

Introduction

Going Between the Worlds

When Witches cast a magic circle in which to perform ritual and celebrate their deities, they say they are ‘going between the worlds’. The circle becomes sacred space, separate from the everyday world and everyday consciousness, a magical un-place where the customary boundaries between dreams, desires, fantasies, realities, seen and un-seen, what is and what might be, alter. Witches and Pagans inhabit a similarly in-between socio-religious space in contemporary Western societies, negotiating continuously between the worlds of the dominant culture and their own path as they create and perform their identities. The anthropologist also negotiates between worlds: those of her own and the other society, of the academy and the world outside, of the mainstream culture and marginal – in this case magical – sub-culture that constitute her ‘field’. This book speaks to all these journeys and the considerable effort, discomfort, courage, conflict, ingenuity, resourcefulness, flexibility, apprehension, fear, wonder and excitement that they may, and often do, entail.

Contemporary western Paganism, or Neo-Paganism, is today a global phenomenon with Pagans in many parts of the world sharing much in common – from a nature-revering worldview and lifestyle to a host of ritual practices, tools, invocations and chants. Within this global Neo-Pagan culture, there is a great deal of diversity in terms of the many traditions practitioners choose to follow, and as a result of individual Pagans’ eclectic, idiosyncratic approaches to their spirituality – an eclecticism which is embraced and applauded within the movement. There is also diversity according to the variety of local cultures in which Neo-Paganism emerges as a marginal and heterodox sub-culture. Wherever it is found, contemporary Paganism is a minority religion and culture whose relationship with the mainstream society in which it is embedded contributes significantly to its local expression. Modern Pagans craft their identities differently according to these larger cultural contexts in which they find themselves. British, American, Canadian, Irish, Lithuanian, Icelandic, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Finnish, Russian, Israeli, Greek, Italian and Maltese Pagans, for example, all share much in common, but they are also different from one another. Local landscapes, histories, mythologies, social and religious contexts, politics, cultural traditions, values and norms all impact on determining local variability.

Pagan scholarship, which has grown steadily especially in the last twenty or so years, has tended to focus on particular Pagan communities (mostly in Britain and North America, where by far the largest numbers of Pagans live) and/or on particular themes: nature and ecology, feminism, festivals, ritual, identity, teenage

Witchcraft, magical epistemologies and religious ecstasy, for example.¹ Differences between British and American Paganisms have been considered in terms of their different histories and preoccupations.² Scholars in a variety of disciplines, along with numerous authors outside the academy, have described a broad range of Pagan traditions,³ explicated their cosmologies, debunked misconceptions, documented and debated their complex histories, established Paganism as an authentic religion and research on Paganism as a legitimate pursuit. This literature now incorporates many wide-ranging studies of Paganism as a global phenomenon, along with richly-detailed local studies, including a number focused on the revival or reconstruction of the polytheistic, nature-oriented religions of pre-Christian Europe.⁴

Thus the diversity of modern Paganism in the global context has been discussed in terms of the variety of traditions, the variability in Pagans' beliefs, and the variety of specific local cultural contexts in which Pagan communities are emerging. In this book I focus explicitly on this relation of the global to the local; I am especially interested in what happens when the global culture of Paganism interacts with a specific local culture. Taking the Mediterranean society of Malta as a case study, I venture between the worlds of the local and global, arguing for the vital importance of the local amidst global processes and influences. My interest is the variability thrown up at the intersection of religion and ethnicity, the creative accommodation

¹ Some important book-length ethnographic studies include, in the order of publication: Gini Graham Scott, *Cult and Countercult* (Westport, CT, 1980); Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA, 1989); Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (Boston, MA, 1993); Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (Prospect Heights, IL, 1995); Lynne Hume, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia* (Melbourne, 1997); Helen Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (Columbia, SC, 1999); Susan Greenwood, *Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology* (Oxford, 2000); Sarah Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 2001); Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism* (London and New York, 2002); Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London and New York, 2002); Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PENN, 2004). This list is far from exhaustive.

² See, for example, Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford and New York, 1999).

³ These disciplines include (but not exclusively) Anthropology, Religious Studies, Sociology, History, Women's and Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Theology, Psychology, Environmental Studies and Media Studies. For descriptions of different Pagan traditions see Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London, 1997) and Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman, *Pagan Pathways: A Complete Guide to the Ancient Earth Traditions* (London, 1995).

⁴ See Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2005).

which occurs when a global religion – Neo-Paganism – is grafted into a particular local culture which also has its own traditions of magical belief and where, perhaps five decades ago, ‘witchcraft’ was held by many to be a reality, albeit as a very different phenomenon from the modern one. Maltese Witches and Pagans today find themselves sandwiched between a contemporary, global, imported ‘Witchcraft’ and longstanding traditions rooted in their own cultural heritage. I discuss their negotiations with both the foreign and indigenous versions.

Most studies of contemporary Paganism have been conducted in societies which are predominantly Protestant and increasingly secular (for example, the US, UK, Canada and Australia), and the ways in which Pagan identities are constructed in these contexts have come to be taken implicitly as normative. This book invites readers inside the world of a small, hidden sub-culture in a strongly Roman Catholic society and introduces its members, their beliefs and practices. It looks at what it is like being Pagan in this closely-knit, urban society where Catholicism has traditionally permeated every sphere of public and domestic, social and political life. Being Pagan in this context, I suggest, constitutes a different set of experiences based on a particular relationship to the dominant society, its norms and institutions.

It is hardly a startling conclusion that growing up Maltese makes a difference to how a person crafts his or her Pagan identity, yet it is important to draw attention to the unique ways in which this, or any, local context inflects and integrates a global cultural phenomenon. Contemporary Paganism in this Catholic, Mediterranean setting differs from Paganisms in British or American contexts, and the difference derives partly from what I see as a broadly interchangeable cultural logic between some important aspects of Catholicism and Paganism in this cultural environment. I am not suggesting, of course, that these religious traditions are interchangeable, but that Maltese Pagans and Catholics share some common ways of thinking and practising religion along with a shared religious heritage which has for centuries, and probably millennia, drawn on and combined ‘pagan’ and Christian ideas and practices. Indeed I would venture that in the Maltese context, and possibly in others, Paganism and Roman Catholicism may have more in common than evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Hence the relevance to this study of religious historian Joanne Pearson’s *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, which demonstrates in detail how Wicca has borrowed from Christian, especially Catholic, liturgical traditions, bringing full circle, many Wiccans claim, the process whereby Christianity appropriated from ancient Paganisms in the first place.⁵ Sabina Magliocco’s discussion of contemporary Italian-American Witchcraft and its relation to Italian folk magical practice is also relevant.⁶ As in Italy, folk practice in Malta was traditionally highly syncretized

⁵ Joanne Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage: Ritual, Sex and Magic* (Oxford and New York, 2007).

⁶ Sabina Magliocco, ‘Spells, Saints, and *Streghe*: Witchcraft, Folk Magic, and Healing in Italy’, *The Pomegranate: A New Journal of Neopagan Thought* 13 (2000), pp. 4–22,

with folk Catholicism, but unlike the case Magliocco describes, Maltese Witches do not claim to be resurrecting indigenous practices, despite living in the land of their ancestors (unlike the Italian-American Pagans).

Another pertinent comparison is Jenny Butler's study of Neo-Paganism in Ireland, also a strongly Catholic society.⁷ As in Italy and Malta, Irish folk religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries combined elements of Christianity and the older pre-Christian religion. The ways in which Maltese Pagans today relate to Christian and pre-Christian spirituality, and the ways in which they construct their contemporary Pagan identities, show similarities to and differences from those of Irish Pagans. Most obviously, Irish Pagans are much more numerous, may belong to well-established groups belonging to a broad range of Pagan traditions, are more visible and more politically engaged in, for example, efforts to protect sacred sites (such as Tara) and ecological projects. There is a much more obvious tendency in Ireland to explicitly emphasize a connection with the pre-Christian past, to conduct rituals at ancient sites, to stress religious continuity under the umbrella of Celtic Spirituality, even if, according to Butler, the link is intuited by Pagans rather than historically documented or provable.⁸ Celtic deities and supernatural beings from Irish folk tradition, such as the *Sidhe* (the fairy host who inhabit the spirit realm and certain places in the landscape), are invoked in Neo-Pagan rituals. Although Maltese Pagans also have ready access to a rich and complex folklore, including fairy beings who in some cases are very real to Pagans, they do not incorporate this indigenous tradition or local entities into their ritual practices. Unlike Maltese Pagans, Irish Pagans seem to enjoy a fairly positive relationship with the public at large. While 'misconceptions about Paganism abound, and ritual practice is sometimes confused with devil worship', says Butler, 'there seems to be an embracing of Paganism by the general public in Ireland, and this is in part due to positive media coverage'.⁹

But there are also similarities between Irish and Maltese Pagans. In both countries some Neo-Pagans incorporate Christianity into their personal spiritual paths and identities. Overall, Irish and Maltese Pagans are perhaps less antagonistic

and Sabina Magliocco, 'Italian American *Stregheria* and Wicca: Ethnic Ambivalence in American Neopaganism', in Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2005), pp. 55–86.

⁷ Jenny Butler, 'Druidry in Contemporary Ireland', in Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2005), pp. 87–125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97. James Lewis also says that 'with the exception of a few tantalizing remarks penned by classical authors and the surviving names of some of the old gods and goddesses, we have no direct knowledge – and certainly no written knowledge – of Celtic religious practices'. See 'Celts, Druids and the Invention of Tradition', in James Lewis and Murphy Pizza (eds), *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* (Leiden and Boston, 2009), pp. 479–93, quote on 485.

⁹ Butler, 'Druidry in Contemporary Ireland', 120.

towards the prevailing Catholicism of their societies than many of their counterparts elsewhere are towards Christianity. The syncretism of pre-Christian and Christian traditions in both countries has continued through to the present in the celebration of local festivals (see Chapter 4), and there is a fairly comfortable slippage between Pagans' gods and goddesses and Catholic saints. In drawing attention to the distinctiveness of Maltese Neo-Paganism in this book, I am not suggesting that Paganisms anywhere or everywhere else are homogeneous – they are not, as many scholars have pointed out. Rather I would call attention to the important and fascinating relationship between the global and the local in understanding all regional variants of Neo-Paganism wherever they appear in the world.

This book addresses two equally important audiences: people interested in contemporary Paganism, its regional variation and relationship with Christianity; and people interested in contemporary Mediterranean ethnography, relationships between religion and society, cultures and sub-cultures, the local and the global. Like any anthropologist, I am most fundamentally and passionately interested in what it is like being another person living her life in her world. Knowing Malta was a deeply Catholic country, I sought from the outset to understand something of what it was like to be a Witch or Pagan in such a society, where, I imagined, Witches might not enjoy a particularly warm reception. I carried out the research by participant observation on-and-off over three years (2005–2008) assisted enormously by three key host participants without whose help and blessing the study would have been impossible. These people, to whom I owe an incalculable debt, are introduced in the next chapter where I discuss how the study came about and my entry to the community to do fieldwork.

For readers who may not be familiar with it, it will be helpful to introduce Neo-Paganism in its broader global context before introducing the ethnographic context in which this study was conducted. Contemporary Paganism is a fast-growing new religious movement well summarized by Graham Harvey as a religion or group of religions 'at home on Earth, an ecological spirituality, a somatic philosophy of life. It is not a preparation for Heaven or a quest for Enlightenment'.¹⁰ In his history of modern Pagan Witchcraft, Ronald Hutton says that 'the essence of all modern paganism is consecration; the attempt to make persons, and places, and objects

¹⁰ Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, vii. Paganism is now the eighth largest religious grouping in the UK, with 42,336 people selecting it as their faith in the 2001 British Census. See statistics reported by James Lewis in 'The Pagan Explosion: An Overview of Select Census and Survey Data', in Hannah Johnston and Peg Aloï (eds), *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, VT, 2007), pp. 13–23, table on p. 15. The Pagan Federation of Great Britain, which represents many of the faith groups from Wiccans to Druids, estimates the number of Pagans at between 50,000 and 200,000. Cahal Milmo, 'Paganism and Prejudice', *The Independent* (London), 29 May 2006. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4158/-is_20060529/ai_n16433217. Accessed 6 March 2008.

feel more sacred, more invested with inner power and meaning which connects the apparent to a non-apparent world'.¹¹

Neo-Paganism is an umbrella term for a large number of modern Western nature religions or earth religions, the commonest being Wicca, Druidry, Neo-Shamanism, feminist (or Dianic, after the Roman goddess) Witchcraft and Goddess Spirituality, Isis-worship and Heathenry (which draws on old Germanic and Scandinavian traditions). While these are all distinctive Pagan paths (which also overlap), some broad principles are shared by many Pagans. For all, love for and kinship with nature, reverence for the life force and its cycles of life, death and regeneration are paramount.¹² These cycles are widely celebrated in eight seasonal festivals, called Sabbats, spread evenly throughout the year. They include the summer and winter solstices (Litha and Yule respectively), spring and autumn equinoxes (Eostar and Mabon respectively) and four other days: Samhain (popularly known as Hallowe'en), Imbolc (or Brigid), Lammas (Lughnasad) and Beltaine. Pagans call these eight days 'the Wheel of the Year'.

A Pagan worldview emphasizes holism: the inter-relatedness and interdependence of everything – all matter and energy – often expressed in urgent concerns about ecology and ideas about karma. Pagans put high value on personal freedom and autonomy along with responsibility to others, including other-than-human beings, expressed in the often quoted Wiccan saying: 'Do what you will, but harm none'. Many conceptualize divinity as duotheistic, with a Goddess and God expressing the Divine reality, but those in the Goddess Spirituality movement, mostly women, put their whole focus on 'the Goddess' and a plethora of goddesses from the pantheons of various living and past cultures, thereby combining a form of monotheism with polytheism. The Goddess may be thought of in different ways by different people. She is 'the living body of a living cosmos' immanent and embodied in all that is;¹³ She is the creative source and sustaining force of nature whereby all proceeds from Her and all returns to Her; She may be conceptualized as a powerful female deity who can be worshipped and prayed to in times of need; She may be an empowering symbol for women's beauty and strength, and so on.¹⁴

Large numbers of Pagans are polytheists, honouring many deities and sacred beings, including some associated with particular parts of the landscape (including

¹¹ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, x.

¹² The principles discussed here are based on those of the Pagan Federation. See Harvey and Hardman, *Pagan Pathways*, xi.

¹³ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco, 1989), 228.

¹⁴ Carol P. Christ's classic article, 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections', in *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (New York, 1982), pp. 71–86, deals with the multiple meanings of 'Goddess' for women.

the urban landscape), ancestors, spirits and wights.¹⁵ Many, perhaps most, Pagans call their worldview animist; Harvey defines animists as ‘people who understand the world to be a community of persons, most of whom are other-than-human, but all of whom deserve respect’.¹⁶ This does not mean that human likeness is projected onto other beings; rather it acknowledges that humans ‘are just one kind of person in a wide community dwelling in particular places’.¹⁷ A great many modern Pagans do not embrace a single spiritual path, preferring to call themselves ‘eclectics’ and choosing whatever appeals to them from the various traditions to create a personally customized path. There are thousands of websites about Paganism and hundreds of thousands of Pagans worldwide who use them.

The origins and development of contemporary Paganism are complex and have been contested amongst insiders and scholars. There are some Pagans, including some modern Goddess followers, who claim a heritage with roots stretching back millennia, even as far as the Palaeolithic, while at the other end of the continuum are those who stress the importance of the 1960s counterculture in spurring people to look for, and invent if necessary, spiritual alternatives more in keeping with their developing Green, anti-war, anti-patriarchal leanings and their growing antipathy towards hegemonic institutions. Modern Pagans draw on numerous sources: pre-Christian religions and Classical paganism; the secret, magical societies of the British occult revival at the turn of the twentieth century, especially the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn; European folkloric traditions; European ceremonial magic; contemporary indigenous people’s nature religions; Eastern religions; feminism and eco-feminism; science fiction and fantasy novels; astrology; gemology; herbology; mythology; meditation; psychoanalysis; quantum physics; Gaia theory; alternative healing modalities; the personal growth movement and more. Many Pagans in Britain, Ireland, Northern Europe, Italy, Greece and Eastern Europe, for example, are increasingly engaged in working to recover the indigenous traditions of their own countries and ancestors, so that geographically or ethnically local Paganisms are becoming more popular and distinguishable. These reconstructionist Pagans, says Jenny Blain, distinguish themselves from the more eclectic Pagans by focusing on the traditions of a particular culture or region – one to which they trace their heritage or feel a strong affinity – believing that

¹⁵ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wight> for an explanation of wights, supernatural beings linked with tracts of land or sea, with some human-like characteristics, referred to mostly in Scandinavian folklore. For more on polytheism see the website of the Association of Polytheistic Traditions, an organization based in the UK: <http://www.manygods.org.uk/>.

¹⁶ Graham Harvey, ‘Animist Paganism’, in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden and Boston, 2009), pp. 393–411, quote on 395. For a comprehensive discussion of animism, see Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London and New York, 2006).

¹⁷ Harvey, ‘Animist Paganism’, 396.

historical documents and artifacts hold valuable clues to ancient religious practices, relationships with deities and spirits, and pre-Christian people's worldviews.¹⁸

A word needs to be said about Wicca and its relationship to the terms 'Witchcraft' and 'Witch'. The origins of Wicca are attributed primarily to Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), an Englishman who claimed to have been initiated in 1939 into a hereditary coven of Witches in England's New Forest, a secret remnant of a religion which he said had survived since pre-Christian times. Gardner, it seems, took a liberal approach both towards the truth and towards appropriating a vast range of sources to craft Wicca's history and 'tradition'. The complex and fascinating process of Wicca's formation has been explored in detail by Ronald Hutton and Joanne Pearson among others.¹⁹ From the late 1940s covens were established in Britain along the lines set out in Gardner's books *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). In the 1960s, Alex Sanders set up his own version of Wicca (Alexandrian Wicca) and took the religion to the European continent. Wicca also spread from Britain to the United States, arriving officially 'with the immigration of Raymond and Rosemary Buckland, two English witches who moved to Long Island, New York in 1962'.²⁰ Since the late 1970s versions have developed in numerous other countries.

People who have been initiated into Wicca call themselves 'Wiccans' and 'Witches'. To them, Pearson writes, Wicca denotes, 'a mystery religion involving a process of initiation and rigorous training within a cosmos polarized between male and female forces, all of which is an inheritance from the magical secret societies from which Wicca is descended'.²¹ While 'Wiccan' used to be reserved for those who had been formally initiated into Gardnerian or Alexandrian Wicca, it is now also adopted more widely by non-initiated and other kinds of Witches. While I did not meet any people during my fieldwork in Malta who had been formally initiated into Gardnerian or Alexandrian Wicca (although there may be some), I met many who identified as Wiccan, as well as the more generic Witch and Pagan.

I want to emphasize, as have other researchers, that I never came across anything remotely akin to Satanism or Devil worship during my research.²² This is particularly important to note in the Maltese context where the Devil is popularly believed to be actively trying to destroy people's Christian faith, and where one is frequently told about cases of demonic possession, desecrated graveyards and

¹⁸ Jenny Blain, 'Heathenry, the Past, and Sacred Sites in Today's Britain', in Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2005), pp. 181–208, especially 184.

¹⁹ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*; Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*.

²⁰ Chas Clifton, 'Raymond Buckland', in Chas Clifton and Graham Harvey (eds), *The Paganism Reader* (New York and London, 2004), pp. 209–10, quote on 209. See Clifton's history of Paganism in the United States: *Her Hidden Children* (New York, 2003).

²¹ Pearson, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*, 4.

²² Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 407; Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 81.

the like.²³ As Hutton has explained, ‘modern Pagans of all kinds do not perceive any inherently evil forces to exist in the non-human world’; the Devil is part of a Christian cosmology not a Pagan one.²⁴ Nor did I ever witness amongst Pagans or in their rituals any behaviour intended to be hurtful, dangerous or damaging to any individual or group, Pagan or otherwise. I did hear from quite a number of Maltese – both Catholics and Pagans – that practising Satanists exist in Malta. But these are an entirely different and separate group from Pagans. Most Maltese Pagans, while acknowledging the right of all people to follow their own faiths, find Satanism as sinister and worrying as Maltese Catholics do, and are upset and frustrated when they are mistaken for Satanists.

In this book I follow the fairly common practice in Pagan scholarship and among modern Witches and Pagans themselves of spelling Witch, Witchcraft, Pagan and Paganism with initial capitals, in the way that I would capitalize any other religion and its practitioners. When I refer to those accused as ‘witches’ by the Inquisition, or traditional healers and magical workers referred to as ‘witches’ by their communities (see especially Chapter 3), I use ‘witch’ with a lower case ‘w’. ‘Contemporary Paganism’ and ‘Neo-Paganism’ are used synonymously in the text.

While sharing much with expressions of Neo-Paganism elsewhere, contemporary Maltese Paganism has its own character. As I have said, the fact that it is situated against a backdrop of Catholic Christianity in the mainstream culture makes for a different form of Paganism from those found in societies where Protestant Christianity predominates. It is not a national-socialist movement as Victor Schnirelman and Anne Ferlat have argued is the case in Russia,²⁵ or an attempt to re-indigenize Maltese religion in the way that Pagan reconstructions sometimes are in Britain, Scandinavia and Greece, for example. Maltese folk beliefs, customs and traditions – some of which have Semitic-Arabic origins and many of which have become overlaid and mixed with Christian elements – contribute to the particular cultural milieu in which Maltese Neo-Paganism is developing. So, too, do myths, traditions, deities, festivals and popular beliefs from neighbouring Mediterranean countries, especially Greece and Italy. Malta’s unique Neolithic heritage and Pagans’ engagements with their ancient sites and local landscape are further significant contributors to the local expression of modern Paganism.

In the following chapters I try to paint Maltese Paganism in its cultural context, relating it both to the local mainstream culture in which it is situated and to contemporary Paganism globally. In doing so I am deeply concerned not to lose sight of the many wonderful individuals I met and came to know, not as research

²³ The Catholic Church has officially appointed exorcists to deal with demonic possession.

²⁴ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 407. See also Harvey’s very useful discussion of the confusion of Paganism with Satanism in *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 217–19.

²⁵ Victor Schnirelman, ‘Perun, Svarog and Others: Russian Neo-Paganism in Search of Itself’, *Cambridge Anthropology* 21/3 (2000), pp. 18–36; Anne Ferlat, ‘Neopaganism and New Age in Russia’, *Folklore* 23 (2003), pp. 40–48.

subjects but as real people living real lives – at once ordinary and extraordinary like all lives – constrained by the cultural contingencies of their surroundings and their own personal circumstances, histories and personalities. This is, properly, a Pagan-centred text in which Pagan voices and lives are paramount, where analysis is embedded in the particularities of Pagans’ experiences as they related them to me and as I observed. My first aim and obligation is to do justice to them in my representation and to make a contribution, however modest, to bridging the epistemological gap between Pagans and the societies in which they live, and between the diverse worlds of modern Pagans living in different countries.

At the end of a Wiccan ritual, the sacred circle is opened with the words: ‘Merry meet, merry part, and merry meet again. Blessed be.’ Over the years of research I came to hear this phrase as a description of my experience of doing fieldwork. I thought that gaining access to study Witches and Pagans as a researcher from the opposite side of the world would be difficult. I thought they would be cautious, guarded and possibly reluctant – or at least slow – to accept me. They were not. I was welcomed with extraordinary warmth and openness from the start, given help and kindness at every turn, and greeted as a friend each time I returned to Malta. The completion of this book marks the conclusion of the research relationship but not of the precious friendships which developed in the course of it. The next chapter introduces the wider socio-cultural context of Malta and explains how I came to be studying Witches in this most Catholic of societies.