Introduction

Four-year-old Oliver is at his first SpiralScouts meeting, and he is obsessed with the apple that is just out of his reach. Last night, his mother, Carolyn, told him about SpiralScouts—that it was a scouting group kind of like the Boy Scouts, but for children whose families were Pagan. Oliver is not sure what a Pagan is, but he loves to talk about “growing his magic,” and his mother is trying to raise him in a vaguely earth-based, religiously tolerant, “spiritual-but-not-religious” home. She told him that he would learn about magic at this meeting and that he would have fun, but Oliver has found that neither of these things happened, and now he is tired, bored, and hungry. He was confused by the adults who lit candles for no apparent reason at the beginning of the meeting and by the pledge that the older children repeated after the circle leader. When he was unsure about how to complete the first activity, a craft that required the scouts to gather in the circle leader’s crowded dining room and cut coffee filters into snowflake shapes, the other circle leader took Oliver’s coffee filter and safety scissors and made Oliver’s snowflake himself. As the leader explained that the scouts were going to learn about nutrition, Oliver spotted a basket of apples on the counter and asked his mother for one. Already embarrassed by Oliver’s earlier comments in front of the group (“You said this would be fun, but it’s boring!”), his mother said no. As
the other children looked at printed images of the food pyramid, Oliver’s pleas for *just one apple* became increasingly desperate. The group took a snack break, but Oliver and his mother had forgotten to bring snacks. Despite Oliver’s obvious desperation and his mother’s obvious embarrassment, none of the adults or children offered the crying child juice or crackers, with most of the adults making a seemingly deliberate effort to avoid making eye contact with Oliver or his mother as his meltdown intensified. Carolyn took Oliver out of the room to try to calm him, but what had begun as a request for fruit had quickly become a tantrum of epic proportions. Oliver’s mother ended up carrying the screaming, sobbing, shoeless child out of the house and into the car. Six years later, Oliver remembers that they never went back to retrieve his forgotten shoes.

Oliver’s first (and last) visit to a SpiralScouts meeting was also my first attempt at fieldwork, but—unlike Oliver—I continued to visit other SpiralScouts groups in other states over the next four years. During these years, I puzzled over Oliver’s experience, wondering what, if anything, this seemingly ordinary tantrum by a cranky four-year-old had to do with a study of the values and religious lives of Pagan families. Although the memory of this incident lingered, I decided not to include it in an earlier version of this book; it seemed too personal and too specific to shed light on larger understandings of Pagan childhood and the shared religious imaginations of Pagan adults and children. As the years went by, however, I found myself returning repeatedly to thoughts of Oliver’s apple. Although the irony was apparent in the scene of a crying child begging for an apple while the adults around him ignore him in favor of a discussion of the food pyramid, there seemed to be a number of additional tensions and contradictions at play in Oliver’s experience with SpiralScouts. Almost none of the other adults or children present at this meeting had spoken to Carolyn or Oliver, despite their obvious awkwardness and distress. The exception was Derek, a father of one of the other children, who attempted to engage Oliver in conversation by telling him, “I heard your mother say that you wanted to be a chef when you grow up. I have two words for you that will upset your mother: Magic Chef.” When the four-year-old looked (understandably) confused, Derek began to explain the Magic Chef catalog to him, wistfully remarking, “You could easily spend forty thousand dollars there” (meaning, presumably, that an adult, not a preschooler, could spend this
amount of money). Derek asked Oliver for his e-mail address, looked surprised when Oliver didn’t have one, and advised him, “Get yourself a Hotmail address or something, and send me an e-mail and I’ll e-mail you a bunch of recipes.” In addition to Oliver’s shoes and toy sword, Derek’s e-mail address, written on the back of Oliver’s copy of the food pyramid, was left behind during Oliver and his mother’s loud—but carefully ignored—exit from their first and last Spiral Scouts meeting.

This book examines the interactions between contemporary Pagan adults and children as they construct, inhabit, and negotiate understandings of childhood, adulthood, and the religious imagination. Although contemporary North American Pagan adults and children tend to emerge from a predominantly middle-class environment, Pagan adults’ understandings of the religious and social worlds of childhood, relationships between parents and children, and memories and reconstructions of their own religious childhoods depart—sometimes radically—from those of mainstream Americans of majority religions. This book suggests that contemporary American Pagans draw on rich, diverse, mythologized understandings of their religion’s history to construct a theoretical understanding of childhood as a realm of wonder, fantasy, and religious wisdom that adults frequently attempt to re-inhabit, through the experiences of their own children and through idealized presentations of themselves as “overgrown children” who retain contact with these magical childhood worlds. In many ways, Pagan adults construct a religious and relational tension in which they attempt to remain ideologically childlike while seeing chronological children as the bearers of an inherent religious wisdom. In many ways, Pagan adults displace Pagan children from the realm of childhood. The ways in which they do so both reflect and challenge mainstream patterns and understandings of parenting, childhood, and religious imaginations in the United States.

Pagans, Families, Values
Pagans

Pagans remain a numerical minority in the United States, although they maintain a significant and steadily increasing presence. This presence, however, is decidedly difficult to quantify. The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), a telephone poll of over 50,000
American households, identified 274,000 adult Wiccans and Pagans in 2001. Likewise, the Pluralism Project has estimated a Pagan presence in the United States of between 200,000 and 1,000,000. Even some of the lower estimates of numbers of adherents would make Wicca the seventh-largest organized religion, or the tenth-largest religious grouping, in the United States.

Despite these numbers, there continues to be very little organizational structure among American Pagans. The sociologist Helen Berger interpreted the number of Pagan parents in the United States (more than 40% of those surveyed in her 2003 “Pagan census”) to mean that the religion was on the verge of undergoing significant changes to accommodate the changing needs of new generations of Pagans. Significantly, Berger observed the “routinization of spontaneity” in contemporary Paganism, which she had predicted a decade earlier. Berger distinguished this routinization from the classic Weberian model, noting that the lack of central doctrines and bureaucracy within contemporary Paganism altered the routinization process. She suggested that despite its unique trajectory, Paganism in the United States would seek greater legitimization and institutionalization as it adapted to successive generations. Although Berger’s investigations of the religion as a whole provide a valuable contribution to the field of Pagan studies and the sociological study of new religions, the existence and extent of a routinized form of contemporary Paganism in the United States remains debatable. Pagans tend to eschew large-scale organization and deny routinization in their individual practice of the religion, which is often highly personalized. Longitudinal studies of Pagan children’s religious practices, as these become available, may offer confirmation of the routinization Berger predicts, or they may indicate greater religious improvisation or attrition rates among second-generation Pagans. In either case, attention to the sociological and structural aspects of the religion provides a way to normalize contemporary Paganism within the study of religion, regardless of whether it actually reveals a trend toward routinization or organization among Pagans.

Berger notes that Weber explicitly excluded magical practitioners from his theory of routinization because of the apparent lack of magical “congregations.” She argues that within contemporary Paganism, “it is not the magical qualities of charisma that are being routinized but
the spontaneity and creativity of religious expression.” Like Weber, Émile Durkheim’s work maintained a sense of the exceptionalism of magic among contemporary religions. Durkheim’s assertion that “there is no Church of magic” reflects a similar understanding of magic as a private act rather than the “collective effervescence” that characterizes religion. Contemporary Paganism challenges this skepticism about the possibility of a magical community that is also a moral community of the sort that Durkheim considers “religious” and potentially offers a way to reconceptualize the possibility of a magical moral community. Rather than the solitary “magic society” Durkheim described, contemporary Paganism responds to the challenge of raising new generations by attempting to forge the “durable ties that make them members of a single moral body.” The moral and imaginative world of Pagan children is one area in which this potential becomes particularly evident. In a religion that lacks organizational and theological consistency, directing the religious and moral imaginations of children becomes one way of establishing a collective effort. The inclusion of children in contemporary Paganism has altered the religion in unforeseen ways, leading, for instance, to increased creativity in rituals and theology and a greater urgency to develop and explicate a clear moral framework.

Paganism’s multiple and conflicting historiographies are the subject of chapter 1 of this book. Briefly, the history of contemporary Paganism is usually linked to the “discovery” of Wicca by Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), a retired British civil servant and amateur anthropologist. Gardner’s claims to have located and been initiated into a surviving pre-Christian coven of witches in the New Forest region of England in 1939 are an integral part of contemporary Pagan lore, although their veracity is questionable at best. Historians of the religion generally acknowledge that Gardner constructed the basic elements of modern Wicca with inspiration from Masonic and Rosicrucian sources as well as from Charles Leland and Margaret Murray’s claims to have “discovered” surviving witch cults in the nineteenth century. The beliefs and practices Gardner developed led to the modern form of Wicca that bears his name: a coven-based, initiatory practice emphasizing balance, duality, and the Goddess and God in equal partnership. Gardnerian Wicca was brought to the United States by Gardner’s students, Raymond and Rosemary Buckland, in 1964, and many of its principles became the framework for contemporary American
Paganism. The historian Ronald Hutton contends that the history of contemporary Paganism has overemphasized Gardner’s influence, but concedes that Gardner and his collaborators can nonetheless be considered the founders of modern Wicca. Many contemporary Pagans seem to agree. More than one-third of the Pagans who explained the history of their religion to me specifically cited Gardner’s influence, some commenting that he “brought the practices of paganism into the mainstream,” “reconstructed” existing Pagan traditions, or “discovered” modern Wicca. Several respondents even offered lengthy and generally accurate accounts of Gardner’s involvement in the early years of the religion.

Contemporary Paganism is generally (although not always) understood by practitioners as an earth-based revival or a reconstruction of indigenous, prehistoric European religions. Pagan rituals are oriented around the “Wheel of the Year,” a modern construction of the eight seasonal festivals of the Celtic year (the four solstices and equinoxes and four additional seasonal festivals, or Sabbats), with smaller rituals generally held at full moons (the Esbats). Like most aspects of Pagan belief and practice, views of the number and type of deities vary dramatically among covens and among individual Pagans (individuals who practice without a coven are sometimes called “Solitaries” or “Solitaires”). Many Pagans consider themselves polytheists or pantheists, although “traditional” forms of Wicca often worship a dualistic union of a female Goddess and a male God (usually with well-defined, culturally specific male and female attributes). Other versions (such as Dianic Wicca and Goddess feminism) maintain a relatively monotheistic belief in a single, supreme female Goddess. While American Pagans exhibit a stunning and confusing diversity of beliefs and practices, there are a number of beliefs that might be considered common to many (though, it bears repeating, not all) practitioners. These include recognition of the inherent sacredness of the natural world; an “ethic of freedom” that rejects the concepts of sin and salvation in favor of personal fulfillment (while minimizing harm to others); reverence for both male and female deities, as well as the divine within humans; and “creative performance of ritual.” Many, if not most, Pagans can be said to share a belief in “a tolerant and pluralist society with maximum potential for individual choice and self-expression . . . [and] a concern for environmental issues.”
Given that American Pagans are adherents of a religion that self-consciously claims to sustain little internal consistency, in many ways, Pagans are remarkably homogeneous. Despite differing conceptions of divinity and religious practice, despite adamant contentions by many Pagans that their beliefs are more individually eclectic or more authentically reconstructionist or more esoteric than those of their neighbors, despite possessing only two explicit ethical codes (the Wiccan Rede and the Law of Return, discussed below), contemporary American Paganism—in all its varied paths and costumes—maintains a strikingly consistent moral world. In a Durkheimian sense, this collective moral world, which “abolishes the traditional Western distinction between religion and magic,” might even be considered a “Church of magic,” albeit a church that is unclaimed and unsupported by many of its members.

This book is grounded in an understanding of contemporary Paganism as a distinctly North American religion that assiduously maintains an oppositional identity among American religions at the same time that it strives for integration and normativity. The social, political, theological, and intellectual roots of contemporary North American Paganism are more firmly planted in nineteenth-century American alternative religions than in British Wicca or ancient and indigenous paganisms. Despite contemporary American Paganism's direct descent from the British Gardnerian variety, its introduction into the American milieu of the mid-1960s radically influenced its translation into an American religion; American Paganism in the twenty-first century bears only a cursory resemblance to its European antecedents. Much as Sarah Pike understood the Pagan festivals she studied as best contextualized within the American tradition of religious retreats, nineteenth-century evangelical camps, and Spiritualist conventions, I contend that American Paganism is best understood as a distinctly, quintessentially American religion, one in a long line of alternative religions of dissent, opposition, and individual religious freedom that populate American religious history. These alternative religions have frequently been constructed by society and by traditional religious bodies as the “other”—dissenting, heretical, or dangerous. Perceptions of otherness and oppositional identities have also been internally constructed by alternative religions themselves as a way of garnering place and distinction in the competitive terrain of American religions. Laurence Moore's analysis of similar types of religious “outsiderhood” posits that
this “language of dissent” has provided many American religious movements with a “characteristic way of inventing one’s Americanness.” Like many of the religious movements Moore discusses, American Paganism maintains a complex and deeply ambivalent relationship with dominant American cultural paradigms, simultaneously resisting and craving routinization and inclusion. Despite its relatively consistent moral perspective and attempts at routinization, however, contemporary American Paganism maintains a highly individualized and oppositional ethos that resists full inclusion within American religions.

Family

I usually spend most of the time with my daddy. And he's the best. I love my daddy. Love him! He reads Calvin and Hobbes every night. One night we didn't read Calvin and Hobbes, and so the next night we read a month and a half, which is one month, and then half a month. I love Mommy. Deanna [Raven's little sister] is a very nice little girl. Also known as a pest. Is this thing on? I love Deanna. And here's Deanna, and then I'll tell you about me.

—Six-year-old Raven explaining her family, 2006

Trying to define family is horrendous.
—Atashih, Raven's father, 2006

At this point in the history of contemporary American Paganism, most Pagans are still late adolescent or adult converts to the religion, but the number of second-generation (and, less often, third-generation) Pagan children is growing. With the introduction of increasing numbers of second-generation children into the religion, many Pagans find it necessary to codify and clarify the religion's loose, individualized ethics into a coherent moral world for their children. This book considers the voices and experiences of these second-generation children and the kinds of moral and imaginative frameworks that are constructed in relationships between Pagan adults and children. Specifically, it considers the ways that contemporary American Paganism illuminates the religious imaginations and interactions of a particular segment of American adults and
children as well as larger issues of childhood and religion in the United States. What are the experiences of the children who grow up within this decentralized, protean, and fantasy-laden new religion? What do Pagan views of childhood and children indicate about ways of being and religious imaginations? What about “children” as an ontological category makes this a reasonable site to reflect on the Pagan religious imagination? How does the category of “children” relate to the “real” children who inhabit these enchanted moral and religious worlds? Children are all too often overlooked in the study of religious phenomena, set apart from (or collapsed into the category of) adults, marginalized, or ignored. Pagan children’s marginalization is exacerbated by their participation in a minority religion. Scholars of new religious movements tend to focus on mapping and understanding the beliefs and practices of adult practitioners. Children’s experiences are often an afterthought, if they warrant attention at all. This project takes seriously the assertion that “looking at how children are raised in marginal spiritual groups will expand our ways of thinking about the social, psychological, moral, educational, and legal dimensions of family life.” As Robert Orsi has noted, children “are the very existence, duration, and durability of a particular religious world. . . . Children signal the vulnerability and contingency of a particular religious world and of religion itself, and in exchanges between adults and children about sacred matters the religious world is in play.” The relational sites within which Pagan children’s religious imagination develops and Pagan childhood is constructed can illuminate the experiences and perspectives of both children and adults. In these interactions, tensions, fissures, and bonds between parents and children, the foundations of a Pagan religious imaginary are established.

Of course, this insight into the religious worlds of families and of adults and children in relationship is not limited to Paganism. The study of children’s religious beliefs and experiences has the potential to illuminate the study of religions on a larger scale by documenting the beliefs and experiences of a neglected segment of the religious population, much as feminist methodologies have documented the importance of attention to women’s voices. In the same way, the study of Pagan families can shed light on religious interactions and the interpersonal dimensions of childhood and religion in other American families. As I spent time with Pagan families at festivals, craft fairs, camp-outs,
and rituals, I learned that American Pagan families’ lifestyles, for the most part, would not seem radically unfamiliar to many middle-class American Jewish or Christian families. Pagan parents and children eat dinner together, attend PTA meetings and soccer games, and participate in public and private holiday traditions. Contemporary Pagan family values may tilt slightly to the left of “average” Americans, but they emphasize fundamentally similar themes: family, responsibility,
respect, integrity, patriotism. When I asked Pagan adults to describe their families in an online survey, many respondents made a point of describing their family as “standard,” “traditional,” or “normal.” Several described their spouse’s military service or their children’s enrollment in public schools. One respondent wryly noted that his family included “myself, male, 35 . . . my wife, female (obviously), 33. 1 daughter who is 3. We are married and all live together and love each other, which makes us extremely weird . . . the only nuclear family we know.”

Interestingly, the tendency of American Pagans to gravitate slightly left of center is evident in some Pagans’ descriptions of the factors that contribute to their family’s “very American traditional life”: selling organic produce and baked goods, living with multiple unrelated adult housemates, or embracing polyamorous relationships and lifestyles. One survey respondent offered an example of this tension between “traditional” American values and the generally progressive and liberal values of American Pagan families: “We’re pretty traditional: dad (43), mom (me—I’m 31), three kids (6, 4, 9 mos). We practice natural family planning (a la Catholicism, amusingly enough), extended breastfeeding, cosleeping, and attachment parenting.” In constructions and understandings of family—as in religion, parenting, education, and multiple areas of everyday life—Pagan ambivalence toward larger North American culture runs deep.

Values

Pagan practitioners and Pagan studies scholars generally agree that only two explicit moral codes form the basis for Wiccan ethics: the Wiccan Rede and the Law of Return (the latter is also known as the Threefold Law). In its most familiar form (and in typically rhyming, faux-archaic fashion), the Wiccan Rede states, “Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill: an it harm none, do what ye will.” “Do what you will” is not generally interpreted by most Pagans as a license for self-centered hedonism, but rather as an exhortation to discover and fulfill one’s personal destiny, providing it does not cause harm to others. It is usually understood to imply the need for individual accountability and responsibility. Many Pagan websites offer “exegeses” of the Wiccan Rede.

The second moral tenet of Pagan (specifically Wiccan) morality, the Law of Return, is a variation on the concept “As ye sow, so shall ye reap”
(again, the archaic structure is favored by many Wiccans). It suggests that every action, whether benevolent or harmful, returns to the actor three times over. Like the Wiccan Rede, its inclusion in contemporary Paganism probably comes most directly from Gardner’s writings of the 1950s and 1960s. It is mentioned in 1971 as deriving from a line in a Gardnerian second-degree initiation ritual, “Learn, in witchcraft, you must ever give as you receive, but ever triple.” The law expands on the fundamental “harm none” premise of the rede, but it can be understood less as a moral code and more as a cosmological statement about the way the universe operates. Some Wiccans go so far as to equate the Law of Return with the Law of Gravity, contending that both operate impartially and universally. This interpretation tilts the Threefold Law’s emphasis away from individual belief and toward the province of moral law. Despite the brevity of these guidelines, Pagans recognize and model a range of moral and ethical behaviors in their daily lives. Children raised in Pagan households (or, often, in households with one Pagan parent) interpret, assimilate, and imitate adults’ behaviors, with or without accompanying verbal instruction. Beyond these two basic codes, the moral landscape of contemporary Paganism remains virtually uncharted. This apparent lack of explicit moral guidance, in combination with ritual practices that are frequently unfamiliar to non-Pagans, has led many observers and critics to conclude that Paganism lacks a system of ethics—that it is fundamentally amoral, unethical, and hedonistic, and therefore easily dismissed. Many of the seemingly amoral and hedonistic conceptions of contemporary Paganism are likely the result of some of the more dubious personal practices of Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner as well as exaggerations of rituals based on re-imaginings of nature-based fertility rites.

The phrase “Pagan family values,” as used in this project, is an attempt to expand the concept of “family values” beyond the “traditional” values espoused by American religious and political conservatives. Since the use of the phrase by then Vice President Dan Quayle in 1992, it has come to be shorthand for support of “traditional” families—that is, nuclear families consisting of a heterosexual married couple and their biological, born-in-wedlock children. “Family values” is often used to reflect a political and social ideology that opposes same-sex marriage, legal abortion, feminism, and gender equality, among other issues. Pagan family values may not mirror these values, but the phrase is not an oxymoron.
Pagan family values expand on mainstream American values to include a redefinition and expansion of the “family,” support for gender equality and civil rights, and a focus on adult sexuality that emphasizes personal responsibility over legislation. The values that Pagan parents teach to and model for their children include an ecological consciousness and respect for humans, animals, and the natural world (often envisioned as a “web” of connectedness). Self-reliance, independence, and personal religious choice are among the values prioritized within Pagan families. Despite intra-faith debates regarding the appropriate level of children’s inclusion in the religion, most (although by no means all) Pagan parents make an effort to teach their children their religious beliefs, practices, and values, irrespective of whether they relate these values directly to their religion. When I asked Pagan parents directly about the values they felt compelled to teach their children, their answers were similar to those likely to be mentioned in almost any Jewish, Christian, or Muslim home: Pagans mentioned honesty, integrity, cleanliness, courtesy, responsibility, kindness, commitment, justice, and empathy. Certain values—respect (in general, but specifically respect for the earth and nature), tolerance, and the value of individuality, for instance—seemed to receive a disproportionately strong emphasis among Pagan parents. Over one-third of the respondents to an online survey on Pagan family values explicitly noted the importance of communicating to their children the need to respect the earth, nature, and other living things:

I believe that children today need to learn to respect nature since as a society we are so separated from it [but] we still need it to survive. I teach my children the importance of recycling and cleaning up after yourselves at the park and not to litter. (Wiccan mother of three)

That all life is sacred, and should be treated with respect. (Pagan parent of two)

I want my children to have respect for others and for all life and the Earth Herself. (Wiccan mother of three)

Tolerance is a value that is frequently emphasized among Pagan parents, particularly in relation to respect for humans, animals, and the
earth. The importance of religious tolerance in the lives of Pagan adults and children will be discussed in the following chapters, but its importance to the specific issue of Pagan family values cannot be overstated.

I try to teach them to be good honest people. . . . I also try to teach them to respect others and what other people believe and to be tolerant of those beliefs. We are all individuals with our own paths, [and] we only have to answer for our own actions. (Pagan mother of two)

Equality of all people, respect for all paths. We emphasize these especially. My oldest child attends a public school where she is in the racial/ethnic minority as well as religious, so this comes up frequently. (Pagan mother of three)

Some Pagan parents related the values they teach their children to explicitly Wiccan values:

Love everyone. Love everything. Everything you do comes back to you 3x. If you do bad, you’ll [receive] worse, but if you do good, the blessings will flow. (Eclectic Pagan mother of two)

I guess the most common moral code among Wiccans is the Wiccan Rede. This states that you have free will to do as you like as long as it harms none. This can be interpreted in a number of ways. But, we discuss this often and how to apply it to our daily lives. We discuss how [our] actions will affect others. Not just humans but animals, plants, insects, and the Earth herself. This makes for good debate and offers a great opportunity to teach truthfulness, honor, kindness, etc. (Wiccan mother of three and grandmother of one)

In some cases, this emphasis on a specifically Pagan approach to values is accompanied by a rejection of “mainstream” values:

My values are not those of mainstream society. Above all, I teach my children not to be sheep, but to be an individual, and use the brain they were given. Question, challenge, and decide for yourself what you believe and value. I also stress respect for the individual, and the planet.
And to stand up for themselves, and not allow others to make them feel bad for what and who they are. Amazingly, they have adopted my values, anyway. (Pagan mother of four)

Finally, a few Pagan parents rejected the question about values entirely, emphasizing the distinction between religion and a less formal type of morality:

Religion and moral values are not connected in our household. You don’t teach through the threat of a bigger parent punishing you should you behave immorally. Morals are the product of acting in accordance with ideals. When we talk about deity, we assign it the qualities of our ideals. God is the mirror in which mankind reflects upon their own divinity. We see in God all the best things about ourselves. In order for God to embody these ideals, we first have to uphold the ideals to the best of our ability. Belief in the ideal has to come first. You don’t take things that don’t belong to you. Not because god said so, but because the consequences of doing it are going to involve corrective action on either your part, or by an outside party. (Pagan parent of two)

Moral values have nothing to do with religion. I teach my children that being ethical and moral has to do with standards that we set for ourselves for our honor and [conscience]. If a person needs a religion to define morality to them, then that person never had any to begin with. (Wiccan father of three)

Despite their varied responses to “mainstream” American values, Pagan parents, for the most part, strive to instill in their children fairly consistent values of tolerance, compassion, and responsibility that will remain with them as they grow to adulthood—regardless of the religion these children choose to practice as adults.

“Weren’t You a Pagan When You Were a Kid?”

At one of the many SpiralScouts meetings I attended during research for this project, the children were given “officer” jobs as a way to increase the Scouts’ sense of accountability toward the circle, the leaders, and
“Willow saying hello and good-bye to a September Monarch butterfly. . . . Maggie [Willow’s twin sister] said the butterfly was blessing Willow.” Photo and caption by Jess Gerrior.
the other scouts. Children volunteered or were selected by the leaders for the roles of “pledge officer,” “snack officer,” and “cleanup officer.” As usual during the “business” part of many of these meetings, the children and leaders were seated in a circle on the floor while the Scouts’ parents watched from chairs nearby. I sat on a folding chair next to Erin, scribbling field notes in my notebook, also as usual. After all the officer positions had been assigned, one of the scouts, a six-year-old named Ryan, exclaimed, “Wait, Z didn’t get to be an officer!” I pointed to my notebook and said, “I can be the recording officer.” Ryan looked doubtful for a moment, and then offered, “Well, you can be the hat and coat officer.” For Ryan, my suggestion apparently seemed less practical than an (invented) office with the hefty responsibility of making sure scouts retrieved their personal belongings before leaving the meeting. Ryan was not alone in his uncertainty about my role in Silverling Circle or my status within the group. SpiralScouts children often seemed uncertain about how to understand my presence at their meetings, events, and homes. In Susan Ridgely’s study of Catholic children’s First Communion classes, she writes that her “in-between” status—not fully a “grown-up” as the children understood her, but clearly not one of the kids—became a key element in her relationship with the children she studied. Like Ridgely, I found that the children often assumed that because I was clearly not a SpiralScouts parent or leader, I must be a larger, slightly awkward child—one who asked them too many questions about seemingly obvious things. For example, at another SpiralScouts meeting, the scouts made animal-shaped name tags and tried to guess which name tag each scout had made. When Jess asked, “Which kid seems most like a lion?” Ryan had pointed at me. Ryan’s suggestion that I needed an officer position seemed to reflect this view.

Contemporary Paganism is particularly well suited to ethnographic research, and an ethnographic methodology has frequently been used as the most effective and appropriate means to approach this new religious movement. Paganism’s fundamental and assiduously maintained decentralization produces radically individualized beliefs and practices within the larger tradition, providing rich material for ethnographic study. Ethnographic fieldwork for this project was conducted at several different sites. Between January 2006 and May 2007, I visited and interviewed families in New England, most of whom were affiliated with
SpiralScouts International, a Pagan children’s scouting organization that is discussed in more detail in chapter 5. Silverling Circle, a large, active group of SpiralScouts families (equivalent to a troop in other scouting organizations), was initially the primary focus of my observations. Families belonging to Silverling Circle eventually branched off to form several new circles in the area (Silver Sapling Circle, the Seacoast Dragon Riders, and Spiral Bear Hearth), providing the opportunity to explore variations among developing SpiralScouts circles. Additional fieldwork was conducted with the (now defunct) First Church of Wicca (FCOW), which formed a SpiralScouts circle to meet the religious education needs of the church’s children. I attended the FCOW’s Sunday services and meetings of their SpiralScouts circle, the Duxbury Sea Witches.

In addition to these families in New England, I conducted participant observations and ethnographic interviews throughout 2006 and 2007 with the families of Spiral Winds Coven at the semi-annual Council of Magickal Arts festivals and in their homes. Fieldwork at these additional sites supplemented my analysis of the explicitly Pagan types of religious imaginations created and negotiated in SpiralScouts with a deeper understanding of the tensions that emerge in the religious and imaginative interactions and collaborations of adults and children in more quotidian contexts. In addition to unstructured conversations at meetings, festivals, events, camp-outs, and other sites, approximately ten Pagan children and twenty Pagan adults participated in formal ethnographic interviews, and approximately forty more children were present during my numerous participant observation experiences with SpiralScouts groups in 2006 and 2007. Most of the children interviewed and observed were in the three- to nine-year-old range (the SpiralScouts “FireFly” program level). Fieldwork was also conducted with half a dozen children between the ages of nine and fourteen.

Additional data on Pagan families were collected through an online survey of adult Pagans—the “American Pagan Families and Family Values” (APF&FV) survey (reproduced in appendix A)—which I developed in 2006 and posted (with permission from site administrators) to a number of websites frequented by Pagan adults, including the Witches’ Voice (www.witchvox.com), Beliefnet (www.beliefnet.com), and the Cauldron: A Pagan Forum (www.ecauldron.com). The Internet
has provided a vibrant site for researchers as well as for practitioners of contemporary Paganism, and scholars have explored the potential of the Internet as a “site” for virtual ethnography. The sociologist Douglas E. Cowan’s study of Paganism on the Internet suggests that attention to online religious practices and communities can demonstrate “how new information spaces are being colonized by religion and its practitioners, how these spaces provide alternative, hitherto unavailable venues for the performance and instantiation of often marginalized religious identities, and how potential for the electronic evolution in religious traditions such as modern Paganism is supported by the very architecture and philosophy of the World Wide Web.” In this study, virtual methods, such as online surveys and e-mail conversations, supplemented traditional methods. Transcripts of in-person interviews, field notes, and written surveys were coded and categorized using the ATLAS.ti software program. During the course of fieldwork for this study, I attended four festivals hosted by the Council of Magickal Arts (CMA) in Texas as well as approximately forty events related to SpiralScouts or Pagan family activities. Attendance at these events provided a rich variety of general observations as well as the opportunity to interact informally with ten to twenty adults and children at each event.

In addition to these observations, informal interactions, and conversations, I conducted eleven formal, audio-recorded interviews with Pagan children and their parents (five of whom were interviewed at least twice) and twenty-two formal interviews with Pagan adults (eight of whom were interviewed multiple times). The APF&FV online survey yielded forty-four completed surveys in which Pagan adults wrote about their family’s experiences related to their religious beliefs and practices. A second online survey targeting second-generation Pagan children—“Second-Generation Pagans: Experiences and Opinions” (reproduced in appendix B)—was completed by eight adolescents and young adults with parental supervision and consent. All fieldwork for this project, including in-person participant observations and the content and implementation of data collection through virtual sites, was approved by Harvard University’s Institutional Review Board. The confidentiality of participants’ identities was ensured in accordance with Harvard’s Institutional Review Board and the American Anthropological Association’s Code of Ethics. Surveys
and requests for information on websites and online forums were posted with the approval of the site's owner or moderator. Throughout all of my encounters with Pagan parents and children at SpiralScouts meetings, Pagan festivals, and online forums, I identified myself as a non-Pagan (but “Pagan-friendly”) academic and explained that my research focused on the experiences and values of Pagan families with children. In an effort to respect the privacy and agency of informants in this study, all children and adults were offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms. Many chose to use their public magical names, some elected to let me choose a pseudonym for them, and a few chose names for reasons known only to them. Names are a powerful thing among Pagans, and magical names, like names of deities, are not chosen, used, or shared lightly. With this in mind, when informants asked me to select their pseudonyms, I attempted to choose names that reflected the general meaning or tenor of their real names. In a few cases, adults whose public presence was a significant part of their life as a Pagan asked that I use their real names, and in these cases, I have complied with their wishes. Jess, the leader of SpiralScouts' Silverling Circle, was one of these people. Active in the local community and within the SpiralScouts organization, Jess sent me this response to my inquiry about her preferred pseudonym:

As for use of my name—I used my full name when I coordinated Pagan Pride Day, and I include it in calendar listings and press releases for SpiralScouts, because using a pseudonym would mean admitting there is a danger of religious persecution, and I choose denial! . . . I understand and respect people's decision to protect their own names and those of their families—everyone has their reasons—but I do wish more people would use their real names in association with Pagan activities. Too often [pseudonyms] only perpetuate the public perception of Pagans as kooks, equivalent to hippies, communists, vegetarians, and other weirdos :).

Jess was not alone in her desire to be recognized as a member of the Pagan community; similar sentiments were expressed by some of the children I spent time with for this study. One afternoon in 2006, I sat with the families of Spiral Winds coven in a shady gazebo at one of CMA's Samhain festivals. I was accompanied by four children between
the ages of five and eleven—Deanna, Raven, Cricket, and Stephen—and their parents. During a pause in our conversation, nine-year-old Cricket asked me, “Why do you ask us so many questions?” I told her that I was trying to learn what it was like to be a child growing up Wiccan, as they were, so that I could write about it. She asked, wide-eyed, “You’re going to write about us? You mean we’re going to be inside books?” She turned to Raven and exclaimed, “We’re going to be inside books. She’s going to write about what we say!” Stephen asked, “Can I be in a book?” and Raven shouted, “Me too!” I assured them that they would all be in the book, but not with their real names. Cricket’s response was immediate and passionate: “No! I want them to know I’m a Pagan child!” Her mother smiled, but asked—despite her children’s protests—that I use the children’s magical names as pseudonyms. “They may think it’s fine now . . . ,” she added, her voice trailing off. The understood message seemed to be that as (potentially non-Pagan) teenagers and adults, they might not want their real names associated with their Pagan childhoods.

Some of the most significant challenges to an ethnographic study of Paganism involve the lack of an internally consistent, bounded community and the relative invisibility of the population, resulting from decentralization, stigmatization, and other factors. Many of the challenges specific to conducting ethnographic research in Pagan communities are exacerbated when children are involved. Parents may be particularly reluctant to publicize their beliefs for fear of repercussions from children’s teachers, peers, or non-Pagan family members. Locating groups of Pagan children is difficult in the absence of Pagan schools, day cares, or youth organizations. The uniquely structured and participatory nature of SpiralScouts International alleviated some of the difficulties in accessing groups of Pagan families. Unlike festivals, open rituals, or other public sites where Pagans gather, SpiralScouts maintains membership records and contact lists. Families in SpiralScouts tend to be comfortably “out of the broom closet,” as they put it, about their religious beliefs, at least to the extent that they participate in a fundamentally (although not exclusively) Pagan organization. SpiralScouts parents participate in meetings and activities, so parents and adult leaders were present for all discussions and interviews with minors. The methodological difficulties in locating groups
of Pagan families that arose during research for this book reflect many of the difficulties encountered by Pagan families (and Pagan individuals) in attempting to locate a community for themselves. Many Pagan groups are ephemeral, coming together to celebrate Sabbats and festivals and often dissolving as members’ interests or circumstances change. The sporadic nature of these gatherings does not provide an opportunity for extended contact for either researchers or practitioners. In many ways, this inability to immerse fully in Pagan culture contributes to the ambivalence within Pagan communities. Moreover, Pagan parents’ emphasis on freedom of religious choice for their children means that some parents are reluctant to consider their children “Pagan” until (and unless) the children themselves decide to follow Pagan paths, making locating “Pagan children” even more difficult. This focus on volitional religion for children is an area fraught with ambivalence and tension for Pagan adults and children, reflecting parents’ valorization of the personal religious quest at the expense of a religious tradition or heritage for their children.

Chapter 1 of this book examines the multiple and conflicting histories of contemporary Paganism and how these varied understandings both reflect and influence Pagans’ understandings of their religion as well as differing ways of approaching and understanding Pagan religion, parenting, childhood, and daily life. Many individuals, families, and groups contributed to the information in this book, but three main groups of Pagan families are central to this story: the families of Silverling Circle in New Hampshire, the families of Dragon Moon/Spiral Winds Coven in Texas, and the First Church of Wicca in Massachusetts. The first chapter of this book introduces each of these groups.

Chapter 2 explores Pagan childhood as an idealized realm that is constructed, maintained, and, at times, exploited by Pagan adults. Pagans’ appreciation for childhood as a protected temporal and ideological category that emerges from Romantic and New Age ideals of purity, magic, and innocence reflects adult Pagans’ desires; whether these ideals also reflect Pagan children’s experiences is a question considered more carefully in this chapter. The valorized and romanticized images of childhood that are constructed and maintained by Pagan adults often lead, unsurprisingly, to an overvaluation of
“childlike” or “innocent” (or magical and inversely powerful) qualities in adults.

Chapter 3 examines the many ways Pagan adults conceptualize and present themselves as “childlike” adults in an attempt to both usurp and invert traditional understandings of power, responsibility, privilege, and spirituality. At the same time that adult Pagans position themselves as childlike and magical, however, they frequently suggest that real, chronological children may be unable to participate appropriately in religious ritual. These tensions and ambivalences between the varied religious, interpersonal, and social dynamics of Pagan adults and children, on the one hand, and larger, more firmly established social and religious institutions, on the other hand, are the subject of chapter 4 of this study. These interactions between Pagan adults and children and between Pagan children and other institutions are influenced by specific understandings of the role and nature of the category of the “child.” That is, Pagan adults and Pagan children interact with many of the institutions discussed in this chapter—scouting organizations, public schools, and other religious traditions—based on specific understandings of what it means to be a “Pagan child” or a “Pagan adult.”

Chapter 5 addresses some of the debates surrounding the inclusion of children in Pagan rituals and the appropriate level of religious instruction for younger generations in this new religious movement. Some Pagan parents respond to the religion’s tendency toward the exclusion of children by developing innovative ways to include children in religious ritual and daily practice. This chapter suggests that rituals involving Pagan children can challenge scholars and practitioners to rethink understandings of what constitutes religious ritual, especially rituals involving children’s participation, and to include the interactions and events of everyday life as well as the structured performance of formal rituals. Rituals such as Wiccanings, which welcome young children into the religion, reflect the tension within contemporary Paganism between the desire for legitimacy and the desire to differentiate Pagan welcoming ceremonies from similar practices in other traditions, such as Christian baptisms. Ceremonies and rituals such as blessings and coming-of-age rites are intended to welcome infants and teenagers into the religion, but—unsurprisingly—these rituals are also
contested within the religion. The importance of religious choice for Pagan children is a core value within the religion and is one of the few principles that receives nearly unanimous support from adult Pagans. These Pagan life-cycle rituals and the ambivalence they elicit are discussed in chapter 6 of this book. Finally, the conclusion situates the collective religious imagination of contemporary American Paganism, as evidenced by Pagan understandings of childhood, within the context of North American religions.