynner stated that they are happy to uphold the standards at their annual Festival of Souls, setting them apart from other Neopagan festivals in the area. Kiya explained that as one of the largest pagan communities in the mid-South, Summerland Grove has “an image to uphold.” Especially in a religiously conservative environment, members of Summerland Grove must behave in a certain manner if they want to make Paganism “an acceptable alternative faith” and not “a bunch of freaky drum people.” Kiya concluded: “Allowing public events where there’s nudity and intoxication sends the wrong message.”³² In order to be successful in the region in which it is located, Summerland Grove has

³¹ Roswena Wishom, Step Into the Circle (Jupiter Gardens Press, 2010) 2.

³² Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

had to become more like the Christian organizations that surround it and is therefore practicing mimetic isomorphism. It has also limited its activities to coincide with U.S. law, an example of coercive isomorphism. Interestingly, although Summerland Grove is responding to outside influences, there are many participants who already hold the same views as the Christian communities that surround them. Mothers of Summerland Grove feel comfortable bringing their children to church events because of the no-nudity policy. Although Angelia has, in many ways, created an oppositional identity to her Dominionist Christian past identity, she still holds views on the appropriateness of the naked body in relation to children that are commonplace in America. Angelia is in line with normative isomorphism in that she has conformed to normative standards of society.

As Lewis wrote in Legitimizing New Religions, the authority of tradition, which is so often invoked in younger religions to both mask and legitimate innovation, is rarely viewed as valid by outsiders. Instead, these strategies are employed by the movement to appeal to the minds of its own participants.³³ One endorsement of tradition and dismissal of spirituality devoid of historical context or consistency is the anti-eclectic movement within Summerland Grove. Eclectics are Pagans who adopt different aspects from various historical religions or cultures. Grynner, Summerland Grove's President, admitted that he and the students he has mentored are wary of eclectics. According to Grynner, eclecticism does not work for those members of Summerland Grove who choose an eclectic path:

The one thing that spirituality is supposed to be, it's supposed to be that rock that never fails you. Eventually even your best of friends will fail you. Eventually any church will fail you. Eventually any organization will fail you. It might not be for very long, it may not be in a major way. But in some way they will fail you. And when everything else is gone, the one thing you

³³ James R. Lewis, Legitimizing New Religions (Rutgers University Press, 2003) 151.

should have to stand firm on to give you support, strength, and comfort is your spirituality. And if you just grab pal malt, it's not gonna. But if it's something you've actually worked on and grown into, anything can happen. At least you're solid. The world may be going to shit around you, but at least on the spiritual level, you're solid. And that gives you the foundation from which to sort through all the other chaos and crap and disaster that has hit your life. And it is a basic need to believe.³⁴

Yet there is an ideological bias against eclecticism in Summerland Grove as well. As Pike discussed in Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves, "'authentic' teachers" or lineage lends authenticity to an individual's religious path.³⁵ One of the most acceptable reasons for following a particular path is to reconnect with the religion of your ancestors. This can limit acceptable religious paths, depending on the circle, based upon one's genetics. For instance, "You're not necessarily going to get a lot of black people popping into Wicca," Grynner stated when addressing the emphasis some Pagans put on lineage. Grynner explained that some Pagan groups emphasize rote and heredity over sincerity. However, Summerland Grove's inclusive nature still falls short when it comes to most eclectics. Eclecticism itself is not looked down upon, but the manner in which it is carried out can be. A lack of care for historical framework or reconstructionist perspective can lead to malice, as Grynner expressed: " 'Oh look, I'm gonna be this great eclectic witch and take a little bit of everything, I don't [care] where I take it from.' That person needs to be shot."³⁶

Kiya also recognized these negative aspects as a result of Paganism becoming more popular:

Paganism has become a lot more mainstream. Whenever something is in the mainstream you have people jumping on because it's the cool thing. I said earlier I don't like hypocrites. I don't like people who don't think much either, especially when it something as important as your faith.

³⁴ Grynner, Personal Interview, 19 June 2010.

³⁵ Sarah M. Pike, Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community (University of California Press, 2001) 127.

³⁶ Grynner, Personal Interview, 25 June 2010.

I need you to be able to understand your faith and not necessarily defend, but explain why you do some of the things that you do. And if you jump on paganism because: ooh its cool, it has fairies, I get to play with fire...that's one of the downsides of it becoming a more mainstream thing.³⁷

In this way the church that strives to “Celebrate Diversity in the Pagan Community” only truly allows diversity to a certain extent. In order to curtail the complaints of Native Americans and appeal to academics Neopaganism has become much more concerned with the historical accuracy of its rituals and the social context of the societies who originally worshipped the gods and goddesses it has adopted. As Neopaganism is essentially an implementation of long gone religious beliefs and practices, Neopagans want the religions they have made their own to reflect those on which they are based. Pike explains the criterion of research which Grynner and others have expressed as necessary: “Neopagans assure themselves and their critics that they have ways of evaluating a borrower’s authenticity.”³⁸ While these anti-eclectic sentiments have not achieved homogenization within Neopaganism, partly due to the multiplicity of theological ideas within Paganism, they certainly are beginning to limit the ways in which one can be legitimately Pagan. Normative isomorphism, or professional homogenization through education, is being encouraged when members of Summerland Grove insist that followers must essentially become professionals rather than inexperienced and unknowledgeable practitioners.

Another way in which Summerland Grove follows the Berger model is its realm system. Summerland Grove’s realm system is a clergy training program which consists of five stages. Each stage takes about a year to complete, save for the fifth stage which has a minimum time requirement of two years. A member who is participating in the realm system will begin by learning the basics of Neopaganism and narrow their inquiry to their particular Pagan path as

³⁷ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

³⁸ Sarah M. Pike, Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community (University of California Press, 2001) 132.

they advance through the realms. The fifth realm's length qualifies participants for clergy status with the state of Tennessee. Once a member has graduated from the realm system, they can become part of the ministry of Summerland Grove. The realm system is an instance of mimetic isomorphism in that it mimics structures found in seminaries as well as coercive isomorphism because it conforms to legal standards.

Summerland Grove's ministers are legally recognized by the state of Tennessee after they have completed the lengthy realm process. This legal status is generally seen as positive by the members of Summerland Grove who are well aware of the advantages of being similar to other dominant religions in the area. Angelia commented that more established religions have seminaries to make sure the spiritual leaders understand the faith. The realm system, which takes at least four years to complete, ensures that Summerland Grove has educated ministers. Bill, another member of Summerland Grove, is concerned with Paganism being "assaulted" by other religions. He added that cults are "a far cry from churches, circles, or covens" and with legal recognition Paganism can "move out of the dark ages of ignorance and into the light of religious freedom."³⁹

Summerland Grove's president, Grynner, believes the realm system helps promote the church's motto: "Celebrating Diversity in the Pagan Community." He explains that the training allows a minister to relate to members who follow different paths within Paganism without imposing his or her "particular morality and spiritual beliefs" onto others. He criticized Christian seminaries which are "too steeped in their particular denomination's theology" that it cannot be set aside when counseling a member. He believes that Summerland Grove's ministry is more

³⁹ Bill, Personal Interview, 22 June 2010.

qualified to help someone in need of counseling because they do not attempt to combine their denomination's morality with the individual's morality. Instead, the framework is set by the party being counseled and a "much broader and much friendlier" discussion can ensue.⁴⁰

Mimetic isomorphism, in which an organization replicates the technologies, goals, or solutions of other organizations in order to be successful, is a means of interpreting the realm system. Various members compared the realm system to Christian seminary as a way to justify the system's legitimacy and highlight its usefulness. Summerland Grove's realm system also engages in normative isomorphism, in that it limits individuality in a profession through education. The realm system is an educational system which compartmentalizes ministers. Instead of sticking solely to their individual Pagan beliefs, each minister is forced to understand the beliefs of every Pagan path present within the church. They are taught to approach differences in the same manner and create solutions in the same vein.

Conclusions

The idea that organization inhibits personal freedom is one shared by many Neopagan leaders. Payment of leaders, hierarchy, professional clergy, and clergy credentials are all developments in Paganism which can both help and hinder the movement. For instance, clergy credentials can help legitimate Neopagan claims and bring Neopaganism into religious discussion. As the movement grows, financial support is necessary to sustain blossoming churches. Others, such as priestess Judy Harrow, say that the movement is already "mature" as it is able to "pass traditions from one generation to the next and accommodate growth through lineage coven systems. Growth that cannot be handled in this system is 'cancerous'."⁴¹ Some

⁴⁰ Grynner, Personal Interview, 19 June 2010.

⁴¹ Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (Waveland Press, 1994) 269.

Neopagans, such as those who worship in covens which are usually under fifteen people, believe that the growth of the religion is dangerous and the creation of new systems to support larger groups should be avoided. In the eyes of Summerland Grove's members, however, their realm system and resulting ministry provide numerous benefits. Cerea, a minister of the church, also shared that many Pagans do not believe in the necessity of organization, but find that they require it in times of need. The virtue of oppositionality among individual members is set aside in favor of providing services to the community.

Nevertheless, many within the Neopagan community crave acceptance from the majority. Orion states that "social consensus is required to transform a personal hallucination into a prophecy."⁴² Summerland Grove was initially formed from a small coven that today has a ministry, a clergy legitimating system, and various other characteristics of a larger organization. Whether these measures are merely practical, part of a legitimation strategy⁴³, or appreciated by all members is a matter which has not been fully explored. However, of the ten members interviewed extensively, some of whom were members of the ministry and some who were not, all members approved of the hierarchal organization of Summerland Grove. When asked what they disliked about Summerland Grove, all members answered that they would like more organization in the ministry. The "growing schism"⁴⁴ which Berger mentions undoubtedly exists, but probably not to the extent that most scholarly works on Neopaganism suggest.

⁴² Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (Waveland Press, 1994) 270.

⁴³ James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (Rutgers University Press, 2003) 151.

⁴⁴ Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the U.S.* (University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 100.

Magliocco's work on oppositionality encompasses a large part of American Neopagan life. She writes of the Neopagan community: "intentional marginalization is essential to their ability to critique the dominant paradigm and come up with creative alternatives."⁴⁵ However, Magliocco's work seems to only apply to individuals. For instance, Magliocco writes that Neopagans "reclaim terminology previously devalued by the dominant culture" to "create an identity in opposition to certain aspects of mainstream society."⁴⁶ While individuals in Summerland Grove may refer to themselves as witches, the community calls itself a 'church' rather than a circle, coven, or other commonly used Neopagan identifier. As a whole, Summerland Grove is not as countercultural as the individual actions or beliefs of its members.

The Berger model accurately describes much of what is occurring within Summerland Grove. Summerland Grove is concerned with the legality of its actions as well as the opinion of non-Pagans in the surrounding area. All of the actions of the community which result in isomorphism are in order to make Neopaganism an "acceptable alternative faith" in the eyes of the surrounding community.⁴⁷ However, there is a reasonable amount of pressure from within the organization itself to conform to certain standards. Berger's model seems to address outside influences as opposed to internal demands. Many of the changes in Neopaganism discussed above, such as anti-eclecticism, may occur for other reasons besides the influence of external organizations. Lewis writes that the "invocation of the authority of tradition" is a mode of legitimation whose principle function is to "legitimate each respective movement in the minds of

⁴⁵ Sabina Magliocco, Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 203.

⁴⁶ Sabina Magliocco, Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 185.

⁴⁷ Kiya, Personal Interview, 12 July 2010.

its own participants.”⁴⁸ In other words, the members of Summerland Grove hold the opinion that eclectic Neopagans are not worthy members of the community, regardless of their effect on others’ perceptions of the religion.

These tensions, which initially seem contradictory, can be explained by observing how the individual and community interact with oppositionality and the Berger model. The individual who is often attracted to Paganism recognizes themselves as contradictory to the majority and embrace this existence. For example, Kiya views herself as separated from mainstream society and Angelia has rejected the worldview of her family. However, when coming in contact with Neopaganism, this oppositionality turns to something that Berger’s model helps us to understand. As Brian became involved in Summerland Grove, he replaced his blood relations with members of the religious community, effectively equating Summerland Grove with a familial structure. The individual’s identity has not necessarily changed, as Neopaganism allows the individual the opportunity to be oppositional, but rather their identity is accepted in a way which allows them to adhere to homogenization. The Neopagan community is a place to be different, yet still be a part of a socially acceptable community. Collectively, the members of Summerland Grove wish to become homogenized in a way they previously did not have the opportunity to. Furthermore, Magliocco discusses tangible forms of oppositionality that are appreciated by the Neopagan community, such as songs and poems. The very acceptance of these oppositional views within a community, and their commonality within Neopaganism, begins to create the normative out of the oppositional. As evidenced by the actions of Summerland Grove members, the existence of a community and the individual’s contact with that community begins to change their behavior from oppositional to conformative.

⁴⁸ James R. Lewis, Legitimizing New Religions (Rutgers University Press, 2003) 151.