

= A Community of Witches =

A Community of Witches : Contemporary Neo Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States is a sociological study of the Wiccan and wider Pagan community in the Northeastern United States . It was written by American sociologist Helen A. Berger of the West Chester University of Pennsylvania and first published in 1999 by the University of South Carolina Press . It was released as a part of a series of academic books entitled *Studies in Comparative Religion* , edited by Frederick M. Denny , a religious studies scholar at the University of Chicago .

Berger became interested in studying the Wiccan and Pagan movement in 1986 , when she presented a lecture on the subject at the Boston Public Library . Subsequently becoming acquainted with members of the New England Pagan community , she undertook fieldwork in both a local Wiccan coven , the Circle of Light , and a wider Pagan organisation , the EarthSpirit Community (ESC) . In total , Berger underwent 11 years of fieldwork among the Pagan community . Along with ESC founder Andras Corban Arthen , Berger also undertook a " Pagan Census " survey of the U.S. in the mid 1990s to obtain more data on the country 's Pagan community .

A Community of Witches is based on interviews with more than a hundred practicing Wiccans and Pagans , study of the pre existing literature on the subject and a national survey of the Pagan community in the U.S. In her work , Berger interprets Wicca as a religion of late modernity , as opposed to postmodernity , and subsequently examines it using the theories of sociologists Anthony Giddens and James A. Beckford . Themes covered include Pagan conceptions of the self , the role of covens and the wider Pagan community , the place of children in the movement and the increasing routinization of Wicca through the foundation of organised churches and clergy .

Academic reviewers were mostly positive , but several raised concerns over Berger 's incorrect use of terminology . Reviewers noted the study 's importance in developing Pagan studies as an academic discipline and helping further the wider sociological investigation into new religious movements in the United States . In the years following the study 's publication , Berger continued to investigate the Pagan community , focusing her interest on the popularity of Wicca among teenagers .

= = Background = =

= = = Paganism and Wicca in the United States = = =

Contemporary Paganism , also referred to as Neo Paganism , is an umbrella term used to identify a wide variety of modern religious movements , particularly those influenced by or claiming to be derived from the various pagan beliefs of pre modern Europe . The religion of Pagan Witchcraft , or Wicca , was developed in England during the first half of the 20th century and is one of several Pagan religions . The figure at the forefront of Wicca 's early development was the English occultist Gerald Gardner (1884 ? 1964) , the author of *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) and the founder of a tradition known as Gardnerian Wicca . Gardnerian Wicca revolved around the veneration of both a Horned God and a Mother Goddess , the celebration of eight seasonally based festivals in a Wheel of the Year and the practice of magical rituals in groups known as covens . Gardnerianism was subsequently brought to the U.S. in the early 1960s by an English initiate , Raymond Buckland (1934 ?) , and his then wife Rosemary , who together founded a coven in Long Island . In the U.S. , new variants of Wicca developed , including Dianic Wicca , a tradition founded in the 1970s which was influenced by second wave feminism , emphasized female only covens , and rejected the veneration of the Horned God . One initiate of both the Dianic and Gardnerian traditions was a woman known as Starhawk (1951 ?) who went on to found her own tradition , Reclaiming Wicca . She furthermore published *The Spiral Dance : a Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979) , a book which helped spread Wicca throughout the U.S.

= = = Academic fieldwork into Wicca = = =

Prior to Berger 's work , several American researchers working in the field of Pagan studies had separately published investigations of the Pagan community in the United States and the United Kingdom . The first of these was the practicing Wiccan , journalist and political activist Margot Adler in her *Drawing Down the Moon : Witches , Druids , Goddess @-@ Worshippers , and Other Pagans in America Today* , which was first published by Viking Press in 1979 . A second study was produced by the anthropologist Tanya M. Luhrmann in her *Persuasions of the Witch 's Craft : Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (1989) , in which she focused on both a Wiccan coven and several ceremonial magic orders that were then operating in London .

The next academic book to be published based upon fieldwork undertaken in the U.S. Pagan community was *Living Witchcraft : A Contemporary American Coven* , published by Praeger in 1994 . *Living Witchcraft* had been co @-@ written by three academics , the sociologist Allen Scarboro , psychologist Nancy Campbell and literary critic Shirley Stave , herself a Wiccan practitioner . It was based upon their fieldwork undertaken in the Ravenwood coven of Atlanta , Georgia , over several months across 1990 and 1991 . At the same time as Scarboro , Campbell and Stave were undertaking their research , the American anthropologist and practicing Wiccan Loretta Orion was also undertaking an investigation into the Pagan movement in the East Coast and Midwest of the United States . Orion 's work was published as *Never Again the Burning Times : Paganism Revisited* by Waveland Press in 1995 , although would be heavily criticized in published reviews written by both Luhrmann and T.O. Beidelman , both of whom were of the opinion that Orion 's Pagan beliefs had clouded her critical interpretation . 1997 then saw the publication of *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia* , authored by the anthropologist Lynne Hume .

= = = Berger and her research = = =

Helen Berger , then a lecturer in sociology at the West Chester University of Pennsylvania , had initially become involved in the study of the Pagan movement in preparation for a series of public lectures that she gave at the Boston Public Library in October 1986 . Based on the subject of the historical witch trials that took place in New England during the Early Modern period , she devoted the final lecture in the series to an examination of the contemporary Pagan Witches , or Wiccans , then living in the area . Having yet to perform the sociological investigation that would culminate in *A Community of Witches* , Berger gained her information for this lecture from the information published in the works of Margot Adler , Starhawk and Marcello Truzzi , and also from a singular interview that she had carried out with a woman who was " peripherally associated " with Paganism . After the lecture , several audience members approached Berger to identify themselves as practicing Wiccans , and it was through them that she came into contact with the New England Pagan community . Three of the Wiccans at the lecture invited Berger to " participate as a researcher " as they founded their own coven , the Circle of Light , and she attended their weekly meetings and festival celebrations for the next two years .

At the first open Pagan ritual that she attended , Berger met Andras Corban Arthen , the founder of the EarthSpirit Community (ESC) , a Pagan organization open to non @-@ Wiccans which she joined after paying the annual membership fee of \$ 30 . Attending many of the ESC 's open rituals and festivals , she was introduced to a " diverse group " of Wiccans and other Pagans , and developed a contact base in the community . Berger and Arthen subsequently embarked on a project entitled " The Pagan Census " in an attempt to gain sociological data from the Pagan community across the U.S. Receiving funding from the Faculty Development Fund at West Chester University , Berger was aided in this project by over 15 students who helped her to code and enter data for the survey . Together , Berger and Arthen wrote and distributed their survey through Wiccan and Pagan organizations across the country , as well as in journals , on the internet and at festivals . The duo received over 2000 responses , providing Berger with one of her main sources of information .

Throughout her 11 @-@ year period of fieldwork , Berger had to use snowball sampling to retrieve

her data on the Pagan community , something that she attributed to the " secrecy of groups and practitioners " . She conducted formal interviews with over 40 practicing Pagans , and over 60 others instead were informally interviewed during conversations at Pagan events , following which Berger recorded their responses in her fieldnotes . She participated in rituals with ten different Wiccan covens , two of which were all @-@ female covens , and the other eight of which were mixed @-@ gender in structure , but all of whom assembled in the Northeastern United States . Accepting that this regional focus might affect her results , she supplemented her fieldwork by reading literature on Paganism from across the country , concluding that " the differences among groups and practitioners within the United States are less important than the similarities . " Unlike the sociologists Margot Adler and Loretta Orion , both of whom had been or became Pagans whilst studying the movement , Berger stated that she had not joined the religion , thereby remaining an " outsider " throughout her research , but had made many friends within the Pagan community .

A Community of Witches was a part of a series of books entitled ' Studies in Comparative Religion ' that were published by the University of South Carolina Press , and edited by Frederick M. Denny . In Denny 's preface to the book , he remarked that it " adds significantly to the steadily growing scholarly literature " on the subject of Wicca and contemporary Paganism , being of " considerable use for our understanding of how other new religious communities are sustaining and developing themselves in the unprecedented rich tapestry of American religious pluralism . "

= = Synopsis = =

Starting with a preface in which Berger explains how she first began studying the Wiccan and Pagan community of New England , Berger opens the main part of her book with a description of a Wiccaning which she attended . Proceeding to introduce both the Wiccan religion and her theoretical approach , Berger explains the British sociologist James A. Beckford 's approach to the religions of late modernity as well as Anthony Giddens ' theoretical approaches to modernism .

In the second chapter , " The Magical Self " , Berger examines the ways in which Wiccans in the U.S. understand themselves , looking at sociological ideas about self @-@ identity and utilising them in her analysis of Wiccan rituals that deal with the transformation of the self . She moves on to look at concepts of gender in the Wiccan community , both for men and women and among homosexuals . The third chapter , entitled " The Coven : Perfect Love , Perfect Trust " , provides an explanation of the coven system within Wicca , and the ways in which friendships are built and collapse amongst coven members , and the extent to which covens imitate family structures .

Chapter four , " A Circle within a Circle : The Neo @-@ Pagan Community " , looks at the wider community beyond the coven structure , interpreting it through theoretical ideas about community in late modernity . Moving on , Berger looks at ideas of community memory and community building amongst U.S. Pagans , before examining the manner in which some Pagans engage in both emancipatory politics and life politics . The fifth chapter , entitled " The Next Generation " , is devoted to the place of children within the Pagan community , and deals with ideas of rites of passage , attitudes towards children 's sexuality and the extent to which children are involved in rituals .

The sixth chapter , " The Routinization of Creativity " , looks at the relationship between Wicca and routinization , and examines how the anti @-@ authoritarian ethos of the religion has been in part eroded through the creation of Pagan organisations like the EarthSpirit Community and the Circle Sanctuary , which have purchased land and led to the development of a paid clergy . Finally , Berger concludes her work with a round @-@ up of her study , and muses on the possible future for Wicca in the United States .

= = Arguments = =

= = = Wicca as a religion of late modernity = = =

Whereas the sociologist Loretta Orion had believed that contemporary Paganism was a postmodern movement , in *A Community of Witches* , Berger argued against this , instead considering Wicca to be a religion of late modernity . In supporting this position , Berger turned to the work of the British sociologist of religion , James A. Beckford (1942 ?) , who in his book *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (1989) had argued that many new religious movements reflect the characteristics of late modernity by challenging traditional definitions of religion , sharing a holistic worldview and emphasising the development and transformation of the self . Berger stated that while " Wicca is not specifically mentioned by Beckford , it does fit the model of New Age religions that he is analyzing . " Whilst accepting that elements of postmodernism can be found within Wicca , Berger argued that the religion does not " signify an epistemological break with Enlightenment thought " , and that as such it was intrinsically late modernist in structure ; as she related , the " emphasis on globalism , the belief in personal and social transformation , and the use of noninstrumental rationality place Wicca firmly within the Enlightenment tradition . "

Berger 's choice of " framework for understanding Wicca within the context of late modernity " was that of structuration , a theory put forward by the English sociologist and political theorist Anthony Giddens (1938 ?) in his book *The Constitution of Society* (1984) . Structuration theory maintains that both structure and agency influence human beings in their choices ; the former refers to the recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available for an individual , whilst the latter refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices . Berger argued that whilst the beliefs and practices of Wiccans were " in part determined by social factors , such as class , race and gender " , at the same time these Wiccans exerted a level of control and self @-@ determination over their lives " both by the very act of becoming a Witch and through the self @-@ conscious use of rituals to create a persona . "

= = = Wicca as a result of globalism = = =

Berger was of the opinion that Wicca 's " development and spread " could be seen as " an outgrowth of globalism " . As evidence , she noted that the religion had been created by modern westerners adopting elements from a variety of " older and geographically disparate religious practices " in order to fashion their new faith , something which she believed was only possible in a globalised world .

= = = The future of Wicca = = =

Whereas Mary Jo Neitz (1991) and Nancy J. Finley (1991) had both argued that ultimately , it would be the feminist @-@ orientated , female @-@ only form of Wicca found in the Dianic tradition that would grow to become dominant in the United States , Berger disagreed , arguing that " inclusive groups " , meaning those traditions who welcome both men and women into their covens , " will ultimately prove to be more significant . " She believed that this was in part because they " are more likely to include and fully involve children in their practices " , something which she saw as having the likely " greatest impact " on the future of Wicca in the United States . In Berger 's view , these children born into the faith would act as " maintainers of their families ' practice " , replacing the role that had formerly been played by neophytes in the community .

= = Reception and recognition = =

= = = Academic reviews = = =

In a review published in the *Review of Religious Research* journal , Stephen D. Glazier of the University of Nebraska described *A Community of Witches* as an " important study " which had " many virtues and few faults . " Glazier commended it as an improvement on earlier sociological studies of contemporary Paganism , which in his opinion had dwelt on " personal experiences " and

acted as something of " proselytizers for Neo @-@ Pagan beliefs and practices . " He furthermore praised Berger for " maintaining a high degree of theoretical sophistication " while still " remaining accessible for the average reader " . He also expressed several criticisms , for instance noting that Berger had used the terms " Wiccan " and " Neo @-@ Pagan " interchangeably , even though they have different meanings , something that he felt might confuse some of the book 's readers .

In her review of *A Community of Witches* published in the *Sociology of Religion* journal , Frances Kostarelos of the Governors State University commented positively on Berger 's work , describing it as " an invaluable theoretical and descriptive account of Wicca " that is also " a fine example of ethnographic research and writing . " Stefanie von Schnurbein of the University of Chicago described *A Community of Witches* as " an exciting and important approach to the study of contemporary neopaganism " in her review published in *The Journal of Religion* . Schnurbein believed that Berger " has an intimate knowledge of her field and makes creative and interesting use of contemporary sociological theory " but that a " discussion of the vivid cultural and theoretical controversies around gender and sexuality would have added to the theoretical value of Berger 's book . "

Writing in the *Contemporary Sociology* journal , Tanice G. Foltz of Indiana University Northwest described *A Community of Witches* as " Well organized , clearly written , and aimed at an academic audience " . Believing it to be a " valuable addition to the existing scholarship on witchcraft " , Foltz did highlight some problems with the work , wishing that it had included an " in @-@ depth analysis " of her Pagan Census survey and noting that it erroneously used the terms " Neo @-@ Paganism " , " Witchcraft " and " Wicca " interchangeably . In her review for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* , Mary Jo Neitz of the University of Missouri was more critical , arguing that Berger had generalised information from the north @-@ eastern U.S. and claimed that it was applicable for the Pagan community across the entire country , something which Neitz felt was counter to her " own observations of Wicca . "

= = = Wider recognition = = =

A Community of Witches was awarded the A List Exceptional Books of 1999 Award . It was also mentioned by Canadian religious studies scholar Barbara Jane Davy in her 2007 work , *Introduction to Pagan Studies* , during which she listed the books on Pagan Studies that had then seen publication .

= = Berger 's later work = =

The publication of *A Community of Witches* did not signal the end of Berger 's studies on the subject of American Paganism , and over the following several years she would publish several more volumes detailing her work in this area . In 2003 , she co @-@ authored a book delving deeper into the results of the Pagan Census that she had undertaken with Andras Corban Arthen . Entitled *Voices from the Pagan Census : A National Survey of Witches and Neo @-@ Pagans in the United States* , it was co @-@ written with Leigh S. Shaffer , a fellow professor of sociology at West Chester University , and also with Evan A. Leach , then an associate professor of management at West Chester . Like *A Community of Witches* , *Voices from the Pagan Census* was published by the University of South Carolina Press in their series on ' *Studies in Comparative Religion* ' , and in his preface to the book , the series editor Frederick M. Denny referred to it as the " sequel " to Berger 's earlier work .

In their preface , Berger , Leach and Shaffer discussed the Pagan Census and how it had been used in producing *A Community of Witches* ; they noted that at the time Berger had originally written the book , " the rest of the data had not been completely processed , cleaned , and analyzed . Unlike that book , which relied primarily on her ethnographic research in the northeastern United States and an analysis of journals , books , and newsletters written by Neo @-@ Pagans , this one is based primarily on the survey data . "

In 2005 , the University of Pennsylvania published an edited anthology entitled *Witchcraft and*

Magic in the New World : North America in the Twentieth Century , which had been edited by Berger . In 2007 , Berger 's third book was published , Teenage Witches : Magical Youth and the Search for the Soul , which had been co -@-@ written with Douglas Ezzy , a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Tasmania in Australia .