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Drifting Out, Spiraling Back Home: Americans' Motivations for Converting to Paganism

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A Thesis in the Field of Religion

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

The question of why a person leaves one faith and converts to another is far from a simple one. In cases where the convert adopts a non-mainstream religion such as Paganism, the issue becomes potentially more complex. This thesis explores the question of why Americans have adopted Paganism as their chosen faith. It begins by examining what modern-day Paganism is and how it evolved, then provides an overview of the motivating factors behind previous "waves" of conversion during the latter half of the twentieth century. An online study was conducted to explore converts' motivations—both in earlier periods and especially among those who have converted since the year 2000—and was supplemented by interviews with a selection of survey respondents. The survey and interview results are then combined with the earlier analyses (predominantly based on the research of Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* and the work of Helen Berger et al in *Voices from the Pagan Census* to derive insights into the motivations behind Pagan conversion and to assess whether those motivations have changed over the decades or maintained a sense of consistency.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Tristan Knight was raised by an agnostic father and an infrequently-practicing Episcopalian mother, but has always possessed a deep curiosity about myths, legends, folklore, and religious practices. A lifelong science-fiction and fantasy aficionado, the first film he remembers seeing was *Star Wars, Episode IV: A New Hope* at age two. He left the movie theater wanting to be a member of the Jedi Order. These interests merged and created a frustration with the inconsistencies of organized religion, and he identified as an atheist from ages 12 to 20.

In July 1995, he began exploring modern Paganism following the conversion of a close friend. During a meditative exercise, he quite inadvertently underwent a profoundly disruptive spiritual experience and left the exercise with an unshakeable belief that whatever their true nature, there are in fact entities in the universe which humans identify as deities. He has been a Pagan ever since.

He volunteered with the Heartland Spiritual Alliance from 2003-2012, spending two years on the organization's Board of Directors, and working with the Spiritual Experience committee for HSA's annual Heartland Pagan Festival to help facilitate various rituals, events, and workshops from 2005-2012. He has been a member of the now-defunct martial Wiccan group The Order of Scathach, designed and led group rituals for three hundred or more Pagans at once, and hopes to eventually make pilgrimages to Glastonbury Tor and the Isle of Skye, among other Pagan-related destinations.

Dedication

For Karen. You started this.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank a number of people who contributed to this project and its origins in a variety of ways. Karen Bowerman helped guide me in my early explorations of Paganism and has been a voice of wisdom and experience ever since (as well as getting me into my first Heartland festival and introducing me to Heretic Camp, both of which quite literally changed my life). The Phi Theta Kappa society, Kansas City Kansas Community College chapter, awarded me the scholarship which paid for my first three undergraduate classes at Harvard University's Extension School, which enabled me to take a job as a student employee with the Faculty of Arts and Sciences that turned into an actual staff position and allowed me to take graduate-level courses in pursuit of my ALM degree. Carey Oxler has been a stalwart friend and co-ritualist, and was instrumental in the initial publicizing of my research survey. Dr. Jim Wallace of Boston University was kind enough to provide information regarding the role of mainstream religion in America during the Cold War and thereby context for the ground in which Paganism grew (though this material sadly had to be left behind in the course of this thesis' evolution). Stephen Shoemaker, Chris Berlin, Richard Martin, and Daniel McKanan have all provided invaluable advice and support during my time at Harvard, particularly Dr. McKanan's editorial advice on this work. Finally, I offer my thanks and respect to a number of deities including—in no particular order—Athena, Odin, and Hecate for any insights, guidance, and assistance they may have provided throughout my time in grad school and the

development of this thesis. It has been a very long road since I decided to go back to college in 2007, and I would almost certainly not be here near its end without the involvement of the parties mentioned above.

Table of Contents

Author's Biographical Sketch iv

Dedication v

Acknowledgments vi

Chapter I. Introduction 1

Chapter II. On Paganism 9

Chapter III. On Religious Conversion 11

Chapter IV. The First Wave: Gardner, Buckland, and the American Successors 20

Chapter V. The Self-Initiated 27

Chapter VI. The Third Wave: 21st-Century Pagans 29

Chapter VII. My Survey and Interviews 32

Origins of the Thesis and Survey 32

The Interviews 39

Interview One: Eliza 39

Interview Two: Hope 41

Interview Three: Don 44

Interview Four: Will 45

Interview Five: Rowan 47

Interview Six: Ted 48

Interview Seven: Ari 49

Interview Eight: Sarenth 51

Interview Nine: Maleck 54

Interview Ten: Erica 56

Interview Eleven: Candace 59

Interview Twelve: Respondent #62 61

Interview Thirteen: Catherine 63

Chapter VIII. The More Things Change… 66

Chapter IX. Conclusion 74

Appendix 1. Survey Results 76

References 113

Chapter I.

Introduction

Religion is in part a response to societal needs and in part a means of explaining the sense of connection to spiritual or energetic presences which are greater than ourselves, and one's connection to that presence. A culture dependent upon fertile crops grown after a river's inundation of a region will develop beliefs centered around the river, the sun, the soil, and crops. Such was the case in what is now Egypt during much of the pharaonic eras. Likewise, a region beset by poverty, disease, and war may develop a faith intended to find ways of alleviating suffering, as was the case with Buddhism.

How, then, does religion respond to an industrialized society? How does it respond to entrenched patriarchy, inequalities in gender, racial, and class relations? How does it respond to ongoing—and worsening—environmental crises and a looming threat of global war? And when religion does respond (often by adapting or developing new reactions to societal challenges), what drives people to abandon one religion for another? Why, for example, might members of a technologically-developed culture find that the most suitable religious beliefs and practices for them are ones which are no longer a dominant part of their culture's religious landscape?

If some members of a society believe that existing religious structures are not providing sufficient solutions, or if they are in fact contributing to the problems, those people may look to the past for inspiration. They may seek answers in ages where some

of those problems did not exist, or try to use older faith practices as inspiration for new responses to new issues.

This was the case for some religious seekers from the early 20th century through the "baby boomers" (the latter of whom comprised the vast majority of first-wave Pagan converts) who chose to combine a reverence for nature and a desire for more egalitarian societies by adopting religious practices derived from a combination of pre-Abrahamic faiths and various occult traditions to create a belief system inspired by the pagan cultures of old, yet adapted for a modern era: a new form of pagan belief, quite literally a "neopaganism."

Growing from tiny covens, the early Neopagans formed more and more groups, spreading as newer members left to pursue their own practices.[1] These were predominantly initiatory traditions, which required new members to be formally inducted into a coven by elder leaders through ritual and ceremony. This led to a slow but steady expansion as new Pagans found teachers, were welcomed into covens, pursued their studies, and eventually formed splinter covens of their own.

Though these early covens were of a hierarchical nature, with the High Priestess or Priest initiating a new member before formal training could begin and with those new students being sworn to protect the secrecy of the coven's members and rites, they were nevertheless popular with seekers who had left mainstream faiths. This apparently contradicted the desire for more egalitarian forms of religion (as compared to the patriarchal institutions departed by new Pagans); one likely explanation for this is that the

[1] Hereafter, the term "Pagan" will be used for brevity, except where "Neopagan" may appear in quoted material.

equality being sought appears to have been both predominantly structural and gender-oriented. Though an individual coven might have clearly defined positions of authority, there is no one overarching Pagan church to which these covens are accountable. There is no Pagan equivalent to the Vatican or the Pope, no supreme authority holding covens accountable in a temporal sense for their actions and teachings. The veneration of the roles of High Priestess and the feminine divine were deemed sufficient at the time for many early Pagans to consider that their faith had made a clear and distinct break from the prevailing Western religious traditions of the preceding nineteen centuries.

It is important to realize that early covens, imitating Gardner's own, were quite hierarchal in their own internal structures and practices. The more gender-inclusive aspects and lack of centralized authority positioned Wiccan covens as seemingly more progressive than the existing religious institutions of the time, though these early covens appear rather formal and rigid in comparison to the generally more loosely-organized patterns of modern covens.

This perception of early Wicca and Paganism as progressive and perhaps even radical stems in part from the societal background in which Gardner was raised (being a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). Gardner's students and those who founded covens based upon or inspired by his teachings came out of very different environments, especially as "first-wave" American Pagans largely seem to have been raised in the 1930s through 1950s, with the resulting cultural biases, many of which were quite different from those of Gardner himself.

A "generational change" took place in the early 1980s with Llewellyn Books' publication of several works by Scott Cunningham, including *Magical Herbalism: The*

Secret Craft of the Wise in 1982 and *Earth Power: Techniques of Natural Magic* in 1983, the latter of which I personally recall having been recommended as an introductory work when beginning my own explorations into Paganism. Cunningham advocated for the practice of self-initiation, effectively allowing Pagans to declare themselves so without the formal practice of ritual or the need for any participants or human witnesses. Likewise, Llewellyn also published Raymond Buckland's *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft* in 1986, containing an entire self-dedication ritual which did not require the involvement or permission of a coven.[2] No longer needing outside approval to call oneself a Pagan (or witch), the number of practitioners and adherents expanded enormously. This new surge of converts fueled an increase in demand for Pagan books and magazines discussing ritual and magickal practice, historical religious traditions, and how to navigate this new solitary form of paganism.

These more individualistic Pagans provided additional pushback against the hierarchies instituted by Gardner (and by Wicca in general). Pagans who self-initiated deemed only their own authority sufficient for them to claim the title of "witch" (or High Priestess/Priest, devotee of a given deity, etc.), and were hesitant to relinquish such authority to a coven leader for the sake of training or perceived legitimacy. That said, some Pagans were—and are—still willing to join a coven temporarily for the sake of learning from its founder(s) or leader(s). Such covens are often more democratic in nature, with leadership positions being held due to a mutually agreed-upon level of respect for knowledge and experience. There is still a degree of authority present, but that authority is granted—even if not formally stated—by the consent of the coven members,

[2] Raymond Buckland, *Buckland's Complete Book of Witchcraft*, second edition, revised and expanded (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2002), 65-68.

and can be revoked if misused, or the dissenting members may quite simply depart to find their own ways.

"New Age" shops and sections in bookstores grew in popularity from the 1960s into the 1990s, and many shops became places for spiritual seekers to converse, make posts on bulletin boards, and organize meetings of local practitioners.[3] Such stores appealed to seekers exploring the myriad and mysterious connections between the physical, day-to-day world and "an intermediate realm existing between the sensory and intellectual worlds."[4] Whether looking for ritual tools, guides for beginning Pagans, grimoires written by experienced occultists, or simply somewhere to interact with like-minded individuals, these environments allowed for interpersonal and intellectual connections to develop where such would otherwise be impossible.

Especially as solitary practice became more and more commonplace, the need for centers of information and interactions grew. Retailers provided safe spaces for Pagans and seekers still in the "broom closet" to encounter one another and to exchange ideas without the need for the formal and sometimes restrictive environment of a coven. Stores facilitated the ongoing expansion of the self-initiated and the solitary practice, and those

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[3] Terry Mattingly argues that "A few years ago, most generic bookstores had a 'New Age' section. [In March 1994], this is rare. But this doesn't mean that the wave of religious trends that crested in the 1980s simply vanished. Truth is, it soaked in." Mattingly quotes Russell Chandler as saying such materials could, at the time Mattingly's article appeared, be found "in the psychology section and over on the women's shelf. You'll find them under self-help, stress, holistic health and the environmental, too." See: Terry Mattingly, "New Age Moves into Mainstream," Tampa Bay Times, January 9, 2020, https://www.tampabay.com/archive/1994/03/19/new-age-moves-into-mainstream/, accessed June 1, 2023. My own experience belies Mattingly's claims, as I visited such bookstore sections frequently from the late 1980s well into the early 2000s. Chandler's depiction is accurate, but far from the entire way in which such materials were displayed. Perhaps booksellers in Florida organized their stores differently from the San Francisco Bay Area and the Midwest.

[4] Michael York, "New Age and Magic," essay, in *Witchcraft and Magic: Contemporary North America*, ed. Helen A. Berger (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 8–27, 12. York's chapter gives an overview of New Age and New Thought philosophies and worldviews, and identifies in detail their relationship to Paganism and the evolution of its paradigms.

same Pagans (along with their more group-oriented fellows) responded by spending their money and keeping such business operating.

As the internet became accessible to more users, the physical bulletin boards were supplemented by online versions and sites hosting a variety of articles and discussion forums. Pagans could now connect much more easily with others not just in their local area, but around the globe.

Eventually, as social media and online news began to disrupt and displace traditional journalism, so too were Pagan communications spheres disrupted. Bookstores and shops specializing in crystals and esoterica lost customers to Amazon and online vendors. For organizational purposes, I have categorized waves of Pagan conversion in the United States by time period, which happen to generally correspond to their method of social spread. The first wave grew primarily through face-to-face interactions with small groups of practitioners; it was a wave oriented around covens. The second wave, of which I am a part, were often self-initiated Pagans who were not initially instructed as part of a coven (though joining one after self-identifying as Pagan was by no means unusual) and who instead typically gathered their early information through books, operators and customers of New Age and alternative bookstores, and discussions with friends; this wave can be thought of as the "bookstore generation." The third and current wave, which can be termed the "online generation" or, perhaps more appropriately, the "social media generation," has frequently gathered information and conducted much of their exploration into Paganism the internet; this often occurred in internet discussion forums and via informational pages on websites during the late 1990s and early 2000s, but many of those forums and sites have shut down, being replaced in large part by

Facebook groups, Reddit threads, YouTube videos and comments and, most recently, Discord servers.

As physical stores began closing in response, analog communications and meeting places similarly disappeared. Social media began overtaking traditional websites as a form of virtual gathering space, and once-popular sites such as The Witches' Voice (commonly referred to by its URL, witchvox.com) shut down their servers. Facebook groups, Discord servers, and YouTube and TikTok posts (the latter often under the hashtag #WitchTok) took over as the places for new and potential Pagans to seek out information.

Yet the faith overall has grown amidst all these changes.[5] Commonalities exist across the three principal "waves" of converts, driving newcomers to leave religions with which they have been raised and to adopt belief systems which often take inspiration from centuries-old practices.

What, then, are the drivers of these conversions? Are there long-standing spiritual beliefs which seem to be better served by the various Pagan traditions than more mainstream faiths? Are there familial practices whose Pagan roots are once more coming to light and influencing practitioners to take up the habits of their ancestors? Do the various forms of inclusivity in the Pagan community (especially for women and those in

[5] The Pagan population of the United States and its growth have been confoundingly difficult to pin down definitively. The U.S. Census Bureau stated the number of Pagans was 342,000 as of 2008 (see "Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population," accessed August 27, 2023, https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2010/compendia/statab/130ed/tables/11s0075.pdf.), and a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center ("Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, June 13, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/, accessed June 4, 2023) put the figure at 0.4% of the U.S., or 1,336,935 using that same percentage of the U.S. population of 334,233,854 as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau as of 1 January 2023 (see Derick Moore, "U.S. Population Estimated at 334,233,854 on Jan. 1, 2023," Census.gov, December 29, 2022, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/12/happy-new-year-2023.html, accessed 4 June 2023).

the LGBTQ+ spheres) present a more welcoming environment than older and more established religions?

This thesis argues that all of the above have combined with an ever-expanding degree of access to literature on Pagan practices and beliefs to spawn these waves of converts, especially in light of support for feminism, environmental and social justice causes, and a search for personal empowerment in the face of increasing authoritarianism. The converts, however, are not merely trading one faith tradition for another. Rather, they are participating in a homecoming of sorts: leaving behind religions which do not align with their already established worldviews and instead finding their way to a faith which embraces them and the paradigms they have adopted.

Chapter II.

On Paganism

Defining Paganism is somewhat challenging, even after multiple decades of the evolutions of Wicca, modern witchcraft, goddess worship, polytheism, and nature spirituality. Ask a dozen Pagans to broadly define the faith, and you are likely to get a dozen differing answers, though several may overlap one another. Ask those same Pagans to define their own personal religious practice or tradition, and you will almost certainly find yourself pulled into long explanations delineating the differences between their specific practice and Paganism writ large.

At its most basic, contemporary Paganism since the mid-twentieth century has revolved around a reverence for nature and the natural world, as well as the veneration of a variety of deities which were worshipped in their regions before the arrival of Christianity, and the enacting of various rituals and ceremonies intended either to pay homage to the Divine or to produce an effect in the broader world outside the ceremony itself. (This latter, depending on the form it takes and who is performing the rite, is typically referred to as witchcraft, spellwork, or magick.)[6] Nature is broadly the overall focus of Pagan belief, whether that includes the belief in deities (which it frequently

[6] Spelled with a "k" at the end to distinguish it from "mundane" magic or stage illusion. Magick is performed with the intent of altering the practitioner, their environs, others, or the world at large. Magic in this context is "merely" entertainment.

does—be they thought of as entities in their own right or manifestations of nature itself) or the practice of witchcraft.

This can take the form of a suburban artist who maintains a small personal altar to the Greek goddess Athena as patron of the arts. It can also manifest as a handful of practitioners meeting on or near the Vernal Equinox to celebrate the coming of spring by making offerings of grain and mead to Eostre, a Germanic goddess of the earth. Likewise, young men may undertake a symbolic hunt dedicated to Herne, a hunter god, as part of a rite of passage into manhood. Another group, focused on the Egyptian pantheon of deities, might come together to ask blessings of Bast, goddess of cats, as one member's cat prepares for veterinary surgery. Regardless of the specific gods or goddess being contacted, the aspect(s) of nature being addressed, or the nature of the rites and practices, modern Paganism maintains connections both to the deities of our ancestors and the natural world we all inhabit.

Chapter III.

On Religious Conversion

Pagan converts adopt their new religion for many of the same reasons why others change faiths. Professor of psychology and religion Lewis R. Rambo offers a theory of conversion which, while not focusing on converts to Paganism, is generally applicable to most converts. Rambo identifies five types of conversion in this theory, three of which are relevant here: apostasy (or defection), affiliation, and tradition transition.

These three types broadly fit the following definitions: "repudiation of a religious tradition or its beliefs by previous members" (apostasy/defection); "the movement of an individual or group from no or minimal religious commitment to full involvement with an institution or community of faith" (affiliation); and "the movement of an individual or a group from one major religious tradition to another" (tradition transition).[7] The three are not mutually exclusive; it is not uncommon for a convert to repudiate the major faith in which they were raised and later join another major faith. The conversion process can thus be thought of almost as a spectrum with defection leading to affiliation and then to transition.

[7] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Yale University, 1993), 13-14. The other two types are intensification, "the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal," and institutional transition, which "involves the change of an individual or group from one community to another within a major tradition." This latter does occur within Paganism, but does not involve leaving Paganism itself, and is thus not discussed further here.

John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, like Rambo, do not focus their studies of religious conversion specifically on Paganism, but nevertheless have identified patterns which apply to Pagan converts. They state that these types of conversion follow six patterns or motifs. They identify these as: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.[8] The intellectual and mystical involve reading about or directly experiencing a mystical event (such as a vision). Experimental motifs revolve around direct participation in a faith's practices to see if they are a good fit for the newcomer. Affective motifs revolve around a convert's direct experience of acceptance by a group and its leaders.[9] The revivalist motif is similar, but more broadly affective in that it places converts in emotionally-heightened situations (e.g., a tent revival) where conformity to behaviors (e.g., singing, dancing, witnessing, etc.) by existing practitioners leads to reinforcement of the new belief system. Finally, the coercive motif relies on external pressure from faith members—and especially leaders—to force potential converts to change their beliefs and behaviors.

Rambo states that conversion is, to one degree or another, prompted by crisis. The crisis catalyst itself can take a variety of forms (he identifies ten general categories), but two broad types encompass these forms: "crises that call into question one's fundamental orientation to life, and crises that in and of themselves are rather mild but are the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back."[10] Regardless of the type or the specific

[8] John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 373, https://doi.org/10.2307/1386185.
[9] John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30, no. 6 (1965): 862, https://doi.org/10.2307/2090965..
[10] Rambo, ch. 3, esp. p. 46.

event, catalysts represent a point not necessarily of no return, but certainly one beyond which one's worldview will never quite be the same.

Such points are major shifts in a convert's life, prompting them to alter their beliefs (or come to recognize them) in such a way that they may abandon social, economic, and lifestyle choices which had henceforth defined their world. What could possibly be so revelatory and life-changing as to necessitate such changes? Why would a convert potentially cast aside the framework of their life? Perhaps in the hope—conscious or not—of returning to a foundational state.

Beth Singler of the University of Zurich presents in her paper, "A Discussion of Conversion through the Example of Modern Pagan Witchcraft," a compelling take on the notion of conversion as it applies to Pagans, Singler makes a valuable comparison between forms of conversion. She splits conversion into two methods: "the Road (hard work) and the Rupture (sudden conversion)."[11] As we will see in the interview summaries, Pagans find their way to the Craft by either path, though the Road seems more oft-taken than experiences of the Rupture. This is not to say that a Road conversion will always lack Rupture, nor that a Rupture is not followed by an ongoing Road (which often deepens a convert's understanding of the new paradigm to which they have been exposed). One method tends to dominate while being accompanied by the other, but which is dominant and the intensity of each varies widely from convert to convert.

[11] Beth Singler, "A Discussion of Conversion through the Example of Modern Pagan Witchcraft," Academia.edu, May 23, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/5068352/A_Discussion_of_Conversion_through_the_Example_of_Modern_Pagan_Witchcraft?email_work_card=view-paper, 6-8.

Many Pagans find themselves exposed to various precursors or gateways in their youth, from myths and folklore of the Greeks, Romans, Norse, Egyptians, and other cultures, to fictional works in the genres of fantasy or science fiction (both of which, especially the former, often take inspiration from folklore and legend). Any or all of these can present worldviews contrary to the Abrahamic-deity-centric paradigm typical of much of America, offering a vision of a world inhabited by a variety of spirits and energies, where differences of gender and sexuality are to be accepted rather than feared and shamed, and where concern for the natural world is a constant backdrop to one's existence, rather than a mere exhortation found in a single passage of a weighty sacred tome. At the same time, exposure to any or all of these may not be sufficient to initiate a conversion experience. Some Pagans require a shock to their system, an event which so disrupts their perception of the world that they can never view things in quite the same way again (e.g., an atheist undertaking a meditative experience wherein they inadvertently encounter deities and come back from the experience firmly convinced that the gods—however one wishes to define them—are real after all).

Her work is not without its problems, however. For one, Singler argues that "[w]ith its democratic epistemology and emphasis on seeker-ship, Wicca cannot be seen to be engaging in a process that delineates 'insiders' and 'outsiders.' And yet, the Wiccan conversion narrative is a measure by which inclusion or exclusion can be judged."[12] Wicca (and Paganism at large) very much delineates "insiders" from "outsiders," in terms of whom is a practitioner or believer. Even new seekers who have not committed themselves to a Pagan path are seen by practicing Pagans as explorers and the curious,

[12] Singler, 11.

leaving them as "outsiders" in Singler's terms. This does not mean such seekers will not be welcomed by Pagans—some Pagans are very willing to discuss practices and traditions with the curious, while others are more reticent—but without a Pagan's own self-identification, they remain outsiders by their own definition.

Singler also writes, "In the case of Wicca, online communities give the opportunity to learn from and be instant religious experts and to receive tropes such as 'coming home.'"[13] Only one of these three points is accurate: that of being able to learn from religious experts via online communities. *Being* an expert, on the other hand, requires a combination of experience and education (whether via reading or directly from teachers). It is not unusual for new Pagans to claim powerful lineages or skills as means of perceived legitimization and self-aggrandizement, but claiming one's expertise—particularly when new to the faith—does not make it so, nor does participation in virtual communities alone. Likewise, most anyone performing even a casual study of religious conversion is likely to have heard the "coming home trope." It is far from confined to Pagan spheres, and to imply that it is exclusively or even predominantly a Pagan phenomenon assumes that no seeker investigating Paganism would have explored other faiths and conversion stories sufficiently to have encountered the term elsewhere. By contrast, it is not unusual for converts to Paganism to have explored, however cursorily, a variety of other belief systems, and discussions with any practitioners of faiths other than that with which they were raised will likely raise the point of arriving someplace they feel welcome and safe; the idea of "home" implies those very concepts, thus rendering "coming home" a largely Pagan trope misrepresents the process of conversion itself. That

[13] Singler, 10.

said, this motif of homecoming is a very common one among Pagans, and is perhaps the most frequently encountered way for Pagans to describe the feeling they have about their faith after adopting it. The motif thus remains valuable as a means of describing Pagan conversion in particular while still retaining utility as a broader description of conversion.

Adler asserts in *Drawing Down the Moon* that "no one converts to Paganism."[14] This necessitates a discussion of the term "conversion" itself, as many practitioners come to Paganism from other faith traditions. Adler likely framed her position vis-à-vis the Christian ideal of conversion, which consists of a full reversal of one's previous belief system, submitting fully to the acceptance of one's inherently sinful nature and Christ's redemptive sacrifice as the only route to redemption. In this view of conversion, a deconversion or total abandonment of one's prior faith is an absolute requirement, leading to a holistic change in belief system (in that one's entire life is affected by their adoption of Christianity. Conversion can be seen through other lenses, however.

Writing about interactions between Native American tribes and Christian missionaries, Jennifer Graber and Linford D. Fisher both separately use "affiliation" in their respective monographs to describe interactions with a faith other than that with which one was raised. Graber's use can roughly be interpreted via context to mean "association with" (a given faith), while Fisher is more explicit, referring to affiliation as a "partial membership" in a faith or specific church.[15] This is inadequate to describe the

[14] Margot Adler, *Drawing down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 2006), xii.
[15] Jennifer Graber, *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), ch. 7.; and Linford D. Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 84.

conversion of the vast majority of Pagans, however, as these are people who generally are not seeking any sort of societal advantage by participating in a non-mainstream religion.

Affiliation can move in the opposite direction, however. Non-Pagans might see advantage in associating with the Pagan community, such as artists who interact with Pagans and are permitted to sell their works at festivals and other events. Likewise, an atheist with environmentalist interests might well take interest in nature-oriented Pagan rites and perhaps even participate in so-called "open" rituals where membership in a particular coven or Pagan group is not required.

For Pagans, though, conversion is a much more holistic process, informing and affecting most aspects of their life A Pagan is likely to refer to affiliation as associating and interacting with non-Pagans who possess overlapping interests and concerns, though they will generally make clear (especially to other Pagans) that they are Pagan first and foremost—if not exclusively—and that their work with members of other faiths should not be construed as membership in a given congregation or denomination.

It is likely more appropriate to reframe the idea of conversion, as does Eugene V. Gallagher's essay, "A Religion without Converts? Becoming a Neo-Pagan." Gallagher begins with the same non-conversion quote from Adler cited above, then goes on to refute Adler's concept of conversion, arguing that Paganism is in fact a religion made up almost wholly of converts (which was likely true when it was published in 1994—second- or third-generation Pagans were quite rare in the United States at the time). He writes that "there is a less dramatic, though no less important, form of conversion [than that of Saul of Tarsus] that unfolds gradually in an individual's life. Partly because it borders on broader processes of socialization, that kind of conversion is less easily

summarized in a single striking example. But the distinction between sudden and gradual conversions should not be drawn too sharply. On further inspection, sudden conversions can be seen as part of a process, and gradual ones can be seen to have decisive turning points."[16] Adam Anczyk and Matouš Vencálek perhaps summarize conversion best: "religious conversion, understood as change in religious behaviour and beliefs."[17] Their definition, combined with Gallagher's, is the context in which the idea of conversion will be presented henceforth unless otherwise specified.

As this thesis examines survey data and interviews with Pagans about their conversion experiences, it will be important to remember the "coming home" motif. This phrase or variations on it appears often in the survey responses and almost always makes an appearance in the interviews; it is perhaps one of the most common aspects of Pagan conversion (though the use of the term occurs after the conversion itself). As Graham Harvey notes, "Pagans are people who 'come home' in two related senses, neither necessarily taking precedence—chronological or ideological—over the other. First, Pagans come home to themselves, second Pagans come home to a sense of belonging with others or within a tradition."[18] I would argue that the tradition in question can be Paganism itself rather than a defined path like Gardnerian Wicca or Khemetic Egyptian practice, but Harvey's statement is otherwise accurate.

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[16] Eugene V. Gallagher, "A Religion without Converts? Becoming a Neo-Pagan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXII, no. 3 (1994): 851–68, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lxii.3.851, 864.

[17] Anczyk, Adam and Matouš Vencálek, "Coming Home to Paganism: Theory of Religious Conversion or a Theological Principle?," *Studia Religiologica*, 46, no. 3 (2013), 161. https://doi.org/10.4467/20844077SR.13.013.1601.

[18] Graham Harvey, "Coming Home and Coming Out Pagan (but Not Converting)," essay, in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (London: Cassel, 1999), 233–46, 239.. Though he does not state this explicitly, Harvey's reference to coming home to oneself seems to indicate arriving at a religious or spiritual tradition which is in line with one's existing and established worldview and belief system, even if these have not been fully articulated or expressed either internally or externally.

There is, of course, no "right" way for Pagans to convert. One eventually chooses to adopt Paganism as one's faith, declares this (certainly privately, but perhaps also publicly, as determined by the believer's level of comfort with such), and proceeds with their life. If the homecoming motif feels appropriate, the believer will take it to heart and the motif will make itself known if and when the believer discusses their conversion experience(s) with others. This is the true heart of Harvey's "[coming] home to themselves": a recognition of what the Pagan believes about the world and their faith, and an identification with Paganism as the path which best aligns with those beliefs.

Chapter IV.

The First Wave: Gardner, Buckland, and the American Successors

Modern Paganism is widely considered to have originated with Gerald Gardner, a British author and aristocrat whose love of nature and Romantic rejection of Victorian societal strictures inspired him to create a system of practices inspired by Greek, Roman, and Celtic faiths. Gardner's work took hold primarily in the 1950s following the publication of his book, *Witchcraft Today*, in 1954. Students and former coven members split off from Gardner and his British associates after completing their tutelage to form their own groups over the next two decades. By the early and mid-1970s, most practitioners were removed from Gardner in their studies by two or three degrees of separation, if not more.

One of Gardner's most prominent disciples was Raymond Buckland, who exported the Gardnerian tradition to the United States beginning in 1962. Buckland published *Witchcraft from the Inside* in 1971, documenting his experiences as a member of Gardner's coven. Three years later in 1974, Buckland diverged from the purely Gardnerian tradition with *The Tree: Complete Book of Saxon Witchcraft*. These books presented both a depiction of witchcraft (now categorized as a religion by Gardner and named Wicca) in practice and, in the latter book, in a more historically-grounded sense. Gardner's own practices were a synthesis of variety of occult traditions, though he presented them as deriving from a millennia-old witchcraft tradition pre-dating

Christianity and surviving in hiding until the present day, a presentation which has since been disputed, refuted, and debunked by a variety of scholars and other authors, including Buckland himself.[19]

At this point, British and American Paganism (then both generally self-describing as Wiccan) diverged, with Gardner and students including Alex Sanders continuing what has come to be known as British Traditional (or "Brit Trad") Wicca in its Gardnerian and Alexandrian—named for Gardner and Sanders, respectively—forms, while Buckland and his own successors went on to found the various forms of American Wicca and Paganism.

In April 1974, the Council of American Witches composed and adopted a set of Principles of Wiccan Belief (many of which are generally shared in some form across multiple forms of Paganism besides Wicca). The eighth of these reads:

> "Calling oneself Witch does not make a Witch, but neither does heredity itself, nor the collecting of titles, degrees, and initiations. A Witch seeks to control the forces within herself or himself that make life possible in order to live wisely and well without harm to others and in harmony with nature."[20]

This refutation of heredity and initiation pushed back against Gardnerian tradition and began to democratize Paganism (though a strong undercurrent of both older practices remained until well into the late 1990s and early 2000s). No longer was it required for a newcomer to find and join a coven before declaring their new spiritual path: the way was

[19] For a more thorough discussion of Gardner's development of Wicca and the later controversies over historical authenticity, see: Adler, ch. 4; and Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), ch. 11, 12.

[20] "Principles of Wiccan Beliefs," Internet Book of Shadows: Principles of Wiccan Beliefs (American Council of Witches, 1974), accessed June 1, 2023, https://sacred-texts.com/bos/bos056.htm.

"clear" for those who heard the call of Paganism and witchcraft to say this was their truth—though it must be admitted that the most independently-minded of seekers doubtless took up the title of witch or Pagan regardless of whether or not any "official" sanction of such practices existed. The Principles of Wiccan Belief were not something casually available to any seeker who might wander into a bookstore or library, however; finding them likely required guidance from already-practicing Pagans, and identifying that group was not always an easy task.

The democratization of Paganism also came about in part through the efforts of Tim "Oberon" Zell and the publication of *Green Egg*, for a time the most prominent magazine dedicated to Paganism. No longer was Pagan knowledge disseminated solely from teacher to student in initiatory traditions, but books and periodicals became ways for previously obscured information to make its way to eager seekers. The curious could go to a local library or bookstore, begin an exploration of mythology via James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, find reference to supposedly suppressed hereditary strains of witchcraft practices in Charles Leland's *Aradia: The Gospel of the Witches*, and examine Garder's own *Witchcraft Today* to learn that a Pagan revival was already taking place (albeit somewhat slowly) in the United States and Britain. The greater challenge was to locate an active coven or individual teacher for more intensive learning, and books alone were of little aid in that regard.

Culturally, American Pagans of the first wave shared a resistance to the conservatism and militarism of the mid-20th-century United States. As feminist and environmental concerns became ever more part of the public consciousness, so too did

the appeal—however historically inaccurate—of a long-hidden tradition of goddess worship waiting to be rediscovered and brought back into widespread practice.

The feminist roots of modern Paganism run deep. Adler writes that some feminist Pagans

> "view all human concerns as both spiritual and political, and they regard the separation between the two as a false idea born of 'patriarchy,' an idea unknown before classical times and one that has produced much bitter fruit—the splitting of human beings into 'minds' and 'bodies.'"[21]

For them, political and cultural resistance to a male-dominated society—particularly one whose aggressive tendencies were highlighted during World War II and the myriad conflicts of the Cold War—appeared both in the worship of a foundational primeval goddess (of whom all other goddesses were often seen as alternate manifestations) and magickal ritual practice. A population of women who were fighting to reclaim the sense of empowerment and independence that had begun during World War II and then retracted during the first decade and a half of the Cold War saw in the use of magick and calling upon the divine a way to pursue equality in a manner adjunct to protests and attempting to elect sympathetic politicians to power.[22]

Feminist Wiccan author and activist Zsuzsanna (Z.) Budapest's stance is likely the one to which Adler refers. Budapest and her co-contributors to *Feminist Wicca* write in the essay collection *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows*, "What people believe (faith – religion) is political because it influences their actions and because it is the

[21] Adler, 182.
[22] For more on feminism's influence on Pagan converts, see Adler, 182-91.

vehicle by which a religion perpetuates a social system. Politics and religion are interdependent."[23] She states on the first page of the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1's manifesto,

> "We believe that wimmin lost supremacy through the aggressions of males who were exiled from the matriarchies and formed the patriarchal hordes responsible for the invention of rape and the subjugation of wimmin. We believe that female control of the death (male) principle yields hummin evolution."[24]

Whether Budapest's often-unattributed claims were historically accurate was not necessarily relevant for a growing body of women who were fighting for equality in the various spheres of American society, and who had just won a major victory in *Roe v. Wade*. The very idea that there had been a goddess-centric faith which was suppressed in order to erode and invert matriarchal cultures (which were implied to have been humanity's default, rather than patriarchal structures) struck a chord in those who agreed that the religious and the political were inextricably linked. Restoring goddess worship, therefore, seemed a viable path to restoring the lost balance and associated peace of the past.

Likewise, the growing sense of environmental awareness and ecological responsibility begun in part with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* served as motivation for a religious movement which saw Nature and the planet itself as inherently divine. This was especially true of Oberon Zell's Church of All Worlds, a science-fiction-inspired Pagan church which also incorporated scientific principles into

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[23] Zsuzsanna Emese Budapest et al., *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows* (Venice, CA: Feminist Wicca, 1976), 2.

[24] Ibid, 1. It should be noted that Budapest was born in 1940 and grew up witnessing both the immediate horrors of WWII's impact on Hungary and the succeeding occupation by communist forces before fleeing for the West, which greatly influenced her gender bias (and unique spelling choices).

its worldview, including what James Lovelock would eventually call the "Gaia hypothesis," which envisions Earth as a single and perhaps quasi-sentient entity comprised of its various biological, geological, oceanic, and atmospheric parts (humans included).[25]

Author and activist Starhawk connects this to Paganism in her book, *The Spiral Dance*: "The model of the Goddess, who is immanent in nature, fosters respect for the sacredness of all living things. Witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology."[26] She continues:

> "Love for life in all its forms is the basic ethic of Witchcraft. Witches are bound to honor and respect all living things, and to serve the life force. While the Craft recognizes that life feeds on life and that we must kill in order to survive, life is never taken needlessly, never squandered or wasted. Serving the life force means working to preserve the diversity of natural life, to prevent the poisoning of the environment and the destruction of species."[27]

This last sentence inspires the work of not only Starhawk's own Reclaiming Collective but numerous other Pagan groups and individuals who strive to try and live in ecologically-friendly ways and to find means of attempting to offset the ongoing damage humans do to the natural world. Starhawk admits in her notes on the twenty-year anniversary of *The Spiral Dance*'s publication, that the ecological focus is one "most

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[25] Adler, 315-320. The Church of All Worlds predates Lovelock's first published discussion of the Gaia hypothesis; whether Zell or CAW formally espoused a planetary sentience—which Lovelock does not, in a purely literal sense—prior to Lovelock's publication is unclear.
[26] 1. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999), 34-35.
[27] Ibid, 36.

Witches believe . . . in theory, but we often fall short in practice."[28] We may work closely with our deities, but Pagans ourselves are only human.

Though it might appear that all Pagans are strongly left-leaning in their politics, this is not the case. As scholar Chas S. Clifton notes, "For every nuclear-power-plant-protesting Reclaiming Witch, we can find one Republican Witch who fully supported President George W. Bush's war on Iraq. . . . For every vegetarian Pagan, there is another performing hunting magic and paying dues to the National Rifle Association."[29] Clifton overstates his case, likely by a significant margin, but is not wrong to clarify that liberalism is not the default for Pagans. This is unfortunately exemplified by some Norse- and Germanic inspired Pagans (often referring to themselves as "Odinists") who follow a "blood and soil" tradition which manifests itself as racism and, in the present area, frequent association with Neo-Nazi groups. This has been a source of friction for followers of similar paths who lack the racist bias, as media coverage outside the Pagan sphere—particularly in fictional television and film—does not make a distinction between the racist and egalitarian forms of these traditions. (Those who reject the racist leanings frequently refer to themselves as "Heathens" to distinguish, but this is by no means a hard and fast rule. It is safe to say that all Odinists are Heathens, but not all—and, in fact, comparatively few—Heathens are Odinists.)

[28] Ibid, 264.
[29] Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2006), 125.

Chapter V.

The Self-Initiated

This period, ranging from 1980 through 1999, saw large increases in the number of Pagans in the United States compared to the previous twenty years. In part, this was due to a wider availability of literature, but it also coincided with the advent of a variety of Pagan festivals around the country. These events—often held annually—provided opportunities for the spiritually curious to attend Pagan rituals and workshops and to meet members of the festival's community (which often reflected the local and regional Pagan populations). Covens and informal groups such as "coffee cauldrons" (loosely organized weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly gatherings which Pagans could socialize with one another, whether in public or a private residence) frequently spun off from such festivals, providing regular if sometimes scattered and disorganized points of connection for seekers. Many coffee cauldrons advertised their presence in bookstores and New Age shops which were already focal points for those looking into Paganism, and symbiotic relationships between stores and these gatherings developed quite often.

Another point of entry during this period was a proliferation of media depictions of Pagans, witches, and magicians, particularly during the 1990s. Rather than unsettling depictions of isolated communities practicing human sacrifice in the modern era such as 1973's *The Wicker Man*, second-wave media portrayed Pagans—and specifically witches—in a more positive light. 1987's *The Witches of Eastwick* was far from an

accurate depiction, particularly in Jack Nicholson's role as the Abrahamic Devil (a figure which is not even recognized by most Pagans), but the rituals performed by Cher, Susan Sarandon, and Michelle Pfeiffer's characters bear superficial resemblance to some actual practices. Their being the film's protagonists reflected both a high degree of female empowerment and an image of witchcraft as source of positive strength rather than manipulation and evil.

Television series in the mid- to late 1990s, especially The WB Network's *Charmed* and the characters of Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, did a great deal to popularize witchcraft in the public consciousness. These depictions delved more into the religious aspects of witchcraft, and a number of converts from this period cite either or both series (and the 1996 film *The Craft*) as major influences in leading to their explorations of Paganism. *Buffy*, in particular, was a contributing factor, as neither Willow nor Tara were formally inducted into covens before starting to learn witchcraft, while *The Craft* centered on a coven of high school girls and the Halliwell sisters of *Charmed* inherited much of their abilities through their family lineage. The idea of self-education and training was just as appealing at the end of the twentieth century as a decade and a half previously, and upon learning that witchcraft and Paganism were real (if somewhat inaccurately portrayed for dramatic effect), many young women—and not a few people of other genders—began deeper spiritual explorations.

Chapter VI.

The Third Wave: 21st-Century Pagans

Nearly three-quarters of a century since Gardner published *Witchcraft Today*, the Pagan world has changed almost as much—if not more—than the non-Pagan world. The old gatherings in bookstores and New Age shops are infrequent, if they even persist. Websites remain common places to gather information, but the site is often YouTube. Most of the prominent internet discussion forums are no longer hosted and have thus been taken down, replaced instead by individual Discord servers or Reddit threads.[30] Nonetheless, the Pagan drive for connection to the natural world and the divine are undiminished.

The past three years have had tremendous effects on the Pagan community and thereby how seekers find it. Festivals have decreased in size and scope—and one of America's oldest Pagan events, the Heartland Pagan Festival in McLouth, Kansas, has just celebrated its last iteration over Memorial Day weekend in 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and cancelled not just festivals but Sabbat rituals and monthly or weekly gatherings, even if those were so-called "coffee cauldrons" rather than workshops or ritual events. Some of those gatherings moved online, facilitated by Facebook and

[30] Discord is a decentralized social platform where individuals can host their own public or private servers. These contain options for message threads, messaging between users, and real-time audio-video communications, and can be used via computers, phones/tablets, and some videogame consoles. The Discord client and basic server hosting options are free, making it an easily accessible venue for many users.

Zoom meetings and organized in social media groups or on Discord. Cyber-Pagans are nothing new—they arose in the early days of the internet as tech-savvy Pagans began gaining access to real-time online communications—but the isolation of COVID lockdowns made virtual rituals and meetings much more common and available than they had been previously.

Despite the popular media's mentions of #WitchTok (the subject hashtag used to discuss Paganism and witchcraft on TikTok) as the digital venue of choice, this is more due to the rapid rise of TikTok usage—predominantly by teens—than its actual use among Pagans. Recent converts over the age of 18 whose use of digital platforms informed their conversion to Paganism universally reported that they turned to websites, YouTube videos, and Discord conversations for information rather than using TikTok. Whether this trend persists or evolves over time is likely to change as rapidly as the landscape of social media itself.

The publishing industry is still a major access point for information about Paganism, especially for seekers who are exploring a variety of faith traditions and have yet to settle into a new spiritual home. Some of the "old guard" Pagan authors have passed beyond the veil or have retired from writing during the twenty-first century—notably Isaac Bonewits (the first person to ever receive an accredited college degree in magickal studies, and a prolific author on the subject) and Morning Glory Zell (Oberon Zell's spouse, who was also instrumental in the publication of *Green Egg* and a respected author in her own right)—but others such as Mat Auryn, John Beckett, and Cyndi Brannen continue writing for ever-expanding audiences.

The causes which inspired converts during the first wave are no less important now, and may indeed have taken on new prominence. The U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 only added to a surge of feminism begun around 2015-2016 (coinciding with the presidential campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump). Much like the case in the 1960s and '70s, women who felt disempowered by an increasingly patriarchal legislative and judicial system supported by conservative religious elements turned to a faith which not only welcomed women but often elevated them. The use of magick and witchcraft to try and achieve ends which could not be achieved by "mundane" means doubtless held appeal, as well.

Rollbacks of Environmental Protection Agency safeguards, coupled with worldwide evidence that human-affected climate change in the form of extreme weather events, temperature shifts, and the increase in ice melting at the poles and in Greenland, served as stark reminders that Mother Earth—and more specifically human survival—is in as much danger as forty or fifty years earlier.

Information about these concerns, which remain important to Pagan converts, is easier than ever to obtain thanks to the pervasiveness of the internet and the ongoing availability of media coverage (be it social media or more traditional outlets). As these issues become ever more problematic, those who wish to effect positive change in these areas can find themselves more and more motivated to take action, and if that action includes leaving a faith and adopting one better suited to one's worldview—such as is often the case for Pagan converts—the widespread access to information in both print and digital forms continues to provide a path for seekers to follow.

Chapter VII.

My Survey and Interviews

Origins of the Thesis and Survey

This thesis was originally intended to examine the motivations behind conversion to Paganism from roughly 2014 or 2015 onward, in response to anecdotal information that Pagan ranks were swelling in response to the rising tide of conservatism in the United States (particularly after Donald Trump announced himself as a candidate for the presidency). Having seen first-hand a rise in right-wing Paganism in the American Midwest in the late 2000s and early 2010s, I was curious about the new converts and what had prompted them to change their religion. I initially considered a global analysis, as far-right Paganism is (also anecdotally) on the rise in Europe, but soon found that data collection outside the U.S. might become more complex than I was prepared for, given my relative inexperience with such projects and the rather stringent privacy rules in Canada, the UK, and the EU. I thus elected to confine my analysis to the United States alone (and to confine the research to those who were 18 years of age or older at the time of the survey to simplify data collection and avoid potential legal complexities of data collection and interviews).

The scope was at first meant to compare recent and first-wave converts in order to draw parallels between their conversion experiences and motivations alongside societal

trends active in the country during the two periods. My thesis advisor, Dr. Daniel McKanan, recommended that I broaden the spectrum of converts to include the second wave in order to look for broader patterns, and after some consideration, I agreed with his suggestion. This necessitated pulling back on the historical analysis and comparisons, as including the necessary level of detail would have resulted in a project better suited to a doctoral dissertation rather than an ALM thesis.

The research survey for this thesis became, in large part, a recruiting tool for interviews. The survey's original intent—to ask at least a hundred Pagans to discuss their conversion—fell short of its intended goal, only recruiting sixty-three respondents between 25 February and 17 May 2023. This caused a shift in the thesis itself, as the available quantitative data meant I would need to lean more heavily into qualitative information from the surveys in order to try and discern patterns in conversion motivation. Fortunately, some unexpected commonalities emerged during the interview process (as will be seen in the interview summaries below), and shared motivations and experiences gradually became clear.

Sampling was in many ways similar to an online version of Berger et al's methods when conducting the Pagan Census.[31] Publicly-accessible online links to the survey were posted on the author's social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Mastodon) accounts, but a great number of responses came after one of the author's friends posted the survey link to

[31] 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), xvii-xix. It should be noted that while Berger's research on the Pagan Census was for many years a definitive look at the American Pagan population, her studies focused on demographics, political inclinations, socioeconomic status, and similar factors; motivations behind conversion were not explored in any degree of detail, and thus any insights about conversion which can be taken from the Pagan Census and Berger's follow-up book will be implicit rather than explicit.

a Discord server of which they are a member. This resulted in a surge of roughly twenty responses between 25 February and 4 March; other responses were submitted gradually during the remainder of March. Another twenty-three responses were received following an interview subject (Sarenth) sharing the link on yet another Discord server, and yet another interviewee (Maleck) likewise shared the link and thereby recruited additional respondents during the first and second weeks of May.

Though the survey was not large enough to present an accurately representative sample size and statistically significant result, some useful trends did emerge from the available data.[32]

Heathenry (or various terms for it) was the largest single tradition represented in survey responses. It appears to be a popular tradition among recent converts, with seventeen of twenty-two respondents converting since 2004, fourteen of those since 2012. Seven heathens reported converting between 2016 and 2021; some interview subjects mentioned being concerned with far-right heathens becoming more prominent in media coverage of Pagans (particularly with the rise of right-wing extremists since the Trump presidential campaign began in 2015), and spoke of wanting to demonstrate that heathens who subscribe to racist or so-called "blood and soil" beliefs are the minority.[33]

Heathenry's expansion may be due in part to popular culture: television programs such as *Vikings* and films like Robert Eggers' *The Northman* have provided somewhat

[32] Respondent #7 provided answers to the survey, but their reply to the question about their state of residence was listed as "个人自购" (Gèrén zì gòu) [personal purchase]. Whether this reflects that they wished to indicate that they own their own home is unclear. Based on this and the fact that several answers do not correspond to the questions being posed, their statistics for age, gender, etc., are not represented in the discussion of the survey results and any conclusions drawn from them; their actual responses are included in the survey data in Appendix A for completeness, however.

[33] Helen Berger discussed on her website in late 2022 that her current research explores the connections between Pagans and the far-right, but that research is unpublished as of this writing.

more realistic depictions of Dark Age and early medieval Scandinavian societies and cultures than in the past, showcasing them–and, importantly, their religion–as far from the uncivilized barbarians of earlier histories. Likewise, the increased appeal of musical groups such as Heilung and Wardruna, both of whom use predominantly traditional instruments (with some modern technology such as samplers) to play music inspired by or in some cases taken directly from their historical roots. Heilung in particular stands as an exemplar of heathenry, as their concerts are less a mere performance of musical works and are instead rituals and sagas set to the band's music. The musicians themselves play while dressed in costumes resembling Scandinavian ceremonial garb and a variety of similarly-attired performers act out a variety of rituals during the songs. As one non-Pagan attendee said to me as we were leaving a Heilung concert in Worcester, Massachusetts in October 2022, "I felt like I'd been allowed to witness a sacred event."

Coming in just behind heathens in terms of respondents are the eclectics: Pagans who draw their practices from a multiplicity of traditions and pantheons. Eclectics are often thought of as the most common form of Pagan by members of the community (who sometimes joke that eclectics pick and choose practices like people loading their plates at a salad bar), though media representations have often portrayed Wiccans as the "default" modern Pagan. Twelve survey respondents formally described themselves as eclectic, though I added a small number of others who did not use that word specifically but whose description of their practice fit the definition. Seven of the surveyed eclectics had converted during the third wave, but given that third-wave converts make up the majority of respondents, this may not necessarily indicate a popularity or lack thereof in eclectism's adoption.

Somewhat surprisingly, Hellenic Pagans—those who practices are rooted in Greek traditions and their pantheon—represented a notable minority of respondents. Six respondents described themselves as Hellenic, with one representative from the second wave and another five from the third wave.

Wicca as a positive self-definition in any form only appeared six times in the survey; three among the eclectics, two "formal" Wiccans ("humanist" and "Blue Star" Wicca in particular), and one Heathen who was raised in an Alexandrian Wiccan tradition. This came as a surprise, as Wicca has often—as noted above—been considered the "default" form of American Paganism. This tendency to default to Wicca could well stem from the fact that Buckland's own practice was Gardnerian Wicca, thus making it the standard for Pagan practice in the U.S. My personal theory is that because Wicca was synonymous with Paganism in this country for so long (and often still is, among those without the specific religious literacy needed to differentiate various Pagan traditions), Wicca became a publicly-accessible "face" of Paganism. Even to this day, if asked about my religious identity, I will answer "Pagan" first and then, if faced with a lack of understanding, I will ask if the querent is at all familiar with Wicca; if so, I tell them to think of my faith as being much like that (just for the sake of brevity and simplicity). It is entirely possible that Wicca has not been the dominant form of American Paganism for several decades, but the language used to distinguish between traditions has remained largely obscure enough that "Wicca" has remained the commonly-used shorthand term.

Gender identity did not seem to have an obvious correlation to the traditions Pagans follow. Among the 30 female respondents, there was not a consistent pattern of traditions being followed; diversity was the order of the day. For male-identifying

respondents, 7 of 18 identified as heathens (including one trans-masculine respondent). Non-binary respondents were similarly Heathen-leaning, with 6 of 12 identifying as Heathen and another four as eclectic.

The majority of female-identifying respondents were in the 36-40-year-old age bracket, with another five each in the 26-30 and 41-45 groups; other age groups had no more than four women in them, and most had only one or two. Cisgender male respondents skewed somewhat younger, with four converts in the 26-30 group, three from 36-40, and one or two in all others (save 46-50, which had no males); the two transmasculine respondents were in the 21-25 and 26-30 groups. Non-binary Pagans leaned younger than most other groups, with one from 21-25, seven from 26-30, three from 31-35, and one from 41-45; this may be due to the relatively recent wide use of non-binary as a reportable gender; this same survey, if held twenty years earlier, might have had a larger number of transgender (or cisgender) respondents than non-binaries, but this is only speculative and can obviously not be verified.

Age likewise seemed to affect some choices of Pagan traditions, though the reasons for this correlation are unclear. Nine members of the 26-30 group self-identified as Heathen, far more in that single category than any other age/tradition group. Three respondents was the average number of Pagans in the eclectic (26-30, 36-40, and 41-45) group as sorted by age. Heathens had four members in the 31-35 and 36-40 groups, with three from 41-45. Respondents in the 21-25, 46-50, and 51-55 age groups were diverse enough that no distinct patterns emerged.

Books seemed to be the dominant “gateway” to Pagans of the first and second waves, while discussions with friends took prominence among third-wave Pagans as

introductions to the faith (with books recommended by friends following closely behind). Popular and online culture also led third-wave Pagans to their path. Some respondents reported having been introduced to Paganism via gaming (either tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, or computer games such as the dynasty simulator *Crusader Kings II*, which allows players to play a Pagan ruler during the Dark Ages and into the medieval period), while others made their explorations via watching YouTube videos or participating in online discussions. Film and television were largely absent, save for two respondents who cited the film, *The Craft*, as an introduction to Paganism.

The survey itself provided fewer insights than expected regarding the motivations behind conversion. While respondents were offered a choice of factors they could identify which influenced their conversion, those factors were apparently too broad to present substantive data. Likewise, text-entry survey responses which might have provided information about conversion motivation yielded fewer conclusions than I would have hoped. The respondents generally seemed—for whatever reason—to be much more forthcoming about their conversion motivations during interviews than when simply asked to write about why they became Pagan. This can serve as a caution for any researchers pursuing similar studies in the future: alternate phrasing of questions in the survey, more (or different) response options, or a clearer focus on the inquiry into motivations may be necessary in order to secure the necessary data from respondents. In any case, anyone else wishing to study why people convert to Paganism should expect that the most relevant information will have to be "teased out" from respondents during interviews and that future research may not be able to rely primarily upon survey data.

The Interviews

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom. The questions were organized in such a way as to lead subjects into a discussion of their reasons for converting to Paganism, search for additional details, and then circle back to draw out any information which might have been overlooked or seemed irrelevant during the earlier part of the interview. Subjects were also occasionally asked to provide clarifying details regarding their survey responses, particularly if they presented information with which the author was unaware. Some interviews provided unintended information regarding the reasons for other Pagans' conversion or the wider state of Pagan culture, particularly in terms of how online communication does or does not facilitate introductions to Paganism for newcomers.

All interview subjects listed here are identified either by a pseudonym or their respondent number.

Interview One: Eliza

The first of the follow-up interviews was conducted with Eliza, a cisgender woman from North Carolina. Eliza first began self-identifying as Pagan in 2015. She was raised primarily Baptist, but joined a Pentecostal church at age 22. She converted to Paganism in 2015, adopting a path which she describes as a combination of Appalachian folk magic and Heathenry.

Eliza's roots with Paganism go back to her early childhood and time spent with her grandparents. Appalachian traditions dating back to the original English and Scottish

colonists contain obviously Pagan traditions, though the predominance of Christianity in the region leads to the Pagan roots being subtly disguised in order to be acceptable. Most of this disguising comes in the form of identifying such practices as "family traditions," such as the handing down of agricultural timing by lunar rhythms or a deep-seated focus on ancestral veneration (particularly in the form of laying flowers and other memorial tokens on relatives' graves).

Connection to the land is a central theme of Eliza's story. She recounted a particular incident where she was standing outside with one of her grandparents, surrounded by a ring of nearby mountains. She described the experience as one of safety and security, with the mountains—or, more specifically, the spirits of these mountains—providing shelter for her. The mountains, Eliza maintains, always felt to her as if they were possessed of a consciousness dwelling within them, or perhaps that they were conscious entities in and of themselves. This animistic representation of the land is nothing unusual in Pagan traditions, but to have it be something innately sensed by a young child, particularly when such a representation was not directly taught by relatives or peers, speaks to a reflexive connection to place. It should be noted that Eliza did not specifically articulate how that connection led from her childhood experiences to her eventual conversion to Paganism as an adult (though the memories of connection to land and spirit would doubtless be ones which would resonate with her if she felt similar connections in her teen and adult years).

Eliza described having moved away from that region for a time but that upon her return to the area (where she still resides), immediately having felt a renewal of that sense of being connected to the spirits in and of the mountains. Though she does not live in the

same house as she did during her initial experiences with these spirits nor does she maintain the same spiritual practices as she did at the time, she has effectively moved back "home" in both a literal and religious sense.

Interview Two: Hope

The next follow-up interview was conducted with Hope, another cisgender woman from North Carolina. Hope's conversion dates to 2007, following a Methodist upbringing. Her first exposure to Paganism was through author Scott Cunningham's *Magical Herbalism*, a copy of which Hope found in her stepmother's home along with "some book about faeries."[34] Cunningham's practical discussion of the use of herbs in magick was more "grounded and useful" to the then 10-year-old Hope. Literature continued to pave Hope's path toward Paganism, as her grandmother gifted her with a copy of Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (a female-centric retelling of the King Arthur myths, which includes numerous portrayals of druidic traditions and practices employed by figures such as Morgan le Faye). Hope continued seeking out Pagan-influenced fiction through high school, citing authors such as Diana Paxson, Morgan Llewellyn, and Monica Furlong as particular favorites.

During her college years, Hope was involved in a university writing lab where she met several Pagan students. These students discussed some of their beliefs and practices with Hope, including teaching her about the use of tarot cards and providing tarot readings for her. She was eventually invited to a housewarming for some members of this

[34] Scott Cunningham, *Magical Herbalism: The Secret Craft of the Wise* (Minneapolis, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1982.)

group, and was able to see a house blessing ritual in action during the party. Hope describes the appeal of ritual and its structured nature as foundational to her conversion, though she admits that the "Eastern Orthodox could have had [her]" at that point in time, simply due to the formality of their ritual practices. She says that she felt "carried" by ritual and that it provided a "firmer scaffolding," a structured environment which encouraged participants to join in the religious work being done.

This reflects Hope's consistent involvement with and commitment to community. Following her initial exposure to ritual, Hope began training with that same group, then eventually moved on to working with others. She helped to lead "a fairly open (though not entirely public) circle for about a decade," and is currently "with one group: an oracular divination group that began in the Norse tradition, but has evolved to include folks from several different paths. This is a group of peers, rather than a group with a strong leadership structure. We offer public workshops and oracular divination, but we also spend time taking care of each other's needs in our meetings. We're fairly 'at-need' in our structures—we don't make a point of celebrating particular holidays as a group, though some years, we will, if we're feeling it."

This dedication to community influenced her conversion process primarily through Paganism's strong feminist identification. Exposure to Pagan ritual made it "very clear that [she] could be a sacramental equal," and gave her an ability to hold ritual authority. This differed markedly from Hope's Methodist background, where women were heavily frowned upon as clergy members. Ironically, while participating in the Emmaeus Christian mystery tradition, Hope was told by a group leader that she felt Hope had a "calling to a ministerial role." This has manifested in her taking on a primarily

devotional and supportive role in her communities, lending aid to a variety of rituals, including those led by others even if the rites do not revolve around Hope's chosen deities.

The importance of both Hope and Eliza's grandparents in the women's respective spiritual development may not be coincidental. While neither said explicitly in their interviews whether the relevant grandparents were immigrants or native-born Americans (or how far removed from their ancestral countries they were at birth), it can be reasonably assumed that these grandparents themselves were taught family traditions by their own parents or grandparents (or members of those generations). The distancing from familial traditions—whether religious or otherwise—often takes a generation or more to begin, and is often more pronounced when one generation's descendants are in infrequent or sporadic contact with the elders. In cases like those of Hope and Eliza where they maintained frequent contact with their grandparents, knowledge transmission is smoother and more natural, and family teachings are often presented less as lessons to be imparted and more as simply "how things are" or "how things are done." If such information is connected to what would now be considered Pagan practices or beliefs—particularly if the information is not perceived to be something about which to be frightened or ashamed—it is likely to be more readily accepted and taken in, particularly by children, as part of a developing worldview.

Interview Three: Don

Don is a white/Caucasian cisgender male from Wisconsin. He converted to Paganism in 1999 from evangelical Christianity. He states that he "hadn't really believed in Christianity in awhile [sic] and had some roommates that were into native American spirituality but that felt wrong for [him] since [he] wasn't native." These friends were involved with a Pagan group at the school, and associating with that group provided Don with exposure to heathenry.

Don does not self-describe as Pagan, preferring to refer to himself as a "Heathen or animist." His practice began among the Asatru (Norse Pagan) community, but now focuses more on spirits of the land (including hiking and meditating along Lake Michigan) rather than direct devotion to deities.

He had little exposure to other faiths prior to college, and what he had was only in the context of trying to proselytize and convert those not of his church. The church occasionally provided visits to other faiths' places of worship, but only as exemplars of their "wrongness," which ultimately influenced Don to distance himself from Christianity. Native American spirituality was appealing, but felt inappropriate due to his lack of Native ancestry; likewise, he did not feel connected to "New Age" beliefs and practices. "Heathenry just felt more appealing," he said, adding that the Christian emphasis on forgiveness did not resonate with him.

Don's inclination toward Paganism has been lifelong. He described being fascinated by mythology, especially that of the Norse pantheon, due to his Swedish ancestry. He added that he visited Sweden at the age of twelve, and found it had striking similarities to Minnesota (where he was raised), particularly in terms of the land, culture,

and energetic "feel." (It should be noted here that many Pagans claim to have a sense for the energy, aura, or spirit of places, and that this can range from peaceful, tranquil, and comfortingly homelike to disconcerting, frightening, and sometimes even hostile. Pagans tend to try and reside in areas which feel like "home" to them when possible.) Like many children, Pagan or not, Don believed in an early form of animism wherein other objects—particularly trees, plants, and stones—had "personalities" of their own; this belief was at odds with his Christian environment and was not encouraged by family or peers.

Partly due to his evangelical upbringing, Don said that he had little access to information about Paganism until meeting friends in college. These friends presented a "new way to see the world," and provided guidance on sources of information. Many of these were books, and though Don spent time in stores looking for relevant titles, online information gradually began to take over as a knowledge source as physical bookstores became fewer and fewer. He adds that reading science fiction—particularly that of Robert A. Heinlein—steered him away from Christianity, though not explicitly toward Paganism.

Interview Four: Will

Will is a very recent convert of the 21-25 age group, having become Pagan in 2021. He is also a cisgender white/Caucasian male and resides in Colorado. He identifies simply as a "Norse Pagan," and works with a variety of Norse deities in his practice: Odin (Will's primary deity), Thor, Freyr, Tyr, Freya, Ullr, and Skathi, making daily offerings to some or all of them as well as the local land spirits.

He states that he had some experience with Christianity prior to becoming Pagan, but found the authoritarian nature of monotheism and the conservative politics often associated with evangelical Christianity to be off-putting. The decentralized nature of Pagan worship eventually proved more appealing.

Will's spiritual journey began primarily with exposure to Daoism, though he admits this was more of a conceptual nature than any ritual or liturgical practice. He eventually found himself having repeated thoughts regarding Odin—some of which he feels were at the deity's direction—and began actively studying Heathenry.

Will reported that he had little information provided by peers or teachers; though he has friends who follow both Norse and Celtic traditions, they were not resources he could call upon. Instead, he read the *Havamal* and various Icelandic Sagas, as well as Jackson Crawford's translation of the Poetic Edda. He also cited the "WolfRed" and "OceanKeltoi" YouTube channels as valuable informative sources.[35] Both channels list themselves as being involved with Reconstructionist Heathenry (which strives for historical authenticity in its practices and traditions), which align with Will's expressed interest in making certain he is "doing it right" in terms of honoring the deities.

It should be noted that Will's interview was exceptionally brief, especially as compared to other interviewees, and that he often seemed hesitant or reticent in his answers. Whether this is his normal personality, an indicator of discomfort with the

[35] There does not appear to currently be a "WolfRed" channel on YouTube as described by Will. There is, however, a channel called "Wolf the Red," self-described as a "Norse Pagan in the south practicing Reconstructionist Heathenry." See https://www.youtube.com/@WolfTheRed, accessed 4 June 2023. The other channel does exist, but is listed as "Ocean Keltoi" rather than as spelled above by Will; their YouTube about section describes the channel/operator as "Omnipotent Beard, #Polytheist, #Heathen, Reconstructionist. Professional Wizard with a Barbarian soul." See https://www.youtube.com/@OceanKeltoi/.

interview process itself, or something else altogether is uncertain, but it did result in his interview being much less informative than the others.

Interview Five: Rowan

Rowan is a cisgender female currently residing in Texas. She converted in 1994, coming to Paganism from the United Church of Christ. Rowan took issue with the UCC's lack of willingness to question their faith, particularly the divine design of humans which kill inadvertently despite a prohibition against killing. (She was given the argument that "killing" as mentioned in the Ten Commandments is a prohibition against murder rather than other forms of killing, but felt this was an inaccurate or inadequate explanation of the quandary.) Ultimately, she says it was her lack of belief in the idea of sole salvation which led her away from the UCC and Christianity in general.

Growing up, Rowan says she "super-loved" books on Greek mythology such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* and the writings of Edith Hamilton. She felt "connected to 'something' in natural spaces" during things like scout camp, and eventually went through what she describes as a "typical girls' witchcraft phase." (This last is a phenomenon which Rowan described as a common fascination with witchcraft held by young girls and teens in the U.S: witches in folklore are presented as powerful and accountable to effectively no one—save perhaps other witches—and thus represent a strongly autonomous figure which appeals to girls who lack that same power due to their age and gender.)

Rowan's eventual conversion was spurred in large part by a Pagan friend's paying for her to attend a festival in order to provide exposure and a "curated experience." She was later gifted books on Paganism by this friend and others, though Rowan acknowledges that she would pick and choose the spiritual elements from those texts which were most useful to her. She felt that it was often hard to find what she describes as "accurate"—likely meaning historically authentic—information right away, as many early Pagan authors and those on whom they based their writings would often cobble together spiritual insights and present them as historical fact with little or no scholarly documentation. Connection with the Pagan community and its experienced members proved a more reliable source of information for her.

Interview Six: Ted

Ted is something of an outlier among the survey respondents and interview subjects, both in terms of the length of his practice—since 1976—and in that he specifically practices magick (in particular as a member of the Ordo Templi Orientalis, which originates in Freemasonry and incorporates Aleister Crowley's philosophy of Thelema) rather than the more theistically-oriented forms of Paganism. He self-describes as an occultist or magician (his spelling, in this case) rather than Pagan, but his magickal practice brings him into contact with Pagans and he often associates with them and is welcomed by the Pagan community at large.

Ted says that his self-identification as a Pagan comes from the ideas of Paganism having "seemed to always be around" as a child. He was exposed to Norse mythology via

Marvel's Thor comics, and took a test of psychic ability which he found in a book on ESP in his home. He describes having had a childhood "spontaneous out-of-body experience" involving the sensation of "falling into the sky" which opened him to the possibility of paranormal experiences. At around age 14, he began visiting a metaphysical bookstore where he read works by authors from Israel Regardie to Nostradamus, which eventually led him to Crowley. The store's owner served as a mentor to Ted, steering him toward books which suited his interests and level of experience.

Ted feels that the discipline involved in the practice of ceremonial magick and the logical, ordered nature of the processes extends to other parts of one's life, which reinforced his inherently curious and already disciplined thought processes.

He differs somewhat from those Pagans who describe a sense of "coming home" in their conversion process, but this may stem from his early exposure to ceremonial magick and the deliberate decision to try and order his thought processes to suit those practices. Nonetheless, Ted still experienced a process of spiritual exploration and discovery which ultimately led him to a community and practice to which he feels well suited.

Interview Seven: Ari

Ari is among the youngest and newest respondents and interview subjects, being in the 21-25 age group and having converted in 2021. She describes her current spiritual path thus: "I consider myself a Brigidine pagan first and foremost. My overall practice is

essentially a henotheistic adaptation of Proto-Indo-European cosmology and theology syncretized with Hermeticism."

She spent quite a bit of time as a spiritual seeker, saying, "I had always felt deeply dissatisfied with the church I grew up in (Mormonism); religious trauma and institutional homophobia didn't HELP with this but I honestly probably would have stayed and tried to make it work if it hadn't felt so EMPTY. I wanted to be a mystic, I think. And there simply wasn't space for me to do that." She considered Judaism but still felt as if she didn't belong.

Remaining in the Mormon church following conflicts over her being queer led Ari into depression and temporarily dropping out of college, as she felt she lacked a "spiritual foundation," something which she feels is vital to maintain in her life. In an effort to find an "alternative technology for engaging with God," she took up tarot and other forms of divination (to this day, she defines herself as a "diviner" rather than a witch), and tried to separate Christianity from her practices.

Three years ago, she found she could not reconcile her personal spiritual needs with Mormon beliefs and took a "step back" from religion in general. She says she felt like she had spent "25 years trying and failing to believe in things." Though she ultimately failed in staying away from religion altogether, she also felt she was tired of not being able to believe. Knowing that Brigid (as a saint, rather than her original guise as a Celtic deity) was considered the "foster mother of Christ" allowed Ari to feel a sense of connection to Brigid without wholly abandoning her previous faith. Ari ultimately went through a direct experience involving Brigid–the details of which she declined to provide–and felt she needed to dedicate herself to the goddess (rather than the saint). She

states that the resulting shift from "belief-centered to practice-centered religion" has been beneficial and led to her feeling more "settled."

For Ari, use of the term "conversion" is not wholly accurate, as it implies to her a hard break with one's former faith or tradition. This aligns with the typical Christian view of conversion, which is understandable given Ari's Mormon upbringing. However, she remarks that she was "always a mythology kid," studying Greek, Egyptian, and Norse legends in childhood. With this in her background, becoming a dedicant to Brigid and focusing on practices of trying to create inclusive community spaces (both in a magickal and mundane sense) is not as sharp a transition as it might otherwise seem. As Brigid's aspects connect her to healing, the forge, and the hearth, Ari's devotion and service to her matron deity have brought her back home in a number of senses.

Interview Eight: Sarenth

Sarenth is another twenty-first-century Pagan, a cisgender male from Michigan in the 36-40 age group who converted to heathenry at Samhain (Halloween) in 2004. He was raised Catholic, and though he had he had generally pleasant experiences in that faith, things changed shortly after undergoing a Novena (Sarenth did not specify which one).

He encountered "a goddess who was definitely not Mary" (he later was able to identify her as Brighid–his spelling) who told him he was going to be leaving his then-current religious and spiritual path. Shortly thereafter and following discussions with a Wiccan friend from high school, Sarenth began exploring eclectic Paganism with Celtic

influences, then transitioned to a Khemetic path to work with Anubis and Bast and began exploring heathenry. He describes having been turned off by the predominant "blood-and-soil" movement which made itself known in the Heathen communities he interacted with and thus reducing his Heathen explorations. However, he says that both Anubis and Odin "show[ed] up" during a ritual, after which Anubis instructed Sarenth to dedicate himself–perhaps temporarily, perhaps permanently–to Odin's service. Sarenth has since had "flashes" of insight which he interprets as signs of Odin's presence.

Even prior to this chain of events, Sarenth had developed an understanding of the world which incorporated elements that easily fall under the broad umbrella of Paganism. He spoke of already having been involved with environmental concerns and specifically Earth Day, and of trying to incorporate a greater understanding and appreciation of nature into his Catholicism. This was likely influenced at least in part by childhood and teenaged interactions with someone Sarenth named L.B., a Druid friend of Sarenth's father who often spoke of his own animistic worldview. Sarenth spoke several times during the interview of his father's love of nature and of gardening in particular, and described his father as a pre-Vatican II Catholic who provided a feeling of living in "a world full of spirits."

Sarenth's religious background made him familiar with ritual and textual analysis. He describes repeated, "rote" ritual as having been beneficial for him in that it allowed him to identify direct mystical experience if and when ritual achieves the aim of facilitating connection to the divine. This has proven helpful in his recent past, as he is part of The Troth ("an international Heathen organization based in the United States,"

and a Heathen Kindred in southeastern Michigan, serving that latter community as its Góði (pronounced "Gothi," a religious–and, historically, political–leader).[36]

His faith has led him into the public arena in a sense, as Sarenth is co-host of two podcasts. One, *Around Grandfather Fire*, he described as a sort of "virtual campfire," where hosts and one or two guests hold largely freeform conversations on various subjects of interest to the Pagan community, including ritual practices, community-building and leadership tips, legends and folklore, and news from non-Pagan sources which may impact practitioners of the faith. His other podcast, *Three Pagans on Tap*, is even less structured and is mostly an opportunity for him to socialize with friends and discuss whatever comes to mind (and tackling the subjects from a Pagan perspective).

Sarenth's daily life is almost fully intertwined with his heathenry, from morning devotional rituals to finding topics for his podcasts to interacting with members of his Kindred about matters both spiritual and temporal. Moreover, he describes his wife as having been instrumental in his conversion process; prior to converting (and long before his transition to heathenry), his wife—a Pagan herself, though following different traditions—recommended various books and websites as Sarenth explored Paganism, and was able to vet those sources he found independently. Their partnership provides a source of stability in contrast to Sarenth's self-described "stressful" day job, and helps to keep him spiritually grounded.

[36] The Troth website: https://thetroth.org/about-asatru-heathery-troth.html, accessed 26 May 2023.

Interview Nine: Maleck

Maleck is another young respondent, a nonbinary person (though they self-describe as "leaning male") in the 26-30 age group from Michigan. They describe their current spiritual path as "Eclectic pagan with Hellenistic and Greenwich and kitchen with leanings [sic]." (I neglected to clarify these terms specifically during the interview, but based on our conversation, I would interpret this responses as having meant to read, "Eclectic pagan with Hellenistic and green witch and kitchen witch leanings," the latter two terms being fairly common among the Pagan community.) Maleck reports being a "first level druid," and though the specific phrasing is reminiscent of how characters are described in online or tabletop role-playing games such as World of Warcraft or Dungeons and Dragons—both quite popular among Pagans—it should be considered to be analogous to a first-degree Druid such as found in formal Druid groves which, like Gardnerian Wiccans, use a triple degree system to gauge members' training and experience. (The difference in terminology likely stems from Maleck's reporting that they have founded a coven of their own, taking inspiration in practices from Heathen sources and combining with an ecstatic mystery tradition of "pack magick" based around what they describe as a "group of basically wolf spirits," though this does not at first glance to mesh with the answers provided in their survey response.)

Maleck's conversion, like that of many other interviewees, is rooted both in an interest in mythology stemming from childhood and a sense that they "fell out of love with Christianity." This led to questioning their spiritual path and "dabbling" in other faiths, including an "on-again, off-again experience" with Paganism. This latter led to a

spiritual experience—the specifics of which were not divulged—from which there "was no turning back" from Paganism.

Though Maleck reports having converted in 2002 per their survey response, they stated in the interview that some pre-conversion influences included encountering Asatru (Heathen) traditions online in 2016 and 2017. These Asatruar worshipped what Maleck describes as "gods of limited access," by which they meant that only white people of European (and specifically Germanic or Scandinavian descent) were believed capable of communing with the gods and being acknowledged or welcomed. Maleck characterized the group's members as "quasi-facsist, crypto-racist," and a combination of misogyny and racist beliefs among them made Maleck feel uncomfortable interacting with them.

It should be noted that which of the relevant dates above is correct is uncertain, making it difficult to put together a timeline of Maleck's pre- and post-conversion experiences. Given that Maleck went on to describe finding more welcoming groups online circa 2018-2019, it is possible that their conversion took place in 2002 but was largely or wholly internal and their descriptions of encounters with other Pagan match a timeline consistent not with the year of conversion but instead with their community involvement.

Though no dates were provided, Maleck stated that they began working with a fellow Pagan (in the context both of employment and ritual/magickal practice) shortly after having moved from their childhood home to Michigan. They said that during a conversation with a friend about how to make offerings to the gods, Odin "showed up" (as a sensed presence in Maleck's mind) and said he would "take over" instruction,

following which Maleck provided instructions to their friend, though the specifics differed from what Maleck had intended to describe.

Despite their initial interest in Paganism, a general lack of information and guidance on the subject from peers or teachers—specifically pertaining to heathenry—delayed their self-identification (which may account for the chronological discrepancies noted above). Maleck remarked that "poor online sources" found via Reddit discussions were a notable impediment, though they later identified thelongship.net (a self-described "Beginner's Guide to Heathenry," according to the website's landing page) as a valuable resource found after the original difficulties.

Maleck describes having long-standing interests in mythology, history, and other faiths (they were raised Baptist) as precursors to their interest in Paganism and heathenry, and upon learning about these faith traditions, they became able "to put names to things" they had experienced and found that they had unknowingly already been doing several Pagan/Heathen practices already (which ones were not specifically identified). Additionally, they said they feel comfortable staying with heathenry because it provides a sense of personal empowerment, particularly in the lack of a need for intercessor or interpreters to validate their spiritual experiences. They summarized this by saying that the "ownership" of their faith has added to its "staying power."

Interview Ten: Erica

Erica, a cisgender female in the 41-45 age group, currently hails from Iowa but was raised in the Omaha, Nebraska, area and underwent her conversion there "in 1995 or

1996." She was baptized Lutheran but stated in her survey response that her parents were Ba'hai and she attended Catholic school as a child. Currently, she identifies her spiritual path as "eclectic from many traditions with heavy influences from Wicca and Heathenry," and practices as a solitary rather than in a coven. She remarks that she has recently been studying houdou and African folk practices, but still describes her own practice as primarily Norse-influenced with additional Celtic influences.

She says of her religious background that "I never felt like I fit in at churches or services. I was searching for a belief structure that felt right to me. It seemed like I could feel the energy of something more and I was trying to find a faith that would allow me to explore and cherish that aspect of myself." She states in her interview that she inwardly began identifying as Pagan in grade school (having been drawn to Norse and Celtic traditions primarily and reading about other pantheons), but was not outwardly open until her twenties. Erica remarked that she felt "something more" when in Catholic school and went to church, but some teachings "felt wrong" and did not make sense to her. Questions she raised about Catholicism's faith and practices received replies she says were effectively, "this is the belief," rather than providing explanations or rationales. Her participation in Christian churches—regardless of denomination—gave her a sense of feeling othered, sometimes as a result of attendees' attitudes and behavior towards her, and at other times simply due to her having entered a church's physical space.

Her explorations outside Catholicism were not only of other faiths, but of unusual phenomena she encountered during her childhood and teen years. Erica described having very animistic beliefs as a young girl and being able to sense the energies of items she would examine during visits to antique shops. She had no vocabulary to describe these

latter incidents but continued to search for explanations and reports of similar experiences. Eventually, she visited a New Age store in Omaha and began reading some of the books she found there, including *Green Magic* by Scott Cunningham, Christopher Penczak's *City Magic*, and another work entitled *Wheel of the Year* (whose author Erica did not recall during the interview).[37] Erica named the now-closed Pegasus Books as the store in question; coincidentally, I lived in Omaha during the same time period (and converted to Paganism in July of 1995) and visited this store myself on several occasions, confirming its relevance in the conversion process of at least two Pagans, and likely several others.

Reading these and other works allowed Erica to find that the term Pagan best fit her pre-existing spiritual and religious belief system, and interactions with the Pagan community via one of the local stores (other than Pegasus Books—Erica did not recall the name) reinforced this. She describes her realization of Paganism's alignment with her views as providing a sense she describes as, "Oh, I found the home."

[37] Cunningham never wrote a book entitled *Green Magic*. There is a work entitled *Green Magic: Flowers, Plants, and & Herbs in Lore & Legend* by Lesley Gordon published by Viking Press in 1977 which was available in the mid-1990s when Erica was making her explorations, however. Whether Erica correctly recalls the author or title is uncertain, but one or the other appears to be incorrect unless one of Cunningham's works was originally published as *Green Magic* and later retitled.
Christopher Penczak's *City Magic* was published in 2001. Erica likely misremembers when she encountered this work. The *Wheel of the Year* Erica mentions may be *Wheel of the Year: Living the Magical Life* by Pauline Campanelli, published in November 1988 by Llewellyn Publications.
Though some specifics are inaccurate, it is clear that the availability of relevant literature has been an important tool in understanding Paganism and ultimately conversion for Erica and others.

Interview Eleven: Candace

Candace is in some ways a highly unusual respondent. A self-described fae (or faerie) gender person from Washington state in the 41-45 age group, Candace also identifies as being of the Fae race, rather than human.[38] The specifics of this racial identification were only briefly touched upon during faer interview, with Candace claiming to have known faer non-human origin since childhood.

Candace follows a spiritual path of "solitary personal gnosis," and has done so since converting to their form of Paganism in 1994. Candace says Paganism is "the only umbrella term that encompasses my own personal religious and magical experiences." Faer form of Paganism is a "'DIY' path taken from a variety of authors and other sources–eclectic," as written in faer survey response.

The magical experiences in question, like many other respondents and interviewees, began in childhood. Candace describes having self-identified as a witch since that period, including engaging in intuitive practices which "felt like what [fae] should be doing." Fae also spoke of a sense of animism, speaking to object, animals, plants, etc., as far back as faer can remember, along with studying Norse and Egyptian mythology. Candace did not provide many details about faer numerous "mystical religious experiences as a young kid," but did specifically call out an incident as a teen wherein fae were going to sleep and had an experience of seeing two faintly glowing orbs

[38] For purposes of discussing Candace's gender and race, the lowercase "fae" will be used to identify gender and—in the appropriate forms—for pronouns. Uppercase "Fae" denotes the Faerie/Faery race in mythological, folkloric, and "mundane" contemporary contexts, save where grammatically appropriate to capitalize gender/pronoun usage. I apologize to readers who are confused by this, but context should clarify any ambiguity in use.
Guidance in fae pronoun use comes both from Candace's own comments and Indiana State University's "Pronouns—A How To Guide," available online at: https://www.indstate.edu/sites/default/files/media/student-affairs/pdfs/lgbtq_pronouns_a_how_to_guide.pdf, accessed 28 May 2023.

appear in the air and "discussing" faer spiritual development and evolution while going to sleep.

Candace's exploration of Paganism in its various forms was largely conducted online using early websites, and use of books began with Silver Ravenwolf's highly popular *To Ride a Silver Broomstick*.[39] Fae describe the available information about Paganism as having been valuable primarily as a means of providing terms with which to discuss existing beliefs. Faer conversion experienced was also eased by Pagans being welcoming of faer gender orientation and sexuality, which was implied during the interview to be a difficult topic when discussed with non-Pagans.

Interestingly, Candace briefly spoke of something almost counter to the common Pagan motif of homecoming. Fae described faer mother recounting an experience when Candace was a young child and asking, "What happened to my other family?" Not being adopted, this was a highly unusual question, particularly as Candace was two or three years old at the time. Whether this pertains to Candace's Fae identity, a prior incarnation (be it real or only conceptual), or something else entirely is uncertain. Nevertheless, Candace finds faerself generally welcome in the Pagan community, with faer identity and sexuality tolerated and accepted for themselves without fear of ridicule or ostracization, and has come to a sense of belonging even if faer "true" home may be in Faerie itself.

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[39] A website called "Volt," and specifically its section on alternative religions was called out in particular during the interview, but online searches conducted on 28 May 2023 indicate that the site no longer appears to be active. Another site, Chaos Matrix, is still in use at http://www.chaosmatrix.org (accessed 28 May 2023).
Silver Ravenwolf, *To Ride a Silver Broomstick* (Minneapolis, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1993). Ravenwolf is a prolific and bestselling author in Pagan circles, and *Silver Broomstick* and *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation* (Minneapolis, MN: Llewellyn Publication, 1998) are both often anecdotally cited by Pagans as having been literary gateways for seekers in the 1990s and early 2000s; whether their popularity persists is uncertain and beyond the scope of this research.

Interview Twelve: Respondent #62

Respondent 62 (hereafter simply "62" for brevity) is a cisgender Caucasian female from Ohio in the 36-40 age range. They began self-identifying as Pagan as it was a "broad enough term to accommodate what I believe in, and gave enough room for growth." The label was also applied in part because they wanted to identify and find a spiritual/religious community following a highly community-focused Catholic upbringing. They identify their current spiritual path as Druidry, particularly those aspects which relate to scholarship and relation to the land. She has started Ár nDraíocht Féin's (ADF) hearthkeeper path (which is intended for solitary practitioners or small groups, and does not require formal ADF membership).[40] They currently work with deities as part of their spiritual practice, but are also interested in "atheistic Paganism," including working with land spirits.

They stated that they would not have even had the word Pagan were it not for high school history classes (describing non-Christian societies rather than Neopagans). An interest in Egyptian and Greco/Roman mythology, like many Pagans, provided an early foundation for later religious exploration. They also said in the survey that they "had a need for a higher power, connection with nature, self-reflection/improvement, and a sense of connection outside [themselves]. But [they] didn't need the dogma, the guilt,

[40] From the ADF website: "Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF) is a modern tradition of pagan Druidry. Although our name is Irish we incorporate practices from ancient and modern Indo-European cultures including the various Celtic and Norse cultures, Slavic, Baltic, Greek, Roman, Persian, Vedic, and other traditions. Our modern practices include elements from historical texts, discoveries, and studies along with modern components to create a practice that works today while respecting and honoring the past." See https://ng.adf.org/articles/orgdocs/about-us/, accessed 29 May 2023.

and fear [they] experienced with Christianity." Their interest in modern Paganism began after viewing the film *The Craft*, and following being asked to read *The Celestine Prophecies*, both of which took place in "roughly eighth grade."

This religious exploration was not confined solely to Paganism; they also "dabbled in Catholicism [and] Islam" in a "very organic" process. Their "personal experience with Catholicism was good," as the people involved were "fine" and the "heart of it" was not bad, but 62 became tired of facing guilt and cognitive dissonance (especially regarding the gay community), along with the American Christian tendency to "try and impose their beliefs on the populace." Their explorations broadened into "positive experiences with Buddhism," and ultimately Paganism, which held appeal for its not generally having a "right" set of beliefs.

This seeking was not generally aided by 62's peers, teachers, or elders, as the latter two came after 62 began self-identifying. They describe the process of exploration as "overwhelming," though having sources of information available was helpful. Their partner provided them a book they stated was called *Atheistic Paganism*, which they found useful, as well as reading Adler, visiting the learnreligions.com website, and listening to podcasts (including Sarenth's *Around Grandfather Fire* mentioned above).[41] After converting to Paganism and self-identifying, they began interacting with their local Pagan community, at which point they were able to begin vetting sources and finding information which more specifically suited their interests.

[41] As with many other books appearing in survey responses or brought up in interviews, the book information as presented by survey participants is not completely accurate. The book 62 describes is most likely this one: John Halstead, Mark Green, and Bart Everson, *Godless Paganism: Voices of Non-Theistic Pagans* (Lulu.com, 2016).

Part of Paganism's appeal for them, as stated in their survey responses and during the interview, includes satisfying that desire for community while being in an LGBT-welcoming space, support for pro-environmental stances, and a general lack of proselytizing. Despite this focus on wanting community interaction, 62 remarks that they do not belong to a specific coven or Druid grove because there are none of the latter in their area, though they would try working within an ADF grove if one was available. Nevertheless, they are part of a group which supports Pagans of other paths in their local area.

Much like many other Pagan converts, finding these senses of belonging as they are, being welcomed, and community, as well as a faith which aligns with their pre-existing ethics and worldview, has been crucial to 62's ongoing practice.

Interview Thirteen: Catherine

Catherine, another cisgender female in the 36-40 age range, hails from Illinois. She converted to Paganism very recently (in 2021), leaving an Episcopalian childhood tradition. She currently describes herself as an "Irish pagan," with a practice that finds her working with Druid orders such as OBOD and AODA (and sometimes rituals with ADF), as well as "several affinity groups online . . . which are private or semi-private groups." She works with deities "attested from the Irish sources," but the majority of her practice is "homegrown" and derived from Irish practices rather than being wholly historically authentic; she freely admits to not being a reconstructionist, as she feels it is unnecessary "to follow Iron Age practices." Catherine describes herself as a "polytheist" in most cases

rather than using “Pagan,” but she acknowledges the utility of the latter term (as do so many other Pagans) as an umbrella term.

She grew up as a self-described “religious kid”; while her parents mainly only celebrated Christian holidays, Catherine was interested in “what’s behind the curtain,” specifically “the mechanics of religion and metaphysics.” She says Christianity “wasn’t doing it” for her, and eventually an interest in her family history (her maternal grandparents came to the U.S. from Ireland in the 1950s) led to investigating Irish folklore and deities. These explorations in turn led to a “coming home,” and a feeling that the Irish pantheon “fit” and “felt right” to her.

That said, Catherine also stated that her explorations prior to conversion included a lot of “New-Agey bullshit” (such as astrology, the use of crystals, etc.) which did not appeal to her, nor did the syncretism between Christianity and some Irish traditions—particularly regarding Brighid. She finds New Age ideals such as the “inner Goddess” (as adopted by non-Pagans who still use goddess imagery and self-connection) feel like “attempts to sell [her] essential oils,” and are effectively “repackaged marketing.”

In a search for authenticity, Catherine sought out verifiable sources for information about pre-Christian Irish faith and practices. Having completed Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programs in Egyptology and ancient Egyptian religions at elite American universities (and moving away from their respective areas) before beginning her serious explorations into Paganism, Catherine found herself frustrated by her lack of access to large institution libraries, as she finds the best sources are often old and/or

difficult to access. She eventually turned to online sources but, like others, still found them generally difficult to verify.[42]

Her survey response regarding reasons for conversion is slightly unique, writing: "That's surprisingly hard. I felt like I connect to my Gods in a way I never had been able to before. I found a community online that was supportive and helpful and I learned that while the judeo-Christian [sic] god may not speak much these days, others are not as reticent." The connection to deity aligns reasonably well with other Pagans, but the latter statement about the communication patterns of deities stands out.

Catherine stated during her interview that what ultimately cemented her conversion was having a direct experience with deity after she had initially decided to self-describe as Pagan. She was camping with friends and made an offering of some butter to the Daghda from the group's cookout. She described this having been almost immediately followed by a sense of a message in her head that the Daghda was "asking" for a marshmallow. Catherine provided one and received a "belly-laugh" by way of response.

Catherine thus represents one of the best examples of this thesis' title: she gradually drifted away from a Christian background from which she felt disconnected, but eventually found herself encountering modern Paganism and its practices more and more, drawing her spiraling back closer and closer to what now feels like a spiritual home.

[42] Catherine specifically mentioned the CR (Celtic Reconstruction) FAQ website as a valuable resource which "hooked" her. It can be found at: http://www.paganachd.com/faq/ (accessed 29 May 2023).

Chapter VIII.

The More Things Change…

What distinctions, if any, separate why Pagans of the first, second, and third waves chose to leave their former faiths for a non-mainstream religion which often involves ritual and magick, is often misconstrued as being connected to devil worship and animal or human harm, and in many ways pushes back against a materialist and ever more technocratic society? What do the waves share with each other in drawing spiritual seekers to a faith more compatible with outsider worldviews?

Both survey responses and interviews indicate that the differences seem less to be about why Pagans convert and more about what introduces them to Paganism and allows them to continue their spiritual journeys.

First-wave Pagans from Gardner's original students and covenmates through the converts of the mid- and late 1970s often had to find Paganism by word of mouth. What instruction was available was frequently handed down directly from teacher to student or, at best, in a coven's group study sessions. Books and pamphlets existed to some extent, but these—especially the latter—were frequently circulated among those already interested or involved in Paganism. Widespread and relatively mainstream distribution of relevant books (other than works on mythology, folklore, archaeology, ancient beliefs and practices, and the like) was uncommon.

Literary access expanded during the 1980s, and by the latter part of that decade, books on modern Paganism and witchcraft began appearing at retailers in suburban shopping malls. No longer confined solely to urban and academic centers or areas where the counterculture movements of the late '60s had never fully released their hold, the stage was set for another wave of the Pagan community's growth. Additionally, a national increase in awareness of—and interest in—things like past-life experiences, encounters with angelic and other beneficent beings, and astrology made ideas such as lighting a candle and chanting with intention or focusing one's will on the attainment of a desired goal (and supplementing that by asking Hera or Aphrodite or Thor to intervene on one's behalf) seem less strange and frightening. Where the availability and dissemination of Pagan information was cautionary and restricted for first-wave Pagans, capitalism made that information a commodity from which profits could be drawn. And for practitioners of New Age and spiritually-oriented businesses, it also provided a common point with which to connect to people who would not only spend money but also potentially become part of a Pagan community.

This retail-backed drive to put Paganism before the eyes of the interested (or those merely curious about how and why witches could still exist in the rational and increasingly technological 20th century) was a boon to seekers. Previously, they would have had to find someone knowledgeable about Paganism, convince that person to provide information, and perhaps commit to joining a coven (often a three-year dedication at minimum) before any sort of learning beyond the cursory could begin. But unlike their predecessors, potential Pagans of the 1980s and '90s could simply walk into a store or library, locate the appropriate section (New Age in most stores, and religious

studies or sociology in a typical library), and peruse the available titles. Instruction could begin as soon as one found a suitable piece of literature.

Public festivals and rituals also became increasingly available to interested parties during this period. Where previously rituals were often deeply private affairs accessible only to members of the hosting coven, "open" rituals served as means for the curious to see how a given Sabbat might be observed and whether that coven's practices and traditions were of interest to a given speaker. Additionally, these events helped to assuage fears from those who worried that the rituals involved harming children or animals, or that the events were merely an excuse for drunkenness and various forms of debauchery.

The 1990s also provided yet another form of access to information as the internet left the realm of being exclusive to higher education, the military, and defense contractors, and the public gained the ability to visit sites on the developing World Wide Web. Online bulletin boards and discussion forums had existed previously in service-provider-based forms like those offered by Compuserve and America Online or via Usenet, but web access greatly streamlined reaching information sources and was unrestricted by provider or platform; if one could get online, one could begin searching for their interests. The popularity and utility of these sites grew quickly, and Pagans and seekers alike used them as places to share recommendations about other resources, discuss their practices, and meet others not just in their immediate physical area, but in wider geographic regions and around the world.

This trend continued into the beginning of the twenty-first century, where it was swiftly followed, paralleled, and ultimately eclipsed by the development of social media. The rise of blogging websites such as Blogspot.com, Wordpress.com, and

Livejournal.com facilitated the ability of Pagans to more easily post their thoughts and ideas to the internet, receive responses from others, and develop friendships and even virtual communities.

The early 2000s also provided a larger market for the still-expanding book publishing industry as mega-stores like Barnes & Noble and Borders offering literally hundreds of Pagan and Pagan-adjacent titles. The market dominance of Llewellyn was diminished by this growth (though they were still far and away the largest publisher), allowing firms such as Red Wheel, Weiser, and Moon Books to produce works by a growing number of authors catering to specific subtypes of Paganism. Literary resources were no longer predominantly Wiccan, but came to include Heathen, Khemetic, and even Mesoamerican material almost as frequently. Books for long-practicing Pagans looking to build or strengthen their communities appeared alongside the ubiquitous guides for those seeking introductory information. This benefited New Age shops, as well, with the books being even more popular among their clientele than in the mainstream sphere, and the growing popularity of hybrid spiritual/physical health practices like yoga and tai chi (and works on those topics) continuing to bring in customers. So long as one had the means to get to the suburbs or an urban center, books were generally vastly more available than they had ever been.

This changed rapidly with the rise of online retail and home delivery. Now it was unnecessary even to travel beyond the end of one's front walk (or perhaps to the local post office) to receive the materials one sought. As internet access became more widespread and affordable—and eventually tied to the increasingly common availability and use of cellular communications—retailers such as Amazon.com could provide books

and ritual equipment at the same or lower costs than physical sellers. This gradually caused the decline and closure of many metaphysical shops; those outlets still persisted as gathering places—it is not unusual for such a store to have at least some form of space that can be utilized for a local Witches' Meetup or public ritual—but they were no longer as essential as they had once been.

Paradoxically, the spread of mass communication and the increasing availability of information made it less necessary to interact with other Pagans in physical space, shifting the American Pagan community back to a more individualistic nature. At the same time, current Pagans have conveniences in research and networking which their predecessors of even three decades ago could have scarcely conceived.

The greatest difference in driving conversion between the three waves, then, appears to be how hard one has to look in order to know Paganism exists, what form seems most appropriate, and whether to take up a solitary practice or where to find others of similar religious inclination.

The common factors motivating people of other faiths to become Pagan, however, are little changed from those of Buckland and Gardner's successors.

Concern for the environment is perhaps more prevalent among those who become Pagan than it was during the religion's early years. Human-instigated climate change is not only suspected, but widely acknowledged, and the questions about it now center on how the damage done can be mitigated (if at all) and how humanity can adapt to a world which is now obviously not the stable one with which our ancestors were familiar. Environmental awareness has become part of many American children's upbringing to

some degree, and an understanding that humans are ultimately one more animal—though highly advanced in some ways—tied to the planet's ecosystem may be the new normal way of perceiving our species. Holistic ecology itself may not have been a term utilized by the Pagans of the first wave, but the underlying concept is one with which they would doubtless been familiar.

Feminism and the fight for gender equality also appear to be constants for Pagans. Many first-wave Pagans were deeply involved in a struggle to resist and counteract the prevailing patriarchy of Western culture, and notable successes were achieved during the first wave (though by no means exclusively by Pagans themselves). Despite gains in women's legal, reproductive, and financial freedoms, however, room remained for growth. The challenge continued to be met, and those who felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in patriarchal religious spaces and traditions continued to gravitate toward forms of faith which gave the divine feminine equal—and often greater—status, hopefully with that change to be echoed in the secular realm. The growing diversity of gender identities in the United States faces perhaps an even greater struggle for acceptance and equality than cisgender women, and Paganism's tolerance and acceptance of such people contributes to the motivation of converts.

Just as important as these is the fact that there seems to be a continual fascination with the myths and folklore of the human past. Almost all the subjects interviewed here—without deliberately selecting for such people—reported a longstanding interest in such stories and in their associated cultures, religions, and deities. Something seems to naturally and reflexively call certain people to view the world in an animistic way, to sense that there is a sort of living energy or a presence beyond the mechanistic world

presented to us by contemporary science. (This does not discount such science but instead implies it feels incomplete. For many Pagans, there seem to be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the rationalists' philosophy.)

This sense of something broader, something deeper, something *more* can be quite alienating and disconcerting for those raised in a society which insists that only those things which can be measured, photographed, have their physical properties tested and retested, and quantitatively analyzed in a myriad of ways are real. But Pagans both modern and ancient have felt—and continue to feel—that reality is also something which has to be sensed. Measurement alone is not enough.

Finally, regardless of the specific means by which information about Paganism reaches a convert or that convert's actual reason for become Pagan, a sense of connection to the Pagan community (and/or its traditions and beliefs) is essential for conversion. For some respondents like Eliza and Respondent #62, that connection comes from relatives and family traditions, even if Paganism is not explicitly identified. For others such as Hope and Ted, the connection is found in peers, friends, or teachers (be they formal or informal). It is exceedingly rare for converts to fully embrace Paganism without at least one or two people who provide an initial "way into" the faith and some degree of confirmation that these societally-outlying beliefs are legitimate despite their not being widely embrace.

To feel a broader sense of the world and its mysteries has always been at the heart of Paganism, and perhaps the greatest difference and commonality it possesses is the ongoing yet ever-shifting strength of that sense. It is not how and why one comes to

Paganism which seems to matter so much as the fact of arriving at a spiritual and religious destination which feels like home.

Chapter IX.

Conclusion

Those who convert to Paganism do not do so after being told that it is the only way to redeem their soul from a perceived original sin. They do not convert in order to take up a new worldview radically removed from that which they possess. They do not convert in order to join part of society's religious norm.

In contrast, Pagans convert almost universally because they have been spiritual outsiders in one sense or another for most or all of their lives. For a variety of reasons, Pagans leave mainstream faiths for a sort of religious unknown. In the interstices between leaving one faith adopting Paganism, there can be a sense of loss (in the sense of losing a community and a feeling of being rooted in a tradition). Alternately, some people who eventually become Pagan are—as often described here—seekers, feeling that there is a spiritual aspect to the world with which they must identify and interact, but often not finding a satisfactory form of that interaction among more prominent religious traditions. As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in *The Lord of the Rings*, "Not all who wander are lost."

Margot Adler notes that, for many converts, Paganism "[feels] like home," a sentiment echoed in spirit or even literally by almost all of this project's interview subjects.[43] And home, in an ideal sense, is a place where one can drop one's pretensions,

[43] Adler, 182.

feel secure and comfortable, and quite simply *be*, interacting with the world through own perceptions and lenses rather than those externally imposed.

For those who convert, Paganism represents not a faith to which they must adapt and conform. It is, instead, a religion to which their worldviews already align and which, once found, often provides a sense that a long-sought destination has been reached and that after their wanderings have ceased, the convert has at last come home.

Appendix 1.

Survey Results

	What is your current age?	What is your gender identity?	If "Other," please define here	What is your race? (Check all applicable)	If "Other," please define here	What is your state of residence?
1	26-30	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		California
2	46-50	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Texas
3	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Illinois
4	21-25	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Utah
5	26-30	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		GA
6	51-55	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian - Ashkenazi Jewish	Ashkenazi Jewish	OR
7	26-30	Male (cis)		Asian-American/Pacific Islander		个人自购
8	36-40	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Illinois
9	36-40	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Michigan
10	31-35	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		California
11	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		NC
12	41-45	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Wisconsin
13	26-30	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		Alabama
14	46-50	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Ohio
15	21-25	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Colorado
16	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Minnesota
17	51-55	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		NC
18	41-45	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Michigan
19	41-45	Female (cis)				Minnesota
20	31-35	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Michigan
21	21-25	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Florida
22	31-35	Demigirl		Hispanic/Latinx - White/Caucasian		Illinois
23	26-30	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Maryland
24	31-35	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Iowa
25	56-60	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		NC
26	36-40	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Virginia
27	41-45	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Iowa
28	41-45	Fae gender	Fae gender			Wa
29	21-25	Non-binary		Asian-American/Pacific Islander - White/Caucasian		Massachusetts
30	26-30	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		VA
31	26-30	Female (cis)		Hispanic/Latinx - White/Caucasian		California
32	41-45	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Arkansas
33	26-30	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		Michigan
34	26-30	Non-binary	Male leaning nb	White/Caucasian		Michigan
35	26-30	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		north carolina
36	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Minnesota
37	31-35	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Oregon
38	41-45	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		Virginia
39	26-30	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Washington State
40	31-35	Male (cis)		African-American - Hispanic/Latinx - Native American - White/Caucasian		Utah
41	26-30	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Iowa
42	31-35	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		Michigan
43	46-50	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		CA

44	26-30	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		Ohio
45	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Virginia
46	21-25	Male (trans)		White/Caucasian		Missouri
47	41-45	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		California
48	21-25	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Pennsylvania
49	51-55	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Massachusetts
50	26-30	Male (cis)		African-American - Hispanic/Latinx		New York
51	31-35	Female (cis)		Hispanic/Latinx - White/Caucasian		Pennsylvania
52	26-30	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		OR
53	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Illinois
54	26-30	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Texas
55	26-30	Genderqueer		White/Caucasian		New York
56	31-35	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		Maryland
57	26-30	Male (cis)		White/Caucasian		Georgia
58	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		New Jersey
59	31-35	Non-binary		White/Caucasian		WA
60	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		VA
61	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		MD
62	36-40	Female (cis)		White/Caucasian		Ohio
63	26-30	Male (trans)		White/Caucasian		Oregon

	What is your particular Pagan path/tradition?	In what year did you first self-identify as Pagan?	What was your previous faith tradition (if any)?	What was your initial exposure to Paganism?	Briefly describe your reasons for converting to/self-identifying as Pagan.	How would you describe your participation in any Pagan groups?
1	Solitary Jewish paganism	2021	Reform Judaism	A local witch store when I was living in NYC	I was agnostic but had some very spiritual experiences. In a moment of crisis I prayed to a Greek god and received an answer and wished to pursue worship of him specifically	Solitary
2	I'm a non-wiccan community-based priestess. I'm a dedicant of Brighid but don't worship other Celtic gods, and follow a path of sacred service.	1994	United Church of Christ	I started gaming with folks who were predominantly pagan, who talked about their own experiences freely. They were mostly Wiccan following northern European trads.	I grew up in a liberal Christian home that encouraged questioning faith. At 19 I realized I no longer believed the doctrine of sole salvation through Christ, and began exploring world paths to find my faith. My pagan friends' experiences resonated and once I started doing ritual work it felt much more natural to me than Christianity had. I started attending open circles and festivals.	Belong to multiple groups/covens
3	Eclectic, with a focus on animism and folklore	2000	Southern Baptist Christian	The movie The Craft. This lead to intense reading.	I appreciated that people and their nature weren't viewed as inherently evil, that there was a celebration of personal power and responsibility, and the focus on nature.	Belong to multiple groups/covens
4	I consider myself a Brigidine pagan first and foremost. My overall practice is essentially a henotheistic adaptation of Proto-Indo-European cosmology and theology syncretized with Hermeticism.	2021	grew up Mormon, then converted to Anglicanism, then became pagan	I think my very first exposure was actually a "pagan holidays cookbook" I found at the thrift store as a teenager, but I had no context for it and was somewhat weirded out. Years later, when I was at college, I made some online friends on tumblr who were pagan and/or witches, and began hanging out in those spaces. I convinced myself my interest was academic until a traumatic event spurred me to the first of several attempts to learn witchcraft. I self-identified as a Christian witch and diviner for about a year,	I had always felt deeply dissatisfied with the church I grew up in; religious trauma and institutional homophobia didn't HELP with this but I honestly probably would have stayed and tried to make it work if it hadn't felt so EMPTY. I wanted to be a mystic, I think. And there simply wasn't space for me to do that. I left the Mormon church, tearful and discouraged, because I knew I didn't belong there and wherever my path to divinity lay it wasn't there. The rituals of high church Christianity filled the hole in my soul, a little, for a while, but something still just felt wrong. Felt empty. Felt like I didn't belong. I	Solitary

				5flirting with but eventually abandoning the idea of incorporating polytheistic religious practices into my complicated relationship with Christianity; I then let my cobbled-together and unsuccessful magical practice lapse for another couple of years, although I kept divining.	considered Judaism. If my life had gone a little differently I might have found my home there. But instead, I tried to take a break from gods of any kind, and failed, because even though I'm bad at believing things there's something in me that NEEDS to do it, and so I went to Brighid, and She took me in as Her foster daughter, and it's still hard and there are still days when I feel empty or like I'm playacting, but doing this feels right, somehow, and so I continue.	
5	Primarily Hellenist	2013	Agnostic	Learning Greek myths as a child	It felt true and right in my soul	Solitary
6	Hermeticist, primarily through Golden Dawn practice & Thelemic symbolism, with eclectic supporting influences from neoplatonic Hellenism, Feri witchcraft, chaos magick, esoteric Buddhism, and Judaism.	2000	Atheist, with a sprinkling of Jewish practice	Practitioners half joke that the deeper one's practice gets, the earlier one realizes one started. As a young left coast atheist weirdnerd in the early 1990s, I brushed against a lot of esoteric belief & practice, primarily Buddhist (or, more often, hippie cod Buddhism), and I kept finding culture heroes and people in my greater social circles involved in magickal & Pagan practice & culture. The writings intrigued and frustrated me — and it offended my intellectual vanity that I could not understand it but there was an obscure sense underneath it. In time I met communities of practitioners who seemed (mostly) levelheaded and reflected things I had only read about.	"Conversion" implies a commitment to a well-defined creedal community / church / practice, so that is not the right word. There was an interval during which I described myself as "interested in Pagan ideas and involved in Pagan community", but in time it became clear that I had developed enough of a Pagan sensibility and cultivated enough of a Pagan life that it was most simple & clear to say simply "I am a Pagan".	Belong to multiple groups/covens
7	Those who follow this path are called Hellens, Greek reconstructionist, Greek pagan or one of many other terms.	2000	no	Christianity	Because we all have the seeds of Buddha nature, and everyone has it, because we meet fate outside	Belong to one group/coven

	Hellenism originated from Emperor Julian when he tried to restore the religious belief of his ancestors after the arrival of Christianity					
8	Initiatory Wiccan (vaguely Alexandrian though my coven's lineage is not quite that robust), Heathen	1986	N/A	I am a second-generation Wiccan, so I was introduced to it through my parents.	It's the tradition in which I was raised, and I based a lot of my understanding of the world on the lessons I've learned in my Wiccan tradition. I experienced my first Heathen rituals in my early 20s and adopted that as a result of powerful mystical experiences in that setting.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
9	Heathenry	2004	Catholic	In high school I had a friend who was Wiccan.	I answered the call of the Gods.	Belong to multiple groups/covens
10	Hellenic Polytheism	2009	agnostic	This is a little embarrassing: the chain of events is getting really into a video game (SMT: Persona 3) -> the game associates each major character with a Greek god and a tarot card -> I was a fan of Greek mythology as a kid and noticed the gods strongly reflected each character and their arc -> started learning about the tarot to see if they also matched -> became a tarot card reader -> met Pagans in online tarot-learning spaces and realized that was an option	I had a moment of gnosis during my tarot journey that convinced me this is the correct path for myself.	Solitary
11	I'm Hellenic-ish (that is to say, somewhat eclectic when it comes to the deities I venerate/worship, with a focus on Dionysos, Persephone, and Apollo), with a strong devotional and divinatory focus, though I'm not currently part of any structured tradition.	2007	Methodist	I suppose my initial exposure was via literature - I found a copy of Scott Cunningham's Magical Herbalism in my step-mother's house, and was fascinated. A few years later, my grandmother gave me Mists of Avalon (may MZB get everything she deserves), and through high school, I couldn't get enough of Diana Paxon, Morgan Llwelyn,	During my first few years of college, I tried really hard to find a church or youth ministry that would give me something that felt substantive. I didn't find anything that felt like spiritual 'meat' instead of 'milk'. I was sure there *had* to be more to be found in Christian traditions, but no one was showing me how to find it. Paganism offered me so many ways to and tools for going	Belong to one group/coven

				and Monica Furlong. In college, I was lucky enough to become friends with some Pagan folks through my job at the university writing lab. They invited me to their houseblessing - and then to full moon rituals. I began training with folks in that community, and didn't look back.	deeper - for increasing connection, developing spiritual gifts and skills, and nurturing devotional relationships of the sort I'd longed for all my life.	
12	Heathen/ Nordic Animism	1999	Evangelical Christian	College friends	Hadn't really believed in Christianity in awhile and had some roommates that were into native American spirituality but that felt wrong for me since I wasn't native. They went to a group for pagans at the school so I went and learned about heathery	Belong to one group/coven
13	Hellenistic Polytheism	2018	Agnostic	I was planning on writing a story about a witch, and started researching Wicca for it. As I read through the information, I realized that I was getting personally invested and dropped the story altogether to focus on learning more about it.	I tried Christianity multiple times over the years and it never stuck. I realized that the model of animism and becoming close to nature and all its inhabitants really resonated with me. It also made me feel much more free in a trans/gender non-conforming way.	Solitary
14	Hellenic	1986	Catholic	I met some Wiccans who were friends of friends at a time when I left the Catholic church but was seeking for a way to define the connection I felt	I had always felt a connection with Greek myth and a sense of the divine in nature. I tried wicca which felt close but not quite it. When I found Hellenic paganism, it felt like coming home.	Solitary
15	Norse pagan	2021	Tried getting into Christianity, later daoism	A friend of mine told me about it	Found the god Odin in particular very interesting	Solitary
16	I'm a satanic witch	2020	Lutheran	My childhood faith tradition was highly hostile to paganism, filled my impressionable mind with misinformation about what it was and how any dabbling would lead to eternal damnation.	I was processing my religious trauma and felt a strong pull toward the occult. I wanted to learn the truth after being fed hatred and lies as a child.	Solitary
17	Appalachian folk magic/ Heathen	2015	Pentecostal	I've always been drawn to and comforted by	Like I said, nature has always been deeply meaningful. Once I	Solitary

				nature. When I left Christianity, I took martial arts and briefly considered Buddhism but discovered a local metaphysical store, and that nature could be my path and it just felt right.	learned how to connect with the earth, with trees and streams, then went on to meet Pagan deities it just felt right and has been way more fulfilling than Christianity ever was.	
18	If I had to label it, I'd say Eclectic/Intuitive	1998	I was raised Protestant	The Craft. *lol* It was a gateway for a TON of Xennials. First book was Earth Air Fire Water by Scott Cunningham	I was a teen girl who felt I had no power, no agency, no voice. Paganism helped me find all 3.	Solitary
19	Blue Star Wicca	2000	Jehovah's Witness, Evangelical Christian, Catholic	When I was a Jehovah's Witness and couldn't participate in holiday activities, my teachers had me research the Pagan origins of those holidays (this was in the 80's)	1. Personal experience with the spiritual/divine that did not align with the Christian cosmology 2. Love of the physical aspects of ritual	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
20	My path has primarily drawn from Norse Heathen tradition, but elements/figures of "Celtic" (primarily Irish) and Indic traditions have always played a large role as well. I've crafted a sort of "Indo-European syncretism" for myself.	2012	I was raised Mormon, left at age 12 and identified as atheist for 12 years or so.	My mother "came out" as a witch to me, and I began reading about Wicca, Druidry, Heathenism, etc., in response, mostly out of "academic" curiosity.	During my atheist years, I studied theoretical physics quite a bit. I understood the theories and philosophy behind concepts like quantum and string theories, but not the math involved. While reading about various pagan traditions I started seeing a lot of correlation between what they taught and what I found in "hard physics". A sort of romanticism initially drew me in, but the deep personal connections I began to find and build between myself and the world around me, and with the concepts within these traditions, are what really cemented this path for me.	Solitary
21	Eclectic	2021	Lutheran	Reading about it in the context of greek mythology in elementary school	The concept of creating a belief system for myself that spoke to me and was based in nature and shared experiences	Solitary
22	Humanistic Wiccan	2019	Christian		I like the rituals and the aspect of nature	Belong to one group/coven
23	Heathenry	2018	Catholic	Met someone who was a Heathen	I had been "spiritual but not religious" for some time. After reading about personal accounts of	Solitary

					experiences with Gods online, I came to realize that I believed that there was something to it based in reality. I had also been drawn to some Hindu Gods for a while. Over time, I became drawn to more and more Gods and wanted to discover my own experiences. It took me more time to narrow it down to a specific tradition, but I eventually took the leap by worshipping Norse Gods in a Heathen context.	
24	Goddess Spirituality, Witchcraft	2007	Catholic	Books	The church's bigotry and narrow mindedness, combined with it's crimes and inability to change led me to seek somewhere else for my spiritual needs to be met. The church just became too small and too sinister to remain.	Solitary
25	Thelema/magick	1976	Polish Roman Catholic	It seemed to permeate pop culture at the time. “Man Myth & Magic” was advertised on tv. I convinced my mom by me a paperback of Francis King & Stephen Skinner’s “Techniqurs of High Magic” at the grocery store. “In Search of” with Leonard Nimoy was a weekly tv series, as was the paranormal game show “Beyond Reason.” Etc etc. Seems like an inevitability to me, though obviously not everyone in my generation followed that path.	It had a ring of truth—in that it resonated with me—that Catholicism lacked. Also, I liked the intellectual rigor of magick, and was excited by the feeling of exploring something unknown and uncharted.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
26	Quite simply, I classify myself as a Heathen in the broadest sense of the word utilizing the following terminology: (1) Possess a worldview aligned with the cosmological concepts of the Well and the Tree, and	1996	Apostasized Catholic	My grandmother possessed numerous books on comparative religion, having been interested in those studies. When she passed, I inherited one of the books published by Llewellyn (itself a pretty basic Wiccan work).	Ultimately, I hold a "because I can" attitude. I'm sure numerous responses will talk about being "called" or having some kind of phenomenological experience which opened their perspectives. In my case, it's just sheer stubbornness and the fact that I've	Solitary

	who accept wyrd and orlæg as cosmic forces; (2) Engages in the gift cycle through reciprocity with appropriate divine figures—the gods, the ancestors, and the wights; and (3) Are animistic, polytheistic, and/or panentheistic in their religious beliefs Given the failings of modern terminology to properly define many of these reconstructionist polytheisms - hinging identity on a distinct ethno-cultural perspective which amounts to all sorts of identitarian problems - this is ultimately the most neutral definition which can be offered. The lack of distinct "Heathen rituals", broader worldviews, or religious actions, makes this definition the most preferable. In many traditional polytheistic European and Mediterranean societies, these would be the defining characteristic of the religion, not just whether they were "Greek" or "Roman" or "Germanic", or whatnot.			While "Wicca" didn't take to me, it opened up the possibility of alternative views and ultimately set me down this religious path.	carved out a serious identity within Contemporary Paganism.	
27	Eclectic from many traditions with heavy influences from Wicca and Heathenry.	1995 or 1996	Baptized Lutheran but parents were Bahia and I went to a Catholic school.	Books in a bookstore.	I never felt like I fit in at churches or services. I was searching for a belief structure that felt right to me. It seemed like I could feel the energy of something more and I was trying to find a faith that would allow me to explore and cherish that aspect of myself.	Solitary
28	Solitary personal gnosis	1994	None	Online forums and books	It's the only umbrella term that encompasses my own personal religious and magical experiences.	Solitary
29	Heathen with touches of eclecticism from previous paths	2015	Christian then Atheist	Wiccan books and magic shows like Charmed.	The path was open and felt inviting.	Solitary
30	polytheist+ animistic,	2012	Protestant Christianity	Scott Cunningham	Fit my worldview	Solitary - Belong to

	more specifically heathenry and Irish polytheism			in highschool	better, my family is Appalachian and carried a lot of beliefs with them that carried over better to paganism vs Christianity, Christianity was toxic and abhorrent to my mental health and general well-being	one group/coven - Belong to multiple groups/covens
31	Eclectic Pagan. My path is informed by Earth Centered Spirituality Circle (ECSC) through the UU (Unitarian Universalist) church and I offer worship to a specific group of Hellenic deities.	2016	Non-denominational Christian	Books on Wicca in Middle School, personal research, and a "pagan conversations" meeting onboard a US Navy aircraft carrier in 2016.	The faith I grew up in couldn't explain the spiritual connection I felt with the all beings (i.e. trees, animals), nature, and the elements. Nor did the belief in one coherent and singular, transcendent divine being ever strike a chord for me. Other religions I looked into, like native American traditions and Shinto (the portions of them publicly available), got closer, but various pagan traditions actually hit the mark in various ways. I continue to research and be informed by practices from Wicca, Heathenry, Hellenismos, and the UU's ECSC, but my personal faith is an intersection of all of the above.	Solitary - Belong to multiple groups/covens
32	I am a Heathen with a focus on blending Ozark traditional practices into modern Heathenry	1995	Christian (Independent Fundamentalist Baptist)	My roommate at boarding school was a second generation Wiccan. I went with her and a few other friends to a local "New Age" shop that was mostly crystals, angels, and Sylvia Brown books, but had a few shelves of Neo-Pagan books.	It felt like a belief system that better fit with my ethics and morals.	Belong to one group/coven
33	Heathenry as well as an ecstatic initiatory Mystery tradition	2019	Christianity (Lutheranism)	Various online forums, especially reddit, as well as a college classmate	Loss of identity with Christianity due to worldview and theological differences, coupled with both long-term low level and a more acute religious experience with Heathen gods. Essentially, Christianity stopped making sense, I had long felt called to these gods, and then had an intense and	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven

					direct experience with them.	
34	Eclectic pagan with Hellenistic and Greenwich and kitchen with leanings	2002	Baptist	My friend's mom is a Catholic witch	Was a better fit for me who was always been drawn to nature and natural cycles. And I was a history nerd as a kid	Belong to one group/coven - Belong to multiple groups/covens
35	eclectic wiccan	2015	methodist christian	I grew up in a town with a metaphysical shop, and when I was 13 i made a friend, another teen, who was pagan	i always had doubts of christianity being the one true religion, as soon as i found out there were other religious paths a person could travel. I also didn't agree with evangelizing. I am also queer and my church didn't have space for people like me. I did (and still do)think Paganism is one of the most beautiful world religions, and it's not for everyone, but it is for me.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
36	Hellenic polytheist and Taoist	1997	United Methodist, Atheist	AOL keyword Wiccan I think. Definitely something online.	When I was 8 I received a kids magazine on Ancient Greece and Rome that included a description of the 12 Olympians. Reading about Athena was like a bolt of lightening to my soul, like I instantly recognized Her. I read all the mythology books in the school and public library but was told no one still worshipped those gods. A few years later my family got internet access and I found that there were traditions that did still honor those gods and I immediately researched them and decided that was what I wanted.	Solitary
37	Kemetic (Ancient Egyptian) polytheism and Druidry	2016	Atheist	Devotional art to the gods (i.e. made for the gods as a gift) on an art website.	Despite being a lifelong atheist, I always wished there was a way to worship the gods, especially since to me they better represented the concepts of diversity and plurality (in all its forms, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, etc) in comparison to monotheism, and addressed the concept of theodicy that Christianity has never satisfyingly	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven

					answered for me. Once I learned there were people really pursuing this path seriously, I was intrigued, and became a polytheist not long after.	
38	Eclectic Wicca	1997	Judaism	A friend introduced me to Scott Cunningham's guide for the solitary practitioner and the rest is history.	Reading Cunningham, it felt like he was describing something that I was missing. I had ceased to practice Judaism 3 to 4 years prior to identifying as Pagan. When I left Judaism, I was specifically looking for feminine understandings of the divine. My own masculinity was something that confused and bothered me, and the overtly masculine sense of the monotheistic God within the synagogue of my youth (whatever the theologians might have said about that) left me wanting more. I found that "more" within Paganism.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
39	Sumerian	2018	Atheist, raised Catholic	From amateur study of history	I felt it gave me a more constructive framework for life than other traditions.	Solitary
40	My path is my own and it weaves, spirals, and circles with many other paths. If I had to name it I would call it Eclectic Esoteric Sorcery.	2007	Catholicism/Mormonism	When I left for college I met some wiccans that I vibed with. Then there was a group of heathens that would have drum circles and I was hooked.	Because nature is so amazing and awesome that Christians say "god did it." When I found like minded people that wanted to go Be in nature and feast and be merry I mean, what's not to love about that.	Solitary - Belong to multiple groups/covens
41	Kemetic Reform Pagan	2021	Methodist Christian childhood	Started spiritually seeking during college. Knew about it vaguely, but eventually came to the broader pagan sphere via witchcraft	At first, it was the emphasis on Earth-based faith, and then Kemeticism because of the concept and upholding of ma'at (Truth, justice)	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
42	Solitary revivalist heathenry. (Meaning: I do not practice with a group, I worship Norse-derived deities and spirits, and my religious practice is informed but not limited by archaeological evidence and academic study of	2016	Raised Protestant Christian, functionally agnostic.	When my parents separated in my childhood, my mother began exploring Wicca. She was unwilling to teach me anything about it— at that time it was the prevailing opinion in some Wiccan circles that children should	I didn't find Christianity appealing— many of the church doctrines reject my existence or right to exist, and all-consuming monotheism simply doesn't appeal to me— so when I decided that I did want to pursue a religion, on an	Solitary

	Old Norse resources.)			not be taught witchcraft— but I was fascinated regardless, and stole several of her books to read when she was at work. I never committed to practicing Wicca or any other religion. She later re-converted to Christianity in my teens and purged all of her Wiccan material— I retained one tarot deck, which I hid for years. It was more than a decade before I began exploring my own religious interests.	experimental basis, I looked for one which met certain criteria, as suggested to me by a friend (who, for what it's worth, is a Kemetic)— the criteria are: - Does it make you happy? - Does it improve you? - Do you find it beautiful? After a study of various options, heathenry was the religious system to which I could answer yes to all of those questions, so it was the one I pursued.	
43	Druid with a dose of Witchcraft	1989	Roman Catholic	A book in Barnes & Nobles	It felt more accurate to what I felt. I never really believed that there was only one god.	Solitary - Belong to multiple groups/covens
44	Irish paganism	2015	Episcopalian, but I was raised evangelical Christian	Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner by Scott Cunningham lent to me by a friend	I know many people who have had very real experiences with the Abrahamic god (God/YHWH/Allah), but no matter what I never felt that real connection. Praying was like talking to dead air. Wicca as described in Cunningham's books was my last try before I concluded that a connection with the divine was not for me. I cast a circle in the style of Wicca, and it was as if the Irish gods had been waiting for me to invite them into my life. I immediately felt a connection with something greater than myself	Solitary - Belong to multiple groups/covens
45	Eclectic Pagan Witch	2018	Agnostic post IBLP	I grew up always being told to fear it, but always felt called to learn more. After escaping the confines of my upbringing I was able to reach and explore other religions and learn of all the not so scary things and find a sense of peace.	My beliefs are not mainstream religious beliefs... in the most basic sense. What keeps me pagan? The connection to the world an other entities that I had not been able to experience before. The separation from a known world into a world of unknown possibilities felt like finding a safety net. There is a beauty in the differences in the Pagan community that cannot be found	Solitary

					elsewhere.	
46	Witchcraft plus some polytheism	2023	Atheist/agnostic	I watched Ocean Keltoi's videos on YouTube, then joined his discord server.	I had a god reach out and then I picked up witchcraft (primarily working with herbs and cooking magic) then felt called to another god.	Solitary
47	Boii [Continental] Heathenry	1994	Catholicism	I came to Paganism through Dianic Wicca, which I sometimes call "anti-Catholicism". It's as toxically matriarchal as Catholicism is toxically patriarchal but it was the way that I needed to get out of my family's faith tradition and the ways my brain had been taught to think.	I didn't like how my family's faith tradition treated me, as a woman or women generally. I didn't like the prescribed life options available to me in that tradition.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven - Belong to multiple groups/covens
48	A mix of Hellenistic, Heathen and Kemetic	2018	Atheist	Wicca	It feels like the right path/ my calling. Like the gods have been waiting for me	Solitary - Belong to multiple groups/covens
49	Solitary eclectic/syncretic	2022	Roman Catholic	Neighbors and internet	R.C. never truly felt as the right fit for me philosophically and spiritually. The Catechism consists of selected questions and answers neither of which can be questioned. Paganism allows me to select the questions and find my own answers as well as question those answers, allowing for evolution of my personal philosophy and spiritual cosmology.	Solitary
50	Overall Pagan & Animist	2016	Agnostic	Mythologies	I started trying to reach out to more spirits and deities and would get more signs of a response. As those responses became more frequent I started settling into paganism	Solitary
51	Heathenry	2004	Nominally Christian	I believe through the internet, but I met my first pagans and bought some books at a shop where I went to look at tarot cards as a middle schooler.	I felt like paganism was more feminist and nature focused than other religions I knew about, and I liked the idea that I wasn't beholden to anybody telling me what I was allowed to do or believe.	Solitary
52	Gallo-Heathen	2020	Roman Catholic	Myths and youtube	Finding a fullfilling and more accessible spiritual path	Solitary
53	Irish pagan	2021	Christian/Episcopalian	Probably Wicca when I was a teen	That’s surprisingly hard. I felt like I	Belong to multiple groups/covens

				but I never identified with it then. More recently I discovered reconstruction paths which led me down the rabbit hole. I can't remember where I found it but I got hooked by the CR FAQ website.	connect to my Gods in a way I never had been able to before. I found a community online that was supportive and helpful and I learned that while the judeo-Christian god may not speak much these days, others are not as reticent.	
54	Gaulish/Heathen	2012	Many. I've been wandering through Pagan stuff, and a brief stint in catholicism, since 2012.	Dungeons and Dragons was the initial catalyst. However, I blame Rick Riordan's Lightning Thief that came out when i was around 8 or 9 to opening me up to the possibilities. I remember being a kid and praying to the Greek gods as well as the Christian god	It just feels much more apt and appropriate for my life and the way i see the world than i could get from any of the monotheistic religions	Belong to multiple groups/covens
55	Heathenry	2014	Fundamentalism Mormonism, and then Episcopalian for a short time.	I don't remember!	Having words that fit the spirituality I felt intrinsically and the religious praxis I was forming felt necessary and enabled me to find resources.	Solitary
56	Heathenry (Norse, Yngvic)	2009	Catholic	Books on Wicca in my local Borders store, particularly those by Scott Cunningham	I had a crisis of faith with Catholicism, then I came out as gay and couldn't see a reason to continue. I found Wicca to fill that gap, and it felt more in tune with how I view the natural world. But Wicca wasn't the right fit for me, and years later I had a hierophantic experience with Freyr that led me to my current path of Heathenry.	Solitary
57	Heathen/Germanic	2020	Catholic	Generally curiosity, Reading history, Crusader Kings 2	I came to the understanding that I believe in Gods. I connected most closely with the Germanic pantheon.I wanted community and ritual.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
58	Germanic Polytheism sometimes called Heathenry	1994	None	Reading books on my own.	The Gods just make sense. All of the Gods are real and these Gods make themselves known to me on a spiritual level. I also wanted to connect with my ancestors - I also worship Slavic and Scottish Gods because of this.	Solitary

59	No single specific path Learning from multiple paths and traditions to create my own pagan practice	2020	None	I briefly lived with a pagan family when I was traveling	-Belief that being Pagan will help me become a better supporter of justice and social change -Needed a way to be more aware of and involved in the meaningfulness of daily life (e.g. through connecting more deeply to nature, through better weaving together of my values and my actions, through better community relationships, etc) -Observed actions of other pagans who I admired	Solitary
60	Heathen Norse pagan Animist	2020	None / agnostic	I honestly don't remember. I've been aware of Wicca and neo paganism since at least high school. My mom was always on a quest for faith and tried something new every few years. We celebrated wiccan holidays for a couple of years when I was a teen. I liked it better than Christianity but it still didn't quite feel right.	I was content to be agnostic but animist for a long time. But 2020 was what it was and I needed more spiritual focus in my life. I meditated on what to focus on and realized I wanted the Norse gods. So I started worshiping them after reading about Heathen ideas for 6 months.	Solitary
61	Eclectic witchcraft	2000	Jewish and Lutheran	I became interested in witchcraft via fiction, but the first pagan nonfiction I encountered was a website, spirit-online.com.	It is what is right in my soul. Also, I've had very clear mystical experiences, some including direct communication with gods.	Solitary - Belong to one group/coven
62	Druidry	2019	Catholic	The movie The Craft back in the 1990s	I had a need for a higher power, connection with nature, self-reflection/ improvement, and a sense of connection outside myself. But I didn't need the dogma, the guilt, and fear I experienced with Christianity.	Solitary
63	Heathen/Animist	2015	Evangelical	First exposure to other systems of belief 2009ish to midwestern Satanism and western occultism, later tarot/astrology in 2014+, and became Heathen specifically in 2020	I was evangelically raised, and was apathetic towards theism until 2020. I believed in divinity, spirits, and magick but was not in a set path or religion etc until then. I had some experiences in 2020 that made me curious about	Solitary

					Heathenry and the European Old Ways that got me involved in that path specifically and my life took a turn.	

	Please describe any group(s) or coven(s) in more detail here, including whether they are organized around gender-specific lines.	Do you participate in any non-Pagan faith community?	If "yes," please describe below	Do you use the word "Pagan" to describe your religious identity?	If "no," what word(s) do you prefer?	What are/were the reasons motivating your adoption of and/or self-identification as Pagan? (check all applicable boxes)
1		No		Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
2	I'm a member of Spirit Haven (formerly Council of the Magickal Arts) and a former member of the Heartland Pagan/Spirit Alliance, which are public pagan organizations with no gender-specific constructions. I also have an informal coven I occasionally work with; most are women (both cis and trans) but there are also men (both cis and trans) and non-binary people involved.	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s)
3	I currently participate in Pagan literary groups and groups focused on rewilding. There is no focus on gender past acknowledging and celebrating the vast diversity present in nature.	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
4	I live in a very small and predominantly Christian town, so I have very little opportunity to interact with anyone who even tangentially shares my belief system or practices. However, I have had the good fortune to take a few online courses in various magical or	Yes	I still attend the local Episcopal church on a semi-regular basis; despite my general ambivalence toward the actual beliefs of Christianity, and also the whole framing of "belief" as key to religion anyway, I find that participating in communal religious rituals of any kind is still deeply meaningful to me	Yes	I do use the term sometimes, although not often-- I generally qualify it with "Brigidine pagan" recently (like, within the last few months) or "Christopagan" before that. I also refer to myself as a Hermetic polytheist. honestly, though, I don't really talk	LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)

	divinatory practices, and the mailing lists and/or forums for those courses have provided me with some semblance of vaguely like-minded community.		and gives me an opportunity for community engagement that I simply don't have opportunities for when it comes to my pagan practice.		about my religious identity very often in a way that would involve labelling it. I kinda just... do what I do?	
5		No		Yes		LGBTQ+ concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s)
6	I live in a small, longstanding Pagan household. Each member has our own distinct traditional lineage and we do an array of Pagan-specific practices and workings large and small. Our cultural politics are distinctly queer. Our household was closely involved in the founding a small temple group with similar sensibilities writ a bit larger, but it has dissolved. I have modest initiatory investments in a formal lodge of a disorganized but well-known system of graded initiatory practice. We pointedly ignored or altered most use of gendered roles & symbolism in the tradition's rituals & liturgy. I was somewhat involved in a large regular community festival for two decades. Given the prompt it is worth noting that the dissolution of the festival coincided with conflicts over gendered participation & exclusion in particular events; some like to call those conflicts as the cause of the eventual failure of the festival, but I tend to count it as a symptom.	Yes	I host & organize an annual Passover seder for a large mix of Jewish & gentile friends, and have a personal network of friends & acquaintances who significantly understand ourselves as bound as Jewish community. I have also had a large handful of brushes with interfaith community events & organizing, though it has been some time since I last was involved.	Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction) - Cultural politics
7	What do pagans mean in the modern world?	No		No	polytheism	Feminism - Gender identity - Feeling of relating to Pagan

	However, there are some similarities between these different groups of believers For example, in general, modern paganism can be described as a movement, not dogma or based on rigid dogma On the contrary, the belief of its followers is rooted in their personal experience. Druids celebrate at Stonehenge Druids are a branch of modern paganism Another common feature of modern paganism is its emphasis on nature and natural environment The understanding of the natural world and the divinity of nature are two important characteristics of modern pagans Because of their respect and respect for nature, modern pagans tend to be eco-friendly and adopt a way of life to minimize the damage they may cause to the environment, which is the altar of modern pagans (Public sphere), modern pagans recognize the sanctity of nature, and they also accept the diversity of nature This in turn made the modern pagans realize that there is diversity in the sacred field In some modern pagan groups, gods and goddesses are considered to exist in a community, much like the human community of the human kingdom Moreover, it is the annual cycle of life, death and rebirth of these gods that defines the pagan year For other groups, all gods and goddesses are regarded as a					deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)

	great god and a great goddess respectively It was also pointed out that modern paganism emphasized equality between men and women, and women played a prominent role in this movement This can be seen, for example, in fact, goddess worship exists in most pagan rituals, and witchcraft worship priestesses preach in temples Modern paganism emphasizes equality between men and women Modern pagans are often accused of being devil worshippers and equated with Satan However, although modern pagans worship all kinds of gods, there is no evil concept like evil belief in this movement Another characteristic of modern paganism is their belief in magic and supernatural In some modern pagan groups, magic is used to achieve the desired effect by supernatural means This is possible because human beings and the supernatural realm are considered to be in constant interaction Therefore, magic can be used by modern pagans to manipulate the material or spiritual world Because of this practice, modern paganism is often cast a negative light, because there is a misunderstanding that its followers use black magic to cause harm to others. However, modern paganism adheres to the ethics of 'do what you want to do, but not harm anyone'. Therefore, using magic to harm					

	others is prohibited On the contrary, modern pagan believers often use magic to bring health and wealth to their own and others' lives					
8	I belong to Coven Pleiades, a Wiccan coven based in St. Louis, Missouri. Pleiades is vaguely Alexandrian, though it does not have a direct line back to Sanders/Gardner.	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
9	The Troth, a large international Heathen religious body. Mímisbrunnr Kindred, a small SE Michigan I run as Góði.	No		No	Heathen	Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s)
10	I am a member of a Patreon where some of us get together with the organizer to do magick every full moon and new moon. The organizer is Greek and both worships the Greek gods and is an initiated Tibetan Buddhist. I don't know if I count as a "group" member because I don't pay for extra training and I am not a part of his enclosed initiatory group. Sometimes we draw upon the power of the moon and petition the goddesses Circe and Hekate. Sometimes we chant (open to all) mantras for blessings or curse-breaking. And sometimes we as a group channel our energy for specific causes (like helping the souls of those who died in major natural disasters to pass over or opposing anti-trans legislation in the US).	Yes	My day job is secretary for a local Christian church, and I occasionally attend their events (I like their Pub Theology group because it's not Christian-specific).	Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)

	(The main benefit we get from the Patreon is him performing prayers and blessings for us every day.) (Since you mentioned gender I feel compelled to say the organizer is nonbinary and uses he/she/fae pronouns.)					
11	I've participated in multiple groups in the past - helped lead a fairly open (though not entirely public) circle for about a decade. Currently, I'm involved with one group: an oracular divination group that began in the Norse tradition, but has evolved to include folks from several different paths. This is a group of peers, rather than a group with a strong leadership structure. We offer public workshops and oracular divination, but we also spend time taking care of each other's needs in our meetings. We're fairly 'at-need' in our structures - we don't make a point of celebrating particular holidays as a group, though some years, we will, if we're feeling it. None of the groups I've participated in have been organized around gender-specific lines, though my current group *does* tend to be comprised primarily of women, both cis and trans. We've had men in the group in the past, and may well have folks of other genders in the group in the future.	No		Yes	Yes, but I prefer 'devotional polytheist'	Feminism - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
12	Group of like minded queer folk not organized along gender lines	No		No	Heathen or animist	Concern for the environment - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore -

						Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
13		No		No	hellenic polytheist	Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
14		No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s)
15		No		Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
16	I am a member of The Satanic Temple, but do not participate in any group worship. I do not believe in segregation of the sexes, my childhood religious trauma is filled with instances of being denied due to being female.	No		No	I'm a satanic witch	Feminism - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions
17	N/A	No		Yes		Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Connection to nature
18		No		Yes		Feminism - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s)
19	Blue Star Wicca, the teaching group I am part of teaches us	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Differences with prior

	both "What the tradition requires to be taught" and in practice we take into account that gender is a spectrum. We have a trans man in the group. In addition, AFAB people can take on traditionally male roles in ritual (Summoner, Priest) and AMAB people can take on traditionally female roles in ritual (Priestess, Handmaiden) - the focus is on energetics					faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
20	I've never been an active member of any groups or covens aside from a few Facebook groups. I prefer solitary practice, as many practitioners tend to hold drastically different personal beliefs and practices, I'm more comfortable doing my own thing.	No		No	I prefer the term Heathen, it feels like generic than "pagan" but also not too precise to allow for flexibility in practice.	Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
21		No		No	Nature/Universe centered faith	Feminism - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s)
22	• Covenant of Unitarian universalist Pagans (CUUPS) • Covenant of Earth and Sky (COVES)	Yes	I attend a Unitarian Universalist Church regularly	Yes		Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore
23	In the past, I have worshipped with others on special occasions within a "hearth union" framework. Essentially, we recognize that each person has a unique and specific practice but share a ritual on this one occasion.	No		No	I usually use Heathen, or polytheist if I want to be more general. I am fine with the term "Pagan" as far as personal identification, but it has a lot of connotations so I don't think it's useful. I also don't identify with 90+% of practitioners who use the Pagan label.	Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions
24		No		Yes		Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-

						influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction) - Immanent deity, Magic
25	Ordo Templi Orientis. In contrast to traditional fraternities, there are no restrictions on what genders or gender identities can join. Its policies are inclusive, with gender-appropriate languages in its ceremonies, and accommodations for trans people in the cases where a particular role is gender-based (such as the offices of priest or priestess in ecclesiastical celebrations).	No		No	Occultist, magician, ceremonial magician, eclectic	Concern for the environment - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
26		No		Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Because I can.
27		Yes	I will help faith based charity organizations that help feed, clothe and house house less community members. I have donated clothing and money to a local group that does a lot of good.	Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
28		No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
29		Yes	I visit church to accompany my Christian friend.	Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Reading or

						viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
30	Primarily solitary, though I participate in one semi-local kindred and keep friends there. Online I'm part of the Troth (too far away to do any of their in person stuff so far), Heathen Women United (open to women + non-binary folk only, I believe there is a similar group for men but I'm unsure how closely tied they actually are)	Yes	UUC hosts events and such which are not pagan specific but open to all. Super respectful of all religions and very inclusive and supportive space (at least my local one is).	Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
31	My practice is mostly solitary. I attend meetings and rituals with a group formerly part of a UU ECSC but has recently separated (all gender affirming). I attend the monthly San Diego Women's Drum Circle which is not entirely faith based, but occasionally includes mentions of a goddess and is led by women with connections to native cultures (women only, unsure whether they are inclusive of trans women). Various pagan podcast followings, all through internet connection only (all gender inclusive).	No		Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
32	I am gythia of Black Bear Kindred, an inclusive Heathen group. We are organized around being an extended family.	No		No	Heathen	Feminism - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions
33	I belong to a loosely connected initiatory Mystery tradition. The group is polytheist and animist, but particularly dedicated to a shared group of gods around which the initiatory experiences revolve. People's of all race, ethnicity, gender, age (assuming legal	No		No	Animist, Polytheist, Heathen	Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Direct spiritual experience(s)

	adulthood), ability, are welcome. There is very little in the way of requirements to the group and most people belonging would still consider themselves solitary practitioners. We have members across the US and Internationally and mostly organize online. The focus is on developing understanding and religious praxis that suits the life and needs of each individual member with relation to their gods.					
34	3paac, my own personal coven, I'm a first level druid	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s)
35	I celebrate sabbats with a local open circle, but my daily practice and my personal sabbat celebrations are solitary	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns
36		No		No	I use pagan as shorthand or as a broad description but use Hellenic Polytheist is more accurate	Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s)
37	My Ancient Egyptian path is solitary; it's not a popular choice, and there's only one major organization in this area and it's pretty problematic. I'm also a member of ADF, which I believe is the largest American druidry organization. It's pan-Indo-European (so includes many gods and cultures), and I was attracted to it due to its public rituals (compared to	No		Yes	Polytheist	Concern for the environment - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)

	Wicca's private ones for example) and their passion for rigorous scholarship.					
38	I am an initiate within the Firefly House in Washington DC. The House is a pan-Pagan organization with ceremonies are rooted in Wiccan traditions, but our membership encompasses everything from druids, witches, heathens, and ceremonial magicians to polytheists, pantheists, animists, and even atheists. We aim to learn about our spiritual beliefs and practices, including ritual and witchcraft, by sharing knowledge collaboratively across our community and through public rituals and events. There are no gender-specific lines and we don't really keep to the degree system of other forms of initiatory Wicca, hence the "eclectic" part of my personal path descriptor!	Yes	My partner (of 18 years) is Catholic, so I'm regularly at Mass. Less frequently, I will attend Jewish ceremonies or events with my family, but even they have largely ceased to attend services of any sort except for special occasions.	Yes		Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
39	I put solitary, though I'm a member of several online communities. Those are mostly for social amd discussion purposes than community praxis.	No		Yes		Feminism - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions
40	There's a temple to "the goddess" in southern Utah that I visit and circle with about once every quarter. They have some gendered events but I don't see the invites. There's a group that tries to drum for every full moon that I also like to go to. But that is precisely as organized as that group gets. There's a guy that has drums and kinda leads but not really.	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - LGBTQ+ concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction) - My dad

	There's a few shops around that if you want to get a quick circle they have some info if who is available. Not due to any formal agreement simply due to familiarity. I tend to collect many stray solitary practitioners that I can bounce ideas off of.					
41	Largely solitary, community is more in virtual servers- haven't had the chance to join larger events	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
42		No		Yes		Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s)
43	I'm primarily solitary but belong to a number of online Druidic groups and one women-only magical online group of no specific denominations	Yes	I volunteer within the UU tradition at times and work in interfaith groups	No	Druid	Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
44	My practice itself is solitary, but I admin for a few discord communities. One in particular is aimed at teaching those newly exploring paganism and witchcraft, especially younger teens who are frequently unwelcome in other discord communities, either explicitly by rule or more socially by having their inexperience used against them or making them feel stupid or silly for asking questions	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s)
45	Disabilities and still living in the bible	No		Yes		Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of

	belt keep my path rather solitary. There are online groups, but it is difficult for me to remember and retain information through message boards.					relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s)
46		No		Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
47	I typically practice alone but do belong to multiple non-gender-segregated online groups. Prior to the pandemic, some of them met reasonably regularly in person to conduct rituals. I belong to a few body-positive groups that are typically primarily for femme-presenting people but all of them also have cis men members. The spaces are held as safe spaces for women, so members of all genders are highly vetted.	Yes	I am a member of the Nearness (thenearness.coop) a non-denominational spiritual community.	No	Heathen, although pagan suffices when necessary	Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
48	One is online, one is physical, neither are gender-specific	Yes	Only for funerals and family holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving though I say my own prayer during grace	Yes		Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
49		Yes	Unitarian-Universalist for fellowship and activism on social issues.	Yes		Concern for the environment - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Personal connections to other Pagans - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
50		No		No	Witch	Concern for the environment - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns -

						Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
51		Yes	I am now also an adherent to Konkokyo, a Japanese religion that has roots in Shinto and Buddhism and doesn't require renouncing other gods.	No	Heathen	Concern for the environment - Feminism - LGBTQ+ concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
52		No		Yes		Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
53	I belong to several online groups and several Druid orders. None of these define my religious life but they all inform and support it. None are gender specific. I belong to OBOD and AODA and sometimes do rituals with ADF, and I belong to several affinity groups online as well which are private or semi-private groups.	No		No	Polytheist	Concern for the environment - Feminism - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s)
54	I am a member of Touta Galation, a Gaulish Organization A founding member of Sepanioi Roti, a Gallo-Brythonic religious tradition with a very heavy emphasis on activism I was a member a few times of ADF, a druid organization, and a smattering of other organizations and traditions of varying religious frameworks	No		Yes		Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)

55		No		No	Polytheist or Heathen	Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s)
56		Yes	I sing professionally for a Lutheran church. I take part of worship services as part of my job, though I wouldn't otherwise if I weren't being paid.	No	Heathen	Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s)
57	I was a part of an electic pagan temple. It was not gender segregated but was female dominated. It was a collection of people with different beliefs celebrating holidays from the wheel of the year together. It dissolved due to a leadership vacuum but I would love to join a new temple	No	No, but I do love to visit places of worship of all religions	Yes		Concern for the environment - LGBTQ+ concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s)
58		No		Yes	Polytheist is also fine	Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
59	I participate in online groups but am otherwise solitary	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s)
60	I have no in person groups. I do participate in online discussion groups. I hate the word coven.	No		No	Heathen	Differences with prior faith/clergy - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Direct spiritual experience(s) - I tried to believe in a monotheistic god previously and it just never clicked
61	I belong to an interfaith pagan circle. We meet twice a week to celebrate and worship; many rituals are Wiccan-based but others	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore -

	follow different pagan traditions.					Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
62	I don't belong to a particular coven/ Druid grove because there aren't any in my local area. I would try a grove if there was one. I am a member of a group that supports pagans in my local community.	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with other religions - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)
63	I participate in online spaces (reddit, discord, instagram, tumblr) to discuss but I don't practice my faith necessarily with anyone. It isn't gender specific but must be inclusive and is usually frequented by other trans people.	No		Yes		Concern for the environment - Feminism - Gender identity - LGBTQ+ concerns - Differences with prior faith/clergy - Social justice concerns - Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore - Experiences with authority during childhood - Experiences with other religions - Personal connections to other Pagans - Direct spiritual experience(s) - Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)

	If "other," please describe below					
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6	I see a wide range of traditions, practices, and relationships with divinity as choosing to understand ourselves as having enough of a shared sensibility, community, and destiny as to employ “Pagan” as a soft of big-tent umbrella term. In the last decade or two, many people who I would count as part of the greater Pagan community have come to more and more often reject the term or a simple sense that it is a shared community with shared sensibilities.					
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24	Immanent deity, or the view that divinity is all encompassing or pervasive in the world, and can be found in various religions. Plus the empowerment that magical practice brings.					
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26	See a few questions back.					
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40	My dad is not a pious man by any stretch of the imagination but he did think he's a Mormon. He's the most pagan Mormon ever though.					
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Total Motivating Reasons for Conversion[44]	
Concern for the environment	28
Feminism	25
Gender identity	17
LGBTQ+ concerns	28
Differences with prior faith/clergy	27
Social justice concerns	24
Feeling of relating to Pagan deities/myths/folklore	58
Experiences with authority during childhood	14
Experiences with other religions	29
Personal connections to other Pagans	17
Direct spiritual experience(s)	45
Reading or viewing Pagan or Pagan-influenced media such as books, television, or film (whether fiction or non-fiction)	36

[44] These totals account for the discrepancy in reporting regarding Respondent #7, as noted in Chapter VII above.

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