University of California, Santa Barbara

Magick in the City of Angels: Navigating Reality Among Contemporary Magick Users in the Greater Los Angeles Area

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Religious Studies

by

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Abstract

Magick in the City of Angels: Navigating Reality Among Contemporary Magick Users in the Greater Los Angeles Area

By

Damian Lanahan-Kalish

This research asks how modern practitioners of magic approach ideas of reality and truth in their lives and magical practices. Specifically, this work focuses on a loosely connected group of magic users referred to in this text as the "magick tradition" in the greater Los Angeles Area. This is a population who identify as Witches, Wiccans, Pagans, and Thelemites among other names. While there is great variety among these different groups, they all share a common lineage as well as many practices and beliefs. They draw on this lineage to create their own forms of scholarship, theology, and ritual with the goal of building new realities and ways of life. Though primarily an ethnography, this dissertation begins by tracing the history of the magick tradition from Renaissance alchemists to modern TikTok Witches. The rest the dissertation relies on participatory fieldwork with three Los Angeles magickal institutions. Two of these are storefronts with associated Witchcraft covens and one is a local body of the international initiatory order Ordo Templi Orientis. Fieldwork with these three locations showed that these magicians move easily back and forth between a reality that is fixed and one that is mutable. This is as true when they are explaining their magick's effectiveness as when they are conducting their spells and rituals. Their magick works explicitly by moving back and forth across these extremes, instrumentalizing the tensions inherent in a modern world where both reality and truth are

often unstable and precarious subjects. These magick users provide examples of how to embrace the uncertainty of unstable truths. Instead of existential dread or political doom, they find beauty and possibility in reality's pliability.

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Introduction

One of the first magickal[1] events I attended in Los Angeles was advertised as a "hypnotic bullshit bonfire" and it was held at The Green Man metaphysical store in North Hollywood, a which would later become one of my primary research locations. This evening was hosted by Adrianne, a woman with short black hair who looked to be no older than her mid-thirties. She was wearing dark clothes with a large satchel around her neck, which I would later learn was a personal talisman. She introduced herself as a hypnotherapist, a life coach, and a Witch. Before starting the class, she had us all write down any "bullshit" we wanted to get rid of from the last year on pieces of lined paper. She provided some short introductory remarks and then led us in a guided meditation using neuro-linguistic programing (NLP). This was a popular technique in metaphysical circles which emphasizes the power of language to change and heal people's psyches. We were then invited to share our visions before throwing the pieces of paper containing our bullshit into a "ceremonial fire" that was burning in a coffee can in the parking lot behind the store. After the event we shared some food and wine and chatted. The youngest woman there, a thin woman with dyed platinum blonde hair in her early twenties, gave us all samples of a mushroom tincture she was trying to sell. She assured me I would still be safe to drive home.

I had come down from Santa Barbara earlier in the day with a fellow graduate student who wanted to spend some time somewhere a bit more cosmopolitan. We got lunch at the

[1] I use the spelling "magick" and "magickal" throughout this text when referring specifically to the form of magic practiced by my subjects. I use the standard spelling to refer to all other magical practices.

famous Canter's Deli and then looked around the neighborhood. It was a popular area for young people and was also a major center for the city's Jewish population. The storefronts were an odd mix of Judaica, trendy clothing stores, Eastern European markets, and stores that sold nothing but sneakers wrapped in plastic. One of the clothing stores had a large pentagram in the window made out of old newspapers. This seemed like a reasonable place to begin investigating magick in the city. My friend and I entered the store where we were greeted by clouds from a smoke machine and a giant unicorn statue. A DJ spun records from an upper level and the store seemed to sell clothes mostly for attending music festivals. In one of the corners there was a small camping tent with a young woman in it and a sign that read "free tarot readings."

From here we visited the Museum of Jurassic Technology, a natural history-style museum whose exhibits teetered on the edge of credibility. We saw an exhibit on decaying dice narrated via a crackly recording by the late stage magician and actor Ricky Jay, dioramas of the historic mobile homes of Los Angeles, and a retrospective of carvings on fruit pits. The interior of the museum was made to resemble at turns a bare bones scientific exhibit, a Victorian mansion, a vaguely orientalist mausoleum, a drawing room, and, on the roof, a tea garden. This dizzying variety of internal spaces combined with the exhibits to create a feeling of suspension between the "real" and the invented. The Museum of Jurassic Technology thrives off of the odd pleasure we feel from both being inside and outside of a joke at the same time. It is a safe place to explore the creeping realization we all have that everything is fabricated and reality is always unstable. It is no surprise that such an institution can be found in Los Angeles

Five years and one pandemic later, this first research trip to Los Angeles exemplifies what the magick community in Los Angeles can tell us about both the city and contemporary religiosity writ large. That pentagrams and tarot are living comfortably beside the most outrageous and trendy clothing speaks to the popularity of magick and Witchcraft, but also begs questions about what happens when occult practices meet commercial culture. This is a city where the imaginary drives industry. The tension between the fantasy of Los Angeles and the material life of its citizens is apparent everywhere. The Bullshit Bonfire encapsulates much of this tension. We were asked to engage in an imaginative act to rid ourselves of our material problems. This bonfire as well as the tarot reader at the clothing store are part of a growing population in Los Angeles and the country, a tradition with roots in the very origins of modernity, a tradition I call the "magick tradition."

Using this term, I have drawn a large circle around my subjects. This includes those who identify as Witches, magicians, sorcerers, cunning folk, Pagans[2], and sometimes even wizards and warlocks. Many follow teachings set down by organized orders like the Golden Dawn, Gardnerian Wicca, or the Ordi Templi Orientis, although just as many mix these teachings, working either alone or in small groups, creating their own forms of magick from the material of their predecessors. Specifically, this term refers to those whose primary religious act is engaging in magical rituals and rites that draw from the lineage of Renaissance alchemists and Victorian magicians – a lineage which is the subject of the first

[2] I have capitalized the word "Pagan" throughout the work when referring the contemporary religious movement in line with the request of Oberon Zell, one of the founders of the movement who has been campaigning for this change for decades. His open letter to the Chicago Manual of Style and the AP Style book can be found here: Oberon Zell, "Capitalize 'Pagan' in Chicago Manual of Style & AP Style Book," Change.org, December 3, 2013, https://www.change.org/p/university-of-chicago-press-associated-press-capitalize-pagan-in-chicago-manual-of-style-ap-stylebook. I have done the same for other terms that refer to magickal religions and their practitioners, such as Witch, Wicca, Neopagan, Druid, and Thelemite.

chapter of this dissertation. This category is intentionally broad and meant to cross boundaries that often separate academic and popular categories such as Witchcraft, ceremonial magic, contemporary Paganism, and Western esotericism. Still, it excludes those who don't center magic as their primary religious act or draw on other lineages such as certain Pagan groups and many who consider themselves part of the "New Age" or "spiritual" community.

The following dissertation explores how those practicing in this tradition understand their reality and wrestle with the idea of truth, particularly when it comes to the effectiveness of their magick. These aspects are explored through fieldwork with three different magickal communities in the greater Los Angeles area. The first is Star Sapphire Lodge, a local body of an international initiatory order. The second two, The Green Man and The Crooked Path, are both metaphysical stores with associated covens. Fieldwork with these three locations showed that these magicians move easily back and forth between a reality that is fixed and one that is mutable. This is as true when they are explaining their magick's effectiveness as it is when they are conducting their spells and rituals. Their magick works explicitly by moving back and forth across these extremes, instrumentalizing the tensions inherent in a modern world where both reality and truth are often unstable and precarious subjects.

What is the Magick Tradition?

What I am calling here the "magick tradition" is both an organizing principal for the groups that I study and an aspect of their life. The idiosyncratic spelling of magick is taken from Victorian occultist Aleister Crowley who coined the term as a way to set what he was doing apart from stage and folk magic. The circle I am drawing crosses two interconnected

categories in the study of religion. The first is what scholars call "Contemporary Pagan Studies," which encompasses traditions referred to as Pagan, Neopagan, Wicca, or Witchcraft. The second is "Western esotericism," which practitioners often refer to as ceremonial magick or the occult. The historical connection between these groups is well documented with many scholars finding the roots of contemporary Paganism or Witchcraft in Western esotericism.[3] On a social science level however there has been very little work connecting the two. This work seeks to fill that gap by showing populations that don't just share many qualities, but also a share worldview, particularly when it comes to unraveling what is "real and true." They also share a number of behaviors that are worth briefly listing here.

All the magickal traditions I have encountered draw on some form of pre-Christian religious system. Everyone I met used classical Greek mythology and deities in their magickal work. This comes directly from their lineage in Renaissance humanism, rekindled regularly by magickal innovators "rediscovering" texts originally translated and made popular in the 15th and 16th centuries. Many Pagans and Witches also draw on mythology from the British Isles, often taken from the works by 19th and 20th century anthropologists and folklorists.[4] Whatever tradition they are drawing on, most groups celebrate festivals based on the solstices and the equinoxes. For Pagans and Witches this is often called the

[3] Nevil Drury, "The Modern Magical Revival," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden, The Netherlands, 2008), 21-23; Ronald Hutton. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. New Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*. (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2006).

[4] Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

"wheel of the year." This calendar has four primary festival (sometimes called sabbats): Beltane (May 1st), Lughnasa (August 1st), Samhain (November 1st), and Imbolc (February 1st).[5] In the contemporary magick community a large variety of other traditions are also drawn on, often connected to the practitioner's ancestry. During my work I met a practitioners who drew on Nordic, Mesoamerican, Slavic, and Italian folk traditions.

Tarot cards and astrology are also nearly universal among magick users. While not everyone I met engaged with both of these forms of divination, most people drew on them in rituals and regularly used their imagery. Astrology has long been popular in the United States, going back to colonial times, although it appears that tarot has somewhat overtaken it.[6] Still, I found that tarot was much more popular than astrology in the communities I interacted with. Many of those I spoke to suggested that the latter was a little too irrational for them. This trend is supported by Helen Berger's most recent survey data which shows tarot being a more popular form of divination than astrology among contemporary Pagans and about a quarter of those researched found it "not scientific at all."[7]

Kabbalah, the Jewish medieval mystical system, remains central to esoteric traditions while playing a less important role in many Pagan and Witchcraft traditions. All the traditions I have encountered that do use Kabbalah base it on the system developed by the

[5] Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who Practice Alone*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), *9;* Drury, "The Modern Magical Revival," 63-72.

[6] Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion*. New Haven, Conn. London: Yale University Press, 2008, 74-76.

[7] Berger, *Solitary Pagans,* 100-105.

19th century French poet and occultist Eliphas Levi. Levi built on the work of Renaissance magicians who Christianized Kabbalah.[8] One of Levi's major contributions was creating a system that combined the Tarot and Kabbalah.[9] The related practice of gematria, which finds secret meaning in the connection between letters numbers, is also fairly common. While these two practices were often combined, with the Hebrew alphabet as the primary vehicle for gematria, I have seen recent magicians using Greek, Gaelic, and Norse alphabets. All of these practices are frequently pulled together into complicated systems of correspondence, often mixing together in unique ways in group and individual practices. This is particularly true of tarot and Kabbalah which were first combined by Levi and have remained entwined in the magickal tradition ever since.[10]

Metaphysicals, Witches, Magicians, Wiccan, Occultists, Pagan, etc.

A kaleidoscope of terms have been used to describe the populations that make up the magick tradition, with different scholars drawing different circles depending on their research interest. At the broadest level they all fit into what historian of religion Catherine Albanese calls "American Metaphysical Religion." Albanese identifies this tradition in her book *Republic of Mind and Spirit,* in which she provides a compressive history of this strain of

[8] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 30-35. Albanese discusses the "Christianizing" of Kabbalah in the Renaissance.

[9] Drury, "The Modern Magical Revival," 26. Drury notes that, while Levi is the source most future magicians drew on, it in fact was the French physician Dr. Gerard Encausse who first made this connection in his book *The Tarot of the Bohemians.*

[10] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195.

American religion, tracing it from precolonial America to the 21st century. In this work she builds on and responds to other historians of American religion such as Jon Butler and David Hall. Butler and Hall argue that there was a vibrant world of both scholarly and folk occult practice in early America, much of which was stamped out by the end of the Civil War by the twin powers of scientific rationalism and Christian orthodoxy.[11]

Albanese argues that the opposite is true: the post-Civil War period was a time for major innovation and a flowering of metaphysical religion. Albanese identifies four "themes" that define American metaphysical religion:

1) "A pre-occupation with the mind and its powers," by which she means both our rational and intuitive mind and all its possibilities, including extra sensory powers.

2) "A predisposition toward the ancient cosmological theory of correspondence." This is an important aspect of the magick tradition which sees the higher and lower realms of existence as mirrors of each other. Often referred to by practitioners and scholars as the relationship between "microcosm" and "macrocosm," metaphysicals study our realm of existence for ways to interact with the higher worlds. This aspect aligns with what Albanese calls "combinativeness" which is a tendency for metaphysicals to combine religious, scientific, magical, and other systems in an effort to decode our reality in such a way that they can work with the higher realms.

[11] Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Hall, David D. *Worlds Of Wonder, Days Of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

3) "The movement of energy," which imagines the whole universe in constant motion. This concept provides the medium by which change in the "microcosm" can effect change in the "macrocosm."

4) "A yearning for salvation seen as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing." This is the tendency for metaphysicals to seek salvation not from the Christian concept of sin but rather from mental and physical ailments, defects, or impurities.

With the possible exception of this last one, the magick tradition regularly trades in all of these themes.

On a slightly less broad level, a term that has become popular over the past few decades with both scholars and magicians is "occulture." Religious scholar Christopher Partridge brought this term to the academic study of religion. Partridge acknowledges that he borrowed it from cultural studies scholar George McKay, although he also notes that the term was being used in the British magick scene at the time. Partridge defines occulture as "those often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices."[12] Like metaphysical religion this is a large umbrella under which the magick users I met in Los Angeles easily fit, but it's not quite specific enough. Magick users draw elements from both of the lineages described above and leave others behind.

From here the study of the academic study of the magick tradition is split into two broad categories. One category includes those who refer to themselves as Pagans, Neopagans, and Witches. This group is often referred to in academic settings as

[12] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume 1 Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2005), 68.

Contemporary Paganism or Pagan Studies. The second category includes those who often refer to themselves as ceremonial magicians and use the term occult to describe their magickal work. This group falls under the academic category "Western esotericism" – a term that practitioners also use. While, as noted above, it has long been acknowledged in both fields that contemporary Pagans owe much to the history of Western esotericism, these two fields are most often treated separately with works on one giving a brief nod to the other.[13]

Nearly all of the work on Western esotericism has been either textual or historical, focusing on the medieval and early modern period. The most interesting of this work for this project are the scholars who have been dedicated to tracing the influence of alchemical, Hermetic, Kabbalistic, and other magickal practices on the contemporary world. The first major name in this category is Frances Yates, who first presented the argument that Hermeticism was a direct influence on the European enlightenment in her book *Giordano Bruno and the Enlightenment Tradition.*[14] Yates' work later came under serious scrutiny, particularly her argument that Rosicrucianism had a major influence on the development of

[13] Two recent examples of the tendency to separate these sides of the magick tradition are Nicholas. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who Practice Alone* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019). Goodrick-Clark's history only contains passing references to Witchcraft or Paganism in his chapters on the 20th century. Mentions of the occult, esoteric, or even ceremonial magic are conspicuously absent from Berger's surveys.

[14] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964; Reis., Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

science, but her work opened the door for other scholars who continued to point to the importance of occult knowledge in the history of Western culture.[15]

One of these scholars was French historian Antoine Faivre who was the first scholar to be appointed to a chair in Western esotericism in 1979 at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. He solidified the idea of a Western esoteric tradition as a "pattern of thought" with its own qualities, not simply as traditions concerned with secret knowledge.[16] He started the first academic journal dedicated to the subject, *Aries*, in 1983. This journal was relaunched in 2001 under the editorship of Wouter Hanegraaff, a scholar whose work is as interested in the history of esoteric traditions as it is on the place these traditions and the study of them has in the modern academy.[17]

While ethnographic work on Western esotericism still remains thin, there are a few scholars, along with Hanegraaff, who have made it a point to study the contemporary incarnations of the traditions they study.[18] Many of these books look at esotericism not as a body of knowledge but as a form of discourse often centered on debates around secrecy and

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[15] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "How Hermetic Was Renaissance Hermetism?" *Aries* 15, no. 2 (September 2015): 179–209; Brian Vickers,. "Frances Yates and the Writing of History." *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 (1979): 287–316; Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*. (London: Routledge, 2001).

[16] Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*. Trans. Christine Rhone (Albany NY: State Univ of New York Press, 2010).

[17] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 2012)

[18] Susannah Crockford and Egil Asprem, "Ethnographies of the Esoteric: Introducing Anthropological Methods and Theories to the Study of Contemporary Esotericism." *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–23. Crockford and Asprem give a concise history of this issue in the field as an introduction to an issue of the journal *Correspondence* dedicated to ethnography of the esoteric.

authenticity. In 2005, Joshua Gunn published *Modern Occult Rhetoric,* which explores the language of secrecy and esotericism in media from the early modern period to the present.[19] Egil Asprem's 2012 book on Enochian magic, *Arguing with Angels,* follows a magickal language from medieval Europe to the contemporary world showing how discourse evolves over centuries.[20] Hugh Urban's history of sex magick follows discourses around freedom and transgression though the same period.[21] Asprem and Urban begin the work of crossing categorical boundaries by including contemporary Pagans in their work, although the bulk of their research remains focused on the esoteric side of the discipline. Some of the most interesting work in this vein has been produced by religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal whose work on popular culture, especially science fiction, often asks us to be wary of the information that is dismissed as too fantastical or magickal when doing academic work.[22] These scholars provide examples of how to approach the occult and the esoteric as something integrated into the broader culture, something that plays out in the all those who draw on this knowledge rather than something that happens only behind closed doors in exclusive meetings or can only be found in ponderous secret texts.

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[19] Gunn, Joshua, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*. Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique. Tuscaloosa, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 2005.

[20] Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013).

[21] Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

[22] Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*. (Chicago, Il.: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

The literature in Pagan studies has proven much more influential on my research as more of it deals with America and tends toward the social sciences. The term Pagan as a description of a contemporary religious community dates back to at least the mid-60s when religious figures like Oberon Zell and Victor Anderson started using the term "Pagan" as a positive identifier for their burgeoning religious movements.[23] The term slowly began appearing in popular and scholarly publications outside the community over the next few decades. While she preferred "Neopagan" to describe her subjects, the publication of Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* cemented the use of "Pagan," "Neopagan," and "Neo-Pagan," as overarching terms for a number of different movements in the United States.[24] Subtitled "Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today," the book brought the term to a broad audience. Although written for a popular press, the book was significantly rigorously researched and broad in scope to serve as the starting point for the academic study of Paganism or Neopaganism. Scholars of new religious movements such as J. Gordon Melton started including them as a category in their work in the early 1990s.[25]

Many scholars, both inside and outside the tradition, have come to use the terms "Pagan" or "Neopagan" as a broad category that includes Witchcraft among other terms of self-identification such as Heathen, Faery, or Druid. Although this is a useful taxonomical

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[23] Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*. Revised & Updated edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 4; Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 179.

[24] Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon.*

[25] Melton, J. Gordon, and Isotta Poggi, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Paganism in America, 2nd Edition: A Bibliography*. (New York: Routledge, 1992).

move it doesn't always line up with the insider use of these terms. Although many Witches do see their tradition as part of a wider "Pagan revival" they will also sometimes refer to "Pagans" as a different population with a different history than that of Witchcraft. Few of the people I met use the term Pagan, with the exception of those at Star Sapphire Lodge, but all of them referred to themselves as Witches. All the members of the two covens associated with my sites embraced this term and some of my teachers even insisted that I was a Witch simply by being in the classes and enthusiastically participating in the rituals.

"Witchcraft" has also become a more common term for scholars of religion. The earliest scholarly work on contemporary Neopagan Witchcraft was Tanya Luhrmann's 1989 *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft.*[26] This was a multi-sited ethnography of British Witchcraft which focused on questions of the populations credulousness when it comes to the effects of magick. A decade later, in 1999, Ronald Hutton published *Triumph of the Moon* which remains the most comprehensive history of modern Witchcraft and in many ways the entire magick tradition.[27] A historian of early modern British Witchcraft, his book traces the roots of the modern movement to Victorian occultism, German and British Romanticism, popular novels, and early scouting clubs, among other influences. The same year, sociologist Helen Berger published the first academic work on Witchcraft across America, *A Community of Witches.*[28]

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[26] Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[27] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon.*

[28] Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

The publication of these books marked the beginning of a small boom in scholarly work on Paganism and Witchcraft. In 2003, Helen Berger published *Voices from the Pagan Census*, a collaboration with members of the groups she studied in her first book and which expanded on the survey work she had begun in the previous work.[29] In 2005, she published the edited volume, *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary America*.[30] In 2007, she joined Australian sociologist Douglas Ezzy for the study of magick among contemporary youth, *Teenage Witches*.[31] Berger's work continues to be the most comprehensive sociological material of Witchcraft and Paganism in the United States.

This period also saw the beginnings of the ethnographic study of Paganism and Witchcraft in America. In 2001, Sarah Pike published *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves,* a multi-sited study of Pagan festivals which focuses on boundaries Pagans contend with, produce, and maintain, in their quest for self-invention.[32] That same year, Jone Salomonsen published *Enchanted Feminism*, an ethnography of one of the biggest Witchcraft institutions at the time, the Reclaiming Witch community in San Francisco.[33] In 2004, Sabina Magliocco

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[29] Helen A. Berger; Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

[30] Helen A. Berger, ed. *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[31] Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy, *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for the Self* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

[32] Sarah M Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

[33] Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2001).

published *Witching Culture,* an ethnography of Witchcraft in the San Francisco Bay Area.[34] All of these scholars did their primary research for these books during the height of Witchcraft's popularity in the 1990s.

The most recent books on the magick tradition in America both focus on Norse Paganism. Sociologist Jennifer Snook's *American Heathens,* published in 2015, is a semi-autoethnography drawing on over a decade of study and practice with the American Heathen community.[35] In 2018, religious studies scholar Jefferson Calico's 2018 *Being Viking* looks at the same population but takes a multi-cited approach looking at the national movement. Both books come in the wake of a growing visibility of Norse Pagans engaging in right wing white nationalism, although most scholars suggest that this is a vocal minority of those who consider themselves Heathens. While there is plenty of overlap between those I study and Norse Paganism, those who consider themselves Heathens tend to be a different population with a different lineage and thus stand slightly outside the magick tradition.

Over the last decade a few new scholars have taken up the historical study of Paganism and Witchcraft, primarily focusing on the British Isles. British archeologist Ethan Doyle White published two surveys of the tradition: *Wicca: History, Belief & Community in*

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[34] Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[35] Jennifer Snook, *American Heathens: The Politics of Identity in a Pagan Religious Movement* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2015).

Modern Pagan Witchcraft[36] and *The New Witches of the West.*[37] While these books focused on the broad category of modern Witchcraft, White has also been the primary historian of the subset calling itself "Traditional Witchcraft," publishing a series of articles and book chapters on the subject from 2011-2019.[38] Israeli historian of religion Shai Feraro published articles and books on Paganism in both Israel and Britain including the most comprehensive history of Witchcraft and feminism in Britain, *Women and Gender Issues in British Paganism, 1945–1990*,[39] published in 2020. In 2019 Feraro and White published an edited volume on the 20th anniversary of the publication of *Triumph of the Moon* titled *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West*.[40] Along with chapters by the editors, it contained new work by Sarah Pike, Sabina Magliocco, as well as work by a newer generation of scholars on esotericism and Witchcraft such as scholar of Irish Paganism Jenny Butler and Swedish scholar of

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[36] Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief & Community in Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. (Brighton: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[37] Ethan Doyle White, *The New Witches of the West: Tradition, Liberation, and Power*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[38] Ethan Doyle White, "Robert Cochrane and the Gardnerian Craft: Feuds, Secrets, and Mysteries in Contemporary British Witchcraft." *Pomegranate* 13, no. 2 (December 2011): 205–24; Ethan Doyle White. "An Elusive Roebuck: Luciferianism and Paganism in Robert Cochrane's Witchcraft." *Correspondences* 1, no. 1 (2013): 75–101; Ethan Doyle White, "The Creation of 'Traditional Witchcraft.'" *Aries* 18, no. 2 (July 2018): 188–216; Ethan Doyle White, "Navigating the Crooked Path: Andrew D. Chumbly and the Sabbatic Craft." In *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of "The Triumph of the Moon"* ed. Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 197-222.

[39] Shai Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues in British Paganism, 1945–1990*. (New York, NY: Springer International Publishing, 2020)

[40] Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White, eds. *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of "The Triumph of the Moon."* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

esotericism Manon Hedenborg White, who focuses on the work of Aleister Crowley. Besides new work by Pike and Magliocco in this volume and the two books on Heathenry, work on American Paganism has been slim. The most recent book published on American magick has been Helen Berger's 2019 sociology of solitary practitioners, *Solitary Pagans.*[41]

Magick: Ancient, Modern, Postmodern

A general theme throughout much of the work on contemporary magick users has been their relationship to the concepts of modernity and postmodernity. While this scholarship is not alone in this preoccupation, Witches, Pagans and other magicians provide a particularly fertile soil for this subject as they embody a number of different tensions and contradictions. On the surface many of these practitioners appear to be attempting a return to a pre-modern world. Historically many Witches and Pagans have seen what they are doing as a "reconstruction" or "reclamation" (terms common in the modern Pagan community) of pre-Christian European religious practices.[42] While ceremonial magicians are less likely to engage in this sort of reconstruction, the very act of doing magick links them to a pre-modern practice. Hutton, in reference to the repeal of European anti-witchcraft laws between 1428 and 1782, calls the transition from a society that believes in magick to one that doesn't "one of the most remarkable processes in the transition of European culture into modernity."[43]

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[41] Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who Practice Alone*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019).

[42] Magliocco, *Witching Culture,* 8

[43] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 132.

On the other hand, other scholars have identified the magick tradition as particularly modern. Hugh Urban in *Magia Sexualis* argues that rather than this magic being "throwback to a kind of premodern, pre-scientific form of thought," it is in fact "distinctively and intensely modern."[44] His work follows a series of 19th and 20th century figures as they use contemporary scientific language and techniques to explore occult sexual practices meant to liberate the self – a goal he argues is at the center of modernity. Urban draws on the work of Hanegraaff who argued that modern occultism was Western esotericism read through the "mirror of secular thought."[45] Meanwhile, Magliocco sees contemporary Paganism as a reaction to modernity, particularly the Weberian concept of disenchantment. Arguing that Pagans are engaged in a conscious "re-enchantment" of the modern world.[46]

Many of these same scholars point out that while modern magick exemplifies certain aspects of modernity, it also embraces much of what has been called postmodern. Ronald Hutton believes that British sociologist James Beckford got "pagan Witchcraft bang to rights,"[47] with the sociologist's concept of "postmodern religion." Beckford describes postmodernity as "a refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the

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[44] Urban, *Magia Sexualis, 5*

[45] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).

[46] Magliocco, *Witching Culture.* This idea is further explored by Robert Puckett in "Re-Enchanting the World: A Weberian analysis of Wiccan Charisma," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism,* ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden, The Netherlands, 2008), 81-108.

[47] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 412.

sole exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge," and describes postmodern religion as specifically containing a "willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks," resulting in "a celebration of spontaneity, superficiality, fragmentation, irony, and playfulness."[48] This description also fits the magicians I met in Los Angeles. The magick they learned and practiced celebrated all of these qualities. Spontaneity was at the center of their emphasis on ecstatic experiences; they reveled in the eclecticism of their influences and happily incorporated irony and humor into even their most serious rites.

Sarah Pike has identified a tension at the heart of the Neopaganism she encountered at festivals that was also present in the magickal community I worked with. In her book *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* Pike writes, "neopaganism seems to have taken the postmodern creed and run with it, only to find that there were limits to where they could go."[49] At the heart of the magickal work her interlocutors were doing was a desire for self-creation and a belief that identity was fluid and changeable. Along with this came a desire to create a religious space devoid of the constraints these practitioners felt in their everyday life. A space where one can fully explore this mutable identity. Pike found that alongside these seemingly postmodern agendas certain ironies arose. They found that when building a space free of norms, where people could be themselves, it required the establishment of new norms and boundaries that

[48] James A. Beckford, "Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity," ed. Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion, Contemporary Issues: The All Souls Seminars in the Sociology of Religion*. (London: Bellew Publishing Co Ltd, 1992), 11-23.

[49] Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves,* 225.

ensured this freedom.[50] Alongside their rhetoric of self-invention lived an insistence that one had a "true self" which could be found.

These ironies and tensions that Pike found in Pagan festivals twenty years ago are still present in the magickal community that I encountered, but others have come to the forefront. The modern urban magicians I worked with were less concerned with postmodern concepts of identity and more concerned with the nature of reality and truth. The postmodern question most present in their lives had to do with whether reality is subjective and mutable or objective and static. Like Pike's questions about identity, the answer was ultimately both. Magicians often insisted that reality is the realm of the imagination and that through magickal practices we can alter our imagination and thus alter our reality. At the same time, they spoke of a deeper, occult reality behind ours which could be interacted with through symbols drawing on the metaphysical practice of correspondence. Some groups, such as Star Sapphire Lodge, fell more on the occult side, while others, like The Green Man, were more committed to a mutable reality, but all contained this seeming contradiction. Similar contractions came to the forefront when talking about magick's effectiveness. The same magician would tell me that magick's primary effect was in changing the internal life of the magician then tell me a story of magick having a physical effect on the world. The same teacher would start a class telling us that it didn't matter how magick worked as long as it did and then go on to lecture for an hour and a half on how magick worked. Magicians are often aware of these contradictions but see little need to resolve them. This dissertation follows their lead in this regard, focusing not on the tensions created by these different visions of

[50] Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves,* 220-221.

reality and truth but on how they live comfortably together and are instrumentalized by magicians to create change in the world and themselves.

Methods

I began my research in the summer of 2020, in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued through the summer of 2022. This meant that most of my fieldwork began online and eventually moved to in person. While I began this work by exploring the larger magickal community in Los Angeles, I eventually settled on three institutions for the core of my research. The first place I began working with was The Green Man metaphysical store in North Hollywood. The bulk of this research was done online by taking classes with the store's staff and its associated Witchcraft coven. Shortly after this I began attending classes and rituals with Star Sapphire Lodge, a local body of the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), the esoteric initiatory order started by British ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley. This was the first location to open during the pandemic, and my work with them was done in equal part online and in person. The final location, which I began working with in October of 2021, was The Crooked Path, another metaphysical store with an associated coven. With the exception of one class, I conduced all my work with this group in person.

Due to the pandemic, I did not live in Los Angeles during my research but instead remained in Santa Barbara, about a hundred miles away. This meant that I always remained somewhat of an outsider in the city. I also never initiated into the groups that I was working with. The bulk of my research was done in public settings, primarily classes and public rituals. This was partially a result of the multi-sitedness of my study. Initiation takes a lot of dedication and work and joining three organizations at once wasn't recommended by any of

the groups that I worked with. More than this I wanted to explore the publicly consumable version of the city's magick to understand how the large population of Angelenos who frequented these stores included magick into the rest of their life. I discovered a rich world of magickal knowledge being offered outside the initiatory system but also a dedicated groups of students eager to learn in these settings and to create new communities.

For most of the time I was doing my research I took two classes a week either online or in person and attended a public ritual roughly once a month. I conducted thirty-nine semi-structured interviews. Eighteen of these were in person with the remaining twenty-one being conducted over video conferencing software. Most of these interviews were with people associated with The Crooked Path and Star Sapphire Lodge since the online format of The Green Man classes made it particularly difficult to recruit interviewees. Alongside this research I also attended rituals and classes with a few other magickal institutions including the metaphysical supply chain House of Intuition, the international Witchcraft community Reclaiming, and the local order of the Golden Dawn, an esoteric group that was instrumental in the creation of modern magick as we know it. Once California started to lift their shelter-in-place restrictions, I spent my time driving back and forth from Los Angeles listening to hours of podcasts either directly from those I was working with or related to the type of magick I was learning.

Conducting online ethnography creates some issues with determining demographics as some people do not show their face or share any personal details. Of those who do, most only share limited details and most online classes do not provide a venue where one can ask their classmates. Even with those obstacles I collected data on one hundred and sixty-nine individuals whom I either met at rituals or took classes with online or in person. Of these,

roughly seventy-three percent identified as female and most the remaining twenty-seven percent identified as male with three openly identifying as non-binary. The majority – seventy-one percent – appeared or identified as white. Ten percent did not share enough information to provide any indication of race or ethnicity. Of the remaining nineteen percent, eight percent were Latinx, five percent identified as South and East Asia, and four percent identified as black or African American. Two people were Middle Eastern or North African. Age was very hard to determine but most appeared to be between their mid-twenties and late thirties with moderate sized cohorts of people both in their teens and those over forty. Other demographic information such as level of education and religious or cultural background proved too difficult to gather in online settings, but some of this demographic information is given on the individual groups whom I worked with in person in their respective chapters.

As a final note on methods I would like to address something that has been somewhat of an elephant in the room when discussing my research in classes and other academic settings. The first question my students ask when I tell them about my work is "do you believe in magick?" Over time my answer to them went from a simple, "No, I have never seen evidence of magick's effectiveness" to a much less satisfying "it's complicated." This is not just because the concept of belief is a notoriously tricky one in religious studies – and even more so in the magickal world – but because my subjects shared so much with me.

My subjects, classmates, and teachers came from the same soil as me. We were all up to date on contemporary popular psychotherapeutic language and techniques, and had absorbed, often secondhand, the work of Carl Jung and various figures from depth psychology and the human potential movement. We also shared many of the same concerns. Despite an academic distrust of grand narratives, I worried constantly about being on the

right path – something very close to what the Crowleyites at the O.T.O. called our "True Will." Like my classmates at The Crooked Path, I felt a deep yearning for community and welcomed the camaraderie of creating ritual together. Most effectively, the guided meditations (called "vision quests") that ended most classes at The Green Man put me face-to-face with my own psyche. These classes took place in my own imagination, where I was taken on internal journeys meant to engage with issues I had long neglected. I came to think of what I and my interlocutors were engaging in as "doing" therapy as opposed to "talk" therapy.

Allowing myself to engage with the work in this way was often uncomfortable, but it was ultimately necessary. It was clear from the beginning that the distance available to many researchers would not be available to me. "Participant observation" is always a delicate balance between the two roles, but this is exaggerated when it is your own imagination and psyche you are observing. This was a landscape already primed by years of education to understand things as a scholar. Care needed to be taken not to settle on ready-made explanations. Still, most of the fear came from questions of propriety and the transgression of boundaries. I was unsure what would happen if I started using the techniques I had learned and applied them in my own life. The lines around my role as a researcher began to melt. I often had to remind my classmates that I was an outsider.[51] I was unsure how to write about this.

[51] Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves,* xv.; Luhrmann, *Persuasions of a Witch's Craft,* 17. Both writers discuss the challenges and advantages of working with populations which are close to the researchers' own. Both discuss their informants, forgetting that they are researchers – something that happened to me regularly. For further discussion of positionality in the Pagan community see: Jenny Blain, Doug Ezzy, and Graham Harvey, eds. *Researching Paganisms* Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004.

In the end I chose to include my own experiences primarily in the third chapter, which involves almost entirely online work, but these questions are central to this work. As I explore the ways that Los Angeles' magickal community approaches issues of reality and truth, I am also wrestling with how I make sense of these concepts and inviting the reader to do the same. All of the magicians I met have developed sophisticated systems which allow them to both conjure powerful magickal experiences and, according to them, effect change in the world. While their claims and language may be quite different from what many use, their vision of reality is shared by many of us in the 21st century. Beneath the surface we share more with these magicians than separates us. It is my hope that in understanding the techniques and theories of these 21st century magicians we can also gain better understanding of the realities that we live in, which are so often both static and mutable at the same time.

To begin this exploration, the first chapter tells the story of the magick tradition's shared lineage, paying particular attention to the moments that lead to the groups that I worked with in Los Angeles. This story begins with medieval alchemists and the incorporation of Hermetic and Neoplatonic thought into Europe before moving on to the secret societies of the Victorian era, which eventually led to the formation of the Golden Dawn. This is the group that influenced both Aleister Crowley, the prophet of Star Sapphire Lodge, and much of the magick practiced at The Crooked Path. From here the chapter focuses on the evolution of modern Witchcraft, first in England, then in America up to the

present. A constant theme in this history is the discovery and reception of sources of questionable provenance and the discourse created around this questionability.

Chapter 2 looks at the Thelemites at Star Sapphire Lodge. These are the contemporary followers of Aleister Crowley. This chapter focuses on the ways Thelemites interact with a reality which is static but hidden from us. This reality is accessible through close study of the world's mystical systems as well as the performance of rituals that produce ecstatic experiences. While the crux of this chapter is the ethnographic work with modern day Thelemites, it also provides two historical examples of this magick action: the first by Aleister Crowley and the second by Jack Parsons, one of Crowley's followers in Los Angeles during the 1930s and 1940s.

The third chapter concerns the unique magickal system taught at The Green Man metaphysical store. Through online classes, the store's staff, led by their "witchfather" Griffin, teach a form of Witchcraft called the "Ced Tradition," a subset of a larger category: "Traditional Witchcraft." The Ced Tradition teaches its followers to be "architects" of a mutable reality. This chapter is a close examination of the mythology, theology, epistemology, and ontology of this form of Witchcraft. These aspects of the Ced Tradition are explored in detail alongside examples of my own experiences exploring this tradition through guided meditations called "vision quests."

The final chapter covers The Crooked Path metaphysical store and its associated coven, the Order of the Dark Moon. This group combines the ceremonial magick found at Star Sapphire Lodge with Witchcraft like that at The Green Man to create a hybrid form of magick which often takes a pragmatic view toward the use of magick and which straddles the line between a settled and mutable reality. This chapter is made up of four character studies

of people whom I worked with at The Crooked Path. Each of these explores the ways that contemporary magicians at various stages in their magical life interact with mundane and magickal realities that shift regularly from fixed to mutable moment to moment.

Chapter 1

A History of Magick

A common lineage is at the center of what the subjects of this dissertation share as members of the magick tradition and thus an exploration of this lineage is necessary to understand the ways contemporary magick users interact with the world around them. There are plenty of histories of the various categories that make up the magick tradition, most of which are mentioned in the introduction.[52] What follows is not a history of the entirety of this tradition but rather the history of the specific groups that I worked with, as such certain moments in the history of magic(k) have been emphasized while others have been skipped or glossed over. While the central goal of this chapter is to tell the story of how the magicians in this dissertation came to be who they are and what they do, as a secondary theme this chapter also focuses on a recurring pattern in the history of magick. Over and over again, foundational documents in various traditions are suspected of being either fraudulent or based on information that is later proved wrong.[53] The tension created by these revelations brings to the forefront the complicated relationship that the magick tradition has always had

[52] Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit*, remains the most comprehensive history of the American metaphysical tradition; Hubbard, *Triumph of the Moon*, does the same for Witchcraft, with a particular focus on the United Kingdom. Goodrick-Clak, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, is a good overview of the major moments in the history of Western esotericism.

[53] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon.* This is also a theme in Hutton's book, although he follows many of these controversies with an eye towards settling them whereas I am more interested in what they produce.

with “truth” and “reality,” as the groups involved find new ways to navigate questions of authority and validity.

The Origins of Magick

The history of the magickal tradition begins in the fires of European Renaissance humanism with the study of alchemy. While magic would later be defined against the categories of science and religion, all of these terms were just beginning to be defined at the time and thus their boundaries were particularly blurry. Renaissance alchemists were almost always members of the learned classes. They included figures like archetypal Renaissance polymath Henrich Cornelius Agrippa, innovator of medical science Theophrastus von Hohenheim (better known as Paracelsus), and manuscript dealer Nicolas Flamel.[54] Like other Renaissance humanists these alchemists benefited from the Greek and Roman documents brought back from wars with the Muslim empire. While artisans and natural philosophers drew on the likes of Pythagoras, writers and political thinkers drew on figures like Seneca, and theologians found inspiration in Aristotle, alchemists found their own sort of mystical humanism in the philosophy known as Hermeticism.[55]

Hermeticism owes its name to Hermes Trismegistus, or Hermes the Thrice-Greatest, an Egyptian magician shrouded in legend. According to some stories, Hermes was an ancient sage who lived before the time of Moses, while others believe he was the earthly form of the

[54] Those familiar with the Harry Potter novels and film franchise might recognize this name. His inclusion is interesting since the franchise otherwise avoids any connection to the actual history of European magic(k).

[55] Catherine L. Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (London, UK. Yale University Press, 2007), 22-23.

Egyptian god Thoth, the inventor of writing. The current consensus is that the core Hermetic texts, eventually known as "The Hermetica," are pseudepigraphal, probably written by multiple authors and eventually collected and attributed to Hermes Trismegistus sometime in the first few centuries of the common era.[56] While pseudepigrapha were far from rare at the time, it is worth noting that the roots of modern magick lie in a figure whose status as a historical or mythological figure remained unsettled for centuries. Stories about Hermes, as well as his works, circulated throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, but the bulk of the works themselves were not compiled and translated into a single language until the mid-fifteenth century, first into Greek by Byzantine editors and then into Latin by two Italian humanists. The first was Marsilio Finico (a priest and Neoplatonist in the service of Cosimo Medici) and he was followed by Lodovico Lazzerelli (a courtier and magician).[57]

The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a mix of Greek and Egyptian metaphysical writings heavily influenced by both Stoicism and Neoplatonism. Along with treaties on astrology and the classical elements, the major innovation that these texts gave the magick tradition is the idea of "correspondence." This idea is exemplified in the creed accredited to Hermes himself, "as above so below,"[58] which is read as describing a system microcosm and macrocosm mirror each other. This is an innovation on neoplatonic philosophy. Whereas neoplatonic

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[56] Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*.

[57] Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 24-26. Nevil Drury, "The Modern Magical Revival," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism,* ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden, The Netherlands, 2008), 21-23.

[58] Hermes Trismegistus, "Emerald Tablet of Hermes." Sacred Texts, (Accessed June 4, 2024) https://sacred-texts.com/alc/emerald.htm/. The actual quote comes from a Hermetic text called the Emerald Tablet. This has been translated many times, none of which use the exact phrasing "as above so below" which is ubiquitous in the magickal community. The closest to this phrasing comes from French alchemist Fulcanelli's 1972 version which reads, "that which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below."

philosophers like Philo of Alexandria saw the universe as a series of different spheres of reality which become less and less complete the farther they get from the divine realm, Hermeticism sees these realms as interconnected on a causal level. Thus, changes on our plane of reality affect and are affected by those on other planes.[59]

Giovanni Pico, the count of Mirandola, took Ficino's translation and mixed it with astronomy, Kabbalah, and Christian mysticism to create a complex system designed to bring the magical practitioner into contact with the higher realms of existence.[60] Over the centuries, magicians drew on this idea to create increasingly complex systems of correspondence that link Hermetic ideas with tarot, runes, color theory, pre-Christian deities, chakras, angels, and even biblical figures in a web that, if read correctly, allows them to work with a hidden reality, manipulating higher realms to create powerful change in this one and vice versa. As Sal, one of my teachers put it, "you move the furniture down here and it mirrors what's up there." This back and forth often leads to an equalizing of the realms through which many traditions see humans as being on the same footing with the gods – something Catherine Albanese recognizes as one of the ways Hermeticism has influenced American metaphysical religion.[61]

After its translation, the *Corpus Hermeticum* spread quickly throughout all of Europe, but by the 16th century, the major forces shaping the contemporary magick tradition came primarily from the North, specifically England, France, and Germany. The first major figure

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[59] Drury, "The Modern Magical Revival," 22.

[60] Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 31.

[61] Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit, 6.*

in this part of the lineage is John Dee, Queen Elizabeth I's astrologer and a practicing ritual magician. Dee practiced what later magicians refer to as "Enochian magic." Inspired by another piece of pseudepigrapha, the usually non-canonical Hebrew scripture The Book of Enoch, Dee and his partner Edward Kelly called down angels into the physical world and conversed with them. Along with various magical secrets, the angels taught them their language, which they were told was the language that the biblical Adam used to name everything in the Garden of Eden. Dee and Kelly called this language Enochian. The ritual system that Dee and Kelly created to commune with angels contains many elements that would become mainstays of modern magick, including the idea of watchtowers, or archangels, stationed at the four cardinal directions, the use of a magical table as an altar, and certain forms of sacred geometry.[62]

Secret Societies

As the Age of Enlightenment dawned, Dee's and Kelly's work was relegated by most historians of the time to a cautionary tale about how otherwise respectable thinkers could be lured by superstition.[63] Meanwhile, those who remained interested in secret knowledge, and magical teachings were starting to gather in secret societies. The rise of Freemasonry in the 17th and 18th centuries did as much to set the stage for later magickal orders as the more explicitly occult work of Dee and others. Freemasonry, while not explicitly magical, was a fertile ground to experiment with ideas inspired by Hermeticism and alchemy and develop

[62] Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic & Modern Occulture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012)

[63] Asprem, *Arguing with Angels,* 43-45

new rituals. Freemasonry's emphasis on secrecy had a double effect. On the one hand it served as a model for what a contemporary esoteric tradition could look like outside the bounds of an established religion.[64] At the same time, secrecy fed the imagination of those outside the group. Other orders started to spring up across Europe and many were inspired as much by rumors about masons as by actual Masonic rituals. One such group was the Rosicrucians.

Rosicrucianism came into the world through another collection of documents of questionable origin. Of the four texts that introduced the idea of Rosicrucianism to Europe, three were published anonymously. The *Fama Fraternitatis* was published in Germany in 1614 along with a satirical work that also mentions the Rosicrucian order written by the Italian writer Trajano Boccalini titled *The Universal and General Reformation of the Whole Wide World.* In 1615 the order made another appearance in the anti-papal pamphlet *Confessio Fraternitatis.* The following year, 1616, *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkruez* provided the world with the most comprehensive description of Rosicrucian philosophy.[65] These texts tell the story of a mysterious mystic and doctor, originally referred to as Father Brother C.R.C. and later revealed to be Christian Rosenkruez, and the secret society of mystical doctors he founded called the "Rosicrucian Order." According to these documents this order had existed for centuries but for most of history its membership had been extremely exclusive. According to the *Fama Fraternitatis* the ranks would be opened one hundred years after the death of Christian Rosenkruez at which point his tomb would be

[64] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 51-61

[65] Goodrick-Clark, *The Western Esoteric Tradition,* 107-118.

open.[66] The publication of these documents was a result of this opening of both the tomb and the ranks of the order.

Whatever the origin of these documents, their publications achieved at least one of their stated goals. Across Europe people sought out membership in the Rosicrucians. According to historian on Western esotericism Goodrick-Clark, "between 1614 and 1620, some two hundred books and tracts flew from the presses,"[67] concerning themselves with the Brotherhood of the Rosey Cross, although no one could seem to find any actual Rosicrucians. As will happen so often in this story, something of possibly fictional roots spawned real world institutions. Over the next few centuries Rosicrucian orders started appearing all over Europe, many of which have offshoots that still exist today. Although these orders were very eclectic in their beliefs and practices, they all shared a dedication to what Catherine Albanese has called "combinativeness," the practice of combining diffuse religious and cultural traditions in an effort to find the hidden meaning inherent in all of them.[68] Rosicrucians see nearly all mystical, religious, and philosophical traditions as containing clues about a universal absolute truth. The stories of Christian Rosenkranz include an education in the Middle East and a deep understanding of all the major philosophers and mystics of Renaissance Europe, including Hermetic alchemists and John Dee.

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[66] Joscelyn Godwin, Christopher McIntosh, and Donate Pahnke McIntosh, trans. *Rosicrucian Trilogy: Modern Translations of the Three Founding Documents* (Newburyport, MS: Weiser Books, 2016). 50-52.

[67] Goodrick-Clark, *The Western Esoteric Tradition,* 188.

[68] Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 14-16.

In America, Hermetic ideas melded with the homegrown Spiritualism of the 19th century producing another important, although much less secretive, metaphysical society. In 1874, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, a Civil War veteran and mystic, and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, an aspiring psychic better known as Madame Blavatsky, met at a seance in Vermont. This was almost 25 years after the famous Fox sisters had revealed their psychic powers, leading to an explosion of attempts to contact the dead which eventually coalesced into the heterogenous religious movement known as Spiritualism.[69] Olcott and Blavatsky were dedicated spiritualists but their interests in things mystical, exotic, and occult didn't end there. The two quickly bonded over these interests and a year later they founded the Theosophical Society in New York City.[70]

In 1877, Blavatsky published her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, which was meant to introduce the world to Theosophy. In the preface, preceding a list of all the people that should not be offended by her work, she writes, "our work, then, is a plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology."[71] With this publication the Theosophical Society publicly dedicated itself to a mission centered on seeking out the hidden knowledge in all the

[69] Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America,* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2012) argues for the ongoing influence of spiritualism in America as a "ghost" that drives many contemporary movements. Ann Braud. *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Makes a similar argument specifically focusing on the political influence of spiritualism.

[70] Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

[71] Helena P Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (1877; Reis., Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1999)

world's religious and magical traditions. This book also introduced the world to the concept of hidden "masters." These are spiritual adepts who have mastered the teaching of theosophy, giving them supernatural powers, and through whom Blavatsky got her knowledge.

After officially incorporating the Theosophical Society in New York and publishing *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky, Olcott, and their fellow Theosophists set out across the globe in search of this "universal Wisdom-Religion." This brought them to England where they had a major influence on those who would go on to create their own secret societies, and eventually to India where they set up their permanent headquarters in 1879. Olcott's interests were much more focused on "the East," particularly on Buddhism, but Blavatsky went in more magickal directions.[72] While in India she started writing her second opus, *The Secret Doctrine*,[73] which built on the ideas in *Isis Unveiled* and knowledge she'd gained in her travels in order to create a cosmology where humans were capable, through a complex system of reincarnation, of attaining a state of enlightenment near godhood. She finished the book in London in 1888 where she had set up court as a popular figure in the city's occult community.[74]

One of the groups inspired by these Theosophical ideas was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a magickal order that is part of the lineage of two of the groups I encountered in Los Angeles, as well as most magickal institutions around the world. The

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[72] Stephen R. Prothero, *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[73] Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (1888; reis. Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1999)

[74] Goodrick-Clark, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 223.

Golden Dawn was founded in London in 1888 by a trio of gentleman magicians: William Robert Woodman, a police surgeon and highly respected horticulturist; William Wynn Westcott, another medical doctor and coroner for northwest London; and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, an eccentric polymath with a special skill for languages. All three men were active masons, and high-ranking members of the British Rosicrucian order, SRIA (Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia), for which Westcott served as "Chief Magus."[75] They were also involved in the short-lived Hermetic Society started by former Theosophist Anna Kingsford in 1884. Kingsford had become frustrated by the Society's move away from Western esotericism and toward Eastern wisdom and Christianity. She was apparently not alone in this assessment as her order attracted many of London's occult figures, including the future founders of the Golden Dawn. Unfortunately Kingsford died in 1887, and the Hermetic Society went with her.[76]

Many early members of the Golden Dawn came from the Hermetic Society and thus Kingsford's death is most likely one the primary impetuses for the founding of the new order.[77] The Golden Dawn itself tells a different story. According to their emic history, the Golden Dawn was inspired by the discovery of another collection of mystical documents of questionable origin, the *Cipher Manuscripts.* According to William Woodman these

[75] Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment,* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 218.

[76] Asprem, *Arguing with Angels, 46.*

[77] Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment,* 333-362. Godwin provides a good overview of Kingsford's life and her influence on the world of Western esotericism during and after her life.

documents, named for the "replacements cipher" they were written in, were given to him by a fellow Rosicrucian upon the death of masonic scholar Kenneth R.H. Mackenzie.[78] The *Cipher Manuscript* was made up of sixty "folios" containing rituals and teachings drawn from Kabbalah, tarot, gematria, John Dee's Enochian system, and other occult practices. Among these was a detailed description of an initiatory system through which practitioners would learn this knowledge and practice these rituals.[79] Along with the manuscript, Woodman claimed to have found a letter allegedly written by a woman known as Anna Sprengel, to whom Westcott wrote in Germany. Sprengel, Westcott reported, was German royalty who had held a high degree in a German order called "the Golden Dawn." This was the order whose teaching and rituals were described in the manuscript. She gave Westcott permission to form his own order and, as Mathers went about decoding the folios, they opened the first British Golden Dawn Temple, the Isis-Uranus Temple, in London in 1888.[80]

As Wescott, Woodman, and Mathers decoded the manuscript, they combined it with other ancient texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the "Greek Magical Papyri,"[81] and developed a complex system of ritual and initiation. At the very top of this system was the

[78] Asprem, *Arguing with Angeles, 46-54;* Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 75; Goodrick-Clark, *The Western Esoteric Traditions,* 196-197.

[79] W. Wynn Westcott and R. A. Gilbert *The Complete Golden Dawn Cipher Manuscript*. Ed. Darcy Kuntz (Edmonds, WA: Holmes Pub Group Llc, 1996).

[80] Asprem, *Arguing with Angles,* 46-51.

[81] A collection of papyri dating from between 100 BC and 400 BC that were compiled and translated during the early 18th century. Written mostly in ancient Greek these documents contain instructions for the working of magic in Greco-Roman Egypt. The Greek Papyri is one of the major sources that nearly all Hellenistic-inspired magick practitioners use.

"third order," made up of figures referred to as the "Secret Chiefs," bearing more than a passing similarity to the Blavatsky "masters." The identity and nature of these figures would change throughout the short history of the order.[82] As Ronald Hutton has pointed out, the Golden Dawn was "not a religious society at all, but a magical one."[83] Their focus was heavily on conducting magical rituals meant to impower the magician. The details of these rituals would have echoes in the magickal tradition up to the present. Like Dee, they set their rituals up as circles with members calling to each of the four corners, each associated with a different element. They dressed in ceremonial robes based on images of ancient Druids and Egyptians, they took magickal names, and they emphasized the importance of gendered polarity, accepting women as initiates alongside men.[84] Most importantly the Golden Dawn brought together Kabbalah, tarot, astrology, and ideas from Eastern religion into a coherent magickal system. In many ways they codified the work that Rosicrucians and Theosophists had been doing. As with any secret society worth its name, it remains unclear how many members the Golden Dawn had at its height, but we do know they included poet W. B. Yeats and A. E. Waite, the creator of the most readily recognizable tarot deck.

Schisms in the order began shortly after it was formed. Mathers broke the order into sections: the inner and outer order, with the former being purely a scholastic enterprise and the latter focusing on ritual. He immediately made himself head of the inner order, claiming

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[82] Drury, "The Modern Magical Revival," 35-36. According to Drury, at one point the three founders identified as the Secret Chiefs, but later the Secret Chiefs would be either astral figures or hidden human adepts which both Westcott and Mathers would claim a direct connection to.

[83] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 79.

[84] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 80. Hutton gives a detailed description of the ancient and more modern origins of these rituals.

direct connection with the Secret Chiefs, something Westcott had already been doing for several years, causing a predictable struggle for authority.[85] In 1891, Woodman died and the next year Mathers moved to Paris to study ritual texts in the National Library and opened his own temple, the Ahathoor Temple #7. While in Paris he still attempted to keep tight control on the order. In 1887, Westcott's involvement in the order was publicly outed and he stepped back to save his career as city coroner, leaving Mathers as the only founding member still active in the group.[86] Around this time, he struck up a close friendship with a young man named Aleister Crowley, a figure whose presence led to the end of the Golden Dawn and who would prove a major influence on the evolution of the magick tradition.[87]

Crowley was a quick study. Just one year after taking his first initiation from Mathers he was ready to enter the inner order. At the time Mathers was not authorized to provide such an initiation so he sent Crowley to London where he was met with skepticism and outright disdain. One year was a very short time to reach the second order and Crowley, as he would do throughout his life, rubbed people the wrong way. He was arrogant and a dedicated contrarian. He was also an open bisexual and advocate for both sexual and pharmaceutical libertinism. The members of the British Golden Dawn refused to initiate him. Mathers was furious and decided to initiate Crowley himself in Paris. He then sent Crowley back to

[85] Drury, *The Modern Magical Revival,* 37

[86] Crowley, *The Confessions,* 176.

[87] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 76.

England to take over and put the group in order. This would spell the end of the first iteration of the Golden Dawn.[88]

In the skirmish over control, Mathers announced that the Cipher Manuscript was in fact created by Westcott in order to give the order validity and that Anna Sprengel never existed.[89] Others challenged him on this and at least four new orders were created between 1900 and 1909.[90] Although British lodges continued to operate until the 1930s they were never as active as the original. Meanwhile Crowley and Mathers had their own falling out which, according to some sources, led to a magickal war which ended in Mather's death.[91] As part of this war, Crowley began publishing all of the Golden Dawn's material, including their secret initiations, in his magazine *Equinox,* further facilitating the order's influence on future magicians.

From here the story of magick in the modern world shifts in Crowley's direction. The man later known as Aleister Crowley, Great Beast 666, To Mega Therion, and Frater Perdurabo, was born Edward Alexander Crowley in Warwickshire, England in 1875.[92] His

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[88] Asprem, *Arguing with Angels,* 69-70.

[89] Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment,* 224. Godwin points out that "no Golden Dawn scholar believes Westcott's story" of the cypher manuscripts origin. I have found this to be true not just among scholars but also the members of the Golden Dawn and related occult orders I have met.

[90] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon, 81*

[91] John Symonds, *The Great Beast,* 116. Refusing to reject or accept the magickal causes, a strategy Symonds uses throughout his biography of Crowley, he simply points out that when it comes to Mathers' death, "it is said, with more truth than is apparent, that Crowley killed him."

[92] Aleister Crowley, *To Man.* Broadsheet. (Tunisia, 1924). This was the same year the Theosophical Society was founded, a fact Crowley found extremely significant.

parents were middle class owners of a local brewery and dedicated members of the strict Protestant sect the Plymouth Brethren. According to John Symonds, a friend of Crowley and his first biographer, the magician's father "insisted, like all Plymouth brethren, upon a literal interpretation of the Bible, foresaw the end of the world, thundered against Papists and Protestants alike, and was generally down on everyone who didn't agree with him." He was also a man for whom "all but religious pursuits seemed futile."[93] While Crowley, too, would dedicate his life to spiritual and religious pursuits, he did not embrace the religion of his birth.

After his father's death, Crowley, just eleven at the time, broke with the church and began seriously pushing boundaries. His mother, drawing from the Bible's Book of Revelation, started calling him "The Great Beast," a name he gladly accepted, wearing it with pride for the rest of his life. Much of Crowley's work and life appears to be a response to this upbringing. He set about systematically rejecting all forms of formal morality while seeking out and building structures that replicated the sort of religious intensity he grew up with. He sought this in mountain climbing, the "wisdom of the orient," an almost methodical breaking of sexual taboos, experimentation with a large variety of psychoactive drugs, and the esoteric world of Victorian secret societies such as the Golden Dawn.[94]

After his rejection from the Golden Dawn, Crowley turned his attention to travel but never truly left magick behind. He traveled to the Americas where he experimented with John Dee's Enochian magic and then to India where he became intensely interested in

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[93] Crowley, *The Confessions*, Symonds *The Great Beast.*

[94] Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 128-135. Urban identifies Crowley's transgressions as a primary source of his magickal life.

Buddhism and Hinduism, particularly the aspects that he understood to be tantric. Eventually he landed in Egypt where over the course of three days in 1904, he received and dictated a text called *The Book of the Law*, a message purportedly given to him by a deity known as Aiwass. The book told of the coming of a new age, the Eon of Horus, for which Crowley's famous creed would be true – "Do what thou wilt will be the whole of the law." [95]

After this revelation, Crowley returned to England where he began developing his own magickal system he called Thelema, a Greek word for will. At first this was conducted through an order called A.·.A.·..[96] Crowley claimed that this order, like so many secret societies before it, had existed for centuries under different names but it was he who opened it up to the world by creating a semi-public face called the "outer college." Most likely Crowley created the order himself with the help of George Cecil Jones, a fellow occultist and former member of the Golden Dawn. A.·.A.·. was set up as a one-to-one initiatory order, meaning that the initiates are only aware of the person who initiated them and the people they initiate.

[95] Crowley, *Confessions,* 493-401; Crowley, *Equinox of the Gods.* Crowley described this event in his own words in these two works. This event is covered in more detail in Chapter 2. Crowley's followers, then and now, are quick to point out that this is not a call for total hedonism and permissiveness. The full statement is "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law, love is the law, love under will."

[96] John Symonds, *Confessions of Aleister Crowley,* 926n19. Symonds in his footnotes to Crowley's confessions, which he edited, explains this notation. He writes, "The triangle of dots indicates that the order is a secret sodality connected with the Ancient Mysteries. The triangle is the sign of Horus and represents fire, light, or spirit. 'Salutations on All Points of the Triangle' is a formula used by freemasons."

Setting up this order helped Crowley develop his Thelemic religion, which was growing into a complex system that drew on Crowley's own visions as well as the influences he had gathered over years of occult research and experimentation. In 1910 Crowley was initiated into the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), a Hermetic occult order based primarily out of Germany that was specifically interested in "sex magic." As with the Golden Dawn, he quickly moved up the initiatory ranks of this order. In 1925, the group's leader Theodore Reuss died and, although no successor was decided upon, Crowley took control. Crowley used the O.T.O. as the public face of his work, continuing to experiment with ritual and liturgical ideas through it for the rest of his life.[97]

After Crowley's death in 1947, the O.T.O. all but disappeared in Europe. Small groups did remain in America, especially in Southern California where it spawned a number of fascinating characters as well as the community I worked with, and the subject of the next chapter, Star Sapphire Lodge. But before moving entirely to the United States, one more episode of particularly British magick needs to be explored: the creation or possibly re-discovery of modern Witchcraft. Two of the groups that I studied and the majority of people I met during my research considered themselves Witches. The use of this term as a self-identifier can be traced directly to the actions of a number of magicians operating in and around London in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Calling All Covens

[97] Urban, *Magia Sexualis,* 120-122.

In her autobiographical history of the birth of contemporary British Witchcraft, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft,* Doreen Valiente identified 1951 as the watershed year in the creation of British Witchcraft as a fully-fledged religious tradition. She points to three events that served as catalysts for this "rebirth." In June of that year, British Parliament repealed its archaic Witchcraft Act, which had grown out of British heresy laws, and replaced it with the Fraudulent Mediums Act which only focused on acts that involved some sort of monetary exchange.[98] That November, John Symonds published his salacious but well-researched biography of Crowley, *The Great Beast,* which made Crowley's life and work accessible to a large audience. Between these two events, in July of that year, Cecil Williamson opened his Folklore Centre of Witchcraft and Superstition (later renamed the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic) on the Isle of Man. Press releases for this opening announced that the ceremony would be overseen by Dr. Gerald B. Gardner, "a member of the Southern Coven of British Witches."[99]

Gardner is in many ways the father of modern Witchcraft. Born to an upper middle class British family, he moved to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in his teen years and stayed in South Asia for most of his life working in various positions connected to the colonial plantation system. This work allowed him to follow a personal passion for anthropology and archaeology, developing a serious interest in local customs, especially those he deemed

[98] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 108. Hutton gives more detailed overview of the history of British witch laws.

[99] Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*. (1989, reis., London, UK:Robert Hale, 2008), 11.

magical.[100] After his retirement in 1936, he wrote the first of a series of novels which, although set in the past, explored ideas of contemporary Western Witchcraft that he had been interested in.[101]

Gardner was also heavily influenced by Crowley. In fact, before going his own way he was initiated into the O.T.O. by Crowley himself and the two of them allegedly had plans for Gardner to spearhead a revival of the order, which had been waning as Crowley aged.[102] Through Crowley and other British occultists at the time, Gardner absorbed many of the ritual structures used by the Golden Dawn, John Dee, Freemasonry, and Rosicrucianism. Sarah Pike and Ronald Hutton point to romanticism and popular British fantasies about the pre-industrial, "natural" world as major influences on the formation of contemporary Witchcraft.[103] Hutton has also shown just how much influence popular writing, both fiction and non-fiction, had on the creation of this tradition including the popularity of gothic

[100] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 239. Hutton goes so far as to call him a "pioneer of Malaysian archeology and numismatics."

[101] Gerald. B Gardner, *A Goddess Arrives* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1939); Gerald B. Gardner, *High Magic's Aid* (1949; reis., New Bern, NC: Godolphin House, 1996).

[102] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 216-223. Urban, *Magia Sexualis,* 169-170. These plans never came to fruition partially because Gardner was in the United States when Crowley died and thus wasn't present for the various battles of succession that followed, but also, most likely, because he already had plans to go in his own direction.

[103] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 20-23, Sarah M. Pike, '"Wild Nature' and the Lure of the Past: The Legacy of Romanticism Among Young Pagan Environmentalists," In *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon"* ed. Shai Feraro and Ethan Doyle White (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 131-152

fiction.[104] Sabina Magliocco adds to this historical analysis by pointing to the important role the academic discipline of folklore has had on these early forms of modern Witchcraft.[105]

Gardner was particularly inspired by the work of archeologist Margaret Murray, the author of the book *The Witch Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*, published in 1921. Murray argues for the presence of a pre-Christian, matriarchal, nature-based religion in the British Isles, the remnants of which included many of the witches burned in Europe during the medieval and Renaissance periods. This book was instrumental in extending British romantic fantasies about the purity of rural life to "Pagan" religion. Eschewing the contemporary view of these customs as brutish and cruel and instead suggesting a sophisticated joyful "old religion," it also provided an important narrative for those seeking a religion that emphasized the role of women. A major part of Murray's thesis was the role that patriarchal power played in stamping out and silencing this religion – an experience many found mirrored in their own religious life.[106]

Thus, when the Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1951, Gardner was ready to out himself as a Witch. In his first public appearance, at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, he gleefully told the press, "of course I'm a Witch, and I get great fun out of it."[107] Gardner claimed to be involved with a coven that he referred to at first as the "southern coven of

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[104] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 253-286. Hutton also points out that through these works it is likely that modern witches absorbed and drew on practices that were part of pre-Christian European religion.

[105] Magliocco, *Witching Culture,* 24-55.

[106] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 195-201, Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 46-48.

[107] Valiente. *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, 13.

Witches" and later as the "New Forest coven." According to Gardner, this coven was led by a high priestess whom he first called "Old Dorothy," later identified as Dorothy Clutterbuck, who could trace the coven's lineage back to Murray's "old religion." The factuality of this claim has come under serious scrutiny and was hotly debated both during and after Gardner's life. Ronald Hutton searched for hard evidence for years and found little. Doreen Valiente, who worked closely with Gardner, did her own investigation, which found that much of what Gardner claimed came from the coven could be traced to Crowley, Murray, and Freemasonry. Still, she remained a believer in the New Forest coven until her death. [108]

Valiente, while not as well known, is as important a figure in the creation of modern Witchcraft as Gardner. She was one of the first people to join his coven and helped him develop his rituals and written material, including his book *The Meaning of Witchcraft.* She split with Gardner in 1958 over issues of privacy and publicity and went on to work with most of the major figures in British Witchcraft. She wrote the poem, "The Charge of the Goddess," which is recited regularly at coven meetings across the spectrum of current Witchcraft traditions.[109] Her book *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* remains one of the most comprehensive firsthand accounts of the evolution of this movement.

Gardner and Valiente called their form of Witchcraft Wicca and went about raising a coven, designing rituals, creating an initiatory process, publishing books, and speaking publicly about his new religion. In these early years of contemporary Witchcraft, the tensions between innovation and tradition were extremely productive. Almost as soon as Wicca was presented to the world, new forms of Witchcraft sprang up all over England and eventually

[108] Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon,* 207-212

[109] Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*. Revised and updated edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) 57-58.

the world, each responding to Gardner by creating new forms of magick while claiming lineages that reached back to various shadowy pasts. The most prominent of these early movements were Alexandrian Wicca and Traditional Witchcraft (discussed in Chapter 3), both of which used Gardner as a foil against which they levied their own claims to pre-Wiccan authority.[110] Many smaller groups also sprang up, many of which drew on Gardner and Valiente's writing but chose not to initiate specifically into Wicca. This category included a nebulous coalition of feminist Witches sometimes called the Goddess movement.[111] It didn't take long for versions of all these movements to start appearing outside of Britain, taking on notable momentum in the United States.

American Witches

Raymond Buckland, a British Gardnerian Witch who immigrated to the United States in 1964, claims to have been the first person to announce himself as a Wiccan in America.[112] While there is little evidence to contradict this claim, the United States was far from magick-free in the mid-60s. Crowley's influence had been strong in the United States at least since the 1930s, especially in California where the seeds of what would become the modern Ordo Templi Orientis were sown. Meanwhile, movements that would later be considered "Pagan"

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[110] Ethan Doyle White," The Creation of 'Traditional Witchcraft': Pagans, Luciferians, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy." *Aries* 18, no. 2 (June 29, 2018): 188–216; Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 287-339; Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Withcraft,* 117-137, 163-179.

[111] Shai Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues in British Paganism, 1945–1990*. Feraro covers this tradition in depth.

[112] Berger, *Community of Witches,* 12; Raymond Buckland. *Witchcraft From the Inside: Origins of the Fastest Growing Religious Movement in America*. 3rd Revised & Enlarged edition (St. Paul, Minn., U.S.A: Llewellyn Publications, 1995); Magliocco, *Witching Culture,* 70.

or “Neopagan,” were forming all over the United States. In 1964, the same year that Buckland announced himself as a Wiccan, Tim Zell, founder of the Church of All Worlds, a religion inspired by Robert A. Heinlein’s science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, referred to his burgeoning new religion as “Pagan.” This marked the beginning of this term’s use as a positive identifier.[113]

While Paganism took hold all over the Western world and Witchcraft continued to spread and evolve in the United Kingdom and beyond, much of the innovation during the second half of the 20th century was undertaken in the United States. Discussing the evolution of Witchcraft, historian of religion Shai Feraro has traced the movement of influence in the Witchcraft world between the United States and the United Kingdom, with the United States slowly taking the lead over the last decade of the 20th century.[114] Meanwhile much of the ceremonial magick of the O.T.O. and the Golden Dawn had further escaped its institutional bonds after arriving in the United States. Ritual and liturgy, which were formerly only available to initiates, began showing up in Pagan movements outside of Wicca, such as the Church of All Worlds, the goddess religion of Feraferia, and Victor Henry Anderson’s Feri Tradition.[115]

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[113] Adler, *Drawing Down the Moo*n, Magliocco, *Witching Culture, 4;* Pike, *New Age and Neopagan, 179;* John C. Sulak., Oberon Zell, Morning Glory, and Carl Llewellyn Weschcke. *The Wizard and the Witch: Seven Decades of Counterculture, Magick & Paganism*. (Woodbury, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 2014.); Oberon Zell-Ravenheart in conversation with the author, January 2017.

[114] Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues*

[115] Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religion.* 59-50. This is due in great part to the publication of all the Golden Dawns rituals by British-American occultist and former secretary to Aleister Crowley, Israel Regardie. Originally published as series of books it was eventually published as a large volume in 1937.

Witchcraft really came into its own, at least publicly, in the United States first through the efforts of Zsuzsanna Emese Mokcsay, better known as Zsuzsanna Budapest or simply Z. Budapest. Budapest immigrated from Hungary in 1956 and was active in the women's liberation movement in both New York and Chicago before moving to Los Angeles in 1970. A year later, in December of 1971, she founded her first coven, the Susan B. Anthony Coven No. 1, and in 1972 she opened an occult store called Feminist Wicca.[116] Budapest was arrested for fortune telling in 1974 when an undercover police officer came in and asked to have her tarot cards read. Budapest was convicted but appealed until she was acquitted and the California Supreme Court did away with the antiquated law.[117] This episode was covered by local press and was given a small mention in the national *Ms.* magazine, which further publicized Z's merging of feminism and Witchcraft – a distinctly political form of American Witchcraft. As she told sociologist Wendy Griffin, "by having a trial they thought, well Z must have threatened the patriarchy after all. And that was like a badge of honor, because good feminists went to jail. We know that. So I did too."[118]

Budapest called her new form of Witchcraft Dianic Wicca and it focused explicitly on "feminist spirituality," a term which she coined, according feminist scholar Wendy Griffin.[119]

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[116] Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues,* 20, Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft,* 186.

[117] Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft,* 186.

[118] Z. Budapest cited in Wendy Griffin, "Webs of Women: Feminists Spiritualities" in *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 62.

[119] Griffin, "Webs of Women," 55.

Men were not allowed to join the coven, which worked with the Goddess exclusively. This was a major break from most contemporary Witchcraft traditions which emphasized the polarity of gender through the ritualized marriage of the God and Goddess, often called the "great rite." She drew on the work of Margaret Murray, as well as the large body of popular texts at the time that advocated for a universal ancient matriarchal religion, in order to create an origin myth for her movement.[120] Budapest described a world where the Goddess had been banished by "patriarchal powers," who "burned down her sacred groves, raped and killed her priestesses, and enslaved wimmin. Her name was stricken from history books, and great darkness descended upon womankind." The only way to reverse this violence was through a reclaiming of the lost knowledge which, according to Budapest, are "what we call Witchcraft."[121] This form of explicitly feminist Wicca spread across the country, and eventually the world, over the next decade. This was a major shift in the magick tradition. Feraro points out that up until the 1960s it had been primarily men who did the talking (and writing) in regard to modern Paganism and the occult." Dianic Wicca, he tells us, is not just a part of the "wider Neopagan network" but also "an inseparable part of the Feminist Spirituality Movement."[122] From this point on, magick in general, but specifically Witchcraft in the United States, becomes directly entangled with political conversations

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[120] Pike, *New Age and Neopagan,* 120-122. As an example of the popularity of this thesis, Sarah Pike points to the publication of Riane Eisler's 1987 book *The Chalice and the Blade,* which "in five years sold "approximately 181,000 paperbacks and 24,000 hardcover copies." Pike then goes on to provide further examples of works in this genre later in the chapter.

[121] Budapest as cited in Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan* 120.

[122] Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues,* 53.

about women's liberation and gender.[123] For many modern Witches, calling oneself a Witch is seen as an explicitly feminist act.

The exclusivity of Dianic Wicca always put somewhat of a limit on its reach, but its message of Witchcraft as a new religion that deliberately upends and provides an alternative to what many saw as the explicitly patriarchal religious options available to most Americans proved attractive. Miriam Simos, better known as Starhawk, was able offer a less exclusive form of Witchcraft by opening her tradition to all genders while remaining deeply committed to feminism and other social issues. Simos was introduced to Witchcraft while in college at the University of California, Los Angeles. A group of Wiccans visited the house she was living at with friends and introduced them to the idea of a religion of the Goddess. Simos was hooked. After college, she studied with both Budapest and founder of the Feri Tradition, Victor Anderson, but sought her own path. Moving to San Francisco in 1974, Simos, by then going by Starhawk, began teaching classes on women's spirituality and Witchcraft and eventually became spokesperson for the local Pagan ecumenical group, the Covenant of the Goddess (COG). By the end of the decade Starhawk had developed her own form of Witchcraft, the Reclaiming Tradition, and published her first book, *The Spiral Dance.*[124]

The publication of this book would prove to be a major moment for the magick tradition. Starhawk continued Budapest's work, intertwining Witchcraft and feminism and insisting that women's spirituality is always political. Along with feminist issues, she remains a fierce activist for social justice and environmental issues. She was arrested during

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[123] Both Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* and Molly McGarry's *Ghosts of Future Past* argue that American spiritualism was often explicitly political with an influence that continues to be felt.

[124] Feraro, *Women and Gender Issues, 52-55.* Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess: 10th Anniversary Edition*. (1979, San Francisco, Harper One, 1989.) 2-3.

the 1999 World Trade Organization protests. While in jail she led the other prisoners in a ritual which she later wrote about in "An Open Letter to the Pagan Community"[125] and further elaborated on in her book *Web of Power,* which advocated for magick as a form of political resistance.[126] She continues to advocate for magick in prison and broader prison reform.[127] *The Spiral Dance* also laid out clear instructions for doing magick on one's own, stimulating major growth in the number of practitioners who consider themselves "solitary," a common term used by those in the magick tradition for individuals who do most of their ritual work alone, don't belong to covens or orders, keep home altars, and often practice a bricolage form of magick sometimes called "eclectic Witchcraft."[128]

Starhawk also became one of the most vocal proponents for a Witchcraft that explicitly eschewed questions of authenticity and focused on results. In response to an article in *The Atlantic* that questioned the validity of the Murray thesis and associated theories of ancient matriarchal religion, she stated that, "Goddess religion is not based on belief in history, archeology, in any Great Goddess past or present. Our spirituality is based on

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[125] Starhawk, "An Open Letter to the Pagan Community," Stawhawk.org, December, 1999, https://starhawk.org/Activism/activism writings/1999-WTO Articles.

[126] Starhawk, *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*. (Gabriola Island, BC: New Catalyst Books, 2008).

[127] Gabby Bess, "Witch Trials: There Is Nothing Magical About Being a Pagan in Prison." *Vice*.com, July 8, 2016. https://www.vice.com/en/article/nej98g/the-challenges-of-being-a-witch-in-prison-william-rouser; Starhawk," A Maypole in Prison." Starhawk.org, May 17, 2011. https://starhawk.org/a-maypole-in-prison/.

[128] Berger, *Solitary Pagans.* Berger's most recent book identifies solitary Pagans as making up seventy five percent of the current Pagan population in the English-speaking world.

experience, on a direct relationship with the cycles of birth, growth, death, and regeneration in nature and in human lives." She goes on to explain that at a time when these forces are under threat it is a "radical act" to call them sacred, and this matters more than academic conversations about accuracy. She explains that "Gods, Goddesses, and for that matter archeological theories, are not something to believe in, nor are they merely metaphors. They are more like portals to particular states of consciousness and constellations of energies."[129] As religion scholar Sarah Pike observes, Starhawk may overstate the emphasis on experience over belief in Pagan communities. In a religious tradition that is intentionally decentralized, the "reality" of such things as deities varies greatly from practitioner to practitioner.[130] Still, what is interesting here is that this is not merely a defensive position taken in response to criticism; it is an active and intentional rejection of established methods of validation.

The recentering of magick to the United States and the move toward more solitary practitioners was also the product of another book, Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon.*[131] Published on Halloween, 1979, the same day as *The Spiral Dance*, *Drawing Down the Moon* is an extensive study of Pagan traditions in the United States that relies heavily on the author's fieldwork with most of the major Pagan groups of the time. Adler, a journalist, produced a book with enough scope and rigor that it remains on the shelves of most metaphysical stores while also finding its way into many scholarly bibliographies on the

[129] Starhawk, "A Response to Charlotte Sallen" *The Pomegranate* 16, no. Spring (May 1, 2001) 2.

[130] Pike, *New Age and Neopagan*, 29.

[131] Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*. rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

subject. She is regularly cited in Berger's, Hutton's, Magliocco's, and Pike's work.[132] Subtitled "Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today," Adler's book includes a large circle of religious innovators who, while eclectic, share certain behaviors and traditions, such as the wheel of the year, a focus on pre-Christian deities, and an emphasis on goddesses all of which are aspects of what I refer to here as the "magick tradition."

While some of the magickal innovation of the previous few decades subsided during the 1980s, that decade saw Witchcraft move from covens to more personal settings. Starhawk books had offered practical advice for Witches working on their own and Adler exposed them to a wide variety of different traditions from which they could draw and an overarching community with which they could identify. This move toward individual practice culminated in the 1989 publication of Scott Cunningham's book *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*[133] which solidified the trend by providing Witches, Pagans, and magicians with the term "solitary" with which to describe themselves.[134] Meanwhile, magickal ideas started to spread outside of circles explicitly identifying as Pagan, Wiccan, or occult. Astrology, tarot, Kabbalah, magickal circles, crystals, and solstice celebrations all made their way into

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[132] Helen A., Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States*. (University of South Carolina Press, 2003); Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, Pike, *Earthly Bodies Magical Selves,* Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America.*

[133] Scott Cunningham, *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (St. Paul, Minn: Llewellyn Pubications, 1989); For the importance of both this book and the publisher, Llewellyn, on this trend see Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who Practice Alone*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 11.

the movement often called "New Age."[135] Ideas from ceremonial magick found a home in popular music and movies fueling the fantasies of its detractors in the epidemic of false claims of "Satanic ritual abuse" that has come to be called the "Satanic panic."[136]

The 1990s saw a resurgence of magick especially among the younger generation. This resurgence was connected to the "goth" movement, and was exemplified in the 1996 movie *The Craft,* in which a quartet of Los Angeles high school students use Witchcraft to fix various adolescent woes. Although the film has an oddly anti-Witchcraft ending, it had Wiccan consultants and much of the Witchcraft presented on screen represents real practices.[137] This both added to the boom in magick's popularity and fed its growing reputation as something trivial. No one seems to have been more critical of these new Witches than those with already established magickal practices. Ethan Doyle White notes the popularity at the time of the term "fluffy bunny" to describe these new magick users who were perceived by their elders as unserious and engaged with an overly commercial form of Witchcraft.[138]

The Pagans I met see this history in a different light. Griffin Ced, one of my teachers at The Green Man, began his first class on traditional Witchcraft with a short history of the

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[135] Pike, *New Age and Neopagan.* The relationship between these two traditions is explored in depth in this book.

[136] Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

[137] Pike, *New Age and Neopagan,* 17. Ethan Doyle White, *Wicca: History, Belief & Community,* 65-74.

[138] Angela Coco and Ian Woodward," Discourses of Authenticity Within a Pagan Community: The Emergence of the 'Fluffy Bunny' Sanction." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36, no. 5 (October 1, 2007): 479–504. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606293160. White, *Wicca, 67.*

craft. In his narrative, the 1990s goth Witch trend was a response to the "fluffiness" of Wicca as well as a reckoning with its reliance on "false histories." The "fluffiness" in this case refers to the group of New Age and magick users that are often referred to with derision as "the love and light crowd." This is meant as a critique of the perceived blindness to the world's social ills found in communities and individuals that center on positivity and reject the darker aspects of magic. This blindness is exemplified in the critique of both the Wiccan "rule of three" and the more recent popularity of the "rule of attraction." The rule of three, sometimes called the "three-fold law," was a central part of Gardnerian Wicca and many of its offshoots for the first few decades. It states that whatever one puts out into the world will come back to them in triplicate. "The law of attraction," made popular by Rhonda Byrne's 2006 book and subsequent movie "*The Secret*," similarly argues that one attracts what they put out into the world. In all three of my field sites these "laws" were presented as overly simplistic and individualistic views of cause and effect which ignored the social conditions and which limit what one can expect to achieve in the world.

The response to "false histories" is a little more complicated. There had always been people skeptical of Gardner's claims that he had been initiated into an old coven, as well as the larger narrative of ancient "Witch-cults" expounded by Margaret Murray and those inspired by her. Margot Adler attests to this change in perspective on Witchcrafts history in a passage added to the 1986 expanded and revised edition of *Drawing Down the Moon.* Echoing the attitudes of Starhawk, she states: "most revivalist Witches in North America accept the universal Old Religion more as metaphor than as literal reality – a spiritual truth more than geographical one."[139] She then goes on to explain how this approach to truth has

[139] Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 86-87.

become an important part of Witchcraft's evolution in the United States, quoting from several elders who have come to see things more in this light. By the 90s, enough evidence had been collected for all but the most credulous to give up belief in an ancient Witch cult.

The first few decades of the 21st century continued a rise in the amount of magick users who identified as "solitary." In her 2019 book *Solitary Pagans,* Berger notes that the only major change between her survey of the Pagan community conducted in 1995 and the one conducted from 2009 to 2010 was the rise of solitary practitioners – from just over 50 percent to 78 percent.[140] Berger suggests that this rise might be connected to a more general trend of Americans "claiming to be spiritual but not religious or to be religious but not belong to a church or other religious institution."[141] It is also aided by greater access to information about magick facilitated by the internet.[142]

During my research, Witchcraft, and to a lesser degree other magick traditions, became more visible. Nearly every supermarket I entered while driving around California had magazines about Witches at the checkout counter. Meanwhile, casual references to magick made regular appearances in new television shows such as the teen drama *Genera+ion,* the period piece *Peaky Blinders,* and the science fiction epic *Foundation.* The

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[140] Berger, *Solitary Pagans,* 1.

[141] Berger, *Solitary Pagans,* xv.

[142] Douglas E. Cowan, *Cyberhenge* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004). Magick users were among the earliest generation of internet enthusiasts. Message boards and newsletters proved invaluable for those curious about magick and Witchcraft, who found themselves far from a coven or a magic store or who preferred not to work with others in person. Chaos Magick, a popular kitchen sink approach to ritual and spell work, found its earliest innovators online.

most discussed aspect of this new visibility in magick classes and the academic and popular press is the rise of the hashtag #witchtok on the social media platform TikTok.[143] This hashtag appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to appear in new accounts, some with hundreds of thousands of followers, over the following years. The most common answer explaining Witchcraft and magick's current visibility, given by both practitioners and the press, has to do with political destabilization and the decline of "traditional religion." This narrative states that in times of societal and political turmoil people seek out spirituality, and Witchcraft offers that to those who feel constrained by older religious systems which they often associate with the very turmoil they are seeking to escape from. This argument appeared in at least six articles and editorials between 2017 and 2022.[144]

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[143] Jane Barnette, "Hocus-Pocus: WitchTok Education for Baby Witches." In *TikTok Cultures in the United States*, 1st ed., 97–107. Routledge, 2022. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003280705-12; Chris. Miller, "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok: Intersections of Digital, Consumer, and Material Culture(s) on #WitchTok." *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 118-. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020118; T. M. Brown, "Practical Magic: The Lucrative Business of Being a Witch on Etsy and TikTok." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2023, sec. Style. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/28/style/witch-tiktok-etsy-business.html.

[144] Jessica Bennett, "When Did Everybody Become a Witch?" *The New York Times*, October 24, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/24/books/peak-witch.html; David Brooks, "Opinion | The Age of Aquarius, All Over Again!" *The New York Times*, June 10, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/opinion/astrology-occult-millennials.html; Ross Douthat, "Opinion | The Return of Paganism," *The New York Times*, December 12, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/12/opinion/christianity-paganism-america.html; Michelle Goldberg, "Opinion | Season of the Witch," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/03/opinion/witches-occult-comeback.html; Marisa Meltzer, "Interview With the Witch." *The New York Times*, October 22, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/style/interview-with-the-witch.html; Molly Worthen, "Opinion | 400 Years Ago, They Would Be Witches. Today, They Can Be Your Coach," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/03/opinion/spiritual-coaches-religion.html.

While most of the people I spoke to welcome the influx of new Witches that such visibility brings, it also raises new anxieties. They worry that the Witchcraft found on social media is a watered-down form of magick and that those practicing it see it mostly as an aesthetic motivated by materialism. The exemplar of this during the time of my research was the controversy around a "Starter Witch Kit." Created by perfume manufacturer Pinrose and planned for sale at Sephora and Urban Outfitters, this kit included a tarot card deck, some crystals, white sage for smudging, and some vials of perfume. The backlash against this from the Pagan community stopped this particular product from coming to market but similar products are now available from many online marketplaces.[145]

The connection between common explanations for the rise of Witchcraft's visibility and anxieties about its commodification are often intertwined. The caption under a photograph posted in an article on Vox Media about the Starter Witch Kit reads, "Magic and Witchcraft have increasingly become commodities as more Americans leave religion behind."[146] Most practitioners seem to have complicated views on making money through the craft.[147] While many eschew materialism, the insistence on avoiding institutionalization and hierarchy means that the only way for those providing religious services and products to

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[145] Chris Miller. "Sephora's Starter Witch Kit: Identity Construction through Social Media Protests of Commodified Religion." *Nova Religio* 25, no. 3 (February 1, 2022): 87–112; Lauren Strapagiel, "That 'Starter Witch Kit' Was Canceled After Massive Backlash On Social Media." BuzzFeed News, September 6, 2018.

[146] Nadra Nittle, "The Occult Is Having a Moment. Companies Want in, but Not If Witches Can Help It." Vox, October 31, 2018.

[147] Tanice G. Foltz, "The Commodification of Witchcraft" In *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America* edited by Helen A. Berger Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 137-168.

make an income is to sell their labor and goods. This is one of the reasons that the magick shop is often the center of a magickal community.

Contemporary Magick Users in the Greater Los Angeles Area

There are few places in the world where technology, commerce, and imagination are more intertwined than Los Angeles. It is a city fueled by a desire for novelty and innovation and built on selling the imaginary. This is as true for the aerospace and real estate industries as it is for the world of entertainment.[148] It is also true for religion. The city has always been a fertile ground for religious innovation and showmanship. It was here that William J. Seymour, an African American preacher, led the Azusa Street Revival from which so much of modern Pentecostalism arose.[149] It was a city primed for the mix of spectacle and piety personified in Aimee Semple McPherson, a charismatic preacher whose services were as much theater as sermon and who gained a dedicated following of adherents, onlookers, and celebrities. McPherson herself became a bona fide Los Angeles star, courting movie deals and getting involved in a scandal that led to one of the first great celebrity trials.[150]

Los Angeles' place in the world of alternative religion is expansive. The city's early 20th century boom brought religious innovation to a place in the midst of defining itself, much of which was explicitly magickal. Paul Foster Case, a former musician and member of

[148] Mike Davis. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Rev ed. (New York, NY: Verso, 2018).

[149] Caroline Bunnell Harris, "Rivers of Living Water: Radical Social Behaviors and Religious Innovations on Azusa Street, 1906–1909." In *Religion in Los Angeles*. (London, UK: Routledge, 2021).

[150] Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America*. (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009)

the Golden Dawn offshoot Alpha et Omega, founded Builders of the Adytum (B.O.T.A.) in 1922. Described as a mystery tradition, this was an order based on Kabbalah and tarot, where a central ritual involves coloring your own tarot cards. Manly P. Hall, the mystic who wrote the encyclopedic work of universal correspondence and combinativeness, *The Secret Teaching of All Ages* [151], founded his Philosophical Research Society in LA in 1934. Both of these institutions continue to exist and influence the magickal community of the city. In the interwar period, Arthur Bell created Mankind United, a group whose beliefs included a cabal of 1,000 families that had been running the world since Christ's death; a utopian vision of labor that would have people working four hours a day, four days a week, for four months out of the year; and a race of tiny metal people who live beneath the earth. H.T. Dohrman's 1958 book about this group bears the title *California Cult*, anticipating a category that would soon become a national fascination.[152] In nearby Pasadena, rocket scientist Jack Parsons spent World War II developing both the chemistry behind jet propulsion and an apocalyptic version of Crowley and the O.T.O.'s magickal system – a story that will be explored more in the next chapter.

In the 1950s, Parsons' most famous ritual partner, L. Ron Hubbard, mixed science fiction, ceremonial magick, New Thought, and psychotherapy to create the city's most controversial and successful new religion, Scientology.[153] The 1960s brought countless

[151] Manly P Hall,. *The Secret Teachings of All Ages: An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy*. (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Publications, 2010)

[152] H. T. Dohrman, *California Cult - Story Of "Mankind United."* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1958).

[153] Hugh B. Urban, *The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

similar experiments in religious combinativeness, often mixing Western esotericism with "Eastern" traditions, usually Hinduism and Buddhism, and a zeal for breaking of long-held American traditions and taboos. James Edward Baker, a former stuntman and owner of one of the country's first health food restaurants, formed what might be the most "LA" of new religions. After a brief period as a disciple of Yogi Bhajan, the founder of the 3HO movement which introduced Kundalini Yoga to the United States, Baker formed his own spiritual commune in the Hollywood Hills. This group, sometimes called the Source Family, or just the Family, continued experimenting religiously and socially. Drawing on ceremonial magick, Christian mysticism, and astrology, while proselytizing through experimental rock music, they continued to regularly re-invent themselves until Baker's death in a hang gliding accident in Hawaii in 1975.[154] The 1969 murders conducted by psychedelic religious commune the Manson family shook the city, marking a shift in the way religious experimentation was seen by the public. Over the next decade, new religious movements in the public imagination went from curiosities to dangerous cults. This change became solidified by the death of over nine hundred members of the Peoples Temple, a California-based church that mixed Pentecostalism and radical Marxism, in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978.[155]

As far as the magick tradition goes, it was in Los Angeles that both Z. Budapest and Starhawk got their start, even if they eventually moved to the San Francisco Bay Area.

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[154] Isis Aquarian, Electricity Aquarian, and Erik Davis, *The Source: The Untold Story of Father Yod, Ya Ho Wa 13 and The Source Family* (Los Angeles, CA: Process, 2007).

[155] Sean McCloud, "From exotics to brainwashers: Portraying new religions in mass media." *Religion Compass* 1, no. 1 (2007), 214-228. McCloud's work follows the shift in press reporting during this time. For Jonestown and its aftermath see: David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

Magick finds a welcome home in the actual city, but it is thriving in the imaginary city. Movies, novels, and TV shows have long explored a city full of secret societies, occult rituals, and dark spell work. This has been part of the pulp fiction of the city in both the horror genre and the city's homegrown noir fiction.[156] Recently it has made its way into nearly every genre of TV show set in the city. Whether this is the result a thriving magick community working in the industry or the otherworldly vertigo that this city with no clear center produces is a question for other researchers. One thing is for certain, Los Angeles is both a magickal and magical city in more ways than one. As one of the Thelemites I worked with put it,

> "There is a goddess here, I prefer to refer to her as Nuestra Señora[157] but I've worked with her. And she is powerful. Her flavor has come into the magick that is practiced in LA. Just like just like everything else. In LA it is about ephemerality; it is about creativity; it is about passion. It's about a vibrant, almost self-destructive energy, that befits a city that is always sitting a quarter of a second away from being leveled."[158]

The subjects of this dissertation are those who live among both these forms of magic/k, and who are the products, creators, and interpreters of the history recounted here. They continue to draw on the productive tensions, complex paradoxes, and very real imaginary worlds they have inherited. Star Sapphire Lodge continues the work of figures like Jack Parsons, embracing the city's twin industries of science and entertainment, embracing Crowley's version of magick as both a science and an art. The Traditional Witches at The

[156] Emily D. Edwards, *Metaphysical Media: The Occult Experience in Popular Culture*. (Carbondale, Il: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

[157] The Spanish name for what would become the city of Los Angeles was El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles: the town of our lady, the queen of angels.

[158] Soror Aaur in conversation with the author on July 7, 2021.

Green Man embrace the complex vision of belief articulated by Starhawk. They see themselves as architects of a mutable reality evoking post-modern theories while drawing on ancient gods and concepts of religion pulled directly from the heart of modernity. The growing community surrounding The Crooked Path mixes the high magick of the Golden Dawn with various Witchcraft traditions, insisting that being a Witch means using whatever you can to live magickly while navigating the often-mundane world of life in a modern metropolis.

The history told here shows a tradition that has become more comfortable over time with a reality that is mutable and a complex concept of what validates something as true. As the origin of documents and historical narratives come into question, practitioners find new ways to provide authority to their beliefs and practices and explain the validity of their magick. According to many modern magick users I met, effectiveness has replaced any sense of ancientness as the primary criteria by which to judge a magickal system. This does not mean that pedigree and history do not matter to these magicians. They still harken back to the history presented here and use their knowledge of it as a signal of their authority, but they often do so with the awareness that many of parts of this history may not hold up to serious scrutiny.

Members of Star Sapphire Lodge told me that it matters little to them if Aleister Crowley's wife really channeled *The Book of the Law*, one of their central documents, to him from the deity Aiwass, as he claimed, for its words to be transformative. My teachers at The Green Man told stories of their knowledge's history in pre-Christian Europe while criticizing those who put importance on such claims. Members of the Coven of the Dark Moon at The Crooked Path draw on the magick of the Golden Dawn's Cipher Manuscript while teaching

in their classes that these very documents were forgeries. The magicians that make up the traditions studied in the rest of this dissertation bring the same complex vision of truth to all of their magickal work, inhabiting worlds where ideas of authenticity are often unstable and where reality is both fixed and mutable.

The first of these and the subject of the next chapter, Star Sapphire Lodge, falls the farthest on the side of a fixed reality. It is essential to their magick that an unchanging reality exists, although it is not the one they live in. They are also the group that engages the most with their own history, as their primary religious act is an engagement with the life and works of Aleister Crowley. In many ways these magicians work a magick which is closer to the Victorian era then the contemporary world. Their magick is based on an unseen, unchanging reality and they access it primarily through the study of texts and the enactment of proscribed rituals. Still, they do all this in a contemporary context and bring many of the same attitudes toward reality and truth that the rest of the magicians studied here do. A close look at how they engage with this older form of magick in contemporary Los Angeles provides a bridge between the history of magick in the preceding chapter and the more self-consciously modern forms of magick found in the other two case studies

Chapter 2

Star Sapphire Lodge and the Unseen Order of the Universe

Star Sapphire Lodge was the first magickal institution I visited in Los Angeles. At the time I was exploring options for my dissertation. I knew I wanted to work with magick and was toying with Aleister Crowley and the O.T.O. being a part of that research. I decided I would attend a Gnostic Mass, one of the O.T.O.'s central public rituals. I was just getting to know the general landscape of Los Angeles, where a uniform banality of exteriors often hides the odd, transcendent, and absurd. I was thus a little confused when I pulled up to the address from their website only to find a nondescript mini-mall in a mostly residential area of the San Fernando Valley. A young woman with dyed black hair was sitting in front of a door squeezed between a music school and a tutoring center that advertised "UC College Application Services." I introduced myself to her and asked if this was where the mass was going to take place. She told me it was, that she was visiting from Las Vegas, and that she would be the Priestess in that day's service. Before heading in, we chatted briefly about the copy of science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin's version of the Tao Te Ching she was holding.

The door opened to a stairwell leading down. As I descended, I noticed the smoky smell of walls heavy with years of burning incense that is common in magickal spaces. At the bottom of the stairs a young woman sat with a mailing list and a small cash box. Above her head was a large painting of a dove facing down towards a flaming cup, a prominent image in the Thelemic world. I gave the young woman the suggested donation then headed to my left into a windowless room with book-lined walls and a square of couches and chairs.

This was Star Sapphire's library. The books on the walls included most of Crowley's output and other O.T.O.-related books as well as sections with labels such as Tantra, Enochian magic, and comparative religion. On the couches two older men sat talking to each other about other magickal orders they had visited. Like many buildings in California, this mini-mall is built on a hill and its basement has a door that opens to the outside where members smoke and get air. Later, I would learn that this room often serves as the social center of the lodge since it is the only place besides the temple with chairs.

On the other side of the stairwell people busied themselves setting up a large room which was split in half by a heavy curtain. In one half, pictures related to the lodge's past lined the walls and there was a small section for t-shirts and other lodge merchandise. Along the back of this part of the room was a mini fridge, a couple of small cabinets with counter space, and a large table. Most of the people in this room were busying themselves setting up an impressive amount of food and drink. I would learn later that most Star Sapphire Lodge events are potlucks and the table often overflows with a collection of homemade items and premade grocery store snacks. The other half of the room, partially hidden at first behind the large curtain, was the temple – the area where rituals, such as the Gnostic Mass which I was there to attend, take place.

Masses are one of the primary functions of O.T.O. bodies and the main responsibility of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C.),[159] an arm of the O.T.O. In the original script there are five roles: three speaking roles – the Priestess, Priest, and Deacon – and two

[159] Not to be confused with the Ecclesia Gnostica, an unaffiliated "open sacramental church," located in Hollywood.

nonspeaking roles called “children.” Although the children’s roles were performed by young children, including Crowley’s own, when the mass was first written, most contemporary masses give the roles to those new to the order, sometimes called acolytes. The three speaking roles are available to any initiate who has been baptized into the E.G.C.

At roughly 2pm we were all corralled into the half of the room with the refreshments. Those of us unfamiliar with the ritual were given small pamphlets titled “A Missal for the People,” which contained the excerpts from the mass’s script which require group participation and diagrams showing the postures and gestures used during the ritual. After a few brief remarks about what to expect we were led single file into the temple side of the room, a square space with a checkerboard floor and chairs lining the walls. On one side of the space was an elaborate altar and on the other a small stand-alone box called the “tomb,” about the size of a closet, from which some participants emerge during the ritual.

Eric, a tall bald man with tattoos who was acting as Deacon, who serves as a sort of host or master of ceremonies for the ritual, invited us all in and then walked to the center of the room, kissed a book, placed it on the altar, and turned to the west. Opening his arms, he spoke in a loud baritone, “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law, I proclaim the law of light, life, love, and liberty.” Then he sang the syllables of the Greek version of the Tetragrammaton, the name of God, “eee-ah-oh.” We all responded, “love is the law, love under will,” and the Mass began.

Unlike other magickal rituals I attended, the Gnostic Mass I saw that day differed little from those regularly performed all over the world. O.T.O. orders and other Thelemites performing the ritual follow a script written over a century ago by Crowley and published as

Liber XV: the Gnostic Mass.[160] In his history of sex magic, *Magia Sexualis*, Hugh Urban describes the Gnostic Mass as a "kind of creative reimagining of the secret rites alleged to been practiced by the early Gnostics and later corrupted by the Catholic Church,"[161] and the mass does have a lot of elements that seem to be intentional blasphemies. There is a listing of revered saints that includes historical figures like Friedrich Nietzsche, William Blake, and Paul Gauguin alongside more explicitly religious figures like Mohammed, Loa-tze [sic], and Siddhartha; mythical characters like Merlin, Krishna, and Pan; and of course Crowley himself, twice.[162] The Priestess sits naked on the altar for a large portion of the ritual and the climax of the event involves a form of Eucharist where one faces the priestess, eats "cakes of light"[163] and proclaims, "there is no part of me that is not of the Gods."

For contemporary O.T.O. members however, much of the transgressive and blasphemous elements of the mass are at most secondary. It has become a ritual about something much more personal and something that, if I'm being honest, it took me a long time to understand. The mass is quite different from Pagan rituals in that it relies on

[160] Liber XV is available with commentary on the website of the Sabazius X°, the national Grand Master of the United States O.T.O. Grand Lodge. (https://sabazius.O.T.O.-usa.org/gnostic-mass/).

[161] Hugh Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 121.

[162] Once as To Mega Therion (Greek for the Great Beast) and later as Sir Aleister Crowley.

[163] "Cakes of light" are small cakes that were originally made with flour, honey, ash, a ceremonial oil called Abramelin Oil, and bodily fluids (usually semen, vaginal fluid, menstrual blood, or a mix of these). Sometimes contemporary bodies sidestep the bodily fluid requirement by including ash from previous cakes that did involve one of these fluids though the actual recipe is rarely discussed. Given the public aspect of the modern rituals and the current Grand Lodge's wariness of legal liability it seems unlikely that they would include any of these fluids without telling us.

repetition rather than novelty for its power. As an outsider it often seemed quite boring the first few times. And yet for my subjects, it was both what drew them into the order and a primary part of their magickal work. This is because the magick that the O.T.O. members are doing is based on a sort of reality hacking. For them reality is mutable, but to change it you must get inside it and understand it on a deep symbolic level. You must understand its mechanics and your place within them to enact your will and use it to shape a better world.

In the opening sentence of the third of the lectures that makes up William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, titled "The Reality of the Unseen," he states that in seeking to characterize the "life of religion… one might say that there is an unseen order, and that supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."[164] While it has become clear over the past century of religious studies scholarship that this statement is overly reductive, it does identify a central aspect of the religious life of those whom scholars and practitioners have categorized as members of the Western esoteric tradition – a tradition that members of Star Sapphire Lodge proudly consider themselves a part of. Antoine Faivre traces this focus on an "unseen order," first to the medieval idea of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) which evolved into the Renaissance idea of *philosphia perennis* (perennial philosophy), both of which refer to eternal knowledge which, if deciphered correctly, can give one access to the a hidden, or "unseen," reality.[165] Religious studies scholar Kocku von Stuckrad, who has been critical of Faivre, also centers on the idea of an "absolute truth" that can only be accessed

[164] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; Collier Books, New York, NY: 1961), 59.

[165] Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, translated by Christine Rohne (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 7.

through specialized knowledge in his definition of esotericism.[166] Where von Stuckrad differs from Faivre and many other historians of Western esotericism is that he sees this as a form of discourse. Egil Asprem builds on von Stuckyard's argument, describing the origins of magick's tendency to combine disparate religious systems into one system as "programmatic syncretism" inspired by a "perennialist agenda" which became especially popular at the end of the 18th century. After all, an absolute knowledge shouldn't be culturally specific. This higher reality is an unchanging place of both platonic forms and powerful energies where all the mysteries of the universe are laid bare. Asprem further finds a willingness among ceremonial magicians to improvise and improve on texts in this form of syncretism. Since this hidden reality is static and hidden, all magicians theoretically have equal access to it through the correct reading of symbols in our reality and a close study of how they correspond with the higher realms, and thus ancient writers are not necessarily more authoritative than modern magicians.

Members of Star Sapphire Lodge seek this hidden order, but they do so while also claiming that the goal of their magick is effectiveness, not knowledge. It is more important, they often tell me, *that* magick works than *how* it works. They take this approach directly from Crowley who defined magick as "the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will." Thelemites draw on this to create magickal lives dedicated to seeking out an unseen reality and use it to create change in the world. They do this by engaging in rituals like the Gnostic Mass, experimenting with magickal tools like tarot and Kabbalah, and engaging in close study of the works of Crowley and other magicians. All the while they

[166] Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation." *Religion (London. 1971)* 35, no. 2 (2005): 78–97.

often use the language of empirical science to describe their experimentation around the effectiveness of magick. In this sense they straddle certain lines when it comes to their understanding of truth. On the one hand they believe that magick, like most things, should be put through extensive testing using the scientific method, and at the same time they are willing to accept truths that fail this form of experimentation if they work. A non-magickal corollary to this approach can be found in medical science which uses the scientific method to test methods and drugs but is willing to accept effectiveness as a proof of validity without knowing how it works.

The O.T.O.'s history both in and outside of Los Angeles makes it ideal for understanding the methods that magick users and metaphysicals writ large use to decipher these hidden, or as James called them, "inarticulate" aspects of reality. As a bridge between the historical exploration of the first chapter and the ethnographic focus of the rest of this project, this chapter will begin by focusing first on two moments in the history of the O.T.O. First, a brief look at Crowley's experience channeling *The Book of the Law* gives us the origins of one of the O.T.O.'s central texts and an example of how its founder sought to verify his own magickal experiences. Second, the events surrounding Jack Parsons and the Agape Lodge show a moment in the history of Thelema in Los Angeles where magick and science were intimately intertwined and which also led directly to the creation of the O.T.O. as the international order it is today. The focus will then shift to the ways current members of Star Sapphire Lodge think about magick through the language of both modern science and the search for the "unseen order" of the universe.

This chapter will also cement our focus on Los Angeles. Despite its British origins and somewhat old fashioned magickal practices, Star Sapphire Lodge is the most deeply

connected to the city of all the groups I studied. Located in the basement of a mini-mall in a particularly suburban part of San Fernando Valley, it is one of the most active and visible O.T.O. bodies in the world, with somewhere between fifty and a hundred dues-paying members and a regular stream of curiosity seekers and possible initiates at most events. Los Angeles is also home to major, high ranking members of the national O.T.O. Both the U.S. National Grand Lodge Master Sabazius X° and, its possibly more well known, Deputy Grand Master Lon Milo DuQuette lived in the area while I was conducting my research.[167]

Testing the Law

Of the three groups I looked at, Starr Sapphire Lodge was the only one connected to a larger organization and the only one that looked to a single historical figure: Aleister Crowley. Understanding more about Crowley is essential to understanding their practice since this is one of the sources of their magick. While a full accounting of his work is beyond the scope of this project, a brief look at how he wrestled with the testing of magick's validity at one of the most important moments in O.T.O. history provides both a valuable window into his thinking and provides an example of one of the stories that Thelemites return to regularly.

After leaving the collapsing Golden Dawn, Crowley got married. He was spending the summer of 1903 at Boleskine House, his manor in Scotland, with his friend Gerald Kelly. Kelly, a painter Crowley had met at the famous Parisian cafe Le Chat Blanc,[168] received a

[167] DuQuette has since moved to Northern California.

[168] Novelist W. Somerset Maupin was also a regular at this cafe and both the painter and the magician would later go on to appear, thinly veiled, in his stories.

letter from his mother, who was staying at a nearby health retreat, insisting that she needed him to join her for some unnamed urgent matter. Crowley joined the painter on this trip and there he met Kelly's sister Rose, who it would turn out was the cause of the letter. She had agreed to marry two men, both of whom said they needed to go abroad to get the permission and resources needed to marry. Rose did not expect either to return, but when they both did, she found herself with two more fiancés than she wanted. [169] Crowley offered to marry her himself, promising that she need not worry about his odd pastimes. "All you have to do is marry me. I will go back to Boleskine and you need never see me again," he explained.[170] Crowley saw this as a win for both: helping her out of her predicament while providing himself a way to thumb his nose at convention in a spectacular manner. In the process of pulling this off, however, the two of them seemed to have developed real affection for each other and, after the sham wedding, went on a real honeymoon.[171]

They traveled all over the world, but it was in Egypt, near the end of their trip, where Crowley's work took a prophetic turn. In the spring of 1904, Crowley and Rose, going by the names Prince and Princess Chioa Khan (titles Crowley claimed had been bestowed upon

[169] This is how the event is described in John Symonds' *The Great Beast, 51*. Crowley's *Confessions 363-364*, which Symonds edited, tells a different story. According to Crowley's account, Rose, after feigning pregnancy to get money from her family, was being betrothed against her will. This "awakened" his "Shelleyan indignation" and he offered to marry her to fix the situation. I included Symonds' account since he had access to sources besides Crowley, although it's not like Crowley to tell the less lurid of the stories.

[170] Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions, 364.*

[171] Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions, 370.*

them by an unnamed Eastern potentate) rode into Cairo in style.[172] On the 14th of March they rented some rooms where the "prince" immediately went about building a temple for the invocation of Thoth, the Egyptian god closely associated with the Greek god Hermes. Rose immediately started acting odd. She took to repeating the phrase "they are waiting for you," dreamily and with some regularity. Crowley figured she was "possibly drunk or hysterical from pregnancy," until, on the 18th of March she, in Crowley's words, "revealed that the waiter was Horus, whom I had offended and ought to invoke."[173] Crowley doesn't seem to have known what to do with this. He loathed taking commands from anyone, especially Rose, whose weakening constitution he had come to resent. On the other hand, he was sure that Rose had no way of knowing who Horus was.

Crowley, in his oddly third-person autobiographical work *Equinox of the Gods*, describes himself as having all but given up on magick at this point and become a man of science. He was still conducting rituals, but his motivations had changed. In his own words, "the interpretation of the occult phenomena which he had observed occupied him exclusively, and his mind and "more attracted to materialism. What are phenomena?" He asked. "Of noumena I know and can know nothing. All I know is, as far as I know, a mere modification of the mind, a phase of consciousness. And thought is a secretion of the brain. Consciousness is a function of the brain."[174] In this mindset he was more skeptical than usual of the mystical origins of his wife's proclamation. So, he put her to the test.

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[172] Symonds, *The Great Beast*, 57.

[173] Aleister Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods* (1936: New Falcon Publications, 1991).

[174] Crowley, *The Equinox of the Gods, 73.*

He examined her on twelve points related to both the god Horus and Crowley's personal relationship to him. She answered each question correctly and with ease, including ones which would be impossible for her to know by conventional means. This was still not enough, so he brought her to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo which, although near their lodgings, they had never visited, and asked her to identify Horus. They walked past many images of the god, which elicited no recognition in Rose, until they reached the second floor where she pointed to a glass case in the distance and explained, "there, there it is." When they approached, they found that it was a 26th dynasty stele with an image of Horus in the form of Ra Hoor Kuit. The exhibit's number was 666, the number of the beast, which Crowley had taken as part of his identity since childhood. This was enough for Crowley to accept that Rose's message was from somewhere beyond this plane of existence.

Over the next few days Rose channeled further messages to the Great Beast (Crowley) while he set about invoking Horus. At first this work was quite frustrating, but after a few days he had a "startling success," being told that, '"The Equinox of the Gods had come"; that is, that a new epoch had begun. "I was to formulate a link between the solar-spiritual force and mankind," he wrote in his autobiography, or autohagiography as he called it.[175] A few weeks later, on April 7th, Rose, to whom he had given the magickal name Ouarda, told him to "enter the room, where all this work had been done, exactly at noon on April 8th, 9th and 10th, and write down what [he] heard, rising exactly at one o'clock. This [he] did. In these three hours were written the three chapters of *The Book of the Law*."[176]

[175] Crowley, *The Confessions,* 394.

[176] Crowley, *The Confessions.* 395.

Crowley does not claim authorship of *The Book of the Law*. Instead, he says it was dictated to him over those three days by a being called Aiwass, whom he would later identify as his "holy guardian angel."[177] The book is made up of three chapters, each in the voice of a different deity: Nuit, Hadit, and Ra-Hoor-Kuit. It introduces several important concepts and figures to Thelema, including the Great Beast and the Scarlet Woman and tells of a coming age, the Aeon of Horus, during which Thelema's most important and infamous credo will reign:" do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."[178]

For years Crowley did little with this revelation. He had it typed up but then put it aside to gather dust in the attic of his Scottish manor. Years later he would return to it as the core of a new religion he hoped to form. Eventually it would become the central text of the O.T.O. with the three days of its writing celebrated every year as a Thelemic holiday. The writing, like much scripture, is lofty and obscure, lending itself to endless exegesis, something both Crowley and his followers would find extremely fruitful were it not for a comment Crowley had added to the text before publication. The introduction proclaimed that "the study of the book of the law is forbidden" and that "All questions of the Law are to be

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[177] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 82. Hutton traces the origin of this concept to the *Book of Abramelin the Mage,* which Crowely was introduced to by Mathers and which would prove central to his ritual work.

[178] Crowley took this term from French Renaissance humanist and satirist François Rabelais's Gargantua and Pantagruel, which depicts one of the titular giants taking over an abbey named Thelema and declaring the only law to be "do what though wilt."

decided only by appeal to my writings, each for himself."[179] Crowley, however, had plenty to say about the book and eventually found the roots of a new religion in it.

In *The Confessions*, after describing the writing of *The Book of the Law*, Crowley immediately tells readers that,

> "The importance of religion to humanity is paramount. The reason is that all men perceive more or less the 'First Noble Truth' — that everything is sorrow; and religion claims to console them by an authoritative denial of this truth or by promising compensations in other states of existence. This claim implies the possibility of knowledge derived from sources other than the unaided investigation of nature through the senses and the intellect. It postulates, therefore, the existence of one or more praeter-human intelligences, able and willing to communicate, through the medium of certain chosen men, to mankind a truth or truths which could not otherwise be known."[180]

There are echoes of James' concept of religion here and Crowley's comments are a clear reference to the language of hidden knowledge at the core of Western esotericism. Crowley, unlike many of his predicators, was not studying these phenomena in an attempt to better understand and explain them, he was seeking out ways to recreate them. He saw himself as one of the "chosen men" and set out to use the power of religion to bring the world into a new aeon. He died without succeeding, but almost a century after those words were written, Thelemites still continue his work. Crowley wrote of magick as an "art and science." This quote shows that he was seeking something beyond the material and urged his followers to do the same. He advocated for a magick that used scientific methods to search out something beyond its scope. His followers, both during his life and after, continued this method. Jack Parsons, the subject of the next section, provides a compelling example of this. He was a man

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[179] Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law* (1909; Reis: York Beach, Me: Weiser Books, 1987).

[180] Crowley, *The Confessions.* 395.

dedicated to both magickal and scientific exploration and saw in both of these a way to move beyond this world. Parsons is a striking example of the mix of magick and science in Thelema and a forerunner of those I met at Star Sapphire Lodge.

Jack Parsons and the Agape Lodge

Although most contemporary Thelemites are members of the O.T.O. and take the Gnostic Mass very seriously, neither this ritual nor the organization it is tied to were central to Crowley for most of his magickal life. In fact, much of the groundwork for these institutions started in America where Crowley spent nearly all of World War I hoping to create a new religion of Thelema.[181] Once the war ended, Crowley made his way back to Europe where he eventually joined and became the leader of the O.T.O. Although Crowley declared his attempt to create a new religion a failure, his work continued to have influence in North America where Karl Germer, who would eventually take over the entire order, led the American branch of the O.T.O.[182]

By the start of the World War II, only one O.T.O. lodge remained in the world: the Agape Lodge in Pasadena, California. This is an institution whose story and legacy would lead directly to those I met at Star Sapphire Lodge. Agape was started by Wilfred Talbot Smith, a British expatriate and long-time disciple of Crowley. He started initiating members

[181] Symonds, *The Great Beast*, 131-145.

[182] *Karl Germer: Selected Letters 1928-1962*. Ed. David Shoemaker, Andrew Ferrell, and Stefan Voss. (Sacramento, CA: Temple of the Silver Star, 2017), Jack Parsons Correspondences, Parsons, Jack – Letters Copies, Box 145, American Religions Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

and performing public rituals at his home in Hollywood in 1935 but eventually moved all activities behind closed doors after losing his job at the Southern California Gas Company due to being outed as occultist.[183]

It was during this time that Jack Parsons, a promising young chemist and enthusiastic science fiction fan, started attending Gnostic Masses and taking steps toward initiation. In 1942, the group relocated to a mansion on Pasadena's "Millionaire Row." A core group including Parsons (who covered most of the $100 monthly rent), moved into this house and lived communally. Pasadena was a boom town during the war thanks to the growing aerospace industry. This brought a lot of young, well-off, college-educated people to town. Parsons, a local boy who had left college early due to the Great Depression, found himself at home amongst this group. Thelema was a systematic approach to magick which made it particularly attractive to scientific minds like Parsons.

By all accounts the mansion housed a lively community of eccentric magick users, including figures like Jane Wolf and Phyllis Seckler who would go on to play a major role in the O.TO.'s future. Crowley, advancing in years, remained deeply connected with everything going on under his name.[184] Many of the members of the Agape Lodge corresponded with him, including Smith and Parsons who wrote regular letters to the aging magus covering

[183] Martin P. Starr, *The Unknown God: W. T. Smith and the Thelemites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024). Starr has done the most comprehensive research on Smith and this period of the Agape Lodge.

[184] John Carter, *Sex and Rockets: The Occult World of Jack Parsons*. (Venice, Calif: Feral House, 2000), George Pendle. *Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons*. First Edition (Mariner Books, 2006.), Urban, *Magia Sexualis,* 135-139.

magickal, administrative, and personal subjects.[185] These letters show Crowley being highly critical of Smith's leadership, particularly his failure to collect dues that were supposed to go to Crowley. Parsons on the other hand regularly sent money to Crowley personally.[186] Eventually Smith, who had just had a child with Parsons' wife Helen, was sent on a "magickal retirement" and Parsons, now in a relationship with Helen's half-sister Betty, was appointed head of the lodge.[187]

Parsons approached his magick with an experimental zeal that he also brought to the burgeoning field of rocketry. While he was running the Agape Lodge, he also became a founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in nearby Altadena. At work he was paving the way for space flight while at home he was engaging in magickal experiments to bring about a new aeon. He began an undertaking called the "babalon [sic] working," a sex magick ritual meant to lead to the birth of a messiah-like child.[188] This working was based mostly on a novel Crowley had written called *Moonchild* although the idea of bringing about a new aeon, the age of Horus, was central to Crowley's cosmology.[189] This "Moonchild" would be the offspring, through immaculate conception, of elemental beings known as Babalon and the

[185] *Karl Germer: Selected Letters 1928-1962*.

[186] George Pendle. *Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons*. First Edition (Mariner Books, 2006.), 221.

[187] Karl J. Germer to Jane Wolfe, December 1942, in *Karl Germer: Selected Letters 1928-1962,* 30-31.

[188] Jack Parsons, *The Book of B.A.B.A.L.O.N.*, 1946, Box 145, Parsons, Jack – Letters Copies, American Religions Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

[189] Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild*. New York: Samuel Weiser, 1975.

antichrist. Parsons considered himself the antichrist but still needed to find a physical vessel for Babalon, a "scarlet woman," as Crowley often called his partners in sex magick. In February 1946, after weeks of rituals, including tantric masturbation and bloodletting, Parsons wrote to Crowley, telling the magus, "I seem to have my elemental!"[190] This elemental was a striking young woman named Marjorie Cameron, who was visiting the house and knew almost nothing of Thelema. Cameron and Parsons were joined in this project by L. Ron Hubbard, who had not yet founded Scientology and was at the time a moderately successful science fiction writer with curiosity about the occult. The three of them went out to the desert to engage in the final steps of the working. Though no child was produced at this event, Parsons would declare the ritual a success and declare that they were now living in the Aeon of Horus.[191]

Shortly after this ritual, Parsons entered a business deal with Hubbard and Betty Northrup (Parson's sister-in-law and sometimes lover). They were to import and sell yachts. Hubbard and Northrup set off to Florida to buy boats and never returned. They kept most of Parsons' life savings, got married, and eventually formed Scientology.[192] Crowley never fully approved of any of this, cautioning Parsons about going too far, and he eventually wrote to Karl Germer, the official head of the O.T.O. in America, that he "gets fairly frantic when he

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[190] Jack Parsons letter to Aleister Crowley, February 22, 1946, Box 145, Parsons, Jack – Letter Copies, American Religions Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

[191] Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 137.

[192] Urban, *The Church of Scientology*, 40-42.

contemplates the idiocy of these louts."[193] Parsons eventually gave up the mansion, which he had been referring to as "the parsonage," and passed leadership of the Agape Lodge to long-time member Roy Leffingwell under whose watch it continued without a permanent address until 1949. In 1954, at the age of thirty-seven, Jack Parsons died in an explosion in his home lab.

Although Parsons wasn't on the best terms with the O.T.O. at the time of his death, he had remained interested in magick for the rest of his short life. Near the end he was planning a new Thelemic group which would bring Crowley's ideas to the next generation.[194] In an act of prophecy, premonition, or simple coincidence he called this group "the Witchcraft."[195] Shortly before the lodge fell apart, Parsons' friend Grady McMurtry returned to the United States. He had been a soldier in World War II and stayed in Europe to study with Crowley after his tour was finished. Upon his return, McMurtry moved to San Francisco with the goal of opening an O.T.O. lodge in Northern California with Crowley's blessing. Before beginning this work, the Magus had ordered him to give a report on the Agape Lodge. He spent a few weeks in Los Angeles interviewing all the members. For the most part he found

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[193] Aleister Crowley to Karl Germer, March 7, 1946, Box 145, Parsons, Jack – Letter Copies, American Religions Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

[194] Jack Parsons to Karl Germer, March 31, 1950, Box 145, Parsons, Jack – Letter Copies, American Religions Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA.

[195] Urban, *Magia Sexualis,*137; Jack Parsons, *The Book of B.A.B.A.L.O.N.,* 1946, Box 145, Parsons, Jack – Letters Copies, American Religions Collection, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA. Parsons mentions witchcraft often in his account of the Babalon working.

the lodge to be a complete mess, although he still had high hopes for Parsons. He wrote to Crowley that Parsons was "shaking the debris of Agape from his shoulders and preparing to make a clean start on a more ambitious program than ever."[196]

McMurtry and Parsons planned to officially incorporate the O.T.O. in the state of California with Parsons leading the push in the south and McMurty in the north. Parsons' untimely death cut these plans short, although McMurtry would eventually incorporate his lodge in the Bay Area and, along with Phyllis Seckler (whom he later married), play a key role in the order's survival to the present. Although there was no official O.T.O. body in Southern California for decades, Thelema remained popular, and Crowley's work lived on in popular culture in the experimental films of Kenneth Anger and countless references in popular music, movies, and novels.[197]

The O.T.O. and Star Sapphire Lodge

After the collapse of the Agape Lodge and then the death of Crowley in 1949, whatever structure the O.TO. had in America quickly began to unravel. According to Soror Aaru, a Thelemite I spoke to who was part of the group who built the current O.T.O. structure, when Crowley's official successor as head of the Order, Karl Germer, died in 1962, it took some of the surviving members years to realize he was gone. Without him, certain initiatory levels became unreachable. Luckily Grady McMurtry found what Soror Aaru

[196] Grady McMurtry quoted in Carter, *Sex and Rockets*, 128

[197] Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 111-117.

referred to as an "in case of emergency break glass document." It was a letter from Crowley allowing McMurtry to declare himself head of the O.T.O. if none existed. Thus began the rebuilding of the O.T.O. into an order far larger and more organized than it had been under Crowley or Germer.[198]

The modern O.T.O. has an extremely complex organizational structure, especially for a group that is, in many ways, relatively young. It is an international organization with a governing body made up four branches: 1) The governing council, which included the head of the order (called Frater Superior) and his Secretary General and Treasurer, 2) the Grand Tribunal, which is responsible for adjudicating internal conflicts, 3) the Sovereign Sanctuary of the Gnosis, which concerns itself primarily with questions of liturgy and theology but also has important governing powers, and 4) the Secret Areopagus of the Illuminati, made up of all those who have reached the 8th degree and whose power primarily includes oversight over the Grand Tribunal.

The American Grand Lodge is overseen by a National Grand Master who has his own council which mirrors the international one. Below this council is the Supreme Grand Council, responsible for governing issues pertaining to the higher levels of initiation, and the Electoral College which focuses on the lower levels. On a local level there are three types of bodies – camps, oases, and lodges – designated for their size and ability to initiate members to higher levels and regularly celebrate the Mass. The camp is the smallest and the lodge is the biggest. Each body has its own governing council which mimics the structure of the national and international lodges. Despite, or perhaps because of, all this leadership

[198] Martin P. Starr "Chaos from Order: Cohesion and Conflict in the Post Crowley Occult Continuum." *The Pomegranate* 8, no. 1 (2007), 109

infrastructure, Star Sapphire Lodge was by far the most egalitarian of the groups I worked with. Whereas much of the activity at The Green Man and The Crooked Path centered around a single magnetic figure, the clear bureaucracy of the O.T.O. leadership served more as a source of administration and guidance, with Crowley's work and the organization holding central authority.

To make matters even more complicated, the O.T.O. is split into two interconnected "arms." The Mysteria Mystica Maxima (M.·.M.·.M.·.) which is primarily concerned with initiations and the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica (E.G.C.) which is charged with the celebration of the Mass and other rituals such as baptism, ordination, and confirmation. Members can hold various positions in each of these arms while at the same time holding positions in the international, national, or local government of the group. One of the Thelemites I spoke to was at the same time a bishop of the local E.G.C. and a member of the Grand Tribunal.

The initiatory structure of the O.T.O. is only slightly less complicated. It consists of twenty-one initiate degrees, thirteen numbered degrees, and eight unnumbered intermediate degrees. One's degree is often designated by a roman numeral followed by a degree symbol. This is typically placed after the magickal name of the member when they are referred to in any official capacity. For example, the head of the U.S. Lodge is Sabazius X°. The lowest degree one can take is called the "Minerval" (officially the zero degree) and this is meant to be an introductory degree. All you need to do is have the sponsorship of two members and a genuine desire to learn more about Thelema. You can stay at this degree as long as you wish and you can be baptized into the group, which allows you to take part in the Gnostic Mass. Each following degree is available by invitation only. As you ascend, certain positions and

responsibilities open up. For instance, after the intermediary degree "Knight of the East and West," which comes between IV° and V°, one is eligible for ordination into the priesthood of E.G.C. The X° and XI° are only available to heads of the national and international lodges respectively. Then there is the A.·.A.·., which has its own initiatory structure in which many, though not all, of the higher degree O.T.O. members also hold degrees.

With roughly fifty dues-paying members at the time of my research, Star Sapphire Lodge is, according to everyone I spoke to, probably the biggest and most active O.T.O. body in the world, although no one there seems particularly impressed by this. When asked about this fact, most members thought for a second and then agreed that it probably is. This success seems to have as much to do with geography as it does with the efforts of anyone at the lodge. The United States has by far the most O.T.O. activity and California makes up a great deal of that.

The members I interacted with were relatively racially diverse for the magickal community, although they were still majority white, with Latinx people making up a large minority.[199] Gender-wise, the group is the opposite of the other two Witchcraft institutions I worked with. Those identifying as male outnumbered those identifying as female by at least two thirds at every event I attended either in person or online. The one metric by which they are extremely diverse is sexual orientation, which is common in the magick community but even more so here where the founder was an open bisexual in a period where it was less common to be open about such things.

[199] The previous grand master was Latinx and made it part of his goal as leader to translate the Mass into Spanish, which he accomplished. It was performed a number of times at the Lodge's annual "Massathon," which brings together Thelemites from around the world to perform 12 masses over a single weekend.

Star Sapphire Lodge was the first of my field sites to reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic. During my time with them they had been very successful dealing with the ups and downs of this period, especially considering that their primary function was holding a public event. Although members I met said that Mass attendance was considerably higher before the pandemic, the events I attended still had nearly twenty attendees each, which seemed to be close to the limit for the temple space. That said, they had lowered the number of public Masses a month for the first months after reopening their doors. According to those in leadership, only about half of the people at any given Mass were dues-paying members of Star Sapphire Lodge with the rest made up of members of other lodges, non-O.T.O. Thelemites, and curiosity-seekers from the larger magick community and beyond.

For Star Sapphire Lodge my research was conducted in equal measure online and in person. I regularly attended their central ritual, the Gnostic Mass, and most of the larger events held at the lodge. I also attended a series of monthly online reading groups focusing on various Crowley works and held over Discord, an online communication platform. These involved one of the core members of the lodge guiding us through a close reading of the text, providing important context and impetus for group exegesis. I also conducted structured interviews with leadership, initiated members, uninitiated participants, and a few members of other lodges with connections to Star Sapphire, as well as engaging in less formal but often in-depth conversations with those at events and social gatherings. The O.T.O. is an esoteric initiatory order and as such there is certain information that I am neither allowed to know nor allowed to divulge. Although keeping certain knowledge among the initiates has always been important to the O.T.O. and other Thelemic orders, no one I met was under the illusion that anything could truly be kept secret in the modern world. After assuring a member of the

lodge's leadership that I would not seek out anything that was meant to be secret he simply shrugged and said, "Well it's all online if you're really curious."

Finding True Will

The law of Thelema is often encapsulated by one of Crowley's most well-known turns of phrase: "Do what though wilt shall be the whole of the law." This phrase has led to derision from those outside the Order, often being seen as a call for complete hedonism. This is not the entirety of the phrase, however. When someone opens a proceeding with this statement, the group then responds, "love is the law, love under will," which completes the "Proclamation of the Law," meant to encapsulate the entirety of the Thelemic principle. The term opens most Thelemic meetings and the common Thelemic greeting "93" is an abbreviation of this term using gematria. Every word in these two sentences has been the subject of intense meditation and exegesis. While whole treaties have been written by both Crowley and his successors on the nature of "love" and "law," no word has received more attention than "Will," which is almost always capitalized in Thelemic discourse to set it apart as something beyond its mundane definition. It is the goal of every Thelemite to find their "True Will" and live according to it in such a way that they can achieve their "great work."

This is a complex process that extends far beyond simple introspection or goal setting. The process involves dedicated study, ritual ordeals, formal initiation, and ultimately a life-altering encounter with an otherworldly being known as your "holy guardian angel." On a practical level for the Thelemites I researched this meant intertwining close textual analysis with an emphasis on ecstatic experience. Each had their own angle that originally

attracted them. Some were initially drawn in by astrology and looked for order and inspiration in the stars. Some saw Kabbalah as a model of an ultimate reality and a tool for interacting with it. Others were drawn in by tarot, alchemy, or the sacred mathematics of gematria. They approach these areas with the language and techniques of scholars and scientists. They see themselves as serious scholars (many work in scientific fields), who engage in close reading and empirical experimentation, testing the efficacy of their magick with the scientific method. To explore how they understand Thelema in their own life it will be valuable to get to know the core group whom I worked with and learn the trajectory that put them on their path to their True Will before delving into the specifics of their philosophy and techniques.

Soror Aaru[200] is a major figure in the modern O.T.O. movement. She serves a number of different functions with the Grand Lodge and, although not a member of Star Sapphire specifically, teaches regular classes to initiates and the public, and attends many lodge functions. She is also the O.T.O.'s most visible trans member and takes it upon herself to spearhead much of the reform happening around gender. As a young person she describes herself having been "basically a young Richard Dawkins," who believed that "anyone who was at all religious or paying the least bit of attention to anything beyond science was clearly delusional and should be locked away for their own protection." This changed when she attended a Jesuit college and met religious people who were "brilliant, inquisitive thinkers willing to question anything, and who were deeply religious." After college she married a woman named Laurie who was interested in the occult. Still not fully converted from her

[200] Thelemites take magickal names when they are initiated. They are formally referred to by this name with the title soror for women and frater for men. In most settings people simply use their mundane names, but I have referred to them here by pseudonyms to add an extra level of anonymity.

original atheism, Aaru was surprised to find herself "strangely transfixed" one day while listening to her wife read from a book on the Tarot: "It was like, this was just beaming in directly from some other reality that I very much wanted to move to."

Aaru's wife was reading verse sixty-one of chapter one of Crowley's book on his Thoth Tarot, which is a verse included in the liturgy of the Gnostic Mass. Aaru and her wife eventually sought out the O.T.O., which was in one of its more disorganized and hedonistic states at the time. While everyone I met assured me that they had never encountered public sex or drug use as part of a Thelemic rituals, these were a regular part of the O.T.O. that Aaru encountered in the 80s. The group was working out of the home of Chris Parker, whom Aaru refers to as "one of the great heroes of the Southern California O.T.O." Aaru and Laurie were initiated in Parker's garage in January, 1987.

Despite the fact that, in her own words, "in aggregate, the O.T.O., at the time, did not have the organizational capacity to successfully order a large pizza," she saw potential in what was going on there. As she moved up in the initiations, she helped create the administrative structure that led the O.T.O. to be the international magickal institution it is today. On a personal level, Aaru was drawn to Kabbalah which she believes has something to do with her being on the autism spectrum. "So let's take the universe and carve it up into twenty-two pieces," she told me, explaining her attraction, "but then take each of those and cut them into four pieces. And then we can layer those in ten other ways, and yeah, it's amazing how – for the sort of person who wants to keep everything in filing cabinets – it is just endlessly attractive." Aaru now teaches regular public classes on Kabbalah and leads a

“gnostic book camp” for initiates looking to improve their knowledge of Kabbalah and other technical aspects of Thelema.

Frater Thodol was also drawn to Star Sapphire by Kabbalah. Born in Russia during the end of the Soviet era, he learned English from evangelical missionaries who worked with his family on humanitarian projects. These same evangelicals brought him to the United States and sponsored his enrollment in bible colleges first in the South and then in the Los Angeles area. Like Soror Aaru, it was a religious college that helped open him up to religious experimentation. He began to think about the concept of heresy. He wondered why, to his knowledge, no Christian college “ever required you to take on a heresy for example, for a semester… pick a heretical interpretation of Scripture, or, you know, a pattern of sinful behavior and adopt it for a semester and record your experience.” He wanted a way to test what he had been learning.

This curiosity was fueled by his uncle who introduced him to Kabbalah. He described long road trips where his uncle would expound on Kabbalistic ideas without “actually presenting any of the terminology or telling you what to read.” Later Thodol would come to understand why this was. As academic as Kabbalah can seem, he saw it as a system that must be internalized in order to work, with a “long vocabulary” that becomes “very subjective, very personal” after years of working with it. Thodol took his research into Kabbalah very seriously. He attended Shabbat at a local Jewish center and took online classes with the B.O.T.A., something that would prove to be a stepping stone for many future O.T.O. members. He found himself drawn to both the Jewish version of Kabbalah associated with 16th century mystic Isaac Luria and the Hermetic version associated with 19th century French occultist Eliphas Levi. Ultimately, he went with the latter because it offered a more

individualist path to the higher Kabbalistic realms. This eventually led him to the O.T.O. where he began attending Masses in 2017 and took his Minerval initiation in 2018. A relatively young member of the group, he was in his late twenties when I met him, an avid student of Crowley and the occult in general, and often one of the most prepared people in our reading groups.

Frater Konsu, a research scientist in his mid-forties, was probably the most outwardly scientific minded of the magicians I met. Given this mindset it was somewhat ironic that his initial introduction to magick was through astrology, which most Thelemites see as the least rational aspect of their practice. He describes himself as possessing a mind that can get a "little obsessed." Thus, close study of astrology soon led him to tarot, which led him to correspondence classes with B.O.T.A., which in turn led him to the O.T.O. He attended his first Gnostic Mass at Star Sapphire Lodge in 2013. He found a home at Star Sapphire and took his Minerval initiation a year later. His involvement grew at a steady pace over the past decade. He is now a member of the lodge's leadership council and runs a number of the reading groups I was part of. As a leader he focuses on being as supportive and unobtrusive as possible, providing a calming paternal presence to most meetings. Over his decade with the O.T.O., Konsu has thought deeply about the idea of "Will with a capital W," as he calls it. He has "come to realize that it's more of a verb, a continuity. It's action. It's not a goal but a path." In his role as both ritual and administrative leader he spends much of his energy helping people find this path.

Others found themselves drawn to the O.T.O. through less direct channels. Although Soror Lisa often serves as the resident expert on Buddhism, she cites her "active imagination" and a desire for ritual states of trance as her motivation in seeking out a magickal

community. Born in the Los Angeles area she attended a local Buddhist college and a few Theravada retreats before joining the O.T.O. roughly five years before I met her. Before joining the order, she describes finding synchronicities abounding in the world and often making up her own private rituals. A high-energy person with a quick, sometimes off-color, sense of humor, she is the primary organizer of social events and often plays the role of host, making sure everyone is having a good time. She is also the one who makes sure everyone pays their dues.

Frater Algedi came to the O.T.O. primarily through curiosity. He found Thelema while engaging in a form of structured religious exploration and recreation. He and a friend had been discussing the wild variety of religious experimentation in Los Angeles and, as a person who was "always trying to think of some adventures to go on," Frater Algedi suggested they spend their Sundays visiting whatever groups remained in the area. For six months they visited the B.O.T.A., the Church of Scientology, a Masonic lodge, a spiritualist church, the UFO-based Aetherius Society, and eventually Star Sapphire Lodge. Algedi saw something different at Star Sapphire: people fully committed to what they were doing. Although he didn't find the Gnostic Mass he attended particularly meaningful, he could tell it was deeply so for the celebrants and he wanted to know why. He was curious what they understood that he didn't.

He told me that curiosity remains key to his involvement. Thelema works for him because it encourages exploration and experimentation. Of all the groups he visited this was one that he believed presented religion as something to explore, not just believe in. In his words, "it wasn't anything hocusy pocusy. It was just very natural, very almost scientific." This wasn't his first involvement with the occult either. He worked briefly as a producer on a

web series exploring the paranormal and he describes an intense experience with a presence on beach as a formative moment in his life. With the O.T.O. he found his people. He believes he "can trust this source that this is my door in to explore the divine, this other world that I know is there, you know, that I've touched in some weird way, but can't explain." Like many Thelemites, just knowing that this other world, or hidden order, exists is not enough; they seek to interact with it and the writings of Crowley are one of the primary ways that they do this.

Wrestling with Uncle A

Crowley's writings are so extensive that his followers have developed a system to categorize it.[201] Each work has an alphabetical classification between A and E. Class A texts are inspired works written through automatic writing or other forms of channeling, the primary example of this being *The Book of the Law*. Class B are important scholarly works while class C are those Crowley considers of only minor help to Thelemites. Class D are instructions for rites and rituals and class E include the various broadsheets and other ephemera Crowley produced throughout his life. Each text is given a title that includes Liber followed by a Roman numeral. Many documents also include a series of letters that are usually a reference to a magickal phrase either in another language or created through gematria or both. Thus, *The Book of the Law* is a class A document. It is Liber XXXI, officially titled, *Liber AL vel Legis, sub figura CCXX, as delivered by XCIII=418 to*

[201] This system includes 119 items, and it leaves out many posthumously published works such as those we focused on in our reading groups.

DCLXVI, with the Roman numbers representing the Kabbalistic tree of life and describing the texts as given to the Great Beast 666 from Aiwass.

The content of these texts is no less complex or confusing than their cataloguing system. Crowley saw himself as both an academic and a poet which often led him to write in the language of both at the same time, creating a hybrid of the difficult writing styles for which both of these genres are notorious. His work is also riddled with problematic material. He regularly makes racist, sexist, and classist remarks which even the most dedicated Thelemite finds it hard to excuse. Wrestling with these texts is one of the primary Thelemic activities. For most O.T.O. members, reading and trying to understand Crowley, while navigating his objectionable comments, is one of the cores of what it means to be a Thelemite. This was the work we undertook in the online reading groups I joined, making our way through two of Crowley's texts, short chapter by short chapter. Classes took place twice a month over the Discord messaging platform. [202] Although the platform has video conferencing capabilities, the administrators opted for voice-only meetings. This was slightly clumsy at first, but people eventually got used to it and we managed to have fairly involved conversations by the end of my regular attendance.[203]

The two texts we read were written in the last years of Crowley's life. The first chronologically, titled *Little Essays Toward Truth*, was published in 1938 and consists of 16 short essays, each with a one-word title such as" Man," "Trance," "Chastity," or "Truth." The

[202] Theoretically each book was a separate monthly event, but the same people generally attend both groups which makes it more of a bi-monthly occurrence.

[203] I was often told that the in-person version of these classes were much more lively, which is probably why they have returned to that format now that the pandemic has wound down.

later book, *Magick Without Tears*, was written in 1943 and published posthumously by Karl Germer in 1953. It consists of 83 letters that Crowley sent to an unknown acolyte. Although the later book is far more informal than the first, both concern themselves more with Crowley's general philosophy than the technical aspects of his magick and thus work well for discussion in O.T.O. reading groups. In *Magick Without Tears* specifically, there is no clear line between the mundane and the magickal and the same letter will address modern scientific principles and discoveries, opinions on contemporary culture, and metaphysical explanations of abstract concepts, sometimes in the same sentence. The tone mirrors these blurry lines with complex academic language mixing easily with colloquialisms and a sense of humor that is often brutally nasty.[204]

As an example of both Crowley's writing style and his sense of humor, he opens his essay on "Woman – Her Magical Formula" with sexist a limerick he had originally published in his book on Christianity, *The Worlds End*:

> "Wine rots the liver; fever swells the spleen;
> Meat clogs the belly; dust inflames the eye;
> Stone irks the bladder: gout—plague—leprosy!
> Man born of woman is most full of trouble;
> God, a gorged fool that belches him, a bubble!
> But of all plagues wherewith a man is curs'ed,
> Take my word for it, woman is the worst!

He then launches into a tirade about the kind of women he is not talking about:

> "Let us first of all make clear what we are to mean by Woman.
> Not that amorphous (or rather, as the poet says, "oniscoid with udders") dull and clamorous lump, bovine, imbecile, giggling, truthless, nymphomaniac yet sexless, malignant, interminable, of whom Schopenhauer rhapsodized in his most famous panegyric: apparently his sentimental softness understood only the best side of her. No! let us observe, shudder, and lay down the pen."

That makes me feel better; my duty to conscience is done." [205]

This opening statement was read by the members of the reading groups as being ultimately sarcastic although still in bad taste.

Crowley's writing is full of material that is openly racist, sexist, or otherwise extremely problematic. He often wrote about sex with people of color, especially black people, as a form of transgression, often referring to his partners as disgusting or animal-like. This same disdain was shown to nearly all of his female, and most of his male, lovers as well. In his autobiographical writing he reports nothing but utter contempt for his first wife, Rose, as she battled mental illness and alcoholism and whom he eventually committed to an asylum for alcoholic dementia. The same writings have him often referring to his various "Scarlet Women" as grotesques and include him openly finding pleasure in emotionally abusing them.[206]

In contrast, the people I met at Star Sapphire Lodge were as respectful and sober as anyone I met in the Los Angeles magick scene. They were extremely considerate of people's feelings, never courting controversy or outrage as Crowley had throughout his life. One of the leaders of the *Magick Without Tears* reading group told me of Crowley, "You don't have to like him; I don't know anyone who does like him as a person." When Crowley made his off-color jokes some would simply laugh it off with the phrase, "Uncle Al, being uncle Al,"

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[205] Aleister Crowley, *Magick Without Tears,* "Chapter XXXVIII: Woman—Her Magical Formula," Hermetic Library, Accessed July 29, 2024. https://hermetic.com/crowley/magick-without-tears/mwt_38.

[206] These accounts fill his diaries and appear regularly in his *Confessions.* Symonds highlights a number of these instances in *The Great Beast,* almost always quoting directly from Crowley's autobiographical work. Symonds is particularly protective of Rose.

but when it came to material that was deemed too offensive, someone in a position of leadership would simply remark that there is absolutely no excuse for this and that we should acknowledge that and move on. Ultimately the tension between the work of a racist, sexist, provocateur and a diverse, sensitive, progressive group of readers was rarely commented on, although it did serve a purpose in the mind of the group. Some described Crowley's antics and regular viciousness as a sort of filtering system for the group. Frater Kansu described to me a method that members use when reading Crowley: "He'll use imagery that has, quote, unquote, negative connotations in order to find someone who truly seeks, who will figure out what exactly he's actually saying. It's not meant to be for everyone." In this apologetic strategy, lingering on the offense prevents a person from recognizing the esoteric truth beyond the awful things that Crowley said and did. Members extend this approach to Crowley's writing style. Crowley's material took work to engage with and it was this aspect that ensured that only the most diligent would get what it had to offer.

O.T.O. members have distinct approaches to reading and study that differ from those of 21st century scholars. When I first started taking classes with this group, I thought many of the skills I had learned over the past decade in higher education would transfer. After all, close reading of difficult and sometimes problematic texts was one of the things I had trained for as a graduate student. My notes from the first class read: "the roles attending as a student and as a researcher are pretty fuzzy here. Next class I would like to have done the reading and come ready to discuss like in seminar." The next week I came with the reading done and several thoughts on the context of the writing, other theorists I thought it was in conversation with, some ideas about what the work was meant to do, how it succeeded or failed to achieve it, and a few soft critiques. I was as prepared as any good humanities grad student should be.

I figured it would be interesting to compare our approaches. My companions were neither impressed by my analytical skill nor put off by my critique of their prophet's work. For the most part they were politely uninterested. When I mentioned Crowley's obvious debt to Nietzsche they responded that Nietzsche was one of the Thelemic saints, then moved on to the next passage without further comment. No one seemed interested in questions about the similarities between the ways James and Crowley saw religion. I quickly realized that this was not that kind of close reading.

These groups resembled something closer to a form of "textual consumption" that anthropologist of religion James Bielo finds in Bible study groups.[207] For this group, textual analysis was at the center of what it meant to be a practicing member of this Lodge, but there was something else going on here. These magicians where neither interrogating these texts as way to better understand human culture, as we do in the academy, nor using them as sacred unchanging receptacles of truth, as occurs in Bible study. They were mining for tools. Thelemites read together with the assumption that somewhere in this confusing collection of writings there may be insights that can be used for their personal religious journeys. They are searching for glimpses of the hidden order of the universe which will lead them to their "True Will," the elusive "conversation with their holy guardian angel," and their" great work."

Crowley achieved all these goals in his lifetime, but he makes it clear that he cannot tell his followers exactly how to achieve them since everyone's path and destination are entirely their own. My fellow readers were mostly unfazed by Uncle Al's more offensive statements and only mildly irritated by his frequent, sometimes intentionally bewildering

[207] James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study*. (New York:NYU Press, 2009)

turns of phrase because Crowley the person was only one example of success, not meant to be emulated but studied. All that mattered was what would help each of them to the next step on their magickal journey. Crowley's life, his writing, and that of his disciples, was material digested by each Thelemite in their own way and put to their own ends. These classes were more like personal brainstorming sessions than reading groups. People would spin off their ideas and for the most part everyone would either build on them or go in new directions. Class was an act of refining for the tools that each person needed.

These classes were also places where religion was enacted. Crowley considered himself an intellectual, and studying is central to his tradition's way of doing magick. Thelemites, both O.T.O. members and others, read more than other magickal communities I have spent time with. The act of studying complex magickal writing seems to be a ritual in and of itself. This is one of the reasons why Thelema's most revered document, *The Book of the Law*, bears a warning against interpretation. It is meant to be set aside from all this and engaged with on the most personal level. This emphasis on study leads to the next step in understanding the members of Star Sapphire Lodge in the context of the magick tradition writ large: the techniques, vocabulary, and tools they use to enact the science and art of magick.

Later in James' lecture on the "The Reality of the Unseen" he critiques the rationalist focus of his time, arguing that when it comes to the "inarticulate feeling of reality," which he sees as the basis for most systems of thought, religious or otherwise, "instinct leads, intelligence does but follow."[208] While Thelemites like those at Star Sapphire Lodge agree

[208] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 74-75.

that this reality ultimately remains inarticulate, they create and pore over volumes of rhetoric meant to articulate it.

The Science and Art: Experimenting with the Unseen Order

Throughout my field research, I have asked many members of the magickal community to define magick in their own words and have received a broad set of replies. Many, however, were some variations on what my O.T.O. subjects said. They all answered using Crowley's definition of magick. "Magick," Crowley tells us in the introduction to his magnum opus *Magick in Theory and Practice,*[209] *"*is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will."[210] Crowley goes on in this work to give a number of other descriptions and definitions of magick, but this is the first one that most practitioners will quote verbatim. Again, the capitalizations in that sentence are not accidents. They represent key principles in the O.T.O. system. For this section I will focus on the ways Thelemites see themselves in relation to these ideas with a specific focus on the scientific language they use. For Thelemites, Science has as much to do with the scientific method of experimentation as it does with signaling the magick they do as something decidedly serious and modern. Whereas it's common for those attracted to Paganism and Witchcraft to describe a lifelong attraction to something beyond this world, most of those at Star Sapphire describe their life before Thelema as dedicated to a firmly materialist and scientific worldview. They carry this with

[209] Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1929; reis. New York: Castle Books, 1992). The full title of this book is Liber IV, Liber ABA, book 4, which itself is broken into four parts, the third of which, "Magick in Theory and Practice," if often printed on its own.

[210] Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice*, xii

them into their magickal life, constantly wrestling with the unexplained aspects of their tradition and often using the language of scientific experimentation.

For some the very structure of the O.T.O. is an experiment. Soror Typhos, a member of a connected O.T.O. lodge who often attended Star Sapphire events, explained the structure of the O.T.O. as an "experiment in the seeing what happens when you create an organization or community based on the principles of Thelema. You put that in the center," and ask, "can you create a functioning community with an organizational structure and procedure and due process… if it brings any kind of truth to it, whatever that means." On a more specific level, many members see the Mass as a large-scale experiment. After declaring the Law, the Deacon recites what sounds at first like a monotheistic statement. The Thelemic creed begins, "I believe in one sacred and ineffable lord and in one Star in the Company of Stars of whose fire we are created, and to which we shall return; and in one Father of Life."[211] This statement goes on to declare the name of the Lord as CHAOS and then lists a number of other deities. Still, many of those I spoke to felt the need to explain how a tradition based on results not beliefs can have a credo at all. This is "belief for the duration of the ritual," Frater Agapitos, a new initiate, told me before his first time performing in a Gnostic Mass. Frater Thodol expanded,

"in order for this ritual to do what I think it should do, in order for the technology of this ritual to do its purpose, you need to admit, or accept certain thesis." He told me, "they're not really like, scientifically factual statements." This idea of "belief for the duration of the ritual" allows Thelemites to commit to a system of magick without aligning themselves with

[211] Crowley, *Liber XV*

the irrationality that they see in other religious systems. As Soror Lisa explained to me during an interview:

> I can acknowledge that I have some other part of my psyche that needs feeding through these rituals and trance-like states. And that's not something that you can so easily fulfill just intellectually. And so that gets fed here. But at the same time, I don't have to believe in anything that is ridiculous, right? Because I don't have to sit here and believe that there was a virgin birth or that the earth is 6000 years old or anything that is, you know, really abhorrent to my brain.

This insistence that an emphasis on belief sets Thelemites apart from the negative aspects they associate with religion is common in the broader magick community.[212]

When discussing the science of their magick, members of Star Sapphire Lodge insisted on the importance of their work's efficacy over questions about how it worked. "I approach it not as a scientist, but as an engineer," Aaru told me, "I'm much less interested in why it works than in whether it works. The way it works is wonderful to have a talk about over the second bottle of wine with other magicians." She goes on to quote her current wife, a therapist, who describes the difference between a magician and a schizophrenic as one of results. "Magicians check off most of the boxes on the DSM for paranoid schizophrenia," she told me," except the last one: daily functioning or happiness are impaired, whereas with us they're enhanced." She goes on emphasize the importance of efficacy over other forms of authenticity. "Yeah, I don't care at all if it was invented last Tuesday on a street corner. You know, if it works, I'm going to keep doing it." There is a sort of pragmatism to the way most Thelemites view the effects of magick.

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[212] Sarah Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, 176-180. Many of the critiques of established religion that Pike's Pagan informants mention in her book were echoed by the people I spoke with, including one who referred the Paganism as a "more realistic religion."

Though he had moved away from the Christianity of his youth, Frater Thodol also rejected the atheism of Richard Dawkins, a figure whom many Thelemites describe an early interest in. He thought it was absurd to just "write off thousands of years of human history, and like, the driving force of human endeavor for so long as like, oh, it was just bullshit," since "the amount of, like, positive and negative output created by it and of it makes it real enough." This attitude also allows Thelemites to incorporate aspects of other religious traditions while often remaining critical of the devotees of these groups. Terry, a regular at the Gnostic Mass, but not an initiate yet, explains his belief in Thelema in the language of trial and error:

> It doesn't matter if you believe that these angels and demons and any of this that we're talking about exists. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't, and it doesn't matter. What matters is that when you do a certain thing, certain results will follow. And if you can show results from doing a certain thing, even if it doesn't make any sense at all, then maybe there's something to it. And doesn't matter what it is.

Most members share Terry's experimental approach. They describe the "science" of their magick in terms of results. As Aaru said, they are more interested in whether something works than how.

This emphasis sometimes causes frustration particularly when it comes to astrology. As Aaru puts it:

> Astrology offends the living crap out of me. It makes me angry because, of all the oracular systems, it is the one that just has no excuse for existing. You know, my gravitational influence on you is more than that of the planet Pluto, or dwarf planet Pluto, I should say… but the goddamn thing works. I've used it over and over, and I am angry at it every time it works, because it shouldn't.

Soror Lisa shares this frustration but reconciles it by imbuing human language and culture with its own power. "I think it's all of the symbolism that's been invested into these things by

our own minds, over thousands of years, in some cases," she explained, "that you're tapping into something very human and archetypal and that's where I think it gets its power. It's not because I think that I'm literally connected to the planet Mars."

Tanya Luhrmann, in her work on Witchcraft, discusses how the Witches she worked with carefully cultivate their understanding of "evidence." For them effectiveness is defined by "criteria so loose that most rituals could be called successful but tight enough so that some would be said to fail."[213] Thelemites' experiments seek similar criteria, but for them this often means that the evidence was found in one's internal life. Although most emphasize the role of magick as a tool for personal transformation, they do not shy away from the fact that Crowley often used magick to create change outside himself and leave the door open for such things to be possible. Frater Konsu makes it clear that he's not ready to accept this part yet, but when he does he told me he would start by "experimenting with trying to change something else and see if there's proof, see if there's evidence, scientific illuminism is the whole thing where you use the scientific method to see if something will work or not." Sometimes these experiments seem to work too well for their practitioners. Frater Fortis, who was a nurse during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, told me about a time he predicted a friend's death. This closed him off from magick for a long time. Another member described a similar scenario where they contacted the spirit of someone they didn't know was dead only to find out that they had recently passed. Frater Algedi, normally a mild mannered and

[213] Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft,* 11.

agreeable person, once found himself overcome by an unknown force, barking orders at a friend, ordering him to dance.

In Tanya Luhrmann's later book on Evangelical Christians, *When God Talks Back,* she further develops the ideas from her work with Witchcraft. Working with Christians who experience God as an external figure she asks, "how are sensible people able to believe in an invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives?"[214] Her answer is that they cultivate ways of experiencing the world by engaging in practices, including ways of reading, that cultivate an ability to experience God this way. Specifically, they cultivate ways of paying attention stating that, "the way you learn to pay attention determines your experience with God."[215] Although many magicians might ask how you cannot believe in something that has a "demonstrable effect on your life," they often describe their magick as a way of shifting attention.

Frater Thodol sees the whole system of correspondence as a way of cultivating attention. He acknowledges that it is ultimately culturally situated. Astrological signs, tarot cards, Greco-Roman gods,[216] the Hebrew alphabet, and the Kabbalistic tree of life are powerful symbols for him because he comes from a Western Judeo-Christian culture:

> "It's like a system of background meditation because, in a way, you can say 'what is meditation?' It's like a way of focusing your mind on something. But in a way, your mind is always focused on something. So, the idea is that, like, is there some common thread? Between all of them?... maybe there is, maybe there isn't, but you could at

[214] Tanya. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. (New York: Vintage, 2012), xi.

[215] Tanya. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back,* xxi.

[216] Although Thodol is from Russia he sold me that he grew up with Greco-Roman gods, as more home-grown deities were rarely mentioned in Soviet Russia.

> least fool yourself into thinking there is. You keep persuading yourself and kind of creating those connections. And if anything, it's like a good mental exercise."

Soror Aaru sees Kabbalah in similar terms:

> "if you have a new system to think in, you'll think new thoughts? Language changes what you can think. So there's that sort of psychological brain function level," but she also sees it as something working on "a level of the archetypal forces of the universe whether those are outside me or inside me, they very frequently have messages for me, want to draw my attention to something, or warn me away from something, and I will get that message from the world around me from what I see, what I experienced, what I hear, couched in the language of Kabbalah: imagery in numbers, in colors, in sounds."

Frater Algedi specifically refers to the repetitive aspect of the Mass as a way of cultivating magickal experiences. While at first he was confused about what people saw in it, he now describes an infinity of meaning becoming available to him once he started seeing the Mass as a spiritual tool. After repeatedly attending the Mass he started having visions. "Once you start doing it and understanding it, you kind of see more and more tips of like this fractal thing that you just can't get at first, like, every time you go, you have a different experience." In this sense studying the O.T.O.'s system of magick and attending their rituals is an act of tuning yourself into someone who has access to a larger, hidden, reality.

As far God goes, this is where the "art" of magick comes in. Asserting that the work they are doing is putting something new into to the world, they explain that the Thelemic mantra "there is no god but man" has to do with creativity. As Frater Kasu puts it, "it's this generative power that mankind has, that humanity has, and that by creating something, we become a god." In an interview, Soror Aaru paraphrased William Blake, who is a Thelemic Gnostic saint and whom she described as one of her heroes:

> "Gods reside in the human breast, all of the gods and goddesses, all these externalized archetypal figures are ultimately facets of yourself, whether you mean that in a psychological sense, or whether they indwell in you or whatever, but in the

> end, they have to be in you for you to interact with them. So, whether they have a pervasive reality that everyone's experiencing or whether they're just yours is supremely unimportant."

This idea of divinity mirrors that found in many Witchcraft traditions including the Traditional Witchcraft of The Green Man.

Frater Thodol sees this as inherent to Crowley's vision of world history, which he describes as a series of "aeons," and he says that Crowley predicted the "post-modern era." *The Book of the Law* lays out three aeons. The first belongs to Isis, the mother, and this is the time of fertility, humanities childhood. The second belongs to Osiris, the father, and is the age of empires and force. Finally, the one we are living in, or the one to come depending on your reading of either the text or the history, belongs to Horus, the child, and is the age of the individual. It is through this that Crowley and his followers see the struggles around human rights that have marked the last few centuries. These were the birthing pains of the new age. Frater Konsu believes "the law of Thelema… is kind of the active mode that people are living these days, whether they know it or not."

Conclusion

Like Thelemites around the world and throughout history, the members of Star Sapphire Lodge use the magick of Aleister Crowley to explore and shape their internal lives and the world around them. Star Sapphire Lodge is both the oldest institution I worked with in Los Angeles and the most self-consciously modern. Unlike many Witchcraft and Pagan traditions, they do not seek validity or inspiration in the distant past, nor do they see themselves as at odds with the contemporary world. Crowley saw himself as a man of his time and Thelema as the religion of the future – one grounded in the most up-to-date

scientific and scholarly advances. The Thelemites at Star Sapphire Lodge continue this tradition, seeing themselves and their magick as fully in tune with the contemporary world.

This places these magicians in an interesting position in relation to the overarching theme of this dissertation: reality's blurry lines. Over a hundred years after the founding of their order, the idea of a hidden reality behind our own has become less tenable. Members of Star Sapphire know this and understand that as a self-consciously modern religion they must seriously contend with new scientific and scholarly concepts of reality that see it as something quite unstable. They use the language of science to test the efficacy of magickal works while arguing that most of these effects are entirety subjective. They see their founder as a very flawed figure while mining his texts for clues to a life more in line with their True Will. They still seek an ultimate reality, but they do so with an understanding that the search may never end.

Far from causing a crisis of faith for Thelemites, these contradictions are often one of the things that excite them about their religion. Despite the occasional claim to the contrary, squaring Crowley's theories with their own lives in the 21st century is a core Thelemic religious act. This happens most obviously in the ways they wrestle with Crowley's texts and his legacy, but it also plays out in their experience of rituals. Because the ultimate goal of Thelema is to find one's own True Will and "great work," understanding these experiences on your own terms is essential.

Thelemites are set apart from many of the other members of the contemporary magick tradition by their emphasis on this search. They know there is something out there just beyond the edges of what Crowley called the "possibility of knowledge derived from

sources other than the unaided investigation of nature through the senses and the intellect"[217] and it is their goal to investigate this using whatever earthly faculties they have. Although this can sometimes be a creative act on a personal level, most communal Thelemic work involves methods of plumbing this knowledge either through ritual repetition and experimentation or close study of texts. This is a vision of a reality that remains fixed but hidden and inaccessible to us through normal means. Only through magick can we glimpse aspects of it and use this to create change in the world. For the next chapters, we will look at magicians who use similar symbols and have similar ends, but have a different approach to the nature of reality. The next chapters address reality not as something to investigate but as something mold to our wills.

[217] Crowley, *The Confessions.* 395.

Chapter 3

Architects of Reality: The Green Man Store and the Ced Tradition

In the Ced Tradition, dragons are interchangeable with the four winds and they represent immense power. Each of the cardinal directions has one and it is both the full representation of that direction, containing its multitude of associations, and the source of that direction's power. Throughout my research with the Ced (pronounced "ked") coven I did rituals associated with these dragons and each of the cardinal and intercardinal directions. The ritual for the southwest was held in a temple in the middle of a redwood forest. It was an open-air structure that my classmates and I had become familiar with over the previous weeks of ritual. It had no ceiling or floor but consisted of four stand-alone columns: two in the classical Greco-Roman style and two in the style of Bronze Age standing stones, like those found at Stonehenge and other sites across the British Isles. The temple had two permanent altars, one to the north and one in the south, each made of stone. The northern altar was about twice the size of the southern one. To the east a fire burned in an iron brazier and to the west was a small stone well. Today, unlike our past visits, there was also a third altar in the southwest with a fire burning brightly on it. As we approached, we could see the berries, branches, and flowers of the hawthorn tree – one of the three sacred trees of this direction – adorning this third altar. We began to circumnavigate around the interior of the temple, a common energy-raising practice in Witchcraft traditions, and calling into the hawthorn and the fire our wishes for our tribe, both on this plane and off.

The concept of tribe is an expansive one in the Ced Tradition. Griffin, the "Witchfather" of this tradition, often tells us that there is no such thing as a "solitary Witch."

The work is inherently social, although some of the beings you work with may not be fully of this world. This means that your tribe includes the spirits, deities, and ancestors that you work with, as well as your immediate family and friends. For me on this particular evening, my tribe meant all my closest friends. As we walked, I was suddenly hit by the image of these friends, now scattered all over the world, tethered by the hawthorn branch piercing our heads and connecting us in a giant circle like beads on a necklace. We sealed our connection by throwing all the parts of the hawthorn plant into the well in the west, a symbol of our past, our ancestors, and the deep murky world of our emotions and subconscious.

Next, willow branches – another plant associated with the southwest – appeared on the altar. Continuing to circle, we began stripping the willow branches, pulling them apart into long strands. As we did this, we concentrated on stripping away our inhibitions. Magick traditions often use modern therapeutic language. It is common to refer to what we are "holding on to," and call us to "let go" of what no longer "serves us." In this case we were meant to go beyond just what we no longer needed and let go of all that we had accrued as part of civilization and to get to the root of our animality. I started off easy, with the idea of "coolness" (something I had subconsciously been trying to hang onto as I aged). As I stripped away the outer part of the willow branch, I felt myself letting go of the weight of social expectations and embracing the more domestic, introverted, unhip, person I had become. We took these willow branches – our inhibitions – and threw them into the fire in the east.

Finally pinecones, representing pine, the last tree of the southwest, appeared on the altar. At first, we did nothing with them. Instead, we inhaled the fire from the altar and filled ourselves up with flame. This, we were told, was "Witch fire," and as we inhaled it, we felt it burning away our humanity. As we breathed deeply and inhaled our Witch fire, we were

instructed to let go and get "primal." I took off my shirt and danced around in an attempt to conjure this state. Soon the language shifted from stripping down to transformation. Our shoulder blades turned into wings and our skin was replaced by scales, our hands turned to claws, and we exhaled all our Witch fire, igniting the pinecones in a huge explosion of primal energy. We were now dragons. Throughout this transformation, I kept thinking about my friends all tied together by the hawthorn branch. I thought about all the times we let go of our inhibitions and wallowed in our animal humanness together through debauches and through times of absolute idleness when we allowed ourselves to simply be lumps of matter.

Becoming a dragon in the southwest means taking on the full force of all that direction represents. Becoming this spirit is reminiscent of traditions such as Vodun and Candomblé, where one is possessed or ridden by a spirit.[218] However, in this tradition we were meant to remain in control the whole time. This is because, in the Ced Tradition, dragons, winds, gods, and other spirits are not more powerful than us. We do not seek to be overcome by them or worship them but rather work with them as co-equals.

Like other rituals led by Griffin, this one ended rather abruptly. Once we had gotten what we needed from our dragon form we simply fell back into our bodies and returned to the mundane world. Returning to our bodies, it was suggested that we run our hands under cold water or eat something salty to "ground ourselves" if we were having trouble getting

[218] Karen McCarthy Brown. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (1991; reis., Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011). Elizabeth Pérez. *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

back over the "hedge," a Traditional Witchcraft term for the barrier between the magickal and the mundane. Sometimes we "gave libation" by blessing a beverage, drinking most of it, then pouring the rest into the earth as an offering to the spirits. This evening, we did not. Little talking occurs after rituals. Generally, everyone is too drained to process them verbally. Griffin tells us to either journal or talk about what we experience with someone else. This, he says, "is where the gnosis happens." In our mind it is all still a raw and unprocessed experience. It required mediation, an act of creation, for it to take full effect in the material world. Mediation is an important aspect of this magick, as this is the moment where we take the work we did in the magickal world and make it concrete in our lives.

I, of course, never physically became a dragon. Nor did I ever physically attend a ritual in a temple like the one described here. In fact, I never even circumnavigated with these classmates because I never met most of them in person. I undertook the entirety of this ritual alone in my bedroom in Oakland, California while listening to Griffin's voice carried through modern video conferencing software from 350 miles away at The Green Man store in North Hollywood, Los Angeles. Ritual visualizations, such as the one above, served as a core of my year-long research with the Ced Tradition, the primary form of Traditional Witchcraft taught at The Green Man. Referred to as "vision quests," such visualizations have always been a part of this tradition, but they took on a new importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. They became the only type of public ritual that the store could offer.

For my research this meant that much of the fieldwork took place in part in my imagination. This forced me to focus on how the magick I was being taught affected and was affected by the idiosyncrasies of my own mind and life history. The line between objective and subjective research blurred in a way that became ideal for one of the core goals of this

kind of Witchcraft. According to Griffin, the goal of this work is to "become co-creative with the spirits of our world in the shaping of reality." What follows is a description of the reality-molding tools provided during classes and rituals and examples of how these tools were put to work shaping both my subjects' realities and my own. Unlike the study groups I attended at Star Sapphire Lodge, these classes were not meant to aid us in a search for a True Will or a hidden reality but rather to aid us in a creative act through which we could construct new versions of reality.

The Green Man and the Ced Tradition

The Green Man metaphysical supply store[219] is located in North Hollywood, just on the other side of the hills from Hollywood and on the edge of the San Fernando Valley. The neighborhood that the store calls home is fairly nondescript. Except for a car repair shop down the street, a marijuana dispensary a few blocks away, and an outdoor taco stand on the corner, most the block is made up of industrial buildings.[220] The exterior of The Green Man does little to break up this monotony. There is a small window with some magickal items and an altar in it and there is a carving over the door of the Green Man himself – an image of a face made out of foliage that is often seen outside British pubs and serves as the logo for the store. Neither the understated exterior nor the less-than-ideal location has prevented the

[219] While conducting my research, I saw the terminology used by stores such as The Green Man shift from "magic" or "spiritual" stores to "metaphysical stores." Although I'm tempted to argue that this is directly related to terminology used by scholars such as Catherine Albanese and Courtney Bender, I saw no evidence that this was the case.

[220] The Church of Scientology of the Valley is right around the corner. A fact which would be more notable in a city where institutions catering to alternative religion is less ubiquitous.

store's success. The store was filled to its reduced capacity during much of the pandemic, with lines out the door most weekends and a steady stream of customers throughout the week.

Inside, the walls are lined with candles, tarot cards, journals, and other ritual products familiar in the world of contemporary magick. In the middle is a large table with various stones and crystals and a small selection of handmade jewelry and charms. Behind the counter several shelves contain large jars of herbs sold in bulk. Under the counter is a display case with more expensive ritual items such as athames (sacred knives used in most forms of contemporary Witchcraft), life-size resin replicas of human skulls, intricately carved wands, and the more expensive crystals and stones. There are three altars spread around the room with medium-sized statues of deities surrounded by offerings of money, alcohol, and stones around their base and hanging off their limbs. Next to these altars are handwritten signs explaining that these are not for sale and are not to be photographed.

The Green Man has several traits that set it apart from similar stores I visited in the city. On the one hand, although only a little over a decade old, The Green Man is one of the oldest metaphysical stores in Los Angeles.[221] They also have a reputation for their knowledgeable staff, which is important at a magick store where staff is often asked not just to recommend products but also to provide instructions for working a spell, creating a potion, or conducting a ritual. Occasionally employees even do small rituals themselves while working to imbue a mundane object with magick. Before the pandemic, The Green Man

[221] This seems to be due primarily to the rise and fall of magick's popularity over the years and a tendency for good magicians to make bad businesspeople. For years the oldest and most famous magick store in the city was Panpipes Magickal Marketplace on Hollywood Boulevard. They changed locations and ownership in 2019 and by all accounts it's not the same store.

hosted more public rituals and events than any of the other stores in the area, including events run by other magickal orders and covens, such as the local Druid order and Reclaiming LA (the Southern California branch of Starhawk's group).[222] Still, it is The Green Man's manager, Griffin Ced, who is most responsible for the store's uniqueness. He is, in the words of Jill, one of the store's owners, "the shiny thing, the big draw," and this is because of his expertise, his charisma, and the specific form of Witchcraft he teaches at The Green Man.

Griffin is in his mid-sixties with a full head of grey hair and facial hair that is usually shaved into a variation on the handlebar mustache. During classes he usually wears loose-fitting short sleeve button-up shirts and khakis, but at rituals he is often shirtless with long necklaces and ritual cords around his neck. His fingers are covered in rings with magickal symbols drawn primarily from Norse and Celtic traditions. He was born and spent most of his childhood in a working-class neighborhood in London. He claims that his family had always had Witches in it and that in his early teens he moved into a "Witch house" in London where he really honed his craft. Before taking on magick as full-time job, he worked in theater as an actor. This brought him to Norway where he worked for a while as a Shakespearean actor. In the 80s he moved to Los Angeles to pursue work in film. While he practiced his own form of Witchcraft for most of his life, the Ced Tradition wasn't created until the early 1990s when he briefly moved to Utah to help raise a coven called the EarthHaven Coven. Griffin created this tradition with Rita Morgan Ced who serves as the original "Mistress and Dame of Ced," the female counterpart to Griffin's role as

[222] As of 2024 both of these groups as well as a few others have resumed using The Green Man for events.

"Witchfather." Shortly after this Griffin started teaching Ced Traditional Witchcraft at the Raven's Flight magick store in Los Angeles.

It was at Raven's Flight that he met Jill Weiss and Carrie Wolf, the two women who would eventually open The Green Man. Jill and Carrie had been taking classes with Griffin at Raven's Flight in 2004 when the store closed its doors and became a purely mail-order operation. The group had developed a strong connection and began a coven together. According to Jill, when the store shut its doors, she sat down with Carrie over a bottle of wine and started to imagine what their own store would look like. By the end of the night, they had a plan, and at the center was Griffin. They brought in Jill's husband Joe as a partner and opened the shop on July 10, 2010. Like most magick store owners, neither Jill, Carrie, nor Joe makes their primary living from the store. They each have day jobs. Only Griffin makes his living doing magick, and even he gets most of that revenue from private spells and other magickal "workings." Griffin is charming, with a puckish way, a deep London-accented voice, and the skill with an audience of a classically trained actor and lifelong performer. Still, what makes him a "shiny thing" is his access to hard-earned knowledge of Witchcraft, shaped over the years by his own experience, into something unique. What he presents during classes and rituals is a deeply complex coherent magickal system that is unavailable anywhere else: The Ced Tradition.

Griffin categorizes the Ced Tradition as part of British Traditional Witchcraft, a loosely connected category of Traditional Witchcraft that takes its inspiration from pre-Wiccan European magick traditions. His personal patron, the deity he works most closely with, is Herne the Hunter, a figure from British folklore. Herne was first made popular by William Shakespeare, who wrote of him as a forest ghost in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,

most likely drawing on the Celtic god Cernunnos whom Griffin also works with.[223] Both deities eventually joined the pantheon of popular Witchcraft deities, alongside Hecate, Odin, Isis, and others.[224]

Griffin also draws on ancient Mediterranean mythology, Persian and Greek astrology, Biblical lore, and various other (mostly Western) traditions to create his system of Witchcraft. Although well worked out and internally consistent, Griffin and other members of the Ced coven go out of their way to make it clear that their tradition is not meant to be authoritative and is certainly not meant to be exclusive. Witchcraft, Griffin tells us often, is more an art than anything else and the system he has developed is merely a powerful set of tools with which to work this art. Everything he teaches is both symbolic and real. The words, images, and experiences he teaches are a pallet which his students are invited to draw on, interact with, and use to shape fate. Along with Traditional Witchcraft, the Ced Tradition also identifies as "Heretical Witchcraft." We are told that taking your own path and going against established tradition is the starting point for being able to create change in the world. It is also the way energy is generated. Grinding against tradition and expectation builds the sort of friction needed to alter reality.[225] This is why the mill is one of the primary metaphors

[223] Shakespeare is often used in various Witchcraft traditions. The three witches in Macbeth are seen by many as a glimpse at what the "old religion" might have been like and their spells are used, with some variation, by many Traditional Witches, including Griffin.

[224] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 43-51. Hutton includes both these gods as versions of the "horned god," popular throughout the world of modern Witchcraft which he traces back to a fascination with the god Pan in European Romantic literature.

[225] Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, 128-135. Urban finds a similar logic in Aleister Crowley's systematic breaking of taboos which he connects to the work of George Bataille's work on transgression.

of Traditional Witchcraft and why rituals often begin with a slow circumnavigation referred to as "working the mill."

Although he claims to be working on a book connected to his tarot deck, during my research it was something of a running theme in Griffin's classes to ask him when he was going to write down his teachings. Griffin would respond with a sort of guilty smile and say something like, "Sometime before I die," and then go on to explain why no such book exists. The way he works, he tells us, is intuitive and closer to "shamanic work,"[226] which relies on the concept of "personal gnosis," a Ced term for direct communication with "spirit," and that this makes the tradition indescribable and constantly changing. As he explains it, every time he sits down to write he must access another realm to channel the work and ultimately gets pulled off in a different direction. Besides, unlike many in the magick community, Griffin says he doesn't really like books and rarely reads. Unlike those at the O.T.O. this is a firmly non-textual community. Griffin is even hesitant to recommend books in class, emphasizing that magick is about "getting your hands dirty" and "digging in," rather than reading. Still, his students and coven-mates needle him regularly. This is because, despite claims of improvisation and inspiration, we can all glimpse the whole of his teachings and crave a more precise guide to accessing them.

What follows is not meant to fill the gap left by this unwritten book. Although I will attempt to provide an in-depth look at the complex ontology, mythology, and theology of the

[226] This term is no easier, nor problematic, to define in metaphysical circles than it is in academia. When used to refer to a type of practice and not a specific tradition it is described by Jerel, another Green Man teacher, in his class on shamanism, as "direct experience of the divine achieved by entering into an altered state." He also makes a distinction between a shaman, which is a role in 'traditional 'communities, and a "shamanic worker," which is someone who uses shamanic techniques in their work.

Ced system, my focus will remain on one specific aspect – the practitioner's ability, and in some sense responsibility, to alter reality. In order to understand Griffin's system, it will be necessary to place The Green Man, the Ced Tradition, and Griffin, into their historical context by briefly exploring the history of "Traditional Witchcraft."

Traditional Witchcraft

Like many Witches, Griffin describes himself as being born with certain magickal inclinations. Although he is critical of the idea, espoused by Margarette Murray and others, of an ancient European matriarchal Witch cult, he does trace his family's Witchcraft lineage to before Gerald Gardner and the popularization of Wicca. His family, he tells us in class, always had practitioners of "the craft." From them he learned the ins and outs of what he has referred to as British Traditional Witchcraft, a regional subset of the particularly hard-to-pin-down category of magick that has come to be called "Traditional Witchcraft," sometimes shortened to Traditional Craft or simply Trad Craft.

Archeologist and scholar of contemporary Paganism Ethan Doyle White has published much of the scholarly material on this tradition. In an article on one of the major figures in this tradition, Robert Cochrane, White gives us something close to a definition:

> Traditional Craft represents a broad movement of aligned magico-religious groups who reject any relation to Gardnerian and the wider Wiccan movement, claiming older, more 'traditional' roots. Although typically united by a shared aesthetic rooted in European folklore, the Traditional Craft contains within its ranks a rich and varied array of occult groups, from those who follow a contemporary Pagan path that is suspiciously similar to Wicca to those who adhere to Luciferianism, a philosophy that centers on the mythological of Lucifer and which draws on a variety of Biblical myths within a folk magical framework"[227]

[227] White, *Robert Cochrane and the Gardnerian Path*, 205.

As the definition suggests, a coherent "Traditional Witchcrat" tradition is hard to nail down, but Hutton, White and Valiente among other scholars have identified a shared history that those who currently consider themselves Traditional Witches look to. White associates the codification of this history with the publication of two books. The first, Doreen Valiente's 1989 autobiography *The Rebirth of Witchcraft,* includes a chapter on her involvement with what modern practitioners often consider the first "Traditional Craft" coven.[228] A decade later, Ronald Hutton's 1999 history of modern Witchcraft, *The Triumph of the Moon,* drawing on information from the same coven as well as its offshoots, described" Traditional Witchcraft" as one of the four major branches of the modern craft. [229]

The covens described in these books and the members of the Ced Tradition trace their origins back to before the advent of recorded history. According to these accounts, what becomes Trad Craft begins with European folk practices that began long before the spread of Christianity and survived in the modern period through the work of cunning folk, fortune tellers, healers, storytellers, trade guilds, and secret orders. Doreen Valiente reports knowing a few living examples of these magick users and describes them as mostly solitary practitioners who took communication with the dead for granted, had a conception of a deity that is "that of a personification of nature or universal life," and put a premium on their

[228] Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft,* 117-136. This is a chapter titled "Robert Cochrane, Magistrate." The chapter "Traditional Witchcraft?" is dedicated to finding evidence of a pre-modern witchcraft tradition and might be misleading for modern readers.

[229] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 287-318.

privacy.[230] This origin departs from that introduced by Margaret Murray and embraced by Gardner and other Wiccans in its insistence that this tradition was never organized or dominant in Europe. As White points out, Traditional Witches are often explicitly non-Wiccan, viewing Wicca as either inauthentic or simply too dogmatic. They see themselves as too wild and ancient to be contained within the rules and rites of any one group. As a category, however, Traditional Witchcraft has a history that is much younger. It has been traced through a collection of letters, articles, and firsthand accounts scattered across the last half a century. Most of those writing this history focus on the work of two major figures in modern Witchcraft.

The earliest of these was Robert Cochrane (born Ray Bowers), who founded the coven of Tubal-Cain in 1961. Cochrane was in many ways the tragic rock star figure of the early Witchcraft scene. He advocated for a craft more connected to "magical efficacy and gnosis" than prescribed ritual and doctrine, drawing on connections to older magickal orders such as the "Society of the Horseman's Wood," which predated Gardner and his work.[231] Cochrane was particularly anti-Gardnerian, writing a series of critical articles about the Wiccan tradition, which he saw as taking the burgeoning modern Witchcraft trend in dangerous directions. It was in this spirit that Cochrane actually coined the term "Gardnerian" as a term of derision, although it is now a neutral term referring to anyone who follows Gardner's version of Wicca.[232] According to Doreen Valiente, who was briefly a part of his

[230] Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft*, 97.

[231] White, *An Elusive Roebuck.*

[232] Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft.* 117. Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 316-17. Hutton credits Cochrane's friend and claimant to another hereditary tradition with the brunt of the attacks on Gardnerians and with first using the phrase in print.

coven, he went so far as to call for a "night of the long swords with the Gardnerians"[233] Despite this provocative reference to Nazism, the bulk of the conflict between Cochrane and the "Gardnerians" played out in the press and none of it ever extended to actual physical violence.[234]

Before any of this conflict could get out of hand Cochrane died from intentionally ingesting belladonna and labium, both of which he knew to be poisonous, on Midsummer's Eve in 1966. Most sources refer to this as a "ritual suicide," something Cochrane spoken of before. He had used the same concoction to "test" the love of a betrothed couple earlier – a test that had almost killed them – and knew what the potion could do.[235] His short career in Witchcraft echoes down to the present. Most of his writing, including letters and notes, have been published and several covens and other institutions have been formed by his followers or those inspired by him. Many of these institutions call themselves "Traditional Witches," although Cochrane never used the term to refer to his craft.

The second major figure in the evolution of Traditional Witchcraft is Andrew D. Chumbley. Born in 1965, he came of age during the second big boom of Pagan activity in the late 80s and 90s. Like Cochrane, Chumbley died young, suffering a fatal asthma attack on his thirty-seventh birthday. Chumbley accomplished a lot in his short life, forming his own order in 1991, the Cultus Sabbati, and becoming initiated into at least four other orders and covens,

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[233] Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft.* 129.

[234] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 312-313.

[235] Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft.* 135, Gavin Semple, *The Poisoned Chalice: The Death of Robert Cochrane,* (London: Reineke, Verlag, 2004).

all the while writing and self-publishing a series of grimoires, books of spells and magickal instructions, and other books. At the time of his death, he was working on a PhD on the study of religion and Tibetan at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.[236]

Chumbley was instrumental in cementing the idea of "Traditional Witchcraft" as an important category of modern magick. In his own writing and in correspondence with Ronald Hutton he regularly refers to Traditional Craft as the overarching tradition to which the Cultus Sabbati belongs. Chumbley's personal craft was eclectic, drawing on everything from ceremonial magick to Tantric Buddhism, but one of his major innovations in the forming of "Traditional Craft'' was the introduction of "Luciferianism," a mythology which draws on various strains of Pagan and Jewish mysticism to tell stories about Lucifer as a heroic figure of will and light. Chumbley considered this tradition to be part of a whole universe of pre-Gardnerian Witchcraft and magick practices in Europe. Both Cochrane and Chumbley claimed initiation into one of these older European traditions, but Chumbley was much more invested in proving this lineage than his predecessor, showing Hutton and other scholars a series of documents apparently belonging to these older orders.[237] In his later life, after beginning his graduate education, he expressed frustration that his vows of secrecy to various institutions forbade him from supplying more detailed evidence, writing in an article, "I can

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[236] Ethan Doyle White, "Navigating the Crooked Path: Andrew D. Chumbley and the Sabbatic Craft." In *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West: Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of "The Triumph of the Moon."* (London: Pallgrave MacMillan, 2019).

[237] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon. 306.*

only be content to whisper in the wings of academic discourse that there is much more to the story of modern Witchcraft than meets the eye."[238]

While Cochrane never used the term as a proper noun and Chumbley's attempts at definitions were always intentionally vague, [239] "Traditional Witchcraft" has grown in popularity in the wake of the publication of Valiente and Hutton's books. Individuals and covens, like those described in this chapter, use "Traditional Witchcraft" to describe themselves. Most metaphysical stores now carry at least one book on this tradition and social media accounts across platforms have pages dedicated to the term, with thousands of followers.

Ethan Doyle White has published the most recent articles on Traditional Witchcraft. In an article titled "The Creation of 'Traditional Witchcraft'," White concludes that unlike Wicca, Traditional Witchcraft, while "providing great emic meaning for many occultists – is fundamentally unsuitable as a category for academic research." He bases this on two claims about the term. First, that it is primarily a "form of rhetorical self-identification," for those who wish to use the terms "Witchcraft" and "Witch" while eschewing an association with Wicca. Second, that it is a "legitimization strategy" that foregrounds the "concept of

[238] Andrew D. Chumbley, "The Magic of History: Some Considerations," in *Hands of Apostasy: Essays on Traditional Witchcraft*, ed. Michael Howard and Daniel A. Schulke (Richmond Vista, CA: Three Hand Press, 2015), 21.

[239] Chumbley's 1996 article "What is Traditional Craft" starts with "Traditional Craft is the Nameless Way of the Arte Magickal [sic]" and continues with more poetics and alternate spellings.

'tradition 'in order to emphasize its (alleged) connections to older forms of 'magical practice,' thus giving it an aura of authenticity."[240]

The Traditional Witchcraft that I encountered at The Green Man fits this description, although I am not sure that the coherence in the modern world of Trad Craft can be put down simply to an aversion to Wicca and a strategy of legitimization. While it is true that these issues are often front and center in chat rooms, blogs, TikTok accounts, and podcasts that identify with the term, most of these preoccupations vanish during in-person work and most recent books on the subject seek to distance themselves from both strategies. In one of the books on the subject found at most metaphysical bookstores, Kelden's *The Crooked Path: An Introduction to Traditional Witchcraft*, the author specifically argues against authenticity being "misattributed to age" and finds Traditional Witchcraft's authenticity in its efficacy and "having firm belief and confidence in yourself." Later he warns firmly against "Wicca bashing."[241] In intro classes at The Green Man it is usually mentioned briefly that this work predates Wicca and is drawn from folk traditions, but no evidence is given or asked for. Nor is this an important point for teachers or students. When Wicca does come up, it is its supposed dogma, not its supposed inauthenticity, that sets it apart from Trad Craft. Wicca, we are told in The Green Man classes, is the "religion of Witchcraft" – religion serving mostly as a pejorative in this case.

What I found key to the "Traditional" part of this name is more a rejection of ceremonial magick. This was Witchcraft that was proudly low magick. It is meant to be an

[240] Ethan Doyle White," The Creation of 'Traditional Witchcraft': Pagans, Luciferians, and the Quest for Esoteric Legitimacy." *Aries* 18, no. 2 (June 29, 2018): 188–216.

[241] Kelden's *The Crooked Path: An Introduction to Traditional Witchcraft* (Llwellyn Publications, Woodbury, MN: 2020) 10-11.

earthly – not cosmic – religion where messiness and ambiguity are encouraged. Beyond this the term does seem to have accrued some positive identifiers. Lucifer seems to be a common figure in this practice, which comes along with a heightened comfort with deities that fall on the chthonic and chaotic side of the spectrum between that and light and order. [242] Our classes, as well as the most popular books on the tradition, teach a magick that uses cauldrons, besoms (brooms), and stangs (three-pronged staffs), along with more common magickal tools. Following Cochrane's example, all Traditional Witches work a "compass" (instead of calling the quarters of a standard magickal circle) and place air instead of earth in the north. Most also view deities as equals to humans and use the term "hedge" to refer to the boundary between the magickal and the mundane. These are only a few of the commonalities found among those that call themselves Traditional Witches that seem to suggest that they have become a coherent, albeit fuzzily defined, tradition. The Ced Tradition fits into this category, although much of what they do and teach is unique to them.

Researching the Ced Tradition

The bulk of my fieldwork with The Green Man began in June 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was reaching its first peak, and ended in May 2022. This meant that I conducted my research mostly online, although I was able to attend a Beltane ritual in West Hollywood, conduct five in-person interviews, and visit the store several times. As an online participant observer, I mostly took classes with Griffin and Carrie or one of the other

[242] In the Ced tradition Lucifer actually embodies all of these qualities. He is a trickster deity of light and the underworld.

members of The Green Man staff. This led to an interesting form of intimacy that set this group apart from my other research locations.

On one hand it was relatively impersonal. Whereas I had developed a good rapport with many at Star Sapphire Lodge and the in-person element of The Crooked Path meant that my classmates and teachers became my friends, at The Green Man I remained somewhat of an outsider, although no more than everyone else who began taking their classes during the pandemic. While people became familiar with my face and Griffin occasionally ribbed me about my ever-growing mane of pandemic hair, I never developed the closeness that I had with those whom I had engaged with in person. In this sense much of this fieldwork was closer to a one-to-one relationship between me and Griffin than a classic ethnography based on full immersion into a community.

On the other hand, the work I did with Griffin took place in my own space and often inside my own imagination. This was work conducted on my bedroom floor among my own possessions, my cats, and within earshot of my partner and my roommates. These "vision quests" had an extra vividness and depth that I never reached doing similar work in public settings. In this way The Green Man offered an opportunity to make my own body and imagination the location of study – a sort of internal imaginative laboratory where I was able to safely experiment with the magick that does so much to frame the lives of my subjects.

The Green Man generally offers three or four classes a week with occasional special events. Most of the time this means Griffin and Carrie teach two classes with one or two others being taught by staff members or guest teachers. During my research I was consistently enrolled in at least one of Griffin or Carrie's classes. This started with a beginner's series: Intro to Trad Craft, Traditional Witchcraft 101, and Traditional Witchcraft

201. After this I took a collection of thematic classes such as The Witches Broom and Mill, Spellcasting, and Walking with the Witch Gods. I also attended classes on ceremonial magick, Wicca, shamanism, and astrology with other Green Man teachers. Although these classes taught other forms of magick, they still carried enough of the flavor of the Ced Tradition to make them idiosyncratic to the store and its associated coven. This meant taking at least one online class a week at The Green Man for over a year. In addition to classes, I attended online celebrations for each of the Pagan sabbats. These events sometimes included magickal working or a lecture about the holiday, and sometimes they were purely social.

Although both Griffin and Carrie teach these courses officially, Griffin does nearly all the talking. They joke about him never giving her a chance to speak, but this seems to be the way she prefers it. Carrie is the "Dame of Ced," the counterpart in the Ced coven to Griffin's "Witchfather," and a very knowledgeable and experienced Witch. Still, she prefers not to talk in public outside of ritual. Instead, she keeps up a lively conversation in the Zoom chat window, joking with regulars and offering quick answers to questions that she is better equipped to respond to than Griffin.

Most classes follow a set structure. Every class begins with a half hour of questions. This is time when we can go over information from the previous weeks and clear up questions about Traditional Witchcraft in general and the Ced Tradition specifically. For most of the classes this is also a chance to discuss our experiences during the previous week's "vision quest." After questions and answers, Griffin launches into a semi-structured lecture. Traditional Witchcraft 101 and 201, as well as a few later classes, followed the Traditional Witchcraft compass, a system which associates the cardinal directions with the days of the year along with an almost infinite number of other correspondences. Most of the more

advanced classes took on a more thematic structure. Although Griffin worked from notes, it was often unclear how specific they were. Some classes he would use a PowerPoint presentation and quickly run us through all the associations connected to a particular direction (gods, spirits, trees, tarot, horoscopes, trials, etc.), other times he would look at his notes and mention that he still needed to cover something as nebulous as "what it means to be a heretic," or "the addiction to intensity." Questions are welcome during these lectures, which would often push the conversation far from its original path. Finally, at the end of all the classes except Traditional Witchcraft 101 and Spellcasting, we engaged in a "vision quest."

Griffin led these "quests," accompanying himself with a hand drum that he used to keep the pace of his narrative, occasionally fluctuating the volume as rituals got more or less intense. Griffin's deep, classically trained voice combined with the drumming to create a hypnotic effect. Most quests would begin by him gently telling us to breathe and make ourselves comfortable before dramatically commanding us to "drop out of our bodies" into the astral space. Usually, the starting point would be the same for each class. For Traditional Witchcraft 201 it was a stone temple with altars for each of the cardinal directions and their corresponding elements. For Awakening the witchblood, we found ourselves at the shores of a body of water before being carried by a faceless ferryman to an island in the middle of the lake where each week's journey would begin. From these starting points, Griffin would lead us into an encounter with some sort of supernatural being or landscape. Eventually his voice would drop out, the drumming would continue, and we would be left to commune on our own with what we had found. This is where the intuitive work Griffin called "gnosis" happened.

Before the pandemic, Griffin and Carrie's classes would be in person at the store, and nearly every class would involve both a vision quest and hands-on ritual training. This experiential aspect was called "floor work" at The Green Man. Although other institutions have begun providing in-person classes and rituals, The Green Man's classes have remained online. Part of this is due to the number of people who attend these classes. Griffin and Carrie's classes average about forty people online, and The Green Man's owners tell me that they are only slightly smaller in person. This means a lot of bodies piling into the small classroom space at the store. On top of this, Griffin says, floor work often gets pretty messy with people "breathing and sweating on each other and saliva flying everywhere," which just wouldn't work in person. This is especially true for the big holidays, such as Samhain and Beltane, where attendance can be in the hundreds. The online format does have its advantages as it allows people from all over the world to sample the class or continue the work they had already begun with Griffin before moving away from Los Angeles.[243]

I recorded details on over one hundred individuals who either took classes or attended events through The Green Man. Participating online provided both challenges and advantages for assessing demographics. It is considerably less awkward to record details about your classmates online than in person. Whereas for in-person classes I resorted to recording what I remembered afterwards and writing it in my field notes, on Zoom I could simply count participants and record information about them while class was in session.

[243] In-person rituals and classes had resumed by the time I finished the rest of my field research in Los Angeles and I did attend both a class and a Beltane celebration in person. As of this writing, Griffin and Carrie's classes remain hybrid, most likely as a way to allow those outside the LA area to attend.

Assessing specifics, however, was more difficult. Ethnicity, age, and gender, while already problematic categories to determine in person, can be even harder when someone is merely a face, a static image, or just a name. Still, though it may be a clumsy one, it is important to get a portrait of who these magick practitioners are if we are going to understand what they do.

As mentioned above, an average of forty people attend each of Griffin's classes online. This is over twice the amount of any other class I took at The Green Man or at any other institution. Rituals varied greatly, with some being attended by less than twenty people and others, like the Yule celebration, having over fifty attendees. A little over half of the people I recorded took more than one class, with a few taking up to four in a row. Roughly three quarters of the participants appeared to be white. Of the other twenty-five percent, the majority were Latinx, with Asian Americans and African Americans making up very small portions. Seventy percent either clearly identified or appeared to be female, with the rest made up of mostly men, and a few identifying as non-binary. The gender statistics come from appearance, the way some identified when talking in class or on chat, and the option that Zoom gives to identify yourself with a preferred pronoun. Most seemed to be in their twenties or early thirties with a cohort of about thirty appearing middle aged or older. Socioeconomic background was nearly impossible to determine online. Classes cost $28 a class or $183 for a full series of nine classes, which is relatively inexpensive in the magick world and not prohibitive enough to conclude much about the financial state of most attendees, let alone their background. The lack of in-person conversation made other demographic categories, such as occupation, education level, and sexual orientation, very difficult to determine. Out of the eight people associated with The Green Man that I got to know personally, three identified as gay, three were in heterosexual relationships, and the

other two did not mention their sexual orientation. All of these people worked at the store in some capacity, although Jill, one of the owners, was also an accountant. All of them had an undergraduate degree except for Griffin.

The Universe According to Griffin Ced: The Cosmology of the Ced Tradition

As mentioned above, there is no book or any form of official literature describing the Ced Tradition although, like many other magick traditions, the classes present a complex, coherent, non-exclusive cosmology. What follows is an introductory portrait of this tradition, painted using interviews with members of the coven, conversations with fellow students, and, for the bulk of the information, my own knowledge and experience from over a year of classes with Griffin and Carrie. I have broken this section up into smaller sections modeled on traditional categories in the study of religion not to suggest that this tradition lacks the openness and eclecticism that it claims, but rather that within that openness lies something as coherent as any other religious system. Because Ced is an experiential tradition, I have included, alongside my description of these various aspects, personal experiences I had with them either in the physical or astral plane.

Mythology: Awakening the Witchblood

The Ced Tradition thrives on conflict and tension and so it makes an odd sort of sense that, despite the usual Pagan antipathy toward monotheism, the Bible is the inspiration for one their most important narratives.[244] This is the origin of the "witchblood," a spiritual

[244] Griffin acknowledges the usefulness of this tension. He explains it as a way of shaking up former Christians and giving them a way to re-narrate the religion of their youth. Many of my fellow students were indeed very uncomfortable with this.

lineage carried by many of those interested in Witchcraft.[245] The story begins with the account of the flood in Genesis chapters 6-8,[246] specifically the first verse of Genesis 6 which tells the story of the offspring of the "sons of God" and mortals:

> When men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them,[2] the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose.[3] Then the LORD said, "My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh, but his days shall be a hundred and twenty years."[4] The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown. (NIV)

This text has inspired a nearly endless string of interpretations, from the ancient book of Enoch, from which John Dee drew his inspiration, to *Supernatural*, a long-running popular TV show dealing with the paranormal. The text's ambiguity about who exactly the sons of God, the "mighty men," and the Nephilim are, has proved fertile ground for creativity of both the magickal and more traditionally theological variety.

For Griffin and the Ced Tradition, the sons of God are divine spirits, most likely angels, but also possibly gods, and the Nephilim are the offspring of the coupling of these spirits with mortals. Yahweh, who is a god in the Ced system but in no way the only God, decided to wipe out all of humankind with a flood in order to destroy these beings and erase the wickedness of mankind. He was after all, according to the Bible, a jealous and rageful

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[245] The term "witchblood" in not unique to the Ced Tradition. It is used in a large variety of Witchcraft traditions that fall inside and outside the Traditional Craft umbrella, often referring to some special hereditary quality needed to become a Witch. The specific origin and description of it that Griffin gives, however, I have not found in any other sources.

[246] Although Griffin acknowledges that the flood myth is much older than this story, it is this particular telling that he relies on most. The story of the Fall is also of interest to Griffin, but only as it relates to the figures of Lucifer and Lilith, neither, strictly speaking, major figures in the Bible.

god, or to put it in more polytheistic terms, a god of jealousy and rage. In the Bible, the Nephilim, along with most of humanity, are killed in this flood. In the Ced telling of this story, some of these Nephilim hid inside caves or found high ground and survived. The descendants of these half-divine, half-human, individuals reproduced with each other and with the rest of humanity and thus passed on the divine part of their blood. This is what Griffin calls the "witchblood." This blood makes itself known not through appearance or genetics but through action and temperament. According to Griffin, all the great leaders and artists of history probably carried this blood. It can be seen clearly in both the ancient stories of the offspring of gods such as the Greek heroes and in the emphasis on breeding among the aristocratic and royal families. Most importantly, it can be felt in anyone who tends toward the rebellious, the artistic, the restless, the heretical, and the magickal.

But why was Yahweh so intent on destroying these half-bloods who could hardly be seen as a threat to a full-blooded god such as himself? This has everything to do with the way that the Ced Tradition sees divinity and humanity. Spirits, including gods and angels, do not possess free will, while humans do. This is because most spirits simply follow the path laid out for them by Dame Fate, a spirit herself who weaves the narratives of our lives. Most humans follow this path as well. They flow like water along the "lines of least resistance," a favorite metaphor of Griffin's. Witches however, who carry both divine and human blood, are imbued with the power to change this flow and the will to want to. They can forge a new, often more difficult, path and change the course of fate. For the Ced Tradition the common, Crowley-inspired definition of magick as causing change in accordance with your will is both the privilege and responsibility of the descendants of those Nephilim who hid from the flood eons ago. In this sense those carrying the witchblood are in fact above the gods in a

way. That is why those in the Ced Tradition do not worship gods but rather "work" with them.

Although the above narrative is often repeated in Griffin's classes, it is not necessarily meant to be believed. Or more accurately, you can believe it if you'd like but don't take it as the complete or exclusive truth. The veracity of the story has nothing to do with its power. We do not necessarily need to believe that the Biblical flood story was a historical event to believe in our own witchblood. Nor do we need to believe that there are humans descended from gods to recognize that certain temperaments seem to drive history. The story is a model that speaks to an aspect of reality. Griffin's students are free to accept it or reject it depending on its usefulness to them. The same can be said for the gods and other mythical figures. These stories and the rituals that are attached to them are meant to point towards a truth that cannot be learned any other way.

Theology: Walking with the Witch Gods

Gods in the Ced Tradition are both real and imaginary, a distinction which is often problematized in the Ced Tradition. The actual images, stories, and attributes of individual gods are imaginary constructs standing in for forces, both natural and man-made, in the universe. This is how the actions of the Hebrew God in the above narrative make sense. Yahweh, among other attributes, is a jealous and wrathful god, which means that, in the Ced system, he is the embodiment of jealousy and wrath. He creates this catastrophe simply

because that is what he does. Or, to paraphrase Yahweh's own words to Moses from the burning bush, he is what he is.[247]

Although gods may be purely aspects of reality given form, their form is extremely important. "There is nothing I can do with the concept of love," Griffin tells us, "but I can work with Aphrodite, I can see her, feel her, and converse with her." Giving forces form gives us something we can work with. Furthermore, the gods often have a layer of nuance that goes beyond simple language. To use Griffin's previous example, there is a difference between working with Aphrodite, the Egyptian cat god Bast, or the Celtic god Aine, although they all represent love, lust, and sexuality. This difference is defined by all the written and spoken lore that's been created about these figures, all the art that's been made about them, and, more importantly, the way we perceive and interact with them on the astral plane. Griffin is deeply skeptical of academia, especially comparative approaches to mythology. He sees attempts at correspondence between gods as well as efforts to pin them down to one story or region as problematic because it takes them out of their ritual context. For him, what people thought or wrote about gods has little to do with the relationship they had with them.

In the Ced Tradition, Gods come in two categories: titans and bright gods. Titans are representations of natural forces. Storm gods like Thor or Zeus fit into this category, as do gods of harvest and fecundity such as Inanna and Demeter. Bright gods are representations of human aspects of reality, such as Nike, the goddess of victory, or Bes, the Egyptian god of home and breweries. In general, we rarely work directly with the titans because natural forces are unchangeable and thus our relationship with them is inherently one sided. We can change

[247] Ex 3:14

our experience of the wind, but the wind does not change with us. On the other hand, we can change our subjective reality by working with the bright gods since they are human forces.[248] It is particularly valuable to work with the "Witch gods," a category that includes tricksters, tempters, and gods of resurrection. In a class called Walking with the Witch Gods, we journeyed each day to a place where we could work with a particular type of god. In one class we learned about the gods of resurrection and the connections between Lucifer, Odin, and Christ. In another we were guided into a clearing surrounded by the dark gods: Samael, the angel of death; Satan, the tempter; Cerberus, the guardian and hound of hell; a figure simply called the man in black; and finally, the goatish, mocking figure of the Devil.[249]

In the Ced Tradition, the god or gods you work with the most are referred to as your patron or patrons. For Griffin this was originally the horned god Herne, whom he describes as a sexual partner, but later in life this figure transformed to the more mature Cernunnos, the god of the wild hunt. Griffin also works with the Witch goddesses Ceridwen and Hecate as well as the Irish dark god Crom. My patrons were a bleeding and aging Prometheus, a living statue of Dionysus made of onyx and gold, and a small rock.

My rock companion came to me in a Green Man class on shamanism taught by Jerel, another teacher at the store. His version of the "vision quest" was called a "shamanic journey." Unlike Griffin, who led us on our quests in real time over video conferencing

[248] Some gods have aspects that are bright gods and others that are titans. Which one they are often depends on where you meet them and what they are representing at the time. Venus is a good example here. Venus is both a titan in her capacity as the goddess of fertility and fecundity, and a bright god in her capacity as the goddess of romantic love.

[249] Many magick traditions I have encountered see Satan, Lucifer, and the Devil as separate figures. It is only the Christian influence on our language which has combined them into one figure in modern popular speech.

software, Jerel pre-recorded his and played them at the end of class. This gave him ample opportunity to fill out the audio. He played us recordings of his voice over complex drumming and a lush background of nature sounds and New Age synthesizers. Jerel's class also involved rocks. Each class we were meant to have a rock that would come to hold the energy of, and represent, what we found on our journey. Some people brought crystals but many, like me, simply brought rocks we felt drawn to. I found one outside my back door right before class. It was a simple, russet-colored, rough, rectangular stone. Nothing special. During the class we were asked to commune with this rock and to ask it to join us on our journey. My rock became simultaneously the tiny mundane object in my hand, an infinitely huge stone wall, and an anthropomorphic rock-man that looked suspiciously like characters from comic books and movies I had grown up with. This rock became my companion for the rest of my research. In the physical world, I kept it on my bedside or sometimes under my pillow before it eventually made its way into my car as a traveling companion on my hours of driving from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles. When asked to add something to an earth altar for an in-person class, this is what I reached for. It appeared in my mind whenever we were asked to "journey with our tribe."

My Prometheus companion also appeared during one of Jerel's classes, although he was extremely present in my work with Griffin. While exploring the dream world, we were asked to bring along a guide if we saw one. At first, I thought of my rock, but then I was suddenly presented with the figure of a disheveled, middle-aged man with no shirt on, holding his stomach where a bandage suggested a wound was, although there was no blood.

It came to me suddenly that this was Prometheus, a figure I had always been drawn to.[250] This was a version of him after all the stories, after he'd played his tricks on the Gods and given man fire, and after Zeus had pardoned him and he no longer lived life eternally having his liver eaten.[251] Prometheus joined me on these journeys offering the weary support of someone who had seen it all but still had a deep love for humankind.

My final companion joined me rather late in my research. We began the vision quest for our first Witch Gods class, by diving headfirst into a cauldron, one of the essential tools of the Traditional Witch. As we swam through pure darkness, we eventually came to a standing position and floated in mid-air. Eventually we felt a presence moving behind us. We could see something dark with flashes of gold out of the corner of our eyes. This figure didn't come into clear focus until the end of the quest, but I continuously tried to identify him. At first, I thought it was another form of Prometheus, but as he came into focus I knew him as Dionysus, but not the drunken and chaotic version. This was a figure made from pure black onyx with a crown and eyes of gold. This was the Dionysus whose cult, I had been taught as a teenager in acting classes, reached back to the origins of Greek theater. This was the god of the festival, but more than that, it was the god of fecundity, and thus everything that makes life live. This dark Dionysus joined me on journeys, always just out of sight, somewhere in the darkness that surrounded me as I shifted back and forth in my room with my eyes closed every week.

[250] Later I realized I'd taken this image from a statue of Prometheus I had seen in an art history class. I believe it was Prometheé by the early modern sculptor Auguste Bartholdi.

[251] It occurred to me later that Prometheus also might have appeared because I had chosen a stalk of lemongrass as a traveling companion, a vegetable that looks a lot like the fennel stalk that Prometheus was said to have hidden fire in when he brought it to man.

Epistemology: Personal Gnosis and Riding The Hedge

These gods, and the others I encountered every week who became central to my research, were not prescribed by any craft nor were they fully based on any single story or image. These figures were conjured from a mix of cultural references, personal memories, and the myths I had learned about the gods.[252] This was done during a specific part of our meditations where our teacher would stop talking and leave us to explore where they had brought us through this storytelling. This is where our individual work was done, and this work was called "personal gnosis."[253]

Personal gnosis has little to do with the ancient Christian sect of Gnosticism or any of the Pagan and non-Pagan groups that have tried to revive that tradition. It refers instead to the knowledge, or "gnosis," received through a direct interaction with "spirit." Spirit, used without a definite article, refers to the undifferentiated world of all that is not material. This includes a sort of supernatural collective consciousness, but it also includes our own imagination and subconscious. It is through ritual and visualization that we get as close as we can to this unmediated spirit. It is in this state that I met my journeying companions. This is not the end of the work however. To fully incorporate the work we do in that realm we must

[252] Before starting my research, I had spent a lot of time familiarizing myself with the Greek myths only to find that these are rarely referenced. The modern Witches I have met tend to see these deities as archetypes and thus focus on their attributes over their stories.

[253] Although it was not a term used by any of my teachers at The Green Man, the term Unverified Personal Gnosis, or UPG, circulated within the magick community during my research. This was a way of describing knowledge that looked to intuition, contact with spirits, and personal experience for validity. Conversations around what type of knowledge can be trusted through this means were often fraught, especially during the height of the pandemic.

find a way to “mediate” it and in order to do that we must return to the material world. In the terminology of traditional Witchcraft, we must “cross back over the hedge.”

Though subjective reality may be mutable in the Ced Tradition this does not mean that you can alter the laws of physics. Magick in the Ced Tradition is done simultaneously in the physical and spirit (or astral) realm. The physical realm is a world of matter and energy that operates by the rules of physics, which are unalterable. The spirit (or astral) realm is a place where personal gnosis and imagination rule. This is the realm of unmediated knowledge: ideas and sensations that exist beyond description. These worlds are constantly working together and Griffin urged us to remember just how much of our life in the physical world is shaped by our imagination and vice versa.

In Traditional Witchcraft the line between these worlds is called the hedge and traditional Witches work by navigating this line but never fully committing to one side. The hedge is another metaphor drawn from medieval British life, where many of the Traditional Witchcraft practices are said to have originated. Griffin tells us that in the Old World people lived much closer to nature and that the hedge marked the line between civilization and the wild. The uncultivated world of nature often stands in for the spirit world in the Ced Tradition and has similar importance in many Pagan traditions. Magick is produced by crossing back and forth between these two worlds. This is how working with the spirits can mold both personal and collective reality.

The example of the vision quest can serve to show how this distinction operates. We begin the quest in the physical world; we are sitting or standing in our rooms listening to a voice from a computer. Griffin has just spent an hour and a half priming us for this journey by filling our minds with images, questions, and concepts to explore. As we ready ourselves

for the spirit world, we cut out the physical. We close our eyes, shut off any lights, and find the quietest place available. With our eyes closed, Griffin works as both a guide and a tether. As he drums, he enters into a liminal space, looking for inspiration inside and coming out to share it with us. We enter the spirit realm via a voice from the material world. As we journey we see images, feel sensations, and allow ideas to drift through our conscious and unconscious mind.

At the end we are called back to our body and told to "get mundane." It is necessary to get fully back over the hedge. This can be done by running your hands under cold water, eating something salty, or simply touching cold metal. If none of this works, Griffin suggests we watch some TV or take a shower. The dangers of remaining in the spirit world are both serious and vague. All we are told is that it is a bad idea. Once mundane, Griffin highly suggests we "mediate" our vision quest. This means writing in our journal or telling someone else about it. Getting it out into the world while it's still fresh. This mediation is how the raw gnosis enters the material world. It is in giving words to what we learned and gained in the vision quest that we make it effective and generate an opportunity to create change. By narrating it we make it a part of ourselves and allow it to alter our personal reality, changing lives in the world and thus changing the world itself.

Architects of Reality

It is important to note how the Ced Tradition sets itself apart from other "religious" systems, Pagan and otherwise. This is a system that is neither binding nor given to truth claims. It is not meant to be a description of an objective universe, a moral guide, or a blueprint for living a good life. Nor is it recommended as a method for therapy or healing,

which is how many magick communities see themselves. It is a way to envision reality that gives practitioners the ability to shape it in such a way that it serves their desires and changes the world for the better. It is religion as a tool for creation. Instead of focusing on lacks, needs, or healing, it is explicitly designed to allow for the creative act of molding a new reality. The Ced Tradition, Griffin tells us, is about creating change and" fucking shit up." If you come here looking to fix yourself you will at best be disappointed, at worst you will come away worse than you came in.

Of course, religion as a tool for reality construction is nothing new in the academic world. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman present religion as a major engine in the creation of our consensus reality in their influential work *The Social Construction of Reality,*[254] something explored more in Berger's book on secularism, *The Sacred Canopy*.[255] French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard made a career out of discussing the way our reality is intertwined with our fiction.[256] Although he doesn't always center on religion specifically, his work has had a huge influence on our discipline.[257]

This vision of reality proved influential on Western popular fiction. Much of the move toward "meta-fiction" in the films of the late 1990s and early 2000s has its origins in

[254] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

[255] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1990).

[256] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[257] Carole M. Cusack and Pavol Kosnáč, eds., *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-Reality: From Popular Culture to Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2016) has several examples of this hyperreality in specifically magickal contexts; Adam Possamai ed., *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (Boston: Brill Academic Pub, 2012) provides a broader overview of hyperreality in religion.

academic discourse about the nature of reality. Movies like *The Matrix*, *Dark City*, *Pleasantville*, and *The Truman Show*, as well as later "prestige television" such as *Westworld*, all center on questions about living in a "real" versus constructed world. These stories nearly always present this constructed reality as false, something to be overcome, often citing the ancient Christian Gnostics as an inspiration.[258] They advocate for waking up to the "real world," which, although often less pleasant, provides a more fulfilling and deeper life.

The Ced Tradition takes a different approach to the idea of consensus reality. Instead of seeing it as an existential crisis they see it as an opportunity to make a better world. Griffin is a crusader for the imaginary and often gets sidetracked defending it. He points out that a great deal of what we experience happens or, at the very least, is colored and given meaning by our imagination. Our waking life is essentially a product of a dialectical process between our senses and our imaginary world. Our perception is filtered through our imagination to make sense of the world. This is true on an everyday level where language and cultural referents allow us to understand what we perceive, but it also works on a deeper symbolic level.

In the Ced Tradition, when we see a snake, our imagination makes sense of it in relation to the platonic ideal of a snake, our cultural conception of snakes, the semi-Jungian archetype of a snake we've gained through our gnosis, and our personal experience with snakes. This is as true for gods as it for snakes. Where the Ced Tradition differs from both Neo-Platonists and Jungians is that they believe these referents, ideals, and archetypes change throughout our life and can be changed intentionally, and it is the responsibility of

[258] Michael Kaler, "Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 22, no. 3 (2018), 1–17.

Witches to change them. Through vision quests and rituals we can "ride the hedge," moving back and forth across the boundaries of the material and the imaginary, creating new narratives and playing with assumptions, ultimately building a new world for ourselves.

While Griffin's insistence that we become architects of reality suggests that the Ced tradition sits firmly in the realm of mutable reality, this is not entirely the case. Griffin and the other teachers regularly reminded us that a mutable reality did not mean that facts weren't real. My research with The Green Man took place during the 2020 presidential election and the COVID-19 pandemic. As politicians, journalists, and social media personalities questioned the validity of everything from the vaccine to the latest school shooting, it was important to all of my teachers that the students trusted medical, scientific, and scholarly consensus. At the same time, there is a similarity in what Griffin was teaching and this landscape of "alternative facts" that made up much of the mediascape at the time. Both were taking the post-modern insistence on the subjectivity of reality out of the world of critique and instrumentalizing it. The difference was that the political pundits, journalists, and politicians did so out a cynical opportunism while Griffin embraced and encouraged his students to explore the freedom inherent in this critique.

This freedom, of course, had its limits. This magick, like that of Star Sapphire Lodge, relied on a certain lineage and works by adhering to the basic laws of the magick tradition. Griffin used complex systems of correspondence to work with another world just like the ceremonial magicians that he critiqued as too "stogy" and "bloodless." The primary difference between the two was that, whereas Thelemites saw material reality as manipulatable by interacting with another, more static reality, those at The Green Man

sought out another more pliable reality in order to change our experience with this more concrete one.

The following, final case study looks at a group that freely mixes these two visions of reality and the way this mixing plays out in the lives of its members. The Crooked Path metaphysical store teaches a form of magick which combines both ceremonial magick, influenced by the Golden Dawn, and contemporary Witchcraft, drawn from many systems including Griffin's, into an expansive form of magick which incorporates a variety of understandings of reality and truth, especially when it comes to magick's effectiveness. This final chapter will explore how these magick practitioners navigate these understandings of reality and truth in their personal magickal lives.

Chapter 4

"All of Them Witches"

The first time I came to The Crooked Path metaphysical supply store in Burbank, CA, where I conducted much of my fieldwork, it was to attend a healing ceremony put on by a contemporary incarnation of the Victorian magickal order Golden Dawn. At the time, this was not one of my central research locations, but I had heard a lot about the store and was curious what the Golden Dawn looked like in 21st century Los Angeles. I didn't get to see the store on that visit. Instead, I found myself, along with small group of fellow attendees, led by a young woman in a cloak around the corner to what seemed like a maintenance door in a small alley. The door opened to black curtains, behind which was a large room very similar to a black box theater. The room was mostly empty except for a series of boxes and a small group of people dressed in robes with striped hoods reminiscent of statues of Egyptian pharaohs. I would learn later that this room was the main temple space attached to The Crooked Path, a room I would eventually spend hundreds of hours in.

The ritual was very serious and somewhat rote. The sense of wildness I had come to associate with Pagan rituals, even those I had only attended virtually, was absent. So too was the theatricality and transgression of an O.T.O. ritual. This was "high magick" at its most academic and dry. Things needed to be done right because this group worked on a cosmic level. This was not the personal magick of Witchcraft. Although we were asked to write down someone's name on a piece of paper to send healing to, the focus of the ritual was

international: we were aiding in healing the pain created by the recent outbreak of war in Ukraine.

Six months later I was hanging out directly above this room with a bunch of Witches, drinking wine, and providing ongoing commentary to the 1968 Roman Polanski occult horror film *Rosemary's Baby*. Although we were all enjoying ourselves, this was a party with a purpose. Along with others who had been taking classes at the store for the past few months, I had been asked whether I would be interested in joining its associated coven, the Order of the Dark Moon. The first step was to see if we could all successfully hang out together. As the night went on, we played party games and eventually broke off into smaller groups where conversations sometimes drifted toward magick but were just as likely to be about music, movies, or food. The party wound down around two in the morning, although Sal, the store's owner and the center of most of its related activity, urged us all to stay later.

Although my position as both a researcher and a non-Angeleno meant I wasn't asked to join the coven, I did attend several similar parties, usually held following a public ritual or the end of a class. At first glance this emphasis on the social seems to be the polar opposite of the Golden Dawn event I had attended downstairs, but these two institutions live comfortably together, with many members of the coven also being initiated into the Golden Dawn. This mix between the old formality of the Golden Dawn and the young casualness of the Order of the Dark Moon makes The Crooked Path and its regular customers, students, and coven members, an interesting case study to tie together the stories of the ceremonial magicians at Star Sapphire and the Traditional Witches at The Green Man. The magick users here learn and practice a mix of high and low magick, adhere to strict tradition and learn to be creative,

strive to be both Witches and ceremonial magicians, and work on both a deeply personal and a universal level.

The people I worked with at The Crooked Path felt no tension between the strictness of the high magick they worked with and the openness and creativity of their Witchcraft, just as they found little tension between the scientific and the magickal or the enchanted and the mundane. As will be explored in the character studies that make up the bulk of this chapter, these magicians each incorporated the magick they learned and conducted at The Crooked Path into their outside life in unique ways. Meanwhile, the mundane sits easily alongside the magickal. We chatted casually about music and TV while weaving ceremonial cords and rehearsing for rituals. Classes could either be a raucous day of rehearsing ritual and goofing off or a long lecture on the Hebrew alphabet. While we were all encouraged to get to know each other on a personal level, we also had more homework than any other magick class I had come upon. We spent our time away from class memorizing Greek and Hebrew phrases and the names of the sefirot (branches on the Kabbalistic tree of life) and practicing choreography of the "lesser banishing ritual of the pentagram," among other complicated rituals. This comfort in the blurry lines between magick traditions is so universal throughout the magickal community I got to know that it was rarely commented on. Whereas the previous few chapters looked at the techniques magickal communities use to understand and mold realities, this chapter will focus on the way magicians live magickly and how these practices are incorporated into their everyday lives through character studies of five different people involved with the store and its associated coven: Sal, one of the stores owners; Celeste, a longtime Coven member; and my classmates Emily, Lucas, and Colleen.

The Crooked Path is located along an up-and-coming commercial street in the middle of Burbank. The neighborhood resembles many I have seen throughout Los Angeles County. Burbank is an interesting town. Famous across the world as the home of the studio audiences of game and talk shows, it is the real center of the American entertainment industry – home of many TV and movie studios as well a growing center of the video game industry. Many of the people I met there had jobs in or adjacent to that world. This was a population full of passionate and fashionable fans of various aspects of popular culture: hipster geeks. At the time of my research, stores catering to this population seemed to be popping up all over town. At the same time, it often seemed like any other Southern California suburb with a vaguely Old West feel. Among the various shops catering to the entertainment industry there are a surprising number of gun shops. The neighborhood where The Crooked Path is located included a clothing store dedicated to pin-up fashion, a plant nursery that served coffee on the weekends, and a game store that was also a tea store and a cat rescue. It also included two Latinx churches and a donut shop called Donut Hut where we occasionally met before class to work on our projects.

The storefront of The Crooked Path is deceptively small. Filled to the brim with magickal products, memorabilia, and decorations, it feels large when you're in it with only a few people but becomes quickly cramped when more than five people are in the store at the same time. The main room is a long rectangle with the counter taking up about a third of the space and the rest is filled with shelves containing the usual magickal products (candles, statues, jewelry, crystals, cloaks, etc.). Like The Green Man, the really valuable stuff is either behind the counter or in display cases. A small room off to one side holds most of the store's books and tarot decks. Although they carry many of the same products as other stores, The

Crooked Path caters to a different crowd. The primary color in the room is black and the figurines and images around the room veer toward the more infernal side of various pantheons. They also carry a small collection of fashionable clothes and well-designed t-shirts, often with tongue-in-cheek text and visuals. It would only be a slight overgeneralization to say that The Crooked Path is for goths and The Green Man is for hippies. Many of the people I took classes with wore dark clothing and makeup and often spoke of their love of horror movies and gothic rock music from the 1980s. One of the couples I took classes with got married on Halloween and described themselves as "spooky people." Although it was never explicitly stated, this group also differed from many Pagans in their almost complete disinterest in nature.

Like The Green Man, the bulk of the building is not dedicated to the retail store. Behind the counter is the large black room which serves as the store's main ritual space, which I visited when attending the Golden Dawn ritual. Above the store is a large space where classes, parties, divination work, and some rituals are held. Directly facing the stairway is a small room that serves as the coven's temple to the Greek goddess Hekate.[259] The entire time I was taking classes, this room was being painted by one of my classmates with various images of the triple-headed Goddess. A few yards away on the same side of the room is another small room which opens up to look down on the ritual space below, like a box seat for a theater. This is where freelance magicians that work out of the store do their divination and spell work for hire. The main portion of the upstairs area is set up for classes. It has a large, carpeted area where seats are set up when class is in session. At the end of the

[259] While this goddess' name is most commonly spelled "Hecate," I have chosen this spelling as it is the one favored by those at The Crooked Path.

room is a small area with a bare floor that has been painted with a checkerboard pattern, two tall, movable pillars, and a table. The walls in this little area have shelves covered in magickal objects of various kinds. Against one wall of the main room is a wreath-like structure: a pentagram flanked with two crescent moons made from branches. There is also a mini fridge and two vivaria containing snakes – animals sacred to Hekate.

My work with The Crooked Path was primarily connected to a series of two classes I took between October 2021 and March 2022. The first of these classes, Witchcraft 101, was a half theoretical, half hands-on class which ended with the class being split into two groups, each of which wrote, planned, and conducted their own ritual. The second class, Ceremonial Magick, was an in-depth look at the ceremonial magick system, primarily based on the Golden Dawn but including influences from the entire history of the magick tradition. Classes were led by Sal, the owner and high priest of the store's coven. With a few exceptions, many of the people who took the first class also took the second. Like the classes at The Green Man, Sal presented a mostly coherent magickal system while insisting that it was not the only way to do things. This system was a clear mix of various influences with a strong leaning toward Wicca, Golden Dawn, and Traditional Witchcraft. Sal is a former student of Griffin's, and the term "crooked path" is very common in Trad Craft circles, but I never heard Sal call himself a Traditional Witch.

The first thing we learned in Sal's classes was about him. Sarah Pike has noted that Neopagans regularly engage in self-reflective autobiography as a form of identity formation.[260] This combined with an emphasis on lineage, which they often cite as what sets

[260] Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves,* 224.

them apart from the less serious magicians or members of the New Age community, means that it is often customary for a teacher to begin a class with their biography as a way of providing a pedigree. Sal's life story, like those of other teachers I had interviewed, was well rehearsed. I heard it when I first researched the store and came across a podcast he had done,[261] during our first class, and in fragments during our interviews and casual conversations. It is a history that ties much of the Los Angeles magickal world together and seems the only appropriate place to start a focus on The Crooked Path and the Order of the Dark Moon.

Sal

Sal is a striking figure. Tall and thin with a dark olive complexion and a mouth full of missing teeth, he looks very much like the archetype of an aging rock star. Almost sixty years old at the time I worked with him, he appears strangely ageless. This is compounded by the fact that he always dresses in something eye-catching, often playing with gender expectations. He has an ever-shifting collection of jewelry and often wears strategically ripped clothing. The first day of our class on ceremonial magick he wore a pleated schoolgirl-style skirt with high heels and ripped tights. Sal calls himself too old for labels although he does think that the term genderqueer might describe him.

He is easily excited about a large number of topics and you can get him going just as easily by bringing up Hermeticism as the music of Prince or Apple products, all of which he is passionately dedicated to. He is also a semi-professional pool player and a singer in a band

[261] George Noory, Interview with Sal Santoro, *Coast to Coast AM,* podcast audio, November 20, 2020, https://www.coasttocoastam.com/show/2020-11-17-show/

doing covers of the legends of 1980s LA rock music scene. He is one of the most welcoming people I have ever met. He seems to have endless energy for engaging with whoever comes into the store and stays after classes and rituals to talk with people for as long as they want. He has the ability to be totally engaged with you while bouncing rapid fire from topic to topic.

Sal was born in New Hampshire and grew up in a traditional Italian family. Though he's been in LA for most of his life he still sees himself as an East Coaster and a distinct accent shows itself when he gets excited. He describes his mother as a "Bostonian to the core and mouthy as hell," with little patience for anything as frivolous as religion, while his father is a dedicated Catholic who believes in the afterlife and God's judgement "150% to the bone." Sal loved the church as a child, although not for the same reasons as his father. In retrospect he says that he just loved to "carry all the cool shit" and "wanted to play with all this stuff." In classes he often tells the story of him wanting to be a priest but then changing his mind when he heard about celibacy.

Sal always had a warm relationship with his parents, but his childhood was not a happy one. He dropped out of school in eighth grade. Before that he was put in the Easterseals program for children who needed special attention. In retrospect he is pretty sure he had ADHD, but he was diagnosed with something else he can't remember. He was drugged for much of that time, which he describes as "living in a cloud." He attributes his lifelong abstention from drugs and alcohol to these early experiences. Drawn by the music scene, he moved to Los Angeles in the early 80s. Sal remains enamored with the city, which he sees as drenched in a dark sort of magick. "I look at the Hollywood sign," he told me

when I asked why the city attracts so many occult devotees, "and see it as a memorandum of all those that died trying to do something here. The James Deans and those who have literally dived off the edge of the H [in the Hollywood sign] and taken their own lives."

While he had been curious about Witchcraft as a teenager, he joined his first coven after moving to LA, which he was initiated into in 1989. This was a Wiccan group called the Druidic Craft of the Wise. Later he was initiated into another Wiccan coven which he describes as "more Gardnerian." Sal remembers his time with these covens fondly, but he wanted something more than just Witchcraft. In the 1990s he started working with the Golden Dawn. He initiated into the first degree but soon butted heads with the higher ups. They wanted him to cut his hair and remove some of his piercings. This was not a matter of dress code, but rather a challenge to Sal's willfulness. They felt that he was too prideful, too wrapped up in his own power to give over to something bigger. In the end he did not comply and was essentially kicked out of the order.

An interesting event occurred while at the Golden Dawn that seems to have had a real effect on the way Sal sees magick. He was working late with the group doing a ritual and suddenly realized that he needed to be at work in just a half an hour. At the time the Golden Dawn was based southeast of LA proper and his work was downtown. He went to his high priest, the one who eventually kicked him out, and asked for advice. The high priest did a simple ritual and told Sal he would now be invisible. He got on the freeway and drove as fast as his car would go. He found himself flanked by California Highway Patrol (CHP) officers the entire ride without being pulled over. Oddly this was not the first story I had heard in the city's magickal community about being invisible to the CHP, which I often joked with Sal was the most LA of magickal stories.

What's interesting about this story is that it speaks to both Sal's attitude at the time and the general attitude toward magickal effectiveness that I heard throughout my research. For all the stories I heard about life-changing visions and the more subtle ways magick changes people's lives, stories of outward examples of magick's effectiveness were almost always limited to relatively inconsequential matters and were treated with excited bemusement by those who experienced them. Hutton noted that in Pagan Witchcraft such phenomena are not expected to occur, nor are they "depended on as a form of self-justification," like in traditions such as spiritualism, but rather are seen as "more powerful in being incidental, occasional, and unexpected."[262] This tracks with Pike's observations about Neopaganism as primarily a form of self-creation and Goodrick-Clarke's observations about the Western esoteric tradition's emphasis on the cultivation of the magician rather than changing the world.[263] Even in Sal's stories where these moments have a strong effect on him, the effect is felt much more as a change in his internal life than a sense of power over the outside world.

After leaving the Golden Daws, Sal got a job at Panpipes Magical Marketplace, a magick store on the Sunset Strip. Panpipes is something of legend in the local magick community. It was most likely the longest running magick store in the city and its central location meant that most major magick figures in the city have a story about it. It was the store that Fairuza Balk, one of the actresses from the movie *The Craft*, visited while researching her role and which she eventually bought and ran until 2001. During Sal's time

[262] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 407.

[263] Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves;* Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions.*

there it was run by George Derby, an "eclectic magician" before the term existed. George took Sal under his wing and introduced him to the local magick community. Two events stand out to Sal about this time and come up regularly in class and conversation. The first was a meeting with Anton LaVey, the founder and head of the Church of Satan. At the time Sal was a semi-active member of that Church and was utterly starstruck. While he was patiently listening to a conversation between Derby and LaVey, the latter abruptly turned to Sal and said, "don't be a fucking parrot, kid." This stuck with Sal throughout his life and he repeats the story often. Although all of the magicians I worked with were comfortable working with infernal figures, Sal was the only one who cites LaVey as a major inspiration, displaying a framed picture of him in the store.[264]

The second event had an even deeper effect on Sal's life. George used to be close friends with another shop owner down the street: a man named Benin who owned a shop called Benin of Africa. Benin was a practicing priest of a Yoruba-based tradition. After the shops would close, the two older men would often hang out at Benin's store and talk shop while Sal just sat on the floor and listened. One day, as Sal tells the story, Benin "threw the coconut husks" and they decided that Sal should be ridden by the Yoruba deity Ogun. He remembers little of what happened next. The way he tells it, "I remember Benin with the machete, cutting up the coconut, and then playing drums. And then just throwing it on the floor. And I remember slipping in the oil of the coconut, and like falling and freaking out. And then everything came down on top of my head."

[264] Sal lived with LaVey's son in the 1990s, although he never met LaVey again.

This event is representative of an earlier time in the magickal world during which a fascination with Afro-Caribbean traditions was common in the New Age and magickal communities, and many practitioners included them under the broader category of Pagan or even occult religions. Modern concerns about cultural appropriation and improved education about these traditions has curtailed the inclusion of Afro-Caribbean traditions in magickal work, at least in predominantly white magickal spaces.[265] There is a certain discomfort in Sal's voice when he tells this story, which might be a recognition of some of these issues in retrospect. He seems to see it as a traumatic event and there's often a slight sense of violation when he tells the story.

Eventually Sal found work elsewhere and left Panpipes, which changed hand a few times after Balk sold it and is now in a new location with little connection to its previous incarnation. He worked at night clubs in various capacities and eventually got work in the BDSM community training dominatrixes.[266] In the early 2000s he found both employment and a magickal home at Raven's Flight, the magickal store where Griffin previously worked and served as High Priest in the associated coven. This is where Sal earned much of his Traditional Witchcraft chops. He also learned how to deal with the aspects of the magick community he often has little patience for. Sal bristles at terms like "empath" and "in tune

[265] For a discussion of cultural appropriation in Neopaganism in the 1990s with specific examples of Afro-Caribbean religious borrowing, see: Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves,* 123-155. For more contemporary attitudes see: Jane Barnette, "Hocus-Pocus: WitchTok Education for Baby Witches." In *TikTok Cultures in the United States* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2022), 97–107.

[266] Sal draws a connection between the "sub space" that submissives in this community reach and the trance state of magick" by using a monotonous movement, you know, like a flop, to lay tempo." For more on the connection between BDSM and Paganism, see: Michelle Mueller, "If All Acts of Love and Pleasure Are Her Rituals, What About BDSM? Feminist Culture Wars in Contemporary Paganism." *Theology & Sexuality* 24, no. 1 (2017): 1.

with spirit." His personal aesthetic and that of the store is a rejection of what he and many at The Crooked Path see as a tendency of some in the New Age and Witchcraft traditions to focus specifically on the positive – a community that is sometimes derisively referred to as "the love and light crowd." While working at Raven's Flight, a member of the Covenant of the Goddess, an ecumenical Witchcraft organization dedicated to women's spirituality, came in and told him he shouldn't be wearing his pentagram upside down because it was associated with "dark magick" and the devil. He read her the riot act, lecturing her on the history of the symbol and Kabbalistic concepts of balance. Raven, the owner of the store and High Priestess of the coven, took him aside and explained that people like that "let us do our work," because they are what the "world sees, so let them be on the outside." This ethos has helped him have the patience needs to run his shop to this day. This speaks to a tendency at The Crooked Path and, to a lesser degree, The Green Man to see themselves as a more serious and thus more valid form of magick than those they deem as naively interested only in a magick that deals with positive energy and emotions. This was made explicit when I brought up a local metaphysical chain store, House of Intuition, whose bright clean aesthetic and aggressive marketing was dismissed and occasionally derided by everyone whom I mentioned it to at both of these stores.

After Raven's Flight closed, Sal remained in Griffin and Raven's coven for a few years until the store closed and Sal went his own way. The impression from both Sal and Griffin, as well as others I spoke to from this time, is that Sal's departure was amicable. It was during this time that Sal met his future wife and business partner, Popi: an equally striking figure, with long black hair, a more downplayed gothic aesthetic, and an ever-present

Weimaraner-type dog named Murphy. When they met, Popi had little interest in the magickal community. She worked at Ticketmaster and would often drag Sal to sporting events. By the time I met her, she had become a devotee of Hekate, although Witchcraft is considerably less central to her life than it is to Sal. She is not a member of the Order of the Dark Moon and rarely participates in rituals, but her influence is often felt. As a daughter of Greek immigrants, she is part of what is pushing Sal in a distinctly Hellenistic direction, and she occasionally shows up in class occasionally to correct our pronunciation of the Greek used in rituals.

While Sal was looking around for the next chapter in his life, Popi asked him what he would do if he could do anything, and he said he would open a magick store. In 2016 they made that happen. Sal works as the face of the store – the magickal expert – and Popi is the businesswoman. In 2018, they opened the current store, a larger space just down the block from their original one. "The mission," of the store he told me, was to:

> "Let people see that they can perform ritual magick and create change in conformity with their will, like Crowley said.[267] I believe in spell craft, the act of wanting something to bend to your will and making it that way. And I believe that people should start being able to do this without the guilt and repression of other philosophies."

With his new store opened, and a clear mission, he began teaching classes on the form of Witchcraft he had been developing for most of his life.

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[267] Both Griffin and Sal give credit to Crowley in their classes but always make it clear that they dislike him as a person. "He was an asshole," Sal is fond of saying, "but he was an asshole who knew his stuff."

The first students who took classes with Sal were a dedicated group. After finishing both Witchcraft 101 and Ceremonial Magick, they wanted more, so Sal suggested they form a coven, and the Order of the Dark Moon was born. He left most of the creation of this coven up to them and they approached it like the creation of a new religious tradition. They took some of the Kabbalistic work they had learned from Sal's Golden Dawn-inspired class and mixed it with the more Traditional Witchcraft and Wicca-inspired work from the first then added in some more Hellenistic elements, particularly a devotion to Hekate. Sal served as their elder and put them through the traditional year and a day of training and gave them first- and second-degree initiations. Still, he didn't want to make himself high priest,[268] so instead he chose a high priestess, Mireya, to run the ritual aspects of the coven. Each member wrote a personal manifesto, and they collectively wrote one for the coven. They each took on specific ritual and administrative roles and created a governing council with rotating membership. They even got a joint bank account. It is, in Sal's words, "the real deal, a complete tradition that we've created."

Another major change happened around the time the coven began. Sal became a dedicant of the goddess Hekate. Shortly before starting to teach his classes, he took an online class on this goddess from Jason Miller, a sorcerer and magickal teacher who teaches online classes that are popular throughout the magickal community. Many Witches I met described his Hekate classes as particularly affecting, requiring intense dedication and commitment. This is a seven-month-long class that costs $700 and requires participants to chant a dedication to Hekate one hundred times a day and regularly provide her with offerings. Sal

[268] Despite rejecting this role at first, the coven had recently voted to make him High Priest during the time I worked with him.

was one of the Witches who told me this class had an intense effect on his life. "I think my personal journey at this juncture is definitely a personal relationship with my deity," he explained.

Previous to this he had considered himself essentially agnostic. He was "just a magician." While in the Golden Dawn he describes doing "god forms" where he would "pull the energy of deity, step into it, do the work, step out of it, and move about my life," and as a Traditional Witch he worked with gods the way that Griffin does at The Green Man, but it was a functional relationship that didn't require the practitioner to commit to belief in deities to work. Now he is engaging in a type of worship closer to what he encountered in the Catholic Church. "I find myself becoming basically my father," he told me, "but it's not Jesus I'm praying to, it's to Hekate." The reason Sal chose not to be a priest, he tells us, beyond the celibacy, was because he realized he "didn't want to be a priest, wanted to be God." While this may have been an exaggeration for theatrical purposes, what Sal meant by this statement was that his magickal work up to that point was primarily about gaining personal power. This all changed when he met Hekate.

This is a point where Sal departs from both his past self and many of the magicians discussed previously in this dissertation. Hekate for Sal is not a personification of her various aspects as she is in the Ced Tradition. Nor is Sal purely interested in the efficacy of working with her like those in the O.T.O. For Sal Hekate is, "an entity that is living, breathing, and anthropomorphized." He sees her as a human-like being separate and above himself. This does not mean that she isn't also a representation. As a deity, he believes she transcends most boundaries including those between reality and imagination. She is both a single entity and

an archetype at the same time. "I see Hekate in any female, I see Hekate in them whether they know it or not." Hekate, he says, is the reason he is married. In a ritual with Mireya he describes his Priestess taking on this divinity during a Deipnon, the regular ritual to Hekate during the dark phase of the moon.

> "We're going on this path working.[269] And she's like, shut your eyes. And we were in the temple, whole coven. We're in our space. Before we closed our eyes, the mercy and severity candles were lit, the Deipnon candle was lit, and the quarter candles were lit. And during these five minutes that she's talking, she extinguished them all. And she's talking and she's like, I'm in a cottage with you. And she's in front of you. She's here and she's talking to you. Look at her. Now open your eyes, and I opened my eyes. And it was just like static electricity in black. And she just started coming to life and forming in front of me. And my eyes are open, and I just started bawling. Crying my eyes out, that moved me so hardcore. You know, I was crying so hard that I literally got on my knees and was wiping my tears with the hem of her gown. My Priestess was Hekate and that was incredible. It just moved my soul. You know, that's what I mean. Like when it first came to me, I had that experience."

Sal laments that his own skepticism has robbed him of experiences like this in the past. He was never interested in seeking out presences from another world. "I hate hanging out with a bunch of people around the table, holding hands and finding out if someone's dead dog's going to brush my kneecap or someone's grandma's gonna come in looking for her sweater," but throughout his life there have been plenty of odd occurrences. He worries that "my analytical mind has robbed me of a lot. Because, you know, what about things that I've blown off as having some rational reason? Have I stolen that from myself earlier in life?" This is a sentiment that I heard a lot from those in the community. To them the data that the rational mind rejects because it lacks a conventional description is often an invitation to a bigger world.

[269] Path working is another Traditional Witchcraft term for the type of guided meditation described in Chapter 3 as a "vision quest."

Through rituals like this, Hekate also provides psychological succor for him that he hadn't known before. "I am so at peace with my deity, more than I've ever been at peace in my life," he told me. In an interview, he shared with me his lifelong fear of his mother's death. He describes being thirteen and "sneaking into her room to watch her breathe in her sleep so I can make sure she wasn't dead. If she shifts, she's alive. I was just obsessed with her dying. And then this little voice in my head told me that if she died I'd have to go with her." He carried this fear with him his entire life despite the fact that his mother is now ninety-seven and calls him twice a day. His work with Hekate as helps him make sense of this fear. This, he tells me, is what makes him get up and do his rituals every night no matter how tired he is. "It gives me something that makes me realize that I've done the work I need to do." Now that a dedication to Hekate to has become central to these nightly rituals, he's been thinking, "Is this what my father's been doing all these years when he prays? Is that what religion does? Keeps us sane?" Sal's new belief in a more concrete form of deity is a personal one. He does not expect it from the others in his Coven nor does he teach it in his classes. Celeste, the subject of the next section, engages in the same rituals and magickal techniques as Sal but views their results primarily as a matter of shifting attention and perspective.

Celeste

I met Celeste for the first time online. She was my tarot teacher for the first class I took through The Crooked Path. At the time I wasn't sure I wanted to have them as one of my primary sites but knew I needed to brush up on my tarot and figured this would be a good

way to get to know what was happening at this store that I had been hearing about since I started my research. Her class was expansive. She gave us an ongoing history of the tarot every class as well as going over one of the categories of tarot cards (sixes, kings, etc.), one of the four suits (each of which represents an element), and one of the Major Arcana, providing examples from four different decks. At the end of each class we did a practice reading for one of our classmates. It was a lot of information but very well organized. There were only four of us in most classes so it was as intimate as an online class could be. Of those four, three would go on to be in my other classes and two would eventually join the Order of the Dark Moon.

I met Celeste in person later when she came in to help with one of Sal's classes on the Golden Dawn, of which she is an initiate. Later we met for an interview over coffee in Pasadena less than a mile from the old Agape Lodge. Celeste is very serious about her magickal and artistic work and speaks with a passion and self-confidence I had come to associate with those who worked in the entertainment industry but had no real hunger for fame. She is a singer and actor who recently started doing a podcast on the popular role playing game Dungeons & Dragons podcast.

Celeste was born in Northern Virginia in a town that she said "tried to be as Mayberry as possible," but failed because it was "really a suburb of DC." Her earliest memories of being interested in something magickal outside of the Bible came from her father reading her "ghost stories, fairy tales about monsters, creatures, just folk tales from all over the world." In her words she "never grew out of believing that there are monsters in the closet." Later, in middle school, she joined many other young people in the 90s who were introduced to Witchcraft through movies like *The Craft* and *Practical Magic,* and TV shows like *Buffy the*

Vampire Slayer, and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. At fourteen she bought her first tarot card deck at a local New Age shop.

What she found particularly inviting about this world was the fact that, "fundamentally speaking, it was about young women, young girls taking power back themselves, taking control over situations that seem out of their control, especially in the 90s." As opposed to the evangelical Christianity of her family and peers, this was "the first spiritual path that didn't denigrate me or condemn me for being born or assigned female at birth, that actually celebrated it, and brought a lot of power and a lot of agency to it as well." While a focus on feminism and women-centered spirituality was certainly prevalent throughout Witchcraft's history, Celeste was one of the few people I spoke with who emphasized this as being central to her magickal work.

She practices a consciously political form of Witchcraft. Believing that "the fact that we are Witches, and we practice Witchcraft is a political act in and of itself, because as much as we don't like to think about it, America is a theocracy," and consciously deciding to be anything other than Christian, especially a Witch, is a political act. She is also firmly against cultural appropriation and the veneration of problematic figures from magick's past, recognizing that some of the "godfathers of modern occultism, like Crowley, were super racist, super misogynistic, and just terrible people all around." She also sees Wicca as problematic in its rejection of anything vaguely dark, including many indigenous magick traditions which they label as "black magic," a term she believes "carries racial baggage." She studies the more problematic aspects of magickal history the same way she has gotten to know the American justice system as a person of color. "I can understand where it comes

from. Know it like the back of my hand, in order to be able to deconstruct the oppressor. The reason I learn all this is because I need to know this better than the people who came up with it. You know, knowledge is a weapon."

Majoring in environmental science in college was the first of a few times she describes herself as going into the magickal "closet."[270] This was due to pressures she felt to focus on knowledge based on "empirical science." At the time the "mentality was that if you had belief in the supernatural or any belief in anything that was non tangible then you were considered un-intellectual, stupid." This would become an ongoing theme in her life. To her, rejecting the purely material is a matter of psychological survival, "whether or not you believe that magick actually exists or not," she explains, "a connection to something greater, something unexpected, unexplainable, is essential. Without it, life, the world just feels completely empty." She has tried being grounded and rooted in the rational, "having the mentality that there's nothing beyond this world. There's no, like, greater power, there's no magic, there are no creatures, it's all just make-believe. And when I really try to hold off when I really hold on to that, I get so depressed."

After college she moved to New York City because "it was the thing to do at that time." There she was able to be more out of the closet. This was where she met the first people who were more interested in what the magick community calls "baneful magick." This includes hexes and curses but also includes the more generally dark aspects of magick,

[270] Borrowing from the queer community, it is common for members of the magick community to describe hiding this aspect of their life as being "in the closet," or for many Witches, "in the broom closet." Celeste does identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community but this is something she sees as private and rarely mentions it. Every reference to the closet here has to do with magick.

such as work with underworld deities and other more morally ambiguous forces. Celeste contrasts those she met in New York with the more Wicca-oriented magick population in suburban Virginia. This is also the crux of the altercation Sal had with the woman from the Covenant of the Goddess. All the groups I worked with consider themselves willing to work on the more baneful side of the magickal spectrum. Although I never met anyone outside those traditions that denigrated them for this, there was an ever-present sense that this was a common area of tension. In 2010, Celeste moved to LA to pursue a career as an actor and singer. At first, she felt she needed to go back in the closet again in order to appear more rational and serious but, after a psychic in Glendale told her spirituality would be a major part of her life for the coming year, she discovered The Crooked Path, took Sal's first class, and has been embracing her magickal side ever since.

For Celeste this tension between the rational and the magickal doesn't need to be a battle. Her approach is something like that found at The Green Man. For rituals she "leaves that scientific materialistic mind behind." She tells it, "You do have no place here. Wait at the door, shoo, go!" The last part of this statement is a reference to the father of Method acting Konstantin Stanislavski's often-quoted advice to "Never come into the theatre with mud on your feet," and to leave, "all the things that ruin your life and draw your attention away from your art — at the door."[271] In fact, Celeste sees a direct connection between her acting and her magick. Both require absolute commitment to imaginary worlds that create very real effects. Method acting has other parallels in her practice. She gives the example of a spell meant to attract a lover.

[271] Konstantin Stanislavski, *Building A Character*. Translated Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. 1st edition. (New York: Routledge, 1989). 215.

> "I put myself in the mind state of what is true of the kind of person that attracts lovers easily. Well, what do they have? They're competent, they're charismatic, comfortable with themselves comfortable in their own skin, which is, for a lot of people the most attractive thing you can be. And so, when I'm in that spell, I channel that energy. And you know, that's why some people work with deities, because deities can help you achieve that goal. And then once I do my spell in that mindset, I solidify that into my subconscious. Once I've done the spell, I forget about it. I forget about it and then I invite that scientific mind to come back here. That's why we have this thing called secrecy. Once you do the spell you don't think about it at all, because the more you think about it, the less power it has. Once I invite my scientific mind back in, that is a signal that I cannot think about the spells ever."

This is an example of the emphasis on magick changing the magician while at the same time creating a real effect in the world.

As far as her connection to the goddess Hekate, it's complicated. She does see her as a being that is meant to be worshipped, but her Christian upbringing gives a "block" against fully committing to this. She grew up with a concept of a Christ who is always watching over and judging her. She is much more comfortable with Hekate and the" Dark Goddess as an aspect" of herself, which she can't always connect with in everyday life. For Celeste being both Asian and raised Christian is a big part of what has kept her from exploring these aspects openly. This is particularly true when it comes to her sexuality, which her fellow coven mates often express freely. Celeste grew up in a family where "the important message that was driven home was I had to keep my body pure for my husband." This compounded with the fetishization she often feels as an Asian woman means that she is not as free to dress in revealing black witchy clothes. The way she puts it, "for my white counterparts," it's easy to be out of the broom closet, "for them it's seen as a quirky aesthetic, they can be like, oh I'm a quirky cute Witch girl. But for me, it's like, no, I'm backwards. Brown, Asian." This is compounded by her parents' worries as she was growing up about appearing "superstitious

and backwards," living in a primarily white suburb. In ritual, channeling the goddess Hekate, she feels safe to embrace these attributes and play with them.

The last few years in the coven have given her a desire build a more permanent safe place for others like herself to live their "witchy" life openly and communally. Her "big long-term goal" is to buy a house for the coven. She imagines something of a refuge. "People can stay there in between homes or trying to leave a rough domestic situation. I would like it to be like a beautiful home where we can do ritual… and have resources and a library and garden. I guess I would be like the permanent resident there. But you know, that's cool."

Emily and Lucas

I met Emily and Lucas on the first day of classes with The Crooked Path. They are a married couple who seem to do nearly everything together. For all the time I spent with them socially, during class, and at rituals, I almost never saw them separately and so will treat them here as a partnership. The two of them met Sal when they were doing research and development for a clothing line they were working on. At the time their plan was to create high-end clothes for the magickal community. As an example, they described suits and golf clothes with sigils sewn into their lining so that magicians could carry their magickal work with them into the professional world. This project was eventually put on the back burner while they focused on cheaper and easier to produce t-shirts. By the time I met them they had a successful line of stylish shirts with images of underworld deities rendered in modern artistic styles. Although they met Sal at the opening of his second location, like many of those in the coven, they didn't begin taking classes with him until 2021, which is also when I began my research.

By the time my work at The Crooked Path was done they had gone from being curious about magick to beginning their initiation into the Order of the Dark Moon and interviewing for membership in the Golden Dawn. Magick had become a serious part of their life personally, socially, and publicly. I knew them during the much of this trajectory. After our first class with Sal, we were assigned to a group together to create and conduct a ritual which meant hours of memorization and the fabrication of ritual objects. In true Crooked Path fashion, it also meant a lot of hanging out. Sal rarely misses the opportunity for a party and held gatherings after every ritual, the end of classes, and even after guest lectures.

Emily and Lucas complement each other as a couple. They are both compact people with a lot of energy who fit well into the hip dork aesthetic I had come to associate with the area. Emily has ever-changing dyed hair and often wears athleisure clothing. She regularly takes control of projects more out of a general anxiety about things getting done correctly than any desire to be in charge. She was one of the most studious people in our class, taking copious notes while the rest of us reeled at the dizzying array of information Sal would throw at us. Although she would tell me that she didn't like to talk in public, I rarely saw this – something she put down to feeling "at home" in the store. Lucas dresses like an aging punk rocker, which he is, often wearing a jean jacket with patches and a wallet with a chain. He is a dedicated problem solver, eager to help and work through any challenge that comes up. During our time together he had become the de facto handyman of the coven, often being called to the store to fix various problems that were bothering Sal. His drive to fix things could get obsessive, a trait which sometimes irked Emily when it got in the way of efficiency.

Emily is a California native. Born to a Mexican and Native American father and a white mother, she was raised in a predominantly Mexican suburb of LA by her mother. She moved to Las Vegas for most of her adolescence then back to LA as an adult. Being mixed race has left her often feeling like she doesn't belong anywhere. She describes being "ostracized" by members of both communities. Despite lacking any connection to the religion, her mother decided to baptize her in the Catholic church, which from a very early age Emily says she knew "there was something off about." In her teen years she got into what she describes as "spiritual but not religious stuff," which eventually led her to yoga training. For many years she was part of a touring company of aerial performers. During Christmastime they would tour megachurches. During an audition for one of these events she met Lucas who had come to offer moral support for a friend who was auditioning.

Lucas was born in a suburb of Dallas and has been living in Los Angeles for the past fourteen years. Although his immediate family wasn't particularly religious, his mother thought he should have some background in Christianity, so they raised him in the local Pentecostal church. Lucas describes his family as always having a certain "weirdness" about them and being "super superstitious." He describes his grandfather as a "commanding dude, like, if he wanted to be involved in something, he would just insert himself." He inserted himself into the local church and insisted he needed a ceremonial robe and staff which Lucas says he "carried around all the fucking time." Later, in high school, Lucas started "smoking a lot of weed, skateboarding, rollerblading, and getting into punk rock." He soon learned that a lot of his heroes were Satanists and this, combined with a fascination with mythology, led

him to a general interest in the occult although this was primarily present in his aesthetics and artistic tastes.

Since starting their work at The Crooked Path, magick has infused both their lives. Lucas, who Emily describes as "typical Virgo," has taken to burning candles with somewhat dangerous regularity. A self-described creature of habit who has worked outside the house since he was fourteen, the candles help him order his day now that he was working from home. He showed me his office which had candle wax on nearly every surface. "I have a set time for each color," he told me, "all of these are set with an intention. So I have to actually sit down, write out the intention. It's the first part of my day. Like I get up, I do the thing, and then I set the thing, and then it burns out through the day. I've almost set the house on fire like fucking three times." This fixation with fire extends beyond the candles. He immediately "glommed on" to the Angel Michael, who stands in the south during rituals, the direction of fire. He's also in charge of the fire extinguishers during rituals.

Emily has always felt that there was some magick in her life. She describes growing up having a certain "Spidey sense" that runs in her family although she stops short of using the term psychic. She is much more drawn to the heady world of ceremonial magick than the low magick of Witchcraft, spells, and candles. She has found the more ceremonial aspects particularly moving during private rituals. She finds freedom in the intoning of the various Greek and Latin terms which are used in ritual. "Just fourteen people in that room," she reminisces about her last ritual, "and we're all vibrating those sounds, you could feel it all through your body. There's just a certain type of energy that was there. And it was, it was fantastic. So, I think more of that, please."

The two of them consider themselves very lucky that they can do this work together. They are the only couple in the coven and the only one I met at The Crooked Path who are both equally interested in magick. They have also been exploring other avenues of this world together. Although they haven't taken classes outside of The Crooked Path, they had plans to check out Star Sapphire Lodge when I last saw them and had become recent fans of Damien Echols. Echols is one of the West Memphis Three – young men falsely accused of Satanic ritual abuse who spent decades in jail before the charges were overturned. While in jail he found ceremonial magick, had recently written books on the subject, and was a regular on magickal podcasts. In many ways, over the time I knew them, magick had overtaken all aspects of their life. The day that Lucas showed me his office covered in wax they had also spent the day cleaning the entire house as a way of honoring Hekate for Deipnon and were planning on going out to dinner with Sal and Popi before making an appearance at a local goth night that had been organized by a covenmate.

Colleen

Colleen started her work with The Crooked Path the same day as me. She was one of my classmates in Celeste's tarot class and then took Witchcraft 101 and Ceremonial Magick with me. During the time when I saw her regularly, she was continuously enrolled in every class The Crooked Path offered and was, along with Emily and Lucas, going through the steps to become initiated into the Order of the Dark Moon. Of all the people I met in the various magickal communities, Colleen was the farthest from the stereotype of a Witch. She dressed fairly conservatively and proudly embraced mainstream popular music and culture. Appearances aside, she was also one of the most spontaneous people I met. Born in a suburb

of Detroit, she attended a college for music and theater with plans to get into the music business in Nashville. At the end of her college career, she went to talk to a guidance counselor who brought up LA. At first she thought, "people in LA suck. They're bougie and snobby, and I don't want to live there." But something seemed to be drawing her to California and she was on a plane within the month. Fourteen years later this is where she calls home.

This sense of being on the "right path" led Colleen to approach her entry into the magickal world with a noticeable matter-of-factness. When I asked her how she got into magick she responded with a single word: "randomly." A few months before I met her she expressed interest in tarot while visiting a metaphysical store with her fiancé. He took this interest and ran with it. For Christmas all her presents were magick themed. A month later she was taking tarot classes with me. Her family seems to have a similar nonchalance about the magickal world. She grew up "very Christian in a town where if she were to come out of the broom closet, there would be a series of bonfires that night, and no one would know which one I was in." Still, while taking classes she asked if she could wait to buy her magickal tools until her birthday because her mom was planning on getting her some of them from her Amazon wish list, including a "really cool athame." Colleen seemed to be slightly surprised by her own casualness. As we sat on the floor in our long black ceremonial robes during a lull in a ritual we had created together, she turned to me and said, "isn't it great how normal all this seems."

Underneath this casualness lies a magician with very serious reasons for her involvement. Although she has a pragmatic view of magick's effectiveness, being willing to

put it down to the "placebo effect," she also describes a lifelong relationship with the paranormal. As a child she would see ghosts and get "glimpses and flashes and premonitions that there are spirits." She describes a constant feeling that "someone is standing behind your shoulder, and you're completely ignoring them, but they're still standing there." For a long time she tried to ignore this but now she sees it as a gift she was "willfully walking away from" while "the spirit or deity or whatever it is continues to pokey pokey pokey." Ignoring this got harder and harder which led her to "drinking to the edge of alcoholism."

Embracing magick was helping her overcome all this, including the drinking. A year after she received her first tarot deck, she lit a candle to stay sober for the month of January as part of the national "Dry January" trend. When I last saw her, she had been nearly completely sober for six months. To her this has to do with embracing the part of herself that she had been fighting and giving in to the magick which was always there. The ceremonial magick aspect of Sal's classes helped a great deal with this because it taught her ways to ward off negative spirits through protective spells and sigils. With these in place, she was able to allow the paranormal to enter without fear of its darker aspects.

Whereas many people see magick as a form of control, Colleen sees as it as part of letting go. While sitting at a coffee shop a few doors down from The Crooked Path, talking about her upcoming initiation, she summed up her life philosophy:

> "You're gonna go the way that you're supposed to go. Like, there's no way around that. Sometimes, yes, we have free will. But at the end of the day, if we're meant to go a certain way, we'll be guided there. I'm not freaked out, even though I probably should be. I'm making the right decisions. The timeline from me asking about internships and jobs to being on a plane to LA was two weeks. Two weeks, I was leaving school and coming to LA and now I'm here at this table, right? Talking to you about magickal things"

Beltane

The last time I saw all of these people together was during a Beltane celebration in 2022. I was exhausted from having attended an earlier Beltane with The Green Man but the excitement of the crowd in line with me outside the store was infectious. This was the first public Beltane that the coven put on after the pandemic. Tickets were sold out and those in line were dressed in an impressive array of witchy and gothic outfits. I struck up a conversation with one couple who I quickly learned hosted an occult podcast I had been listening to. I also recognized a few "WitchTok" influencers.

Around eight in the evening, the doors opened. As we filed in, Popi took our names and checked us off of a list and we milled around the increasingly crowded store looking at products and chatting. I struck up a conversation with three young women who I had overheard were just starting Sal's Witchcraft 101 class and were excited to attend their first Beltane. While chatting I would occasionally get glimpses of people I knew from classes who were joining the coven. They had the distinct look of fear and excitement common with those about to put on a performance. At one point Celeste came out to try to figure out something to do with the sound system, as she had been given the title of "mistress of song." Sal eventually appeared looking even more harried than the rest and announced that we would be letting people in, and that this being a fertility festival, we should be prepared for sexual energy and that we should use the bathroom now so as not to disrupt the ritual.

We entered the temple in a single file line. This was the ritual space I had come to know well since my first visit to the Golden Dawn. As we entered, we were met by Emily and another of my classmates who directed us to circumnavigate the room once before

finding a stopping place along the wall. The room was set up in a way that was common to many Witchcraft traditions but also had idiosyncrasies specific to the Order of the Dark Moon. There were altars to the four cardinal directions and another altar in the northwest dedicated to Hekate. As the coven came in, each member found their places by the direction associated with the role they were playing that day. The last ones to enter were Sal followed by Mireya. Many in the coven work in the entertainment industry and their ceremonial clothes looked like they stepped directly out of a high budget fantasy movie.

Mireya circumnavigated the circle and gave the blessing of water and air by smudging us with incense smoke and sprinkling us with water. This is a way of cleansing ourselves and the room in preparation for the evening's work. Finally, she evoked the Hebrew tetragrammaton, the name of God used in ceremonial magick which also opens the O.T.O.'s Gnostic Mass. Sal did a short incantation in Greek and then he and Mireya performed a dialogue invoking Hekate with Mireya standing in for the Goddess. The final step in preparing the space was "calling the quarters." To the north was the altar of earth, decorated with crystals and a large container of dirt. An older man with intentionally garish face paint called to the angel of Earth, Uriel, and asked him to give us strength and grounding for our ritual. Emily stood beside him, shadowing him for the evening. To the east, the direction of air, a thin blonde woman with a wispy white dress stood in front of an altar decorated with feathers and called to the angel Rafael and the power of intellect and spirit. She was seconded by another classmate of mine. In the south, a shirtless young man with black eye makeup stood with Lucas in front of flaming cauldron and called to Michael and the passion of fire. Finally, to the west, Celeste stood in a long green dress in front of a bowl

of water, the element of the subconscious, and with Colleen's aid, called on Gabriel, the messenger angel.

After the quarters were called, a few of the coven members did some magickal work, invoking various spirits and calling on the gods of fertility. Sometime during this period Sal had slipped out. Suddenly he reappeared dressed as the god Pan. He was shirtless, wearing goat horns on his head and pants of thick fur. He had boots on that not only looked like hooves but mimicked the backwards bend of a goat's legs. As he entered, the two men standing in the east left and returned with a large maypole which they placed in the center of the room. As they set this up, Sal began to dance in circles around the room, calling out chants that alternated between "Io Pan," "Io Hekate," and guttural nonsense syllables. Once the maypole was set up, we were each given a colored thread and we danced around the pole in alternate directions. As we danced Sal shifted the words of the song until we were all chanting," hey ho, let's go" – a section of the song "Blitzkrieg Bop" by seminal punk band The Ramones.

After the ritual, everyone was invited upstairs for "wine and cakes," a term adopted from Wicca, which, for most magick communities, now means any form of after-ritual food and libation. In this case it meant a large variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages and an abundance of tacos that Lucas had prepared for the occasion along with whatever else people brought. Everyone seemed to agree that the ritual was a success. Lucas busied himself making sure everyone had what they needed before deconstructing the maypole. Emily retreated in exhaustion and spent most of the night downstairs with Popi and Murphy. The party broke up around three in the morning, although Sal was begging everyone to stay since the witching hour had just begun.

This ritual represented everything that those at The Crooked Path were trying to do. It was a mix of Witchcraft and ceremonial magick that ended with a chant drawn from popular culture. It was a very serious magickal undertaking that involved the invocation of biblical angels and Hellenistic gods on a holiday associated with the folk traditions of the British Isles. This was exactly what Sal and his students set out to do when they formed the coven: build an entirely new tradition while holding onto the rigor of the long lineage they were drawing from. It also draws together the two vignettes that opened this chapter. It was serious magick that ended in a great party.

Conclusion

Focusing specifically on the lives of these five individuals provides a view into how modern magicians in Los Angeles understand reality and truth through the lens of their magick. This is particularly clear in the way they discuss their magick's effectiveness and their interactions with supernatural beings. Sal, the ostensible leader of the group, finds himself regularly shocked by the effectiveness of his magick especially when it comes to his interactions with the goddess Hekate. He expresses remorse that he held so firmly to a form of magick rooted in a more materialist ontology for most of his life, denying himself the experiences of a more expansive world. Celeste finds herself struggling with similar issues but ultimately sees her magick, even her work with the goddess, as a tool for altering her perspective on the world and focusing her attention. Emily and Lucas both embrace the supernatural as a growing part of their everyday life while having different relationships to it. For Lucas it is primarily a way of ordering his life, providing structure and deeper meaning. For Emily it is a way of communing with a hidden aspect of reality that she has always

sensed. Colleen found that holding to a materialist reality and denying something larger caused pain and distress. Opening her reality to the magickal world helped her resolve this tension.

Unlike the preceding two chapters, this final case study does not focus on the overarching approach to reality presented by its central institution. This is in part the result of the chapter's focus on individuals, but it is also a result of a relative lack of any such coherent vision. If the various understandings of reality and truth I found at The Crooked Path could be summed up in one phrase it might be my classmate Gabriel's response to an introductory question during the first day of a class. When asked why he was taking the class he responded, "because magick is real and it works." This statement could provide a simple explanation for how ceremonial magick and Witchcraft live side by side at the store. These were magicians interested in what worked more than what was real. But something else was drawing them together. During the time I worked with them, a community was forming around the store. A year later, when I visited for a ritual, this community had greatly expanded and coalesced. In this community they may disagree about what constitutes reality and what qualifies as truth, but they all agree that magick is indeed real and it works. In some sense, this is what the entirety of the magick tradition is doing. Creating spaces wherein reality and truth are just mutable enough for them to work their magick.

Conclusion

This work has shown the ways that magicians in Los Angeles wrestle with ideas of truth and reality, both of which remain fixed and mutable for them, often at the same time. The Thelemites at Star Sapphire Lodge look to a reality beyond the apparent one which is both static and universal. By engaging with the works of Aleister Crowley and conducting the rituals he created, they continue a Hermetic legacy which seeks to alter our more mutable reality by accessing this higher realm. The Traditional Witches at The Green Man seek to become architects of their own reality by "crossing the hedge" and entering into a world where they meet deities and other supernatural figures and, through interacting with them, alter the ways they experience the more concrete reality of everyday life. The individual magician I met at The Crooked Path absorb all of these approaches to reality into their lives, creating their own approach while building a community where magick is a concrete reality.

Of course, complex conceptions of both truth and reality are not the exclusive purview of magicians. Most of us contend with questions of what makes something real and true in our life. It is not the intent of this dissertation to suggest that magick users are unique in this, nor is it my intention to suggest that any of them have total control over all of their reality. Like all of us, their perception of the world and the means by which they determine what is true and real is a product of the people and cultures that have surrounded them throughout their lives. They are, as philosopher Michel Foucault would put it, "disciplined" into subjects with a limited set of ways of knowing just like the rest of us in modern

culture.[272] What these magicians show us are examples of how to wrestle with these ways of knowing, with the express purpose of changing ourselves and our world. Through this wresting they make visible both the mutability of our own reality and the structures we all wrestle with when attempting to change it.

Thoughts on the Current State of Magick

While this wrestling has been the focus of my research, I have also noticed a number of things that stand out as quite different from what has been written previously about the magick tradition that I would like to address with an eye toward future research. This is not meant to suggest that past scholars necessarily misrepresented their communities or missed certain aspects. Much has changed, since a great deal of this previous work was written in the early 2000s. Even the most recent survey, undertaken by Helen Berger, was finished in 2010, making it more than a decade old when I started my research.[273] Much has changed with the current popularity of magick and this could account for the differences I noticed between those I read about and those I studied. Finally, this work will close with a brief vignette that I believe illustrates magick's power to work on our realities and the ways in which we inhabit multiple versions of reality at the same time.

At the end of his history of modern Pagan Witchcraft, Ronald Hutton lists five observations that can be applied to the general Witchcraft community:

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[272] Michel Foucault,. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995),

[273] Berger, *Solitary Practitioners.*

> "First, *it aims to draw out and enhance the divinity within human beings.* Second, *it abolishes the traditional Western distinction between religion and magic.* Third, *it is a religion, or set of mystery religions.* Fourth, *its essence lies in the creative performance of ritual.* Fifth, *it is eclectic and protean.*[274]

All of these qualities remain strong in the modern magick community, but Hutton then goes on to make several generalizations which no longer hold true.

Hutton states that all of the Pagan Witches he has spoken to "regard cursing as an activity which is not merely ethically abhorrent but genuinely dangerous."[275] Berger, Leach, and Shaffer note a similar attitude in their *Voices from the Pagan Census.*[276] Sabina Magliocco also finds this to be true, although she does note some contention around this issue.[277] The groups that I worked with all rejected this attitude. As a group of magick practitioners that identify as neither Pagans nor as Witches, it is interesting to note that Star Sapphire Lodge is the one group I worked with that didn't explicitly argue that cursing was acceptable in certain settings. The topic rarely came up, but when it did they said such things were acceptable only as "self-defense." Griffin and his Ced Tradition held a similar opinion, although they did echo Celeste's opinion that prejudices against "baleful" work were often based on racism. Sal, on the other hand, openly advocates for a magick beyond ethics. In a two-day class he taught us on "hexing" he explained that magickal tools are morally neutral,

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[274] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 391.

[275] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 396.

[276] Berger, Leach, Shaffer, *Voices from the Pagan Census,* 36.

[277] Magliocco, *Witching Culture,* 113-116.

like any other tools. Hexes are like weapons. According to Sal, the ethical use lies in the magician, not the hex, and sometimes the ethical things to do is "fuck someone up."

Much of this change seems to have to do with the rejection of the "three-fold law" as an ethical framework. Magicians seem to have become uncomfortable with explanations of cause and effect that can be used to place the ownness of one's suffering on the sufferer, especially when that cause is said to be magickal. This was mentioned by at least four of my teachers and was a subject that regularly appeared on the websites and podcasts I followed. It's unclear how widespread this change is, but it appears to be common enough that a new evaluation of magickal ethics and theories of cause and effect would be welcome.

On a related note, Hutton also asserts that he "never encountered anything remotely resembling Satanism in my entire experience with Witches."[278] Sarah Pike also notes that her Pagans distance themselves from Satanism and the "occult."[279] Neither of these statements hold for the groups that I studied. Satan and Lucifer are both figures in the expansive pantheon of The Green Man's Ced Tradition and Sal openly acknowledges his debt to Anton LaVey and Satanism. Pike's reference to the "occult" is more interesting. Although she makes the point that her subjects were making these distinctions at the height of the "Satanic panic" and thus such boundaries were particularly important, there still seems to be a firm divide in the academic literature between those who practice "Western esoteric" or "occult" traditions and those who fall into the "Contemporary Pagan" or "Witchcraft." As I mentioned

[278] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 408.

[279] Pike, *Earthly Bodies Magical Selves,* 90-1, 113.

in the introduction, most of the connections drawn between these groups remains a matter of history, as if they stopped interacting after the invention of contemporary Witchcraft in the 1950s. This is primarily the result of the tendency for the study of Western esoterism to focus on history and texts while the study of Witchcraft and Paganism has tended more toward the social sciences. Using the term "magick tradition" throughout this text has been an attempt to bridge some of this divide and create a space where the ongoing connection between these subfields can be further explored.

In the population I worked with, these boundaries were very porous. This was clearest with The Crooked Path where the magickal systems of the Golden Dawn, Wicca, and Traditional Witchcraft mingled together and even shared the same physical space. But I also took a class on ceremonial magick at The Green Man from one of the members of the Ced coven and although Griffin found the world of Western esotericism "a bit to dusty" for his tastes, other members regularly mixed these two strains of magick. This transmission doesn't seem to go as freely the other way. Only two people I met at the O.T.O. spoke of attending classes or rituals with Pagan or Witchcraft groups. One was a classmate from The Crooked Path, the other was the only person I met in Los Angeles who considered himself a traditional Gardnerian Wiccan. The porousness of this boundary was an ongoing theme of this work, but much more needs to be conducted on the constant entanglement of these two strains of modern magick.

As a condition of being a "mystery religion," Hutton asserts that "modern pagan Witchcraft has no public spaces or acts of worship. It is almost wholly the preserve of closed

groups or solitary individuals."[280] Nearly all of my research was conducted in public settings such as rituals, festivals, and classes. The magick I encountered in Los Angeles was not only public facing but had active communities of non-initiates. In her book *The New Metaphysicals,* sociologist of religion Courtney Bender found something similar among Cambridge's metaphysical community. Identifying a coherent community among the workshops, classes, conventions, and social gatherings that this population attended,[281] Helen Berger draws on Bender's work and suggests that such a community exists among solitary Pagans while at the same time suggesting that having no central location such as a "church" is the primary reason for the increase in their predominance over Pagans who practice in groups.[282]

This may be true, but I would like to suggest that the magick (or metaphysical) store serves as something of a corollary for a church. The Crooked Path and The Green Man offered those I worked with a physical place (once the pandemic waned) to go to for religious, guidance, rituals, and camaraderie. Each of these places provided a unique form of religious experience, had ordained clergy, and had consecrated spaces. The magicians I took classes with also had a surprising amount of loyalty to their store. Although many explained this as a matter of convenience it is notable that, despite their physical closeness, I only encountered one person who attended classes at both institutions. Some, like Colleen, even

[280] Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon,* 397.

[281] Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[282] Berger, *Solitary Pagans*, 8-13.

attended classes with a regularity it would not be a stretch to call "religious." The fact that each of these institutions had an associated coven added to this coherence of community, although most of the people I met who frequented one of these institutions had no interest in joining the coven. This is not to make too much of the corollary between a church and a magick store – a connection neither would find particularly welcome – but rather to suggest that further research on these stores as a central location for magickal religion would be extremely fruitful.

Leaving Los Angeles

As I was driving up from Southern California to Oakland to spend the last few months of dissertation writing in the Bay Area, I crashed my car. I had been driving a particularly straight stretch of freeway that I had driven countless times before when I started to feel drowsy. One moment I was looking for somewhere to pull off, the next I found myself driving on the gravel. I hit the brakes, but instead of stopping the car suddenly tipped on its side. The horizon went diagonal and somehow my windshield appeared to have crashed into the dirt. I remember being upside down and thinking, "Well, I guess the car is really crashing. It's going to take forever to get to Oakland." And then thinking," Maybe this is it." I landed on my wheels. There was dirt all over the inside of the car. My ribs hurt but I felt fine. I glanced out the window as a family who had pulled over looked at me with fear in their eyes.

I opened the door, got out, and to my surprise I seemed fine. It didn't make a lot of sense. The first thing I did was make sure my laptop survived. The dissertation, too, seemed to be intact. The police arrived and took statements. Then the paramedics arrived, conducted

some tests, and confirmed that beyond a few bruised ribs I was totally fine. I walked around looking at all of the stuff that had come flying out of the car. Something had ripped a full can of Coca-Cola in half. Then, in the dirt right by my car, I found my russet-colored rock which had become a companion first in my vision quests at The Green Man and then in my car. It seemed important. I picked it up and put it in my pocket, careful to not let anyone see me do this.

I do not think that my rock companion saved my life, but if I'm being honest, I'm not entirely sure it didn't help. There are multiple ways to make sense of what happened to me depending on how you view our reality. The first is that explained by my partner's father: that the Prius I was driving is based on engineering first employed by Volvo, which emphasized safety over speed and appearance, and thus Swedish and Japanese engineering had saved my life. Another would be espoused by the members of Star Sapphire Lodge: the rituals I had engaged in with the rock connected it to a hidden reality, which allowed me to subconsciously draw on higher levels of reality, which shifted probability just enough to keep me from being crushed. Those in the Ced Tradition might say that through the relationship I had with the rock, I shifted my own reality in such a way that I was able to harness the powers of physical protection and save myself. Most of those I met through The Crooked Path would argue that none of these answers really matter. As long as the rock's power worked, I should keep it with me.

At the end of my introduction I suggested that we all live in fixed and mutable realties at the same time. Throughout this text I have shown how one population of magickal practitioners makes sense of this contradistinction, often mining it for productive ends. My experience with the rock and car crash is an example of just how mutable our reality can be

and how engagement with systems that seek to change this reality work on them even if we don't "believe" in them. While I still lean mostly toward the first description of events, I cannot shake the possibility that the others are true and that this rock, which I am looking at as I write this sentence, has some real significance. The magickal work I did during this research has done something to change this small everyday rock and, in doing so, has changed my reality.

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