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Syncretism in contemporary pagan purification practices

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**SYNCRETISM IN CONTEMPORARY PAGAN PURIFICATION
PRACTICES**

by

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**A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Anthropology
in the College of Arts and Sciences
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida**

Spring Term 2010

Thesis Chair: Dr. Ty Matejowsky

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ABSTRACT

Purification, which involves ceremonial acts or customs employed to gain purity in order to create sacred spaces, represents a vital aspect of religious practice both historically and cross-culturally (Cunningham 2003[1988]:48). Preparations for passing into sacred spaces of worship are important elements of ritual life for nearly all faith communities.

My thesis has two important research goals: (1) to examine the purification practices of contemporary Paganism; and, (2) analyze the degree to which contemporary Pagans have adapted a syncretic approach to these cleansing rituals. With regards to the former goal, I address the following three questions: what is the significance of religious purification rituals historically and cross-culturally?; why is purification especially important to contemporary Pagans?; and how have different forms of Paganism varied in their purifying methods? With regards to the latter research goal, I critically review diverse cultural traditions and belief systems variously integrated into contemporary Pagan practices of purification. The influence of Native American, European, and other Old and New World traditions and techniques are all considered in the context of this thesis. Taken as a whole, this type of overview is significant as the scholarly literature on contemporary Paganism and Pagan purification rituals remains sketchy and incomplete at this stage.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr. Matejowsky, Dr. Gay, and Dr. Howard for their assistance, support, and input throughout the research and writing phases of this thesis project. I would also like thank the UCF Department of Anthropology and the Honors' College for making this experience possible. To all my friends who have allowed me to use you as a sounding board to talk endlessly about this undertaking, thank you. Without the support of my wonderful husband and family I could not have pursued this research, and to them I am forever grateful.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Purification

Purification is a vital aspect of religious practice both historically and cross-culturally. It is prominently featured in major belief systems of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, as well as diverse traditional indigenous religions of Africa, Asia, and America (Cunningham 2003[1988]:48; Altman 2002:125; Sherma 1998:97). Accordingly, preparations for passing into sacred spaces of worship are important elements of ritual life for nearly all faith communities. Practices such as rites of separation¹ are often critical in marking transitions from profane to sacred states. Purification, in the context of this thesis, is understood as ceremonial acts or customs employed to gain purity in order to enter or create sacred spaces.

Research Questions

My thesis has two main research goals: (1) to examine the purification practices of contemporary Paganism and (2) analyze the degree to which contemporary Pagans have adopted a syncretic approach to these cleansing rituals. Syncretism involves the interaction and negotiation of new elements into a belief system from different groups or domains (Leopold 2005:3-4). With regards to the former goal, I address the following three questions: what is the significance of religious purification rituals historically and

¹ Rites of Separation are generally understood to be rituals that separate the individual from their previous life in preparation for the next stage. The participant must be purified before they can advance to the next step of existence.

cross-culturally?; why is purification especially important to contemporary Pagans?; and, how have different forms of contemporary Paganism varied in their purifying methods? With regards to the latter research goal, I critically review diverse cultural traditions and belief systems variously integrated into contemporary Pagan purification practices. The influence of Native American, European, and other Old and New World traditions and techniques are all considered within this thesis. Taken as a whole, this overview is significant as the scholarly literature on contemporary Paganism and Pagan purification rituals currently remains rather incomplete (Hutton 1999:3).

Thesis Objectives

Although this thesis is rooted in anthropological perspectives, most of my data is derived from primary anthropological sources and related sociocultural literature and not from direct firsthand ethnographic fieldwork. Significantly, however, my own personal experience within the Pagan community over the past six years provides something of an insider's perspective. I have studied Neo-paganism for nearly ten years. At the outset of my studies, I only had limited interaction with other adherents. My congregational practice within an eclectic coven² only encompasses two years after which I chose to pursue other spiritual paths. Although my Neo-pagan practice has become somewhat infrequent, I still feel connections with the spiritual ideas of honoring ancient Gods and Goddesses. I am drawn to Neo-paganism for the love of exploring different spiritual

² By eclectic coven, I mean a group of contemporary Pagan practitioners, mostly from a Wiccan background, who practice a mixture of beliefs from a variety of cultures and spiritual traditions.

paths. For various reasons, I have never been one for practicing Magick.³ My personal philosophy emphasizes practical hard work without supernatural assistance. I am still currently a member of the Druid organization *Ar nDraiocht Fein* (ADF), but my practice is now rather limited.

An important purpose of this work is to expand the scholarly base of research on contemporary Paganism. My thesis provides a foundation for more firsthand ethnographic research that I plan to conduct at the graduate level in the years to come. This research undertaking helps with planned future investigations into rites of passage and other contemporary Pagan ritual practices.

Thesis Overview

The thesis proceeds as follows. The first chapter of this work examines the various contemporary Pagan denominations and their common practices. Following this explanation, I investigate purification practices and their importance in contemporary Paganism in addition to other world religious purification rites. The conclusion of this work synthesizes the findings expressed.

Considering that most of the literature devoted to contemporary Paganism is written by practitioners, aspects of my research have proven challenging. Thus far, I have read several scholarly and non-scholarly sources with a wide range of findings. The validity and relevance of such information is often difficult to assess given the relative obscurity of purification in Paganism as a specific research topic for anthropologists and other scholars. Critical work that does address these rituals include Arnold van Gennep's

³ The difference between "magic" and "magick" was best described to me by a friend who has been practicing for years. He said, "Magic are the tricks magicians do in a stage show".

(1960[1908]) *Rites of Passage, The Druid Renaissance* compiled by Philip Carr-Gomm
(1996), *Scottish Customs from Cradle to Grave* (Bennett 1992), *Contemporary Paganism*
(Barner-Barry 1995), *A History of Pagan Europe* (Jones and Pennick 1995), and
Sanapia: Commanche Medicine Woman (Jones 1972). These books are able to give
adequate background in the areas of ritual, introduce various Native American traditions
and beliefs, and provide a general overview of historical and contemporary Paganism.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM

Overview

In this chapter, I consider contemporary Paganism in its varied manifestations. After defining Paganism, I identify the various subcategories and individuals informing this particular belief system.

Defining Paganism

In approaching Paganism as a concept, I prefer the definition used in *A History of Pagan Europe*, which suggests Paganism encompasses “nature-venerating indigenous spiritual traditions” (Jones, Pennick 1995:2). Comparatively, Margot Adler states in her influential work *Drawing Down the Moon*, that Paganism is the “pre-Christian nature religion of the West” (Adler 1986[1970]:xiii). Although essentially valid, I take issue with Adler’s definition to some degree. Mainly, I feel that it does not really consider the wider spiritual base of Eastern religions and other non-European indigenous traditions that I propose in this thesis to be vitally important to contemporary Paganism. While there is considerable variation among the kinds of practices and beliefs of today’s practitioners, some core characteristics for contemporary Pagan religions are that they are polytheistic, view nature as a theophany,⁴ and recognize the female divine principle of the Goddess (Jones, Pennick 1995:2).

⁴ Theophany is in this context is a divine manifestation.

It is important to note that while contemporary Paganism is rooted in ancient Pagan rituals and teachings, Neo-paganism is considered a new religion by most scholars in that there are no continuous or proven links between today's practices and those from ancient times (Jorgenson, Russell 1999:326). Similarly, it is equally important to recognize that there are many ancient practices inappropriate or even unfeasible to contemporary practices and, therefore, necessitate modification. With information gaps about ancient Pagan practice persisting, often due to the lack of written records, contemporary writers have had to rely extensively on their own experience rather than actual accounts of ancient Pagans (Jorgensen, Russell 1999:325). Writers such as Gerald Gardner (1884-1964), the founder of the influential Gardnerian Wiccan tradition, states that he feels at liberty to make his own theories without having proven factual support (Gardner 1954:18). This attitude, along with some creative engineering in incorporating practices from other religious traditions, helps fill in missing information for many contemporary Pagans. I address these issues over subsequent pages and attempt to synthesize my findings with current modes of belief.

Contemporary Paganism

For many non-practitioners, contemporary Paganism is an oft misunderstood belief system. The word "Pagan" often invokes images of unbridled orgies in the woods for Pan or his Judeo-Christian guise, Satan. Moreover, the term "witch" carries many negative associations, including but not limited to, practices such as infant sacrifices, pacts with the Devil, and all other sorts of mischief and deviance that have been linked

with their practices and beliefs (Starhawk 1989[1979]:16, 22). Such sensational, outmoded, and stereotypical views are problematic and detract from the rich cultural and religious traditions encompassed within contemporary Paganism.

To say that contemporary Paganism is strictly a polytheistic belief system is to misunderstand a key aspect of the religion's enduring appeal; namely, the lack of dogma. The majority of practitioners have polytheistic notions of Pagan deities, similar to gods and deities in Hinduism (Zaehner 1962:18-19).

Identifying the assortment of traditions and practices within contemporary Paganism is quite challenging. A wide variety of observances encompassed within the broad categories of Pagan customs makes such an undertaking difficult. For the purposes of this paper, I categorize the main traditions as (1) Wicca, (2) Druid, (3) Eclectic, and (4) Asatru. Under each of these categories are various subcategories focusing on works of a specific leadership or hearth culture from which the practices are derived. A hearth culture represents culturally specific traditions from which practitioners develop their common beliefs and customs.

Gerald Gardner

Gerald Gardner remains quite a divisive figure in today's understanding of witchcraft and Wicca. The following is how he identifies himself in relation to his work:

"Now I am an anthropologist, and it is agreed that an anthropologist's job is to investigate what people do and believe, and not what other people say they should do and believe. It is also part of his task to read as many writings as possible on the matter he is investigating, though not accepting such writings uncritically, especially when in conflict with the evidence as he finds it. Anthropologists may draw their own conclusions and advance any theories of their own, but they must make it clear that these are their own conclusions and their own theories and not proven facts; and this is the method I propose to adopt" (1954:18).

As is seen above, Gardner views himself as an anthropologist. His self identity as a witch is made clear through his various writings. He worked as a British customs officer and spent most of his life in Indonesia. During his time abroad, Gardner conducted considerable amateur research on the religious practices of Southeast Asian tribes and other indigenous groups. He published numerous academic articles and attended various anthropological conferences, gaining a significant scholarly recognition (Jencson 1989:3).

In many ways, the basis of modern witchcraft is traceable to Gardner. Much of his witchcraft writings are influenced by the works of C.G. Leland and Margaret Murray, his experiences with Southeast Asian folk magic, and the incipient Great Britain witch movement who practiced the "Way of the Wise". Charles Godfrey Leland (1824-1903), is a folklorist and linguist, whose work *Aradia* represents the Goddess figure adopted into Gardner's Wicca. *Aradia* is the story of the first witch born of the Goddess Diana, sent to earth to teach her craft. Margaret Murray (1863-1963), a prominent Egyptologist and folklorist whose theories of a pan-European pagan religion revolve around the Horned God, is also greatly influential on Gardner (ibid:4).

It also seems that much of Gardnerian tradition involves syncretism. The effects of his travels, experiences, and influences of Eastern spirituality are now prevalent throughout today's Paganism.

Wicca

Scott Cunningham, a respected proponent and writer on American witchcraft, recognizes at least five major differences between Wicca and other, predominantly

Judeo-Christian, religions. These differences are: (1) Goddess and/or God worship, (2) reverence for the Earth, (3) acceptance of Magick, (4) belief in reincarnation, and (5) no proselytization (Cunningham 1999[1988]:62).

Wicca typically emphasizes the God and Goddess as main deities. Nature is perceived by Wiccans to be both masculine and feminine. Since nature is a manifestation of the divine, the godly must be represented with both male and female forms (Cunningham 1999[1988]:63). While this dichotomy is often expressed in a polytheistic manner, it is important to recognize that Wiccan theology incorporates both monotheistic and polytheistic influences. This seemingly contradictory statement may invite confusion and is something that most practitioners overlook. Monotheistic polytheism essentially means that the universal source of life is too great for mortals to adequately comprehend. Accordingly, Wiccans worship the Gods and Goddesses as aspects of this universal power to make them more comprehensible (Cunningham 1999[1988]:9).

The Goddess is the feminine aspect of this universal force and frequently associated with the moon and earth in Wicca. The Goddess takes many shapes but is more often than not displayed in one of the three following forms: maiden, mother, or crone. These aspects are directly linked with lunar phases, so that the Maiden is the new and waxing moon, the Mother is the full moon, and the Crone is the waning moon. The Goddess' association with the Earth is reflected in the fact that all things are born and grow from the earth, and with death all things return to the earth. These earthly manifestations, along with their association with the God, are represented in the yearly seasonal cycle.

The God is viewed by contemporary Pagans as the masculine aspect of the aforementioned primal source. As consort of the Goddess, his contributions relate to fertility and bounty of the harvest emerging from their union. This union ties him to the process of seasonal change including the death and rebirth reflected in the Wheel of the Year.⁵ The God is frequently envisioned as the Horned God of the Wild. This characterization is often associated with death as it is symbolic of the sacrifice of autumn bringing new life to the Earth. He is also envisioned as the sun which is vital to agricultural communities and seasonal growing cycles. This characterization directly relates to the God's powers during the year. He is strongest and at the height of his maturity in the summer when the sun is present for long hours of the day. The sun's importance is felt keenly in Northern Europe where the majority of these practices evolved (Jones, Pennick 1995:124).

Ritual is a vital aspect of Wiccan practices and other contemporary Pagan belief systems. My observations indicate that ritual, magick, and the Goddess are primary trends informing contemporary Paganism. While practitioners may hold rituals whenever they want, there are specific times when it is most important, such as Sabbats and Esbats.

Sabbats

Sabbats are comprised of the Eight High Days, sometimes called the Sun Festivals, but most often referred to as the Wheel of the Year. This cycle is split into two primary components: winter and summer. The Wheel is then subdivided again into four solar festivals based upon astronomical movements of the sun, and four lunar festivals

⁵ The Wheel of the Year is the seasonal festivals celebrated by most contemporary Pagans. They are derived from several ancient sources and occur every six weeks. Please see the section on Sabbats.

reflecting the seasonal changes and their association with the moon's cycle. The lunar or fire festivals are (1) Samhain, (2) Imbolc, (3) Beltain, and (4) Lammas. These lunar rites are associated with fire because of the large bonfires built by ancient Celts for purification purposes on these occasions. The solar festivals comprise the other half of these sabbats which are the celebrations of (1) Yule, (2) Ostara, (3) Litha, and (4) Mabon. The Wheel of the Year is patterned after earthly cycles of life and evokes notions of rebirth that many contemporary Pagans believe occur after death (Jones, Pennick 1995:89-90; Carr-Gomm 1991:69).

Samhain

The year cycle begins at the start of winter with the lunar festival of Samhain on October 31. This sabbat coincides with the lunar cycle's dark moon phase, which is symbolic of death. Samhain, the Festival of the Dead, occurs when the veil between the physical and spiritual worlds is thinnest, making communication with the dead easier. Accordingly, Samhain is recognized as a time of ancestor veneration. Reflections on the previous year's events are also important. Practitioners can prepare for goals they wish to accomplish in the coming year. Samhain is also a time for adherents to turn inwardly, nurturing the desires and intentions that will be reborn in the fertile spring (Harvey 1997:6; Cunningham 1999[1988]:67-68). This festival also reflects the pastoralist origin of this cycle as it is the time when the herds are gathered back together after the grazing season (Jones, Pennick 1995:90).

Yule

The next sabbat in the Wheel is the solar festival Yule or Midwinter which joyously celebrates the God's rebirth and sun's return. Yule generally occurs during the winter solstice on December 21. As it commemorates the God's rebirth, it also symbolizes the reincarnation of human souls. This festival is one of great revelry. It is traditional to hold all night vigils with Yule fires to greet the morning sun, and acknowledge the God's return (Cunningham 1999[1988]:7-8; Harvey 1997:65).

Imbolc

Imbolc, held on February 2, entails a festival of purification reflecting spring's beginning (Cunningham 1999[1988]:8-9; Harvey 1997:65-66). Imbolc is the second lunar festival and represents the new moon and early childhood (Carr-Gomm 1991:73). This time of the year is traditionally associated with the first lambing and the start of a ewe's lactation cycle (Jones, Pennick 1995:91).

Ostara

Ostara or the Spring Equinox marks the next stage in the passage of the year. It is celebrated on March 21. The second solar festival is a time of both light and darkness. The Earth becomes increasingly fertile and continues the process that begins at Imbolc and culminates with Beltain (Cunningham 1999[1988]:9-10; Harvey 1997:66). This

sabbat is associated with adolescence; a time when children begin to come into their own as independent individuals (Carr-Gomm 1991:74).

Beltain

Beltain or Beltane, held on May 1, celebrates the God's coming of age when the male and female deities conceive in sacred union. This festival marks summer's beginning. A popular May Day tradition is the May Pole. This large phallic symbol is festooned with greenery and floral garlands and symbolizes the uniting of the Goddess and the God. Beltain is also one of the fire festivals where livestock are driven through great bonfires to purify them before going to pasture (Jones, Pennick 1995:90). Another Beltain practice is fire jumping. This ritual promotes fertility in couples that leap over the flames. Beltain is associated with the full moon and reflects times of youth and lovers (Carr-Gomm 1991:74). Suffice it to say, this festival celebrates the Earth's vitality and sacred sexuality (Cunningham 1999[1988]:10-11; Harvey 1997:66).

Litha

Midsummer, Litha, or the summer solstice is celebrated on June 21. Generally, fertility is believed to be heightened during the summer season. Litha reflects times of early adulthood as well as dream expression and fulfillment (Carr-Gomm 1991:77). All night vigils are held for the morning sun on the year's longest day. Midsummer's Eve is a night filled with frivolity and cavorting, and like Samhain, is a time when the veil

separating the physical and spiritual world is thinnest. As reflected in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Litha is a time when mischievous fairies abound (Cunningham 1999[1988]:66-67; Harvey 1997:11-12).

Lughnassadh

Coming after Litha on August 1 is the first harvest festival known as Lughnassadh or Lammas. This festival not only commemorates the time when the first grains and fruits are harvested, it also marks the period when the God begins to lose His powers. This lunar sabbat not only represents the old moon, it also symbolizes the time of life for marriage, responsibility, and family. Lughnassadh is an occasion of satisfaction when accomplishments in life can be realized (Carr-Gomm 1991:74).

Mabon

The Wheel of the Year cycle culminates with Mabon on September 21. This second harvest and fourth solar festival is held during the autumnal equinox. As harvest activities near completion, Mabon represents a time when fulfillment of desires and intentions declared at Samhain come to fruition. It also symbolizes a time of maturity for both humans and the earth. Reflections of life and gift exchanges are the focus of practitioners during Mabon (Carr-Gomm 1991:74). After this festival, the ritual cycle comes full circle in anticipation of the next Samhain. The Wheel of the Year, with its

ever unfolding cycle of festivals, represents times of personal growth and fulfillment, and the earth's seasonal changes.

Esbats

Esbats or ceremonies of the moon are as important to modern Wiccans as sabbats. Esbats usually coincide with full and new moons. Each year there are 13 different full moon esbats. Their individual meanings and focus vary depending upon the moon's current astrological⁶ sign. These nighttime ceremonies typically involve the practice of Magick. During full moon esbats, a "Drawing Down the Moon"⁷ rite is usually performed. The full moon symbolizes the God/Goddess' combined power as sunlight bouncing off the moon's surface reflects light towards the Earth. In a spiritual sense, this process is indicative of the God's power (the sun) as it is delivered into the Goddess's arms (the moon) and shared with their children (Wiccans) (Ravenwolf 2003:297).

Druids

Historical interest in Druidry effectively begins in the 18th century. During this time, this growing fascination was informed by a sense of brotherhood and national pride that made it more of a cultural phenomenon than a religious one. By the 1960s and 1970s, as Pagans rediscovered Druidism, more and more Westerners began to identify with these ancient orders. Druid spirituality provides the context for contemporary

⁶ Astrology is the study of the movements of the heavenly bodies and how these movements relate to human activity and consciousness (Ravenwolf 2003:180).

⁷ Drawing Down the Moon is a ritual performed that draws the moon's power into the practitioner through several steps.

Pagans to create their own groves⁸ based on revived archaic spiritual practices' (Harvey 1997:19). Unfortunately, since the majority of Druid lore remains lost after the Roman invasion of Britain during the 1st century, no definitive guidelines on traditional Druid religious practices exist (Ellis 1994:114). Modern Druids have pieced together a belief system that works for them primarily through information derived from folklore, mythology, and archaeology.

There are generally three Druid levels adapted by contemporary practitioners: the Bards, Ovates, and Druids. Bards are typically musicians, poets, artists, and those inspired by Awen.⁹ Bards are tasked with bringing ancient wisdom into the present. The Ovates are seers who must divine future wisdom to assist those in the present (Harvey 1997:25). They are sign interpreters and listen to voices from the Otherworld.¹⁰ Along with these duties, Ovates are also spiritual and physical healers. The Druids are politicians and spiritual leaders in the traditional sense. Notably, contemporary participants in Druid orders consider themselves Druids. In this way, modern practitioners have reshaped this ancient system into a viable spiritual system.¹¹

Druidry is a polytheistic system of worship as gods are looked upon as ancestors (Ellis 1994:113-115). Many Druid gods are worshipped in triple form similar to many Indo-European belief systems (ibid:127). An important aspect of Druid identity is participation in hearth cultures. What hearth worshippers follow is generally rooted in specific cultural locales and pantheons such as the Celtic hearth tradition. "Our Own

⁸ Groves are organized groups of Druid practitioners.

⁹ Awen is a "flowing spirit" from the Goddess, seen as inspiration and motivation, similar to the Greek Muses (Harvey 1997:20-21).

¹⁰ The Otherworld is the spiritual realm that the Gods, fairies, elves, and other mystical creatures reside (Harvey 1997:2).

¹¹ For more information on the ancient Druids see *The Druids* by Peter Berresford Ellis and for contemporary Druids see *Contemporary Paganism* by Graham Harvey chapter 2.

Druidism” or *ADF* is a major U.S. Druid organization that encourages members to discover the hearth culture that resonates most with them. Initiates often begin with vague interests in specific hearths and then read all available information¹² about its pantheon and traditions to determine if any of the hearth’s gods specifically call to them. If not called, they typically review other traditions. Some popular hearths are rooted in Norse, Hellenic, Roman, Vedic, Slavic, Celtic, and Proto-Indo European traditions.

Other Forms of Witchcraft and Paganism

Eclectic Witchcraft

Eclectic witchcraft can be considered a syncretic practice as most witches adopt the beliefs and traditions that they feel most appropriate to their own spirituality. With varied practices often unrelated to each other, eclectic witchcraft creates its own traditions from myriad sources (Starhawk 1989[1979]:25). With no particular rules in eclecticism other than personal preference, eclectic witches frequently take liberties in their spiritual expression. An example of this involves rituals invoking deities from multiple pantheons.

According to Starhawk, an important figure in the Goddess movement, Goddess religion has three core principles: immanence, interconnection, and community. Immanence reflects the fact that the Goddess and God are manifest within all sentient beings, making everything sacred. Interconnection refers to the idea that all of the earth’s

¹² ADF has a recommended reading list of scholarly books dealing with the Indo-European hearth cultures enveloped under the organization. They also have a list advising authors to avoid due to their questionable scholarship.

components are interrelated and part of one living organism. The notion of community suggests that there is growth and transformation from interactions with other humans and living things (Starhawk 1979[1989]:10).

Pagan Reconstruction

Pagan Reconstructions are focused largely on matters of ethnicity. Some of these reconstructions are Asatru,¹³ Romuva, Hellenic, Egyptian, and Roman Paganism. Asatru, Heathenism, or Odinst are based on northern European traditions from Scandinavia and Germanic cultures. Although there are unfortunate associations with Nazism to these particular groups, the majority of today's Asatru practitioners do not condone racist ideologies or practices (Harvey 1997:65). Romuva is the revival of the Pagan religion of Lithuania, which is the last Christianized European country (Jones, Pennick 1995:172-173). Hellenic, Egyptian, and Roman reconstructions are also represented within *ADF* as well as several other cultural reconstructionists groups. *ADF* Druidic group has expanded from the typical Celtic focus to all Indo-European traditions.

Shamanism

Shamanism, another subgroup within contemporary Paganism, is the religious home of large groups of practitioners. These adherents usually work with spirits, trance, and herbs more often than those of other practices. Shamanism also encompasses those

¹³ Asatru means allegiance to the Norse deities, the Aesir (Harvey 1997:53)

who practice Native American spirituality. This categorization is somewhat controversial, as the practice of Native American religion by non-Natives is not favorably viewed by many American Indians.

Besides these other groupings there is a large miscellany of other practices and traditions. Scottish Witchcraft, Picti-Witta, and kitchen witches are but some of the vast selection of belief systems not addressed in this thesis.

Magick in Contemporary Paganism

Magick, as practiced by contemporary Pagans, is commonly defined as “energy work” (Cunningham 2003[1988]:19). Cunningham describes Magick as “the projection of natural energies to produce needed effects” (ibid) and suggests that this energy is derived from divine, Earth-centered, and personal sources. Cunningham offers further elaboration about the three Magickal energy sources, describing personal powers as energy that rules our bodies, Earth powers as natural forces, and both as manifestations of divine power. Divine power is seen as existing in the Goddess and God as the life force and source of universal power which created existence (ibid:20).

Often Magickal ceremonies invoke deities much like prayer in the Judeo-Christian tradition helps bring about desired results. Based on my limited experience with Magick, I view it as something more akin to a willful focusing of desire towards particular goals. Quite simply, the idea behind Magick is that practitioners can accomplish anything if they truly put their minds to it.

An interesting aspect of Magick that most Craft teachers instill in their students is the importance of exhausting all real world resources before resorting to Magickal ones.

Energy put into Magick is used to amplify actions already performed so that efforts directed towards achieving goals become more important. Visualizing a desired outcome is a central aspect of Magickal practice. Most significant is the link that is created with deities, making Magick a religious act wherein practitioners connect with the divine (Cunningham 2003[1988]:23).

Contemporary Pagans also emphasize the consequences of practicing positive Magick. A phrase commonly uttered in relation to witchcraft is, “An’ it harm none, do what ye will” (Ravenwolf 2003:105). While this phrase seemingly gives followers great license with their actions, it becomes clear on closer inspection that the belief actually promotes a very strict code by which to live. The phrase “An’ it harm NONE” includes doing no harm to others, the Earth, natural creatures, and, most importantly, oneself. It is not so much a call for apathy, but rather, a way to consider the consequences of human actions. If anything, this ethos promotes serious reflection about how actions affect others. Discerning the outcomes of human actions and their possible results represents one of the intriguing complexities of contemporary witchcraft.

Summary

As illustrated in the chapter, more than a few diverse practices currently underlie contemporary Paganism. These influences reflect the syncretic nature of this belief system and the ability of its practitioners to find those ritual practices and beliefs that work best for them.

CHAPTER THREE: PURIFICATION PRACTICES

Overview

In this chapter, I define purification and examine some basic purifying practices found cross-culturally. The influence of purification practices from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Native American Religions, and Shintoism on contemporary Paganism is of considerable importance.

Purification

Ritual purification entails restoration to times of purity or self whereby the faults and sins of a community and/or individual are consumed through ritual process. Such purification processes prepare individuals for entrance into sacred times and places (Eliade 1961[1959]:78). Arguably, the most common form of purification cross-culturally involves water as a purifying and regenerating agent (ibid:131). Other notable purification practices include the use of fire, smoke, herbs, salt, fasting, and confession (Altman 2002:126). Purification is often conceptualized as a ritual cleansing of physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional states (ibid:127).

Purification in Contemporary Paganism

Purification practices are significant aspects of contemporary Paganism. This primary importance is due to the energy work incorporated in most Pagan rituals and

beliefs. Purification rites are performed for various reasons (Cunningham 1993:35, 106, 113-115). The two main purposes for purification are personal cleansing and creating clean ritual spaces. Personal cleansing encompasses a wide range of activities such as the purification of the body, ritual tools, jewelry, clothing, home, car, and office. Purification for ritual locales specifically entails creating sacred and safe spaces for religious rites. Purification practices are typically performed either before or at the beginning of a ritual. They help distinguish practitioners from aspects of the mundane world.

An important part of purification involves the use of natural and supernatural elements as ritual agents. Items can be exposed to fire, water, earth, and/or air to be considered purified in a balanced manner. Balance is a key point in contemporary Paganism. In Wiccan tradition, the God and Goddess create balance within divine expressions of worship. These deities are also representative of the balance underlying daily life. The five elements represented in the pentagram,¹⁴ are the same earth, air, water, fire, and spirit. Ideally, there should be an equal representation of these elements in all ritual aspects.

Purification of Ritual Tools

Purification of practitioners' ritual tools and personal jewelry for consecration is especially important. Common ritual tools in Paganism are the wand, chalice, cauldron, censor, pentacle, Book of Shadows, and athame or sword. Jewelry frequently symbolizes connections between adherents and deities. Druids often have simplistic ritual tools as such items are commonly found in ritually significant natural locales. To purify these

¹⁴ The pentacle, a pentagram encased within a circle is a sacred symbol to many contemporary Pagans.

items, practitioners pass them through incense smoke and sprinkle them with salt water. The incense represents fire and air energies, while salt water symbolizes earth and water. Another purification method involves burying ritual tools during a full moon, washing them off with water, passing them through candle flames, and smoking them with incense. This method is more intensive and mainly utilized for items practitioners feel need rigorous cleansing.

Notably, the purifying agents that practitioners use tend to be rather specific. It is generally believed that certain times are better for purification such as during a full moon. The purifying water used must be consecrated by practitioners. It is preferable that it not come from a tap, but, rather, be water collected from natural sources such as rain, rivers, oceans, or lakes. Purifying candles are typically white and dedicated for this specific purpose, with oils and symbols placed onto the candle wax. Incense utilized are usually matters of personal preference, but often they are herbs associated with cleansing including sage, sweetgrass, sandalwood, cedar, juniper, and rosemary.

Purification of the Body

Body purification involves practitioners taking ritual baths and/or censuring.¹⁵ To prepare their bodies and minds for particular rituals, practitioners first bathe to get rid of impurities. Frequently, practitioners begin mentally preparing for rituals by lighting candles and using incense to relax and facilitate altered states. Baths generally also include herbs, sometimes in sachets, to impart the direct benefit of their Magickal powers. When baths are completed, practitioners typically adorn themselves with

¹⁵ Censing is to burn and perfume with incense.

jewelry, robes, or nothing at all which is commonly called skyclad (Farrar 1996[1981]:37).¹⁶ At this point, the ritual is almost ready to begin. The last step before rituals can commence involves purification with air and fire. For this purpose, practitioners generally use smudge sticks or homemade incense, which purifies with the two essential elements of fire and air. Once these various steps are completed, practitioners are now ritually purified.

Purification of Ritual Space

Establishing sacred space for ritual represents a crucial aspect of contemporary Paganism in the importance of separating the sacred from profane. “The establishment of a space as sacred requires boundaries to exclude elements of impurity and the performance of ritual purification to enhance and maintain purity” (Sherma 1998:98). To create sacred spaces, practitioners must first delineate areas where rituals will be held. This task involves marking off perimeters with preferred materials such as flowers, stones, or other items. Once boundaries are established, spaces will be swept with brooms specifically consecrated for Magickal work. This action symbolizes the removal of dirt and negative energy. After these actions, practitioners will circle spaces a few times per element depending on personal preference. The order in which practitioners use the elements varies, but often the spaces’ consecration begins with incense, water, and salt. Incense represents both fire and air elements and water and salt sometimes are

¹⁶ Nudity in ritual is often a practice viewed as immoral by other faith systems. Interestingly, baptismal nudity was practiced by Judeo-Christian traditions, and that ritual nudity implies a paradisiacal image (Eliade 1961[1957]:135).

combined to spread at once. The order and manner of how this happens largely depends upon personal preference and tradition.

Purification of the Home

The physical act of cleaning is vital in home purification. To rid domiciles of negative energies, it is necessary to begin with the mundane act of house cleaning. This same principle applies to acts of consecrating the body and tools. The underlying logic is that if materials are not physically clean, they cannot become spiritually clean.

Home purifications are important to frequently practice. Stress and tensions that build up in the home affect adherents and their families. House purifications tend to relieve these negativities. Cunningham describes four methods from a variety of household purifications in his book *The Magical Household*. Elemental purification uses earth, air, fire, and water to cleanse houses by walking clockwise with each element and saying prayers at regular intervals. Broom purification involves creating besoms¹⁷ from tree branches and flowers, using them to symbolically “sweep” houses clean. Infusion purification utilizes herbs containing cleansing powers such as rosemary, bay, and marjoram, steeping them in boiling water, and sprinkling the infused water around living areas. The final house purification Cunningham identifies is lemon purification. Involving nine lemons, practitioners peel the lemons and squeeze the natural oils from their rinds into a bowl of water. The lemon water is then used to wash down surfaces (Cunningham 2003[1988]:119-126).

¹⁷ Besoms are Magickally consecrated brooms, essential and identifiable tools of witches.

Importantly, the efficacy behind the purification depends on intention and involves natural essences. Adherent can just as easily use store bought lemon scented cleaning agents to clean their homes. However, the hard work and personal touch put into the homemade mixtures are lost, making the ritual purification less potent.

Purification in World Religions

Purification is an essential element of religions worldwide. While the scope of this thesis prevents me from covering all of these practices, I do consider purification with respect to major religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, as well as some Native American and Shinto religious purification practices.

Purification in Christianity

Christian baptism is seen by religious scholar Mircea Eliade as an initiatory rite similar to what the Essenes, a strict sect of Judaism, practice (Eliade 1961[1957]:130-131; 1958:116). However, Christian baptism is performed only once, while the Essenes repeat their ritual baths more frequently. Hence, Eliade characterizes baptism as an initiatory rite rather than one of lustration (Eliade 1958:116). He equates immersion to the “dissolution of forms” which is symbolic of death and rebirth (Eliade 1961[1957]:130). He, furthermore, compares water in religious complexes as a purifying and regenerating agent involving the “washing away of sins” (ibid:130). Christianity seems to have adopted several ideas of purification, especially concerning ritual bathing or baptism, from Judaism.

Baptism for Christians symbolizes spiritual birth and the mysteries of resurrection whereby initiates are symbolically reborn in Christ after ritually dying. Baptism conveys a profession of faith and forgiveness of sins that symbolically wash the slate clean. Traditionally, no clothing is worn in this ritual so as to signify the initiates' childlike state, although this is no longer a common practice. Baptisms typically occur in various natural water sources or in fonts built specifically for ritual purposes. Baptismal fonts can vary in size, shape, and even symbolic design (Altman 2002:14).¹⁸

Modern forms of baptism variously do not include total immersion. Instead, those undergoing baptism are commonly subjected to infusion or having water poured over the forehead. Sometimes salt is added to baptismal water as an extra purifying agent that both spiritually cleanses and exorcises negative or harmful energies (Altman 2002:174-175).

In Catholicism, Holy Water is a potent symbol of spiritual cleansing. Priests bless water to transfer God's power to believers. Upon entering a church, Catholics dip their fingers in Holy Water to bless themselves and wash away venial sins (Altman 2002:131). Holy Water is also seen as important in warding off evil spirits (ibid:131-133).

Purification in Judaism

Purification rites are equally important in Judaism. While these rituals were practiced by observant Jews in the times of the Temple of Jerusalem before 70 C.E. when

¹⁸ The most decorative font I have witnessed is in the Orlando Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Being baptized into that denomination at eight years old, I had many experiences within the church's functions until I was around eighteen. The temple's baptismal font is fairly large in size, but usually there will only be one baptism occurring at a time. The most impressive part of its construction though is the base of the font. This base has twelve life size sculptures of oxen representing the twelve tribes of Israel, which has important meaning in the culmination of times to the faith.

the temple was destroyed by the Romans, contemporary adherents performing these rights are often from Orthodox or Hasidic sects. Ritual bathing is the most vital aspect of purification in Judaism. There are three primary forms of ritual bathing practiced: hand washing (*netilat yadahim*), hand and feet washing, and total immersion (Altman 2002:128). Observant Hasidic males totally immerse (*tevilah*) themselves in the *mikveh*,¹⁹ or ritual bath, to spiritually and physically purify themselves for Sabbath and Yom Kippur (Robinson 2000:87, 97).²⁰

New mothers or menstruating women are considered unclean under traditional Jewish law. Therefore after a proscribed period of time, usually seven days for menstruation and 33 to 66 days for new mothers, females immerse themselves in purifying *mikva-ot* (Robinson 2000:140). The Torah calls for restraints upon sexual intimacy between married couples during menstruation. Menstruating females are considered ritually impure as they are losing vital bodily fluids and potential life. This time of *niddah*, or separation, restricts contact between males and females. Couples must refrain from sharing a bed during this time (Robinson 2000:245-246). Brides also attend *mikva-ot* for purification just prior to their wedding days. The submersion into the *mikveh* is also necessary for new converts to Judaism (Robinson 2000:144, 176).

Contact with corpses makes one *tamei met* or ritually impure under Jewish law. Accordingly, it is customary for observant Jews to wash their hands when leaving a

¹⁹ *Mikva-ot*, the plural of *mikveh*, are ritual baths that must be able to hold 201 gallons of naturally collected water. This is either through a spring, rainwater, melted ice or snow. The water cannot be collected through mechanical means. Rainwater collection must be stationary, but spring water is purifying if flowing and moving. These baths must be connected to a public facility, and it is imperative that before entering the *mikveh* the adherent has bathed thoroughly (Robinson 2000:246; Neusner et al 2000:45; Altman 2002:128).

²⁰ Yom Kippur is a Day of Atonement the purpose of which is to cleanse the adherent's sins before Adonai. Sins in this respect are viewed as failure to live up to personal potential or fulfill obligations (Robinson 2000:96-97).

cemetery. To be cleansed of this impurity, ancient Jews needed to be purified by High Priests, who would sprinkle them with a mixture of ashes from a red heifer and pure spring water (Robinson 2000:189; Numbers 19:14-22; Neusner 2000:54). In Judaism, it is also believed that hands are deemed perpetually unclean, and, thus, must be washed before meals and sacred rites. This belief is based on the fact that hands are constantly active and potentially in contact with unclean objects. There is no way of knowing what impurities humans have inadvertently touched with during the day (ibid:46). Hand washing is the most widespread form of Judaic ablution (Altman 2002:128). While hand and feet washing was required of ancient priests before performing Temple services, it is rarely practiced today by rabbis. Occasionally, contemporary Orthodox rabbis follow this rite during important holidays such as Rosh Hashanah,²¹ Sukkot,²² and Yom Kippur²³ (ibid).

Purification in Islam

Similar to purifying rites in Judaism and Christianity, water also plays an important role for ritual purity in Islam. To Muslims, prayer (*salat*) is ineffective for ritually unclean believers (Robinson 1999:99). The major Islamic purification rituals are ablutions²⁴ (*wudu*), dry ablutions (*tayammum*), and bathing (*ghusl*). *Ghusl* is a major purification ritual that involves washing the whole body. Its underlying purpose entails cleansing participants in pure water under specific ritual circumstances. These conditions

²¹ Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish new year held 1 Tishri (usually in September). It is also a celebration for God, as it is believed in Jewish lore that on this day He created mankind (Robinson 2000:93).

²² Sukkot is a harvest festival that traditionally was one of the three "Pilgrim Festivals" to the Jerusalem Temple. This holiday is the most joyous of Judaism (Robinson 2000:101-102).

²³ See footnote 18.

²⁴ Ablutions are the act of washing in order to obtain a condition of spiritual or physical purity (Altman 2002:125).

include: (1) conversion to Islam, (2) after sex, (3) post-ejaculation, (4) post menstruation, (5) post-natal bleeding, and (6) following contact with human corpses (Tayob 1999:33; Robinson 1999:99). Ablution's aim is not only to attain physical cleanliness, but to also prepare practitioners for prayer in the right frame of mind. If pure water is unavailable for ablutions, as is often the case in the desert environment of the Middle East, dry ablutions are permitted. Dry ablutions involve physically washing skin and bodies with pebbles or pure dirt. The technical term for ritual ablutions in the Qu'ran is *wudu* (Neusner, Sonn, and Brockopp 2000:40).

The specific Qu'ranic verse that explains how ablutions are performed states:

"Believers, when you get ready for prayer, wash your faces and arms to your elbows, wipe your heads, and your feet up to your ankles. If you are impure from sexual defilement, then purify yourselves. And if you are ill or on a journey, and have gone to the privy or touched women, but cannot find water, then turn to pure sand and wipe your faces and arms therewith. God does not want to place a burden on you; but God wants to purify you and complete his favor upon you so that you may be grateful" (Quran 5:6).

Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, (922-996), is a Maliki scholar who wrote the *Al-Risala* a book devoted spiritual education, writes more specific instructions about ablutions in his treatise of Malikite law (Watt 1994:69; Neusner, Sonn, and Brockopp 2000:45). His description of ablution involves the purity of water, ritual cleansing, sand cleansing, and the wiping of shoes (ibid 40). Because of these Qur'anic laws, mosques frequently incorporate water systems into their architecture or place sacred buildings near natural water sources (Tayob 1999:31).

There are two main types of impurities in Islam: (1) *haqiqi*, or real impurities, which include feces, urine, semen, blood, and alcohol, and (2) *hukmi*, or conceptual impurity, which relates to human mental and bodily actions. Conceptual impurities

include touching corpses, disbelief, contact with dog saliva, touching pigs, and menstruation or post-natal bleeding (Tayob 1999:32).

Purification in Hinduism

Body emissions, life-cycle events such as death, and the establishment of sacred spaces are three areas that affect purity in Hindu tradition. Purity is important when worshipping the religion's Gods and Goddesses (Alley 1998:302). Control over body emissions is essential for Hindus. Women are seen as perpetually impure because of menstruation. The most impure life-cycle event is death, as it affects the deceased's entire family, especially widows. After death, bodies are purified by fire and water. The deceased's cremated ashes are released into water (Sherma 1998:98).

For Hindus, the Ganges River is one of the most sacred and holiest sites. The river represents the universe's feminine energy connecting life and death. It is believed to be the body of the Goddess Ganga. To bathe in the river is to be cleansed of sin (Altman 2002:136; Sherma 1998:97). Ablutions, meditation, and worship invoke the Ganges' purifying power (Alley 1998:299). *Ghats*, or stone steps, give access to Ganges pilgrims for ritual ablutions. Such ablutions cleanse ritual impurities through the sacred Ganges' waters (Alley 1998:302).

Purification in Native American Religion

Sweat Lodge ceremonies are probably the most important of all the ritual cleansing observances for Native Americans. Sweating purifies participants' minds,

bodies, and spirits. Ceremonies represent birth and regeneration through the lodge's construction and placement. These structures are usually built by participants with willow branches arched into a dome much like Mother Earth's womb. A door built is at a low point in the lodge to teach humility. Consequently, participants must crawl or bend down to gain access to this sacred space. A hole dug into the middle of the ceremonial building is symbolic of the center of the universe. Several heated stones, the number of which determines the ritual steam's heat and potency, are placed into this hole. Participants enter the sweat lodge naked as equals and later emerge together as purified (Altman 2002:142).

Lakota Sweat Lodge ritual (*inikagapi*) is documented in great detail. Once the lodge is built and covered with tarps or blankets, the leader of the ritual sprinkles sage onto the ground of the lodge and makes sage incense to carry clockwise around its perimeter. Participants then enter clockwise into the lodge where sweetgrass braids are passed around to smudge bodies in acts of purification. Heated stones are then placed into the pit. Adherents sprinkle cedar onto these stones, which sends a pillar of white smoke into the air. The leader passes the sacred pipe around the circle, and then water is brought into the lodge. The four sacred directions are blessed and prayers are made to the proper spirits. Water is poured over the heated stones creating thick steam as the songs are sung. Several rounds of steaming are performed while prayers are made by the leader and participants. Adherent's leave the lodge after this is accomplished where they again smoke the sacred pipe (Bucko 1998:1-12).

"Going to the Water" is a traditional Southeastern Native American practice performed before ritual ball games. Ball games represent a very important part of

traditional Southeastern Native American culture, often called the Little Brother of War. Participants go into the group's sacred streams and receive ceremonial scratches for strength and agility (Altman 2002:141).

Native Americans also use smudging frequently in their purification practices (Bucko 1998:3). These practices involve setting alight bundles of herbs and using their smoke to cleanse. Typical herbs used in this process are sage, cedar, and sweetgrass.

Other Examples of Purification Practices

Shintoism, the native spiritual religion of Japan, emphasizes the ritual importance of purification. The four elements of worship in Shinto are: purification (*harai*), prayers, offerings, and ritual feasts (Altman 2002:139). *Misogi* is full body ritual bathing. The most powerful *misogi* occurs at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine where practitioners stand under waterfalls to wash away impurities and reveal their true spiritual nature (ibid:140). The hand water (*temizu*) ritual involves worshippers rinsing their mouths and pouring clean water on their fingertips. Priests recite special prayers and wave purification wands over followers while also sprinkling them with salt water. After the *temizu* ritual is completed, offerings are made to the *kami*²⁵ or ancestral spirits (ibid).

Summary

In this chapter, I have examined some of the basic purification practices in contemporary Paganism, and those from major world religions. While there is still much

²⁵ Kami are the deities or spirits of Japanese religion.

work to accomplish in examining purification practices historically and cross-culturally, this chapter provides an adequate overview for assessing the role of syncretism amongst today's Neo-pagan movement.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Overview

In this chapter, I synthesize my findings from previous sections and provide some relevant questions to be addressed in future research endeavors.

Conclusion

Through my brief examination of the major world religions, there are certain trends I notice. Significantly, water is almost always used as a primary purification agent. Contemporary Paganism seems to have been directly influenced by many of these water-based practices. Most explicit is the use of pre-ritual cleansing baths, water and salt aspersions, and sweat lodges.

Water's ubiquitous presence as a purifier raises a number of intriguing questions. Is this element related to spiritual cleanliness due to water's ability to physically clean? How universal is water as a purifier? Two-thirds of the Earth's surface is covered in this substance. The human body consists of around 60 percent water and humans cannot survive without constant replenishment. Its importance is evident in agriculture, herding, and in supporting humans' subsistence (Altman 2002:7-8). Water also has unique abilities to transform into liquid, solid, or vapor forms. Lakota *inipi* ceremonies express this element as *Mni wichoni* "water of life" (Bucko 1998:4).

The connection between Hinduism and the sacred fire of Indo-European based contemporary Pagan practices appears plausible due to the common ancestry of the

Aryan tribes that spread throughout Europe and Asia (Hopkins 1971:10, 14-16). Air and fire mixed together through incense and smudging as practiced in Buddhism and Native American traditions has been adopted into the practices of modern Pagans. Also, within the Native American Sweat Lodge ceremony, fire and water interact to create steam, which symbolizes air. The element of Earth also has a common theme as purifier. Earth veneration is a vital part of many belief systems both historically and cross-culturally. A nearly universal belief suggests that humans are born from the earth and return to the earth when they die (Eliade 1961[1957]:140-141). Similarly, the earth is also viewed as a source of fertility and as a representation of the Goddess. Earth is a component of purification evident in the sweat lodge rituals as well as dry ablutions in Islam.

Despite purification's essential role in most world religions, there is surprisingly little written about the topic. Any examination of ritual purification practices worldwide reveals evidence of syncretic processes. Religions tend to incorporate or integrate cultural and ritual practices of the populations with which they come into contact. Ancient Pagan Indo-European purification practices influenced those of Hinduism which, in turn had an effect on Buddhism (Hopkins 1971:10-16, 55-57). Purification rituals within Judeo-Christian traditions also seem linked to the propagation of similar practices in Islam (Neusner, Sonn, and Brockopp 2000:40-55). The interaction with ancient Pagans also appear influential to Christian practices throughout Europe and the Old World (Jones, Pennick 1996:59, 68-69).

The reinvigoration of Pagan practices occurring over recent decades in Western society is influenced by the purification practices of ancient Pagan traditions. Water, the purification agent most fully examined in this thesis appears to have the greatest syncretic

commonality of all the major religions considered herein. I suspect that the other elements have representation in purification beliefs throughout today's global religions. I plan on investigating this potential area of study in future research. Problems in ascertaining the influence of other traditions on contemporary Paganism is directly reflected in the lack of scholarly approach in the formation of this ancient belief system. The writings from most Neo-pagan scholarly practitioners do not offer explicit reference to how their specific ritual practices originate.

This thesis project raises other questions. Investigating this topic, I notice that purification methods are almost always presented without rationales or properties for purifying elements. Why do certain herbs hold weight as purifying agents and others not? How are salt's properties important as purification elements? These are just a few of the queries I have in relation to this study.

The purpose of this thesis is to explain the common purification practices of contemporary Pagans and how they are connected to the observations of other religions historically and cross-culturally. Based on my findings, it seems apparent that the purifying rituals of Paganism have incorporated syncretic elements from other religions.

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