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The Church of All Worlds: From an Invented Religion to a Religion of Invention

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in Religious Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

The Church of All Worlds: From an Invented Religion to a Religion of Invention

by

Damian Lanahan-Kalish

The Church of All Worlds is a Neo-Pagan religious group that took its inspiration from a work of fiction. The founders of this church looked at the religion that Robert Heinlein created in his science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* and decided to make it a reality. This puts them squarely in the company of what Carole Cusack has termed “invented religions.” These are religions that seek validity in works that are accepted as fiction. The Church of All Worlds, now over fifty years old, has grown beyond its science fiction roots, adopting practices and beliefs that have made them an influential part of the modern Pagan movement. Though fiction no longer plays as strong a role in their practice, they have remained dedicated to an ethic of invention. Through ethnographic research with Church members in Northern California, this paper explores how this ethic of invention manifests in official Church history, the personal relationships of members, and the creation of public rituals.

The story of the Church of All Worlds (CAW) began April 7, 1962 at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, when two freshman psychology students shared a glass of water. Inspiration for this sharing of water came from a science fiction book they had both read: *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein. The protagonist of this book is Valentine Michael Smith, a young human who was raised on Mars, where he learned to harness amazing psychic powers hidden in the human mind. In Heinlein's book, Smith becomes aware of the power of Earth religion and decides to start a church to spread his own enlightened vision of human potential, non-violence, and free love. The church he founded was called the Church of All Worlds. These two college students, Lance Christie and Tim Zell (who now goes by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart), looked at this religion and thought "it was fiction so good is *should be true*," and thus they engaged in the most holy of Martian traditions, water sharing. According to Heinlein, the Martian tradition of sharing water, and thus becoming water brothers, is the most sacred bond that any two people can form. In the novel it is often described as being a stronger tie than marriage or even family. In bringing both this ritual and this sacred bond out of the world of fiction and into their everyday lives, Zell and Christie set in motion the events that would lead to the creation of the real-life Church of All Worlds (Zell-Ravenheart).

Fifty-five years later, almost to the day, I shared water with a group of about fifty members of the Church of All Worlds. I was sitting in a circle on a grassy hill in the middle of a fifty-five acre parcel of land in Mendocino, California owned by the Church called Annwfn (AHN-win). This was part of a weekend that would include a meal of stone soup, a sexually playful competition for the role of May Queen and King, a "bardic circle" (sitting around a fire drinking and singing), a personal conference with Aphrodite, and a men's group

where we passed around a carved wooden phallus named “John Thomas.” We also raised a maypole since it was May Day. This was the Church of All Worlds’ annual Beltane celebration, the most popular and involved of the eight festivals they hold throughout the year. Much of what happens at these events also happens all over the world on this pagan holiday, but just as much of it is idiosyncratic to the Church of All Worlds. Most of the rituals I attended at that Beltane would be changed the next year. The specific Beltane I attended will never happen again.

How the group that started with two science fiction fans in a dorm room turned into one of the longest lasting Neo-Pagan groups in the United States is a story that involves the roots of the modern pagan movement, a battle with the IRS to become one of the first tax-exempt organizations to define itself as pagan, and the publication of one of the most important Neo-Pagan magazines. It also includes the coining of the term “polyamory” and the raising of modern unicorns. The first few decades of this story have been covered by journalist Margot Adler in her seminal book on the Neo-Pagan movement *Drawing Down the Moon*, John Sulak in *The Wizard and the Witch* (an oral history of the Church’s central couple, Oberon and Morning Glory Zell-Ravenheart), and scholar of religion Carole Cusack in her book *Invented Religions*. Adler and Sulak’s books serve as detailed explorations of the history and lived experience of the Church, but it is Cusack’s work that provides the clearest theoretical framework for studying the Church of All Worlds.

Cusack’s work focuses on what she calls “invented religions.” These are religions that were either “inspired by a fictional narrative,” or have “constructed a deliberately fictional narrative which was communicated to sympathetic listeners and acquired reality through this shared conversation” (22). Cusack contrasts these religions with other new

religious movements that seek legitimacy by claiming that “their religion is not ‘new’ but rather a contemporary statement of a strand of ancient wisdom” often also “establishing new scriptures as authoritative through elaborate claims of external origin, including translation channeling, and the chronicling of visions” (1). Invented religions eschew any attempt to seek legitimacy in the past or in other worlds and embrace origins in human creativity, looking either to science fiction or using their own acknowledged fictions as sacred texts.

Of the groups Cusack looks at in her book, the Church of All Worlds is the most organized and, in terms of alternative religious trends in the United States, the most influential. But it is also the one that has evolved the most and, in doing so, moved furthest from its roots in fiction. Cusack acknowledges this evolution noting, “CAW has grown in influence and become part of the broader pagan revival... so much so that its fictional origins are nigh irrelevant” (2). On the surface this statement is truer today than when it was written. A minority of CAW’s members under the age of sixty have read *Stranger in a Strange Land* and no one seems to think that unfamiliarity with the novel is a problem. Still, something of the Church’s birth in fiction remains. A spirit of invention infuses everything Church members do. It can be seen in the ever-evolving structure of the Church, the new forms of romantic relationships that members have created, and, most visibly, in the elaborate rituals that the clergy create anew for the eight three-day festivals held annually on the traditional Celtic holy days. This group has managed to wed the two seemingly opposing ideas of novelty and tradition, embracing invention itself as a tradition. They have transformed their invented religion into a religion of invention.

In order to trace the role of invention in the contemporary Church of All Worlds, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews, and, over a period of a year, I was a participant

observer in both ritual and casual settings. I attended two festivals that fell on opposite ends of the “Wheel of the Year,” the pagan ceremonial calendar. The first of these was Beltane, the spring festival of fertility, rebirth, and abundance. The second was Samhain, the fall festival, which takes place around Halloween, “when the boundary between life and death is the thinnest” (Motherbear). Both of these events took place over three days and were held at Annwn. I also accompanied members of the clergy to Pantheacon, the West Coast’s biggest Neo-Pagan convention, and helped the group move their collection of “arcana” from Santa Cruz to a storage space in Santa Rosa, California.

Today, the Church of All Worlds is comprised of a fluctuating group of about fifty people. Demographically the group represents much of what has been found in the Neo-Pagan community in general.¹ Members are overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and with at least a bachelor’s degree if not some form of more advanced education. Unlike some Neo-Pagan settings, most Church of All Worlds events are about equal in gender breakdown. The people I met ranged in age from eighteen to eighty-two. There are two distinct generations that make up most of the current group: an older generation that joined in the 1960s and a younger generation, mostly in their late thirties to early forties, who joined during the Church’s second heyday in the 1990s. Most members live in the Bay Area or further north, closer to the Church’s sacred land² in Mendocino, California, although some travel from as

¹ Helen Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer provide a very good statistical portrait of the Neo-Pagan scene in their book *Voices from the Pagan Census*.

² Terms like “sacred land” and practices like burning sage, or “smudging,” which are taken directly from Native American traditions point to the tricky problem of cultural appropriation in Neo-Paganism. For CAW these are interesting artifacts of a time when Neo-Paganism was much less careful about whom it borrowed from. Not that everyone is wary of this borrowing now. I did meet a white man from Wisconsin who considered himself an Apache scout but he

far as Australia and Thailand to attend rituals. Professionally, the group is quite diverse, although a disproportionate number of those I met are in “healing” professions both in the traditional medical industry and in alternative practices like reiki and chiropractics.

Defining membership in the group can be tricky because openness is one of their central values. This means that some people who attend every festival the Church holds and even live on its land do not consider themselves members while others consider themselves members without attending a single event or communicating much with the group. There is an official dues-paying membership that is currently at a low point somewhere around one hundred people, down from more than 1,500 at its height in the 1990s (Zell-Ravenheart). This number can be misleading since, for anyone not seeking ordination as clergy, paying dues is primarily a way to support the Church financially. Membership is further complicated by the fact that nearly everyone, including key clergy, is a member of other religious groups, both pagan and more mainstream.

The slipperiness of membership is why I focused mostly on clergy and former clergy for my interviews. This is a group that does the bulk of the creative work present at rituals and other formal Church settings. CAW clergy was originally set up as a semi-hierarchical ring structure inspired by the religion created in *Stranger in a Strange Land* and later mixed with the Celtic image of the labyrinth that appears on much of the Church’s official print and web material. This system was complicated and notoriously hard to navigate. While keeping the ring structure officially intact, the Church today uses a simpler distinction in everyday operations. Most of the people I interviewed were either priests or ministers. The distinction between these two groups can best be described as a matter of responsibilities. Ministers

avoided mentioning this in group settings. Sarah Pike’s book *Earthy Bodies, Magical Selves* provides a very good discussion on this topic.

have a responsibility to provide service both to other Church members and the rest of the world while priests and priestesses are responsible for the administration and running of the Church. The Church also has a High Priestess and a “Primate” (a role held by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart for most of the Church’s history) who hold higher leadership roles. Then there are the May Queen and King who don’t need to be clergy or even members of the Church yet hold responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the sacred land for an entire year. With the possible exception of the minister’s responsibility to be of service to the world, all of these titles are dynamic and mean something different to each person holding them. Even the leadership roles such as High Priestess and “Primate” remain ill-defined. It is unclear what will happen when someone besides Oberon holds the latter role. The one responsibility held by every person with a title in the group is the creation and performance of rituals.

This essay uses CAW’s own terminology of the “Phoenix Awakenings” to discuss both the Church’s history and three different aspects of the Church. These “awakenings” work well since they are themselves an example of self-conscious invention in the Church. Looking back at the Church’s history from the current perspective, Oberon describes Phoenix Awakenings as a “mythos we created,” to describe the “diastolic expansion and retraction” of the group. The Phoenix was specifically picked for this way of narrating Church history because of its connection to creation and re-creation. As Zell put it, “It’s like having a forest fire that comes around now and then to clean the place out a little bit.”

As the above quote would suggest, Church leadership is open about the mythologizing of their history. There is a fairly standard history that is rehearsed anytime new people are introduced to the Church. It can also be found in most published histories of the Church and presented whenever Oberon is asked to speak at a public event. In this story

there are three Phoenix Awakenings. This essay connects each of these Awakenings with a different aspect of the Church's approach to invention. The first Phoenix Awakening covers the early years of the Church when it defined its unique place in both the growing counterculture and the religious landscape of late 20th century America. I will use these early years to discuss the process by which both members and scholars place the Church within the broader world of alternative and metaphysical religion in America. I use the second Phoenix Awakening, the era of the Church's greatest expansion, to focus on the interaction with changing ideas of gender and sexuality. In this section I pay particular attention to the Church's involvement in the creation of polyamory as a category and the ways this idea has changed the family life of past and current members. Finally, with the third Phoenix Awakening, which is currently underway, I look at the spirit of invention that permeates the Church's unique perspective on ritual. In that last section I focus on ritual life in the Church today.

The First Phoenix Awakening: A Tradition of Invention

Most sources trace the birth of the Church of All Worlds back to either the dorm room where Tim Zell and Lance Christie shared water for the first time or the same room a few weeks later when they expanded their group to include their respective girlfriends (and future wives). What was actually created during these early days was not the Church of All Worlds. The institution that began during those first few "water sharings," and in the several weeks that followed, would come to be called Atl. Zell and Christie were drawn to this name for a number of reasons. It was the Aztec word for water, a sacred substance in *Stranger in a*

Strange Land, and they liked its connection to both Atlas of Greek mythology and Atlantis (Cusack 60). Atl was also inspired by ideas that went far beyond those of *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Both students were avid readers of Ayn Rand and Friedrich Nietzsche and had strong libertarian leanings. More importantly, they were influenced by psychologist Abraham Maslow's transpersonal psychology movement, to which Gale Fuller, a mentor they shared as psychology students, had introduced them. Using a personality test given to students by Fuller and recorded by Zell and Christie, they identified other students with similar traits to their own. These were students "low on abasement, high on autonomy" and seemed to fit Maslow's description of "self-actualizers" (Zell-Ravenheart). They then contacted each of these people, gave them a copy of *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and, if they liked it, asked them to join their group. By the time Zell and Christie had graduated, the group was influential in creating the first "autonomous student paper" at Westminster, an alternative fraternity called Mu Omicron Alpha, and a thriving underground community of water brothers³ that extended, through correspondence, well beyond the walls of their Midwestern college (Sulak 45).

How Atl eventually gave birth to the Church of All Worlds is a story of inventions and serious planning. As Zell and Christie neared graduation they knew they needed to decide what to do with the organization that had become so important to them and a growing group of others. The question was whether to remain an underground, semi-secret society or to go public as a church. The idea for a church was based on the model set forth by *Stranger in a Strange Land*, in which Valentine Michael Smith had become aware of both religion's

³ "Water brother" is a term taken directly from *Stranger in a Strange Land*. In the book it is originally a Martian word and, because the Martians are genderless, it is used to refer to both men and women. In the contemporary Church the more gender neutral term "waterkin" is used.

influence on earthlings and its privileged place in liberal law. Following Heinlein's example meant introducing themselves to the world as a new religion, however the group had functioned so well as an underground society that they were reluctant to change gears and go public. Furthermore, Christie and Zell had great reservations about what it would mean to take on the responsibility that comes with creating a religion. Zell recalls their thinking:

If we're starting a religion, what does that mean? There's a lot of responsibility there because as near as we could figure out every religion had gotten really fucked up along the way. I mean the most obvious one being Christianity because people don't know about the horrible history of Buddhism. Much has happened in places like Tibet. But people were pretty aware of the history of Christianity with things like the holy wars and the Inquisition and witch burnings and all the brutalities and it's like that doesn't seem to be what Jesus had in mind. As far as we can figure out this guy was a gentle peaceable rabbi trying to tell people they should love each other and be less judgmental and all that kinda stuff they say in the last paragraph of the movie *The Meaning of Life*. You know that's basically it. Just try and be nicer to each other, okay. But it didn't work. A thousand years later people were burning people at the stake and waging holy wars, so what went wrong? We spent a lot of time thinking about that because if we're starting a new religion what can we do to make sure that it doesn't go really Republican on us, you know? (Zell-Ravenheart)

Zell and Christie were acutely aware not just of the dangers of creating a religion but also the unique position they were in as self-conscious creators of this new religion. By rejecting ideas of revealed truth, they had a full range of creative options at their disposal. For Zell and Christie the act of inventing a religion meant an exceptional level of responsibility. If they were making the whole thing up they had better make up the right religion.

In the end, Zell and Christie decided to keep Atl as an underground organization and start the Church of All Worlds as a public-facing church. Zell often uses the TV show *Star Trek* to describe his relationship with Christie. "He was the Spock to my Kirk," he is fond of saying (Zell-Ravenheart, Cusack, Sulak). Christie, who was the more methodical and logical one, continued running Atl, which eventually developed into an important force in the environmental movement. He was still running this group when he died in 2010, although

ATL had come to stand for the Association for the Tree of Life, an environmental activist organization that still thrives today (CAW.org, Tree-of-Life.works). Zell, the more outgoing and charismatic of the two, took on the task of starting the Church.

On Labor Day 1967 Zell held a garage sale at a local coffee shop to raise funds for his new Church. This raised enough curiosity among those who attended that the coffee shop's owner asked him to come back the following week and answer questions about his group. It was during this follow-up session that, in answer to the question "what kind of religion is this?" Zell responded with "well I guess you could say we're pagan" (Zell-Ravenheart). A year later Zell officially incorporated the Church and began publication of *Green Egg*, a magazine that became a major organ of communication for the growing Neo-Pagan community. In 1970 the Church became, according to Zell, the first religious organization recognized by the IRS to use the term Pagan in their application for 501(c)(3) status.⁴

From here the group took a distinctive turn and became part of the broader "Neo-Pagan" tradition, a movement that uses mostly pre-Christian deities⁵ and rituals for religious inspiration and devotion. Though the Church is definitely one of the forerunners in this tradition, with some members claiming that they were the first to refer to themselves as "pagan" in a positive way, even Zell points to a more complicated history. He was inspired to own this label by an article he had read by fellow religious innovator Omar K. Ravenhurst. Ravenhurst co-founded Discordianism, another of Cusack's "invented religions." In the late

⁴ Though most evidence for this claim comes from the Church itself, I have not been able to find another organization using this term that predates their official incorporation with the IRS.

⁵ Some groups do look to deities popularized since the invention of Christianity but these mostly come from places that were Christianized late or not at all, the major exception to this being those groups who use Vodou or Santeria deities in their work. I have not encountered any Pagan groups besides CAW that actively draw their gods from science fiction.

1960s he was a member of the religious commune Kerista in Southern California. In an article in the Kerista newsletter which he titled “Functional Religion” he argues for a new form of religion that can succeed where Christianity has failed. In this religion, transcending taboos “both stabilize[s] and overthrow[s] social structure.” Ravenhurst calls for a “return of paganism as a legitimate social force, for the advent of Liberal Paganism, of a New Theology of Paganism, and of Pagan Reductionism.” This would be a pragmatic form of religiosity that would reject the obsolete dogmas of Christianity and “return” to a religion that can adapt to people’s needs. As for Kerista, Ravenhurst believed they should “comprise the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Pagan Resurgence!” (Ravenhurst). Kerista ultimately went a very different way⁶, but to Zell this was an ideal description of everything he wanted to do.

Invention in the Metaphysical Tradition

Of course neither Zell nor Ravenhurst created something entirely new. Their efforts fit into what historian of religion Catherine Albanese has called the “metaphysical tradition.” In *The Republic of Mind and Spirit* she describes the metaphysical tradition as another major influence that has directed the history of religious life in America. Her work argues for the importance of groups that have often been labeled as occult or fringe. Albanese’s innovation in the field is a direct response to the state in which she finds the study of American religion. She identifies two major turns in this narrative. First, scholars like William McLaughlin argued for the importance of “evangelical” Christianity in the formation of the United States.

⁶ According to Zell, “Brother Jud,” the leader of the group, took strong offense to the functional approach suggested by more flexible pagan religions. He thought of himself as an “authentic Hebrew prophet.”

This is an argument that the volunteerism, populism, and individuality of evangelical Christianity played a key role in the creation of what Albanese calls “American ethnicity.” Later, historian of religion Jon Butler complicated this narrative. Butler argued that early America was a much more messy religious landscape than the “evangelical thesis” claims. Far from evangelicalism being the strongest driving force in the creation of America, Butler argues that established state churches and “the occult” are equally influential. In this narrative, the occult is often seen as being defeated as American religion becomes more institutionalized. Albanese describes her book as “suspicious” of this claim. Her argument is that metaphysical tradition is an important part of “the American religious drama” and that far dying out in the 18th century, it achieved “its mature form after the Civil War.” The influence of this tradition continues to grow in modern times, “shows no sign of abating and every sign of flourishing into any future that can be foreseen” (4).

Though the metaphysical tradition that Albanese identifies is a mostly American phenomenon, she traces its history back to the alchemical work of the European Renaissance and early modern period. She finds it in America in both Christian and non-Christian contexts. Major players in this story include Mormons, Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, the Theosophical Society, and modern adherents to New Age spirituality and self-help. What the metaphysical tradition is exactly is complex. For the sake of this study I will focus on a trilogy of concepts that Albanese sees as key to most of these traditions: the theory of correspondence, the movement of energy, and combinativeness. Correspondence is the idea that the mundane world mirrors the divine. This is an idea often found in the history of religion but metaphysical traditions emphasize it. To this they added the idea of energy, which serves to break down the firm distinction between microcosm and macrocosm.

Albanese tells us that “metaphysicians find a stream of energy flowing from above to below – so powerful and constitutive of their reality that they discover themselves to be, in some sense, made of the same stuff” (6). Energy is the conduit through which we can bring together the mundane and divine worlds. Metaphysicians use tools that they gather from any number of traditions to achieve this connection. This form of spiritual bricolage is what Albanese calls “combinativeness.” Meia, one of CAWs newest members, gives an example of how combinativeness mixes with invention in CAW. The first time she met Oberon he told her not to “try and reinvent the wheel, if other people have done it go ahead and use what they have done. If what you’re trying to create comes from multiple different places, use what other people have done and then work with what you have. If that still doesn’t work go ahead and add your little piece because possibly you have the missing piece that makes it work.”

Building on Albanese’s work, Courtney Bender provides a good template for working with these metaphysicals in a contemporary ethnographic mode. In her book *The New Metaphysicals* she explores the loosely knit network of spiritual healers, teachers, and consumers that make up the spiritual community of Cambridge, Massachusetts. By conducting a series of one-on-one interviews, as well as attending workshops, lectures, and conferences in the community, she gives us an example of how some of the inheritors of Albanese’s history live today. It is her goal to trace what “particular cultural, theological and even scientific legacies make experiencing and touching the divine possible” (2) for this group of people. Her work is in response to other sociologists’ literature on her subject who have primarily looked at this group on an individual basis and have seen them as “spiritual

orphans” (2) creating their own piecemeal religion out of the spiritualities available to them after becoming disillusioned with organized religion.

One of Bender’s central arguments is that these groups deny this history or see it as irrelevant even though many gather in the Swedenborgian and Universalist churches that institutionalized their tradition in previous generations. Bender’s work is further complicated by the fact that her subjects reject most attempts to place them in the narrative of American spirituality. This is because these groups look first to personal experience and then to modern science to provide authority for their beliefs. Thus, Bender tells us, they produce “religious practices [that] complicate the importance of traditions, theologies, hierarchies, and institutions” in ways that “simultaneously reproduce and hide their genealogy” (3). This is a world where these “new metaphysicals” find authority for their teachings and healing not just in their training but also in some sort of personal revelation or traumatic experience that awakened something in them. For the people Bender studies, personal experience is the gold standard, but when it needs more support they often look to science, since it also avoids using tradition and the past as the primary location for authenticity.

The tradition described in these books easily encompasses the world of Neo-Pagans in general and CAW specifically. Still, Bender’s focus on location and Albanese’s much larger narrative means that Neo-Paganism itself is almost never mentioned in these books. It makes a brief appearance near the end of Albanese’s book where she focuses mostly on the ways that Neo-Pagans distance themselves from the “New Age” movement, which they see as somewhat shallow and materialistic (525). Bender only gives Neo-Paganism a short

footnote noting how much more ethnographic work has been done on them compared to her more nebulous subject. Neither author mentions the Church of All Worlds.⁷

Both writers do cite Sarah Pike, the scholar who has done much of the recent ethnographic work on American Neo-Pagans. Her book *Earthly Bodies and Magical Selves*, published in 2001, remains one of the only book-length ethnographies on the subject. Pike focuses on Neo-Pagan festivals as her primary site of research. She attended a number of large Neo-Pagan festivals, fostered relationships with the organizers, interviewed festival goers both at the events and off-site, and kept abreast of the online life of Neo-Pagan festival goers by joining a number of message groups. Pike argues that the festival is central to Neo-Pagan life. Pike is also very interested in discussing boundaries in her work, both inside the Neo-Pagan festival and along its physical and religious borders, and thus does a lot of the work of describing what's at stake in taking on the pagan identity in the modern world. In her words she is interested in how "Neopagans create new religious identities through conflict and improvisation" (xi).

Though not directly addressed by any of these scholars, the Church of All Worlds clearly exists within the theoretical worlds they have identified. By looking at the places where CAW either resembles or differs from these traditions we can begin to understand the ways invention works in the modern metaphysical world. The ways CAW members talk about themselves often puts them squarely in the company of Albanese's subjects. "Energy" comes up in nearly every conversation I have had with anyone associated with the Church. Motherbear, the current High Priestess of CAW, refers to the deities used in ritual as "an

⁷ Interestingly, Albanese does spend a couple of pages in her chapter on "The Metaphysical East" on Anodea Judith, a popular writer on yoga and the chakras who was also High Priestess and president of the board of directors for the Church of All Worlds for ten years (455-456).

energy collective.” Eric, a newly ordained priest, uses similar terms to describe magic, referring to it as “energy mechanics through will and intent.” When asked to describe what magick feels like, Lauren, a newer member, described it as “a cloud of energy that just kind of swirls around me which I can feel on my skin.”

This energy is intertwined in CAW with a correlation between the divine and the mundane. One of the first rituals developed by Zell and Christie was meant to collapse this separation entirely. In a practice taken directly from Heinlein’s book, waterkin greet each other in any semi-ritualized setting by saying “thou art god” or “thou art goddess.” One member explained this tradition to me as an expression that “everybody is made of the same star energy and everybody is different obviously and all creatures and living things are unique but they’re also all connected with the same life-force energy.” The Church’s very name also marks it as embracing Albanese’s “combinativeness.” As Meia is fond of pointing out, “they are the Church of **All** Worlds which means everybody, and every belief, and every god or goddess is welcome.”⁸ They embrace any tradition that “works including established religions, those whose traditions are lost to time, and, of course, those invented by modern authors.” In this context “working” can mean many things. On a personal level, the word “connection” comes up often when asked about why a particular narrative, deity, or rite is chosen. This can mean connection with others or the divine. On a group level, “working” usually means creating a meaningful and personally constructive experience for those involved.

⁸ This openness is not uncommon in Pagan traditions. The word “eclectic” is often used to describe someone who avoids a fixed tradition or pantheon. Members often refer to CAW as an “eclectic tradition.”

This emphasis on both connection and experience ties them directly to Bender's subjects. Though Bender's metaphysicals may not be Neo-Pagans and, as Sarah Pike has pointed out, Neo-Pagans are often resistant to being lumped in with the more nebulous "New Age" category, it is hard not to see similarities between CAW members and Bender's Cambridge spiritual seekers and energy healers. On the simplest level all these people are interested in the same things. Many of my subjects told of experiences with past lives and most believe in some sort of extra-normal sensory power. Edward Fish, a newly ordained minister calmly told me in our first interview that he had memories of living as the son of the Greek sea god Poseidon in ancient Greece. Before the rituals began at Beltane I was treated to a free tarot reading, and at Samhain, I attended a talk on communicating with the dead. Many CAW members have had experience with reiki and other forms of alternative medicine. Four of the eighteen people I interviewed considered alternative medicine their primary profession and the term "healing" came up often at festivals both in ceremonial and conversational settings. Like Bender's metaphysicals, CAW members use the language of both education and science to refer to their religious practice. They attend workshops and lectures and read voraciously. They keep up with the newest popular science ideas, paying particular attention to neuroscience and quantum physics.

Members of the Church of All Worlds would see themselves in the genealogy presented by these scholars, but it is the ways in which they exceed these categorizations that make them most interesting. As all three of these scholars have noted, what sets Neo-Paganism apart from other metaphysical traditions has to do with practice, specifically ritual. Ritual is the core of Neo-Paganism. Practitioners make the point over and over again that it is a "religion that you do," not one that you believe in. In many of my interviews the

respondents went to great lengths to explain that their vision of divinity, magic, or energy was their own and didn't represent the group. No such effort was made in describing what they did in ritual settings, either at home or at official Church events. This emphasis on the communal is one of the things that sets CAW and many Neo-Pagans apart from other metaphysicals. Is a primarily social religiosity. While I was talking to Oberon and two other early members of the Church about using the terms "religion" and "Church" someone brought up the term "spiritual but not religious." Oberon was quick to explain that he never considered himself very spiritual. "Spirituality, that's your own personal thing, but when you get together with a bunch of people and develop common goals and purposes then you become a religion," he told us, "I've always considered myself of a religious but not spiritual type." Though many of my subjects described personal experiences of the divine, it was never what brought them to the group. In fact most "religious experiences" happened once they had already joined CAW or another Neo-Pagan group and often as part of a ritual.

So if they are not looking to revealed truth to validate their religious world, where do CAW members look? The easiest answer to this would be that they believe because it works. But the same could be said of many of the Neo-Pagans discussed in Pike and other scholars' works. In a much broader sense this just describes what William James called "pragmatism." What sets CAW apart is a constant desire to play with these ideas of authority and to build institutions based on this. Instead of throwing off tradition, they dive headlong into it with a full understanding of its artificiality. They are constantly creating and re-creating holidays, clerical roles, rituals, and even legal bodies. This is invention as a tradition.

The Second Phoenix Awakening: A Community of Invention

The late 1960s and early 1970s were an extremely industrious era for CAW. They started renting a storefront in St. Louis and began to formulate more clearly what it meant to be a modern pagan religion. This was also the period when the Church's publication *Green Egg* came into its own. Though the publication began as a newsletter for CAW members it quickly became much more than that. It published articles, artwork, fiction, and poetry from nearly everyone involved with the early movement. Its subjects ran the gambit from critical biographies of Victorian magicians to political cartoons, recipes, and ritual instructions. Most importantly, *Green Egg's* letter section published nearly every letter sent to it, providing a place for the geographically separated Neo-Pagan movements to converse and, more often than not, engage in fiery debate.

This was also the time period where Zell recruited members of the Church who would be instrumental to its growth, such as Tom William and Don Wildegurb. Even as the Church grew, Zell remained its center. This was mostly a result of his time commitment. He was the group's only real full-time worker. He also provided nearly all of the Church's financial support which he earned working for the Human Development Corporation as a social psychologist (Sulak 46). Thus, when Zell experienced two interconnected life-changing events it changed the course of the Church forever.

In 1970, during the first Earth Day celebration, Zell had a vision of the whole world as one living organism with every living thing connected on a fundamental level. He would later call this the theory of "Theogenesis."⁹ This concept would be taken up by most

⁹ Zell would later embrace the term "Gaia thesis" instead of Theogenesis in order to draw connections between his work and that of British scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock.

members of the Church, pushing the organization to embrace an environmental focus that soon became one of its defining attributes. In 1973, Theogenesis brought Zell to the Gnostica Aquarian Festival in Minneapolis, a convention for Neo-Pagans and other magick users, where he had been asked to give a speech on the topic. In the audience was a young woman named Morning Glory (née Diane Moore) who changed the Church in ways no one could have anticipated. Morning Glory would go on to become the longest running High Priestess of the Church and, according to some members I interviewed, a full-fledged goddess after her death. This meeting was the beginning of a lifelong relationship for both of them. In Morning Glory's words, within hours of meeting they were "so in love that (they) could hardly speak" (Sulak 117). It was clear from the beginning, however, that this would not be a traditional relationship. There is an oft-repeated story, told in almost the exact same words to me as are published in both Sulak and Carole's books, that Morning Glory used to tell about this first meeting. According to her she knew something special was happening but she needed to be upfront about her expectations. "I don't want to be in a monogamous relationship," she told Zell, "for one thing I already have a family, monogamy is just not in my nature and I don't want to deceive you. I want to be free to have other lovers, and you're free to do that as well." According to her, Zell just looked deep in her eyes and smiled "like he had just found the Holy Grail" (Cusack 66-67).

Two years later the two were married in a large public "hand fasting" – a ritual they adapted for the occasion from an old Celtic tradition which involves the betrothed having their hands bound together and which remains popular in Neo-Pagan weddings. The ritual was overseen by both the High Priestess of CAW, Carolyn Clark, and Isaac Bonewits, a close friend of Zell's and a fellow innovator in the growing pagan scene. Bonewits was

instrumental in the development of the “Neo-Druid” movement which grew alongside, and often in conversation with, CAW. Margot Adler, the NPR journalist and author of *Drawing Down the Moon*, sang at their wedding. This was an example of religious invention in action. All of the participants worked together, drawing on both the information they could gather from pre-Christian European religious tradition and their own imagination to create a new ritual that consecrated what they saw as a new form of marriage.

By the 1990s the Zells were living in Northern California and had become central figures of a Neo-Pagan movement at its zenith. Over the previous decades they had raised unicorns, searched for mermaids in New Guinea, helped facilitate a lunar eclipse celebration at a replica of Stonehenge in Washington state, and grown *Green Egg* to its highest circulation ever¹⁰. Of all these changes in which they had been involved, perhaps the most innovative in their mind was their personal relationship. On March 19, 1989, Oberon, then going by the name Otter G’Zell, and Morning Glory married Diane Darling and became a “triad marriage.” A year later, in an issue of *Green Egg*, Morning Glory published her article “A Bouquet of Lovers,” a succinct and practical discussion of how to manage non-monogamous relationships. It is in this article that Morning Glory uses the term “polyamory” for the first time. Over the next decade the Zells experimented with an ever-growing and changing family structure. Though the original hand fasting with Diane eventually dissolved, by 1997 Otter and Morning Glory’s family had expanded to five adults, all married to each other in various legal and spiritual arrangements. Taking the collective last name Ravenheart, this group referred to themselves as the Triskelion Family.

¹⁰ CAW does not have exact records of *Green Egg*’s circulation, but Margot Adler claims that the number never reached over 2,000 (107).

Polyamory and the Divine Feminine

Though the Church has no official doctrine or dogma beyond “be excellent to each other,” polyamory remains a central part of what it means to be a member of CAW. Of the eighteen members of the Church that I interviewed, twelve consider themselves polyamorous, eight of whom are actively engaged in polyamorous relationships. Two couples described their relationship as “temporarily closed” due to life complications, mostly in regards to having children. Two others couples are actively engaged in conversations about what it would mean to open their relationship. Though everyone in the Church defines terms differently, they make some important distinctions. First, polyamory is not swinging. Meia described her parents as becoming swingers “when polyamory didn’t work for them during the 80s and 90s.” For members, swinging is about sex and polyamory is about love, affection, and commitment. According to several members of CAW, Morning Glory gave the Oxford English Dictionary its definition in 1999 as “the practice, state or ability of having more than one sexual loving relationship at the same time, with the full knowledge and consent of all partners involved” (*polyinthemedia.blogspot.com*, The Ravenhearts).¹¹

When discussing polyamory in their own lives, many members see it as an act of overturning traditional sexual mores that reframes relationships in a more rational light. Anodea, a former High Priestess and president of the board for the Church, describes the practice in pragmatic terms. “Jealousy and possessiveness never made sense to me,” she told me. “Why limit something that’s abundant? Why limit love? We need more love not less.”

¹¹ The OED’s current definition is very close to this though it does not cite Morning Glory as a source. The earliest source it has for the term is from a 1992 Usenet group called *alt.config*. Morning Glory used the term in her article “A Bouquet of Lovers” for *Green Egg* in 1990.

Anodea, like other members, made the point that this was not all about sex: “You can share affection with people. It didn’t necessarily mean you were going to go to bed with that person, but you could sit on their lap and cuddle, and all of that was fine. And it just felt so much more loving and reasonable than everyone going, ‘Hands off,’ and, ‘You looked at her,’ and all that crazy stuff. Jealousy ruins so many marriages.” Anodea does not assume that polyamory is the answer for everyone. She considers it a sexual preference, “I think of being polyamorous or monogamous as by and large kind of like gay or straight. It’s kind of what you are. It’s what works for you.”

This points to a tension I found when discussing polyamory with many of the CAW members. Like Anodea they tended to describe polyamory as both the ideal choice for relationships and an inborn sexual preference. On one hand, they see it as an important innovation in relationships that strips away hurtful taboos and rebuilds the concept of sexual relationships and marriage in a way that maximizes pleasure for all involved. On the other hand, they believe that certain people are born monogamous and others polyamorous. This is a prime example of the complications that arise in a group of people who consciously create their own set of beliefs, aesthetics and ethics, one of which is a firm dedication to inclusivity and acceptance. Though many members believe that polyamory is the superior form of relationship, it would be antithetical to their other beliefs to then claim that monogamy is inferior.

CAW also has an important concept of gender that has provided its own tensions throughout the years. During my first meeting with Oberon he told me that the major innovation of the Neo-Pagan movement was to bring back the divine feminine. I responded by mentioning a number of intellectual visions of God that were explicitly genderless. He

quickly cut me off. “That’s not what we’re talking about,” he told me, “what we’re referring to is the feminine as divine. We are bringing back the Goddess.” This was not a genderless, amorphous divine, but rather one that carries the specific attributes usually attached to femininity. An important innovation along these lines was the ordination of priestesses. These are not women who seek the ordination that men have, but rather women who take on a role that includes their gender as a defining characteristic. Thus in the Church there are both “priests” and “priestesses,” each with equal but different responsibilities and powers. These roles fit into an oft-repeated narrative in CAW that emphasizes the Neo-Pagan role of revitalizing “the Goddess.”¹² In this story their work is an important counterbalance to the masculine vision of the Christian God or what they sometimes refer to as “the big sky daddy.” In recent years, with new ideas about gender entering the mainstream, this system is beginning to wear thin for many members.

A class held at the CAW hospitality suite at the Pantheacon pagan convention addressed this issue directly. A number of people associated with the Church who identify as gender fluid or otherwise outside the male/female binary talked about their personal experience with the Church and the Neo-Pagan world in general. At the end of the workshop, everyone was asked by the facilitator to create their own deities that represented their personal gender identity. This event, which clearly resonated with the creative aspect of CAW, was well received but it was unclear what would be done with these new deities. At Beltane a couple of weeks later, the same clearly gendered gods and goddesses were called

¹² Though Neo-Pagans worship a large selection of specific goddesses it is common to refer to “the Goddess” in the singular as a stand-in for the general inclusion of femaleness in their idea of the divine, or what they also call “the divine feminine.” There is no real male counterpart to this as “God” or even “the God” has too much monotheistic baggage attached to it. They do sometimes refer to “the divine masculine” but even that is a rarity.

on. One of the speakers from the Pantheacon event was made visibly uncomfortable by the still very gendered aspect of CAW ritual and eventually went home. Another former member, who was born into the Church, left the group due to its inability to get beyond this binary.

Many of the organizers of this event and many of those attempting to bring the Church into the contemporary world of gender fluid language are part of a “kink” community, a group that had difficulty finding its place in the Church. When BDSM started becoming a more openly discussed part of the sexual landscape in the 1980s many CAW members found themselves in a position they never anticipated. Against everything they claimed to believe, they were openly and publicly judging other people’s sexuality. This hit Morning Glory the hardest since she had been such a proponent of sexual freedom. She couldn’t fathom how causing another pain could fit into her vision of a freedom- and pleasure-loving practice. After a long period of contention she eventually began to understand how this too was part of the “vibrant variations of sexuality.” She even experimented with it later in life. Since then, kink has become an accepted part of the CAW world. At the Beltane bonfire, I received a lengthy education on the kink dating app FetLife from a diverse group of CAW members.

Not all of these issues are at the forefront of every CAW member’s life but polyamory and gender do play a key enough role in what the Church is that it has affected the relationships of most members. In order to look at this more closely, I will focus on one relationship in the group whose life in and out of the Church highlights the ways in which being part of a tradition that expects you to consciously and creatively define your relationship shapes what your relationship can become. Eric and Shasta are part of the

younger generation who joined the group in the 1990s, although Shasta only joined a couple of years ago after she met Eric. They served as May King and Queen from 2017 to 2018. They gave up their crowns at the Beltane I attended and where Eric was ordained a minister of the Church. At the time I interviewed them they had been married for about a year and were trying to conceive. Eric has been polyamorous for most of his adult life whereas Shasta has always been monogamous. Their marriage is currently closed but discussions surrounding this status are a major topic in their relationship. To hear Shasta tell it, “Eric and I are only married because I was able to come to some place of willingness to explore.”

Shasta and Eric are both professionals with higher degrees. Eric works as a therapist both for the military and in his own private practice. Shasta is a professor of nursing. They are both open and thoughtful, especially when it comes to their own lives. Eric is a professed “people pleaser” and suffers social anxiety. He is constantly going out of his way to make sure others are comfortable while always seeming a little uncomfortable himself. Shasta is the opposite. She has the deep calmness of someone who has come to peace with her outsider status and does little to either hide or announce herself. I spent a good amount of time with the two of them together at rituals and other group settings, but the bulk of our conversation about their relationship happened in one-on-one interviews.

Eric still considers himself polyamorous even though he is currently in a closed marriage. He put his relationship to polyamory in distinctly spiritual terms. For Eric there is a direct connection between the “poly” of polyamory and the “poly” of polytheism. When discussing the difference between monotheism and polytheism he told me that “when you have a multiverse, or any kind of poly reality, you’re holding multiple truths simultaneously, which is really hard for people because belief is not just a matter of experience, it’s a matter

of survival.” Later he connects this to both polyamory and his own personal life philosophy. “The relationship between polyamory and paganism,” he explains, “I think just comes from the same willingness to hold multiple points of view and open-mindedness and coming from a place of inclusivity instead of judgment and separation.”

Buddhism is as much a part of Eric’s life as paganism, but he specifically cherishes the this-worldly aspect of paganism. During our conversation he told me about his therapist who is celibate as part of his Buddhist practice. During his sessions he realized that he wasn’t interested in the same things as his therapist. “I’m not interested in being an enlightened being,” he realized, “that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to be in the messy and the raw and feel things that I’m not comfortable with. I don’t want just a spiritual bypass, I don’t want to be so calm.” This is what Eric calls “the divine messy.” This is what attracts him to both polyamory and polytheism and also how he connects to the CAW greeting “thou art god.” For Eric, human beings can be both “one step out of the primordial ooze” and entirely divine.

Krista’s path to Neo-Paganism and CAW is less connected with the pairing of the divine and mundane that Eric talks about and has more to do with the divine feminine. Born a “tomboy” into a strict Seventh Day Adventist household, Shasta had always felt something amiss in her spiritual life. She described a deep connection to nature that stretched back to her childhood. After moving to California in the late 1990s for a temporary job as a nurse, she started spending time in Healdsburg where the Seventh Day Adventists have an academy. Although she did some theater work with them, her attentions were quickly drawn to other parts of Northern California culture. She joined a women’s group and began dating a man connected to the Centers for Spiritual Living in San Rafael. These connections, along with

reading the book and watching the movie *The Mists of Avalon*, pointed her in the direction of Goddess religion.

This eventually led Shasta to the realization that she wanted to be a priestess. She explained this realization as “triggering” something that was always inside her. As a child, her sister had often called her a “moon worshipper” because she had a deep and “innate connection with the moon” and she was always attracted to “earth connection, honoring the moon, the cycles, the rhythm.” She was also interested in the “balance between masculine and feminine” and had recently become focused on “tapping into [her] own femininity which hasn’t always been at the forefront.” So she started telling people she “wanted to be a priestess” and asking “does that even exist in the world today?” Describing this time she told me that “it was kind of a seed in the back of my mind for a long time, and then someone said ‘hey, you can be a priestess.’ And I was like, really, that exists in the world? That’s a thing?” This led Shasta to a year-long priestess training in Gualala, California.

After her ordination, Shasta had become fully pagan but she was still looking for a tribe. She began reaching out the pagan community and dating a little bit, as much to meet someone as to find male pagans. Nearly all of her pagan contacts to this point had been women. This is how she met Eric. Their “two hour brunch turned into a twelve hour date,” and a year later Eric took her to her first CAW festival. Up to this point Shasta had been “fairly conservative in [her] relationship style.” That same festival, Eric convinced her to join in a polyamorous group activity which she found deeply unpleasant. This remains an issue between the two. Both of them told me that it was a stipulation of their marriage that Shasta would be willing to open the relationship in some form. As she put it, the agreement is that they’d take it slow with “her foot on the brake.” Still, she feels she’s getting closer, “tapping

into and finding a true place of saying I actually want more than what I've been doing. I want to try something different. I want something bigger and more expansive and I can have that with Eric.”

Eric and Krista's stories are fairly representative of other couples I have gotten to know in the Church. Krista's story of awakening to the need for the divine feminine in her life echoes those of many of the women I have talked to from both her generation and the older one. For the older generation, however, experimentation with sexual mores was intertwined with the overturning of masculine power. Free love was a form of feminism. For Krista, this was not so. Growing up in the 1990s there was little about free love that seemed revolutionary. The decision she faced when getting involved with Eric was a personal rather than political one. Her choice also represents the tension that I hinted at earlier in this section. Whether or not polyamory is a rule in the Church, it is clearly a strong norm. It is also a concept central to her husband's spiritual life. Their religious beliefs demand that they define their relationship on their own terms. This involves the sort of rational thinking that Anodea explained, but it mostly involves a conscious act of creation. In the Church of All Worlds they are not meant to look to past examples to define their relationship but rather engage in a magickal act that creates something new, just as their forbearers Oberon and Morning Glory had done.

The Third Phoenix Awakening: Inventing Ritual

The defining moments in the Church's third Phoenix Awakening are moments of crisis. First, as the new century began, Oberon found himself kicked out of his own Church.

According to those I've talked to, the board of directors, located in Ohio at the time, relieved Oberon of his administrative and ceremonial titles in order to consolidate power in the Midwest. Three years later they dissolved the Church entirely. All its assets, including Oberon's former house in St. Louis, were sold off to pay debts. The only story that gets told in the Church now is that this was a move to gain power and ultimately "rip off" the Zells. The other story, the one told by those allegedly ripping off the Zells, hasn't seen light in publication nor was I able to contact anyone involved. This situation isn't helped by the fact that the central figure in the Ohio coup died shortly after selling off CAW's assets.

Although this was clearly a traumatic time for Oberon and Morning Glory, they both took it in stride, dealing with the loss by burying themselves in other work. Morning Glory doubled down on a statue-making business she had started called Mythical Images. This had become something of a family industry, with all the members of their unconventional family lending a hand. They designed and cast statues of the gods, goddesses, and mythical beings that they had spent their life with, and sold them at fairs and Neo-Pagan conventions (Sulak). Meanwhile Oberon had been asked to write a sort of "how to" book on magick for the "Harry Potter generation." What he eventually produced was the *Grimoire for Apprentice Wizards*, a book whose popularity led Oberon to create the Grey School of Wizardry, an online school where students can learn magick in a virtual setting designed to resemble Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from the *Harry Potter* books (Cusack 74-76).

The Zells' exile from their church would ultimately prove short-lived. Even without the official designation as a church, they had continued to hold festivals at Annwfn during the pagan holy days. In 2005, one of Annwfn's caretakers was preparing the insurance papers for the upcoming Beltane and they came across documents that made it clear that the

Midwest group had never filed the Church's disincorporation with the IRS. Although they'd dissolved the entity in Ohio, the Church still held 501(c)(3) status in California. As Oberon puts it, all they needed to do was "file a change of address for our primary office from Toledo to Cotati, and we were back in business!" (Sulak 365). A few months later, on May 1, Oberon was reinstated as Primate and made president of the board of directors. Morning Glory became High Priestess and vice president.

This marked the beginning of the Church's third Phoenix Awakening. Over the next decade the Church steadily grew. They re-launched *Green Egg* as a "web magazine," and Oberon worked hard to make the Grey School a reality, publishing two books along the way, including his and Morning Glory's only published work together, *Circles and Ceremonies*. During this time, a new generation of magick users started coming to Annwfn for the seasonal festivals. These were young people, mostly from the area around Annwfn, attracted to the Neo-Pagan lifestyle by its experimental view of relationships, its emphasis on imagination, and its focus on nature. This group was also marked by the fact that they joined during a traumatic transformation in the Church.

In 2014, Morning Glory died from the cancer she had been struggling with for years. The current Church exists very much in the wake of her death. Many of those who joined the Church in these later years describe their involvement with, and care for, Morning Glory as central to their initiation into the group. Others, who never met her, look to her as a goddess of love, compassion, and sensuality. The elevation of Morning Glory to goddesshood speaks directly to the creative relationship with the divine that the Church embraces. During a CAW wake that I attended for another longtime member, we raised numerous glasses and toasted the dead using the phrase "what is remembered will never die." Combine this with the

traditional “thou art god/goddess” greeting and it is not hard to see how the lines between mortals and the divine can be easily transgressed. In this way Morning Glory was always a goddess but, for CAW members, she can now become even more so as she leaves this world and becomes part of the sacred narrative.

Doing Ritual

Throughout my research members of the Church used the word “ritual” without an article. Members often spoke of “doing ritual” when describing their religious behavior. They even used this term for specific rituals. Before the central ritual of the Beltane that I attended I was told “ritual would begin when the sun went down,” and “I’m looking forward to ritual tonight.” This was more than an idiosyncratic turn of phrase. CAW members and many others in the Neo-Pagan world see the return of ritual, which they believe has been erased from the Western world through the twin powers of Protestantism and modernity, as one of their most important innovations. Responding to the overwhelmingly Protestant environment that many of the people I interviewed came from, they felt themselves yearning for a religion that was physical and theatrical. Krista, who grew up Seventh Day Adventist, describes being “really drawn to ritual and ceremony – more than was present in my upbringing.” Motherbear described going to Mass with a Catholic friend during childhood as so moving that she often wished she could become a nun. She “just loved all the ritual and the statues and all of that, and the smoke and all that.” Thus the very act of “doing ritual,” almost any ritual, was constructed as a revolutionary act.

My first experience “doing ritual” was at the Beltane I attended on the first weekend of May in Annwn, shortly after starting my research. Although the current Church mostly draws on Greek myths and deities, their annual festivals are based on the Celtic calendar, with eight holy days celebrated on or near the solstices and equinoxes. Beltane is the spring festival and thus it is all about fertility, abundance, sensuality, and play. The Beltane I attended involved a wake, a group ordination, and a number of semi-ritualized meals and bonfires, but the central rituals of Beltane for the Church of All Worlds are the May Games, the raising of the maypole, and a Saturday night ritual loosely based on the Germanic holy day Walpurgis.

This last ritual serves as the clearest example of invention in the Church. It is also the most interactive of the rituals and thus provided the most opportunity for me to “do ritual.” The ritual began, as many Neo-Pagan rituals do, with the casting of a magickal circle by calling to the four elements. Zoe, one of the new clergy, undertook this. In Neo-Pagan tradition the four cardinal directions are also associated with the four elements: north is earth, east is air, south is fire, and west is water. Calling a circle is essential for any major magickal act, as it provides a space in which sacred work can happen. It provides a boundary between the mundane and the sacred. For CAW members it also provides a place where play and make-believe become serious work.

At this particular ritual, as the directions were called so too were the deities of spring. In this case it meant Dionysus, Aphrodite, Eros, and Demeter. These deities were embodied by other recently ordained clergy. As they came forward they gave a short speech describing their role in this ritual and in the pantheon in general. Finally, we were asked to join the circle. As we entered one by one, one of the recently ordained clergy waved a piece of

burning sage over us¹³ and Demeter gave us each a different colored ribbon. After a short speech about the significance of Beltane we were asked to look at our ribbon. The color of the ribbon determined which god or goddess you would be communing with that evening. I pulled pink for Aphrodite. The rest of the Aphrodite crowd gathered in her area of the circle. Aphrodite gave us small pieces of paper and asked us to write down something that we wanted to let go of. Knowing that I would have to share this with Aphrodite and possibly others I wrestled with what to write on mine and eventually settled on the awkwardly phrased “my possible futures” to represent my regret for paths not taken.

When it was my time to meet with Aphrodite I explained to her my choice and she looked at me with divine sympathy and told me this was of no use to me anymore. She gave me a temporary marker and told me to write “I am vibrant” on my arm. She then blessed me and gave me the gift of a honey stick to represent the sweetness of life. After this, each of us came forward and said what we wanted to get rid of and threw our paper in the bonfire. There was a simple script we were meant to follow. We said “I give away what is of no use to me,” then we said what was on our paper. Once this was done we announced out loud what we’d written on our arm. Oberon was one of the first to throw his cares into the fire. He had recently lost his storefront in Santa Cruz and was staying with friends in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Earlier that year I had helped him move all the magickal items that he and Morning Glory had collected over the years into a storage unit and, like most people there, I was well aware of his situation. “I give away my loneliness, my grief, my poverty,” he said. A palpable sadness fell over the circle.

¹³ This is an act called “smudging” that is extremely common in the Neo-Pagan community. It is meant to purify you of any negative energy you are holding onto. As I waited for my turn, Zoe’s daughter expressed surprise that I had never been “smudged.” “It’s wonderful,” she told me.

As my turn approached I became gripped with anxiety. I had heard so many stories from CAW members about how they had done a ritual asking for something specific and ended up with what they wanted in exactly the way they didn't want. "I did a ritual to Aphrodite for love in my life," one young man shared with us "and boy did I get it! I ended up with two more lovers that no one could possibly handle at the same time." I'd come to think of this narrative as the "genie's wish" effect. I was worried about what would happen if I threw "my possible futures" into the fire. I could end up dead. I quickly found another piece of paper and wrote the more prosaic but less dangerous "my regrets" on it and threw that into the fire.

This small moment of belief in the magic of the ritual did not mean that I had somehow become one of the Neo-Pagans. What it did mean was that I had felt some of what the ritual was designed to do. It was meant to transport me into a place where magic is possible. A few months later I interviewed the woman primarily responsible for this ritual. Zoe is one of the more serious and ambitious of the new generation. During their ordination each member was asked what they wanted to accomplish as a minister or priestess. Zoe said she wanted to reinstate the Elysian mysteries, a cycle of rituals that in the past was almost as essential to the Church as the Wheel of the Year. This was no small feat considering how notoriously hard organizing CAW members can be. In our conversation, Zoe was more than happy to discuss her work creating this and other rituals.

Zoe had created this ritual as part of her initiation into the priestesshood. Although the reading list for becoming a priest of the Church of All Worlds has shrunk, there are still a great deal of practical requirements, one of which is the creation and administration of a ritual. Organizing Beltane was one of Eric and Krista's last responsibilities as May Queen

and King. As a favor they had asked Zoe and John to plan the Saturday night ritual. Zoe asked Oberon if this could count toward her ordination and he agreed. For Zoe, ritual is all about focusing intention. “You have an intention, then you bring your focus to that intention. And by embedding it in ritual it helps. First of all it helps clarify what you really want. I think if you use it regularly it’s something that could be very beneficial.” When I interviewed her she was staying in a mobile home with her husband in Southern California where they were taking care of his mother. She used her trip south as an example:

So like, doing the ritual when we came here was, okay I could have just gotten in the car, driven here, and been here, but I wouldn’t have been organized in my thoughts and my intentions wouldn’t be clear. So magick for me in this particular instance for this situation is allowing me to set clear intention and opening the possibilities, seeing things that I wouldn’t normally be able to see. Sort of set myself, not outside of myself, but set myself in a different space where it’s like I’m open to different input than I might normally be.

In this sense ritual is an external act that is used for internal preparedness. It also helps to mark the boundaries of events. Instead of the trip down to Southern California being just another series of moments in their ongoing life it becomes a clearly bounded event and, as such, it can be more clearly and deliberately contemplated and experienced.

This same sort of intentionality, a term used often in Neo-Pagan and other metaphysical traditions, is what Zoe brought to the Beltane ritual I attended. She was helping us focus and bring intention to things we needed to get rid of. That event also served another purpose for Zoe: it was a creative outlet. Zoe, like many of the people I interviewed, had a background in theatre and she approached this project like a play. She called up “her people” and made sure she had the support she needed, then set about writing and rehearsing the production. It is extremely important to her that the ritual be “experiential” and that it not be

boring. That it not be “old men reading out of books and everybody falling asleep. Like the Catholic church.”

Zoe’s rituals are also exhausting for her. I tried to talk to her after a particularly moving ritual a few months later at Samhain and she seemed almost dazed. I later heard her tell John that it “took too much out of her” and the two of them disappeared for a few hours to their tent. This was a reaction I saw with a number of other ritual creators. The ritual experience could be intense for all involved but it was the most intense for those creating and performing it. This is partially because of the usual strains of performing, but it also has to do with responsibility. Zoe and other clergy are doing hard and essential work for the rest of the attendees. They are responsible for the novelty that is at the core of CAW ritual. Without this the ceremonies run the risk of becoming dull and ultimately ineffective. This act of creation is what keeps people coming back to Annwfn year after year. They come to have novel experiences in a familiar setting. They come for the tradition of invention.

Conclusion

One of the most common activities at any Neo-Pagan event is waiting. Nothing ever happens on time. Jokes are often made about things happening on “pagan time.” The Church of All Worlds even refers to this necessary time of waiting and gossiping as “sacred bullshitting” and will often include it in the minutes of board meetings. It was during one of these periods of sacred bullshitting that I met an older man named Ken who had been involved in the magickal community for decades. His eyes lit up when I told him why I was there. As it turns out, he had gotten a master’s degree in religious studies from Chicago in the

mid-1980s. We chatted a bit about that and he told me that he was not really a member of CAW or any other group, although he held meetings in his basement for the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. I asked him what brought him here and he motioned toward the group preparing for the evening's ritual. "This is the only place where you can get this," he said. I asked him what he meant and he said that as far as he knew this was the only place where new ritual was being constantly produced.

In my own experience of the Neo-Pagan community this is a bit of an overstatement. There is an element of creativity present in most Neo-Pagan settings. As Sarah Pike has pointed out, most modern practitioners are conscious that they are "reinventing ancient pagan traditions or creating entirely new ones," and that these new traditions are "self-consciously shaped to meet the needs of contemporary Americans and Europeans" (227). In some ways the same can be said for nearly all traditions. Few would argue that there are any traditions that aren't ultimately invented and reinvented over time to suit new audiences.

Still, there is something to what Ken said while waiting for ritual to start that evening in October. The Church of All Worlds began with an act of totally self-conscious creation. Although they have since adopted many aspects of other traditions, that spirit of invention still fuels the Church. What is most interesting about CAW is not that they have, and continue to self-consciously create, their own religion, but rather that this creativity has become an ethic. It is present in the mere fact that, although they have moved so far past it, their beginning in science fiction remains the central element of their origin story. It is present in the relationships like those of Eric and Shasta who create their life together in a tradition that refuses to let them rely on old models. Most of all it is present in the constant creation of new rituals. Looking back on that evening, this is what we were really looking at.

We were watching the group responsible for that evening's ritual hurriedly put on costumes and set up props. This is what Ken was motioning to when he said "this" was why he was there. He was there to watch invention in action.

Through their emphasis on invention, the Church of All Worlds provides an extreme example of something we rarely think of having a place in religion: the enjoyment of novelty. Members of the Church have come to rely on the annual events to provide this for them and the clergy have come to cherish the chance to create something new. Although many religious traditions rely on repetition and reliability to work, novelty often has a covert place. It has been part of religious festivals all over the world for centuries, it is at the core of many storytelling traditions, and it is present in the multi-media extravaganza of the modern megachurch. It is my hope that this study of a small Neo-Pagan group will open up space to focus more on novelty as an ethic in the broader world of religious studies. It shows that a community can be maintained without firm boundaries, that belief can come from fiction, and that invention can become tradition.

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