

The Trumpeter (1998)

ISSN: 0832 6193

Never Again The Burning Times: A Book Review



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Introduction

... anthropologists had established long ago that witches don't exist except as figments of the imaginations of the credulous.¹

So writes Loretta Orion in the introduction to *Never Again The Burning Times*. "Can a social scientist who is an initiated witch be taken seriously?" she wonders.² The answer, after reading her ethnographic study of post-modern witchcraft and neo-paganism, is an emphatic "yes." The demographics, beliefs and behaviour of this important subculture are clearly described by a competent researcher who was a participant, not an aloof observer.

Orion is an American anthropologist. She is also an initiate into the Minoan Sisterhood. During the decade she studied paganism, she attended numerous pagan gatherings, was a member of two covens, spent time with the Reclaiming Collective and Selena Fox. "...witchcraft and Neo- paganism ... constitute a revival of a rich and ancient tradition

that supports individual initiative in acts of magic in relation to a religious perspective that embodies a divine, living and responsive universe." she concluded.³

Neo-paganism challenges anthropological truisms. Durkheim thought the soul was society individualized: pagans believe the animal nature is the personal essence.

Orion locates today's witchcraft in a western occult tradition whose own roots extend to ancient Egyptian religions and the beginnings of Sumerian science. She highlights differences between British and American witchcraft, terming the British Craft a revival and the American an attempt to create a new religion.

Review

The book focuses on the witch as outsider, "contrary," visionary, and agent of change and on magic as transformative power.

Orion, a former nurse, enquired closely into pagan attitudes to health, especially alternative forms of healing and personal responsibility for wellness. A chapter explores suffering as an opportunity to shape-shift. Shamanism, an important part of American paganism, is described in detail.

The symbiotic relationship between paganism and ecology is clearly delineated. Orion makes the point that pagans, though they celebrate lunar and agricultural festivals, differ from practitioners of the Old Religion. To both the planet is living and holy, but present pagans see it as polluted and suffering, needing protection and healing.

What is the end of myth and ritual? Why, to transform society. Orion feels that cultural radicals, more than violent or political efforts, "... challenge the "orderly state" on a very

fundamental level - its view of the nature of reality."⁴ She notes that the Christian view of "... a static world, susceptible to change only at the hands of the Christian God..."⁵ is inimical to the pagan belief in immanent divinity of the changing earth, and a duty to interfere on its behalf. Because pagan philosophy threatens the established order, persecution is possible.

I am wary of magic. I could wish for more emphasis on the positive antecedents of paganism. Nevertheless, Orion has captured the essence of neo-paganism, its creativity, lack of a guiding prophet, ecological conscience. It is, as she says, a social movement under construction.

Conclusion

Never Again The Burning Times is an important addition to any pagan's library. Non-pagans puzzled by this spiritual renaissance will find many of their questions answered in this well-written, thoroughly researched volume. In fact, it is used as a reference in some anthropology courses!

Endnotes

1. Never Again The Burning Times, Page 10

2. Ibid. Page 10

3. Ibid. Page 145

4. Ibid. Page 240

5. Ibid. Page 147

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