

## Concerning Magic

It was not until very recently that scholarship, even within the field of religious studies, has begun to focus on Neo-Paganism. One of the reasons for this may be due to the complexity of the religious systems that fall under the umbrella term 'Neo-Paganism'. Neo-Paganism may be defined in a variety of ways and its adherents are usually self-identified or belong to groups that self-identify as Neo-Pagan.<sup>1</sup> This makes an overall description of Neo-Paganism difficult, especially for outsiders.

In the later part of the twentieth century, works such as Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today* and Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* have allowed scholars to gain a glimpse into the myriad of world views that Neo-Paganism contains. For instance, Adler points to themes that are, for her, central to Neo-Paganism:

“Most Neo-Pagans sense an aliveness and “presence” in nature. They are usually polytheists or animists or pantheists, or two or three of these things at once. They share the goal of living in harmony with nature and tend to view humanity's ‘advancement’ and separations from nature as the prime source of alienation (Adler 4).”

However, even with works such as these available, there is still very little scholarly work done on Neo-Paganism.

Another of the reasons that mainstream academia continues to dismiss or ignore Neo-Paganism may be that the terminologies used by many of its practitioners have negative connotations within by Western scholarship. ‘Witchcraft’, ‘Magic’, ‘Witch’, ‘Fairy’, and ‘Sabot’ are just some of the terms often used by practitioners which have negative connotations that are deeply rooted within Western cultural paradigms. As such, it may often be the case that the use of these terms points to a worldview which would be considered obtuse, illogical, or even deviant from the perspective of the Western scholar. Amongst the scholars that have chosen to focus on Neo-Paganism, these negative connotations have often led to both misinterpretations and omissions of integral components of the practitioners' belief systems. The resulting descriptions of Neo-Paganism reflect more of the scholar's methodology, background and personal beliefs rather than the viewpoint of the Neo-Pagan practitioner.

One Neo-Pagan component that is often omitted, misinterpreted, or, at best, treated superficially and briefly, by the Western scholar is the subject of magic.<sup>2</sup> Magic, like Neo-Paganism itself, is frequently described differently depending upon the practitioner that is being

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms ‘Neo-Pagan’ and ‘Pagan’ interchangeably. However, it should be noted that for some scholars and practitioners the terms are not interchangeable. For instance, ‘Neo-Paganism’ sometimes refers to a group of practitioners that follow beliefs that have been reconstructed from pre-Christian religious traditions, while ‘Pagan’ sometimes refers simply to a practitioner that adheres to a non-Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

It should also be emphasized that any definitions of Neo-Paganism vary greatly because of the ‘self-identification’ that occurs within many of its traditions. Sometimes all it takes to become Neo-Pagan is to identify as such and this identification is enough for the overall community. This phenomenon should not simply be dismissed but rather should be explored. It may reveal some interesting aspects of Neo-Paganism that aren't readily apparent if the scholar looks only at groups rather than individual practitioners.

<sup>2</sup> While this paper specifically deals with magic in Neo-Paganism, the criticisms of Western scholarship it provides may also prove significant for discussion pertaining to other religious traditions and cultures that embrace magic.

dealt with and the tradition to which they adhere. Regardless, the understanding of magic that is adhered to by a Neo-Pagan practitioner is part of a greater worldview, one that cannot be described fully without its inclusion.

Those scholars who wish to focus on Neo-Pagan traditions, especially those traditions in which magic is emphasized, must approach the subject of magic honestly and resist the Western habit of defining its use as either deviant, immoral or as the result of an irrational, superstitious belief.<sup>3</sup> In order to provide an opportunity for reflection on this matter a brief historical account of the use of the term ‘magic’ and how ‘magical practices’ have historically been categorized will be offered. Following this, a discussion will be presented on how the historical definitions of magic have affected contemporary Neo-Paganism scholarship and why scholars need to rethink these definitions when encountering magic in Neo-Pagan traditions, such as Reclaiming Wicca. These discussions should also show the importance of including a detailed description of magic when the scholar is trying to give a holistic description of a Neo-Paganism belief system.<sup>4</sup>

Magic has historically been defined by Western scholarship as “immoral and anti-social...” and/or as “superstition – an evolutionary early stage of science, inadequate and misleading... (Wax 503.)” In “The Notion of Magic,” Murray and Rosalie Wax argue that these definitions are the result of historical discussions among scholars as to how magic is to be defined.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, one of the best ways to understand these definitions is to place them into the ‘magic versus religion versus science’ debates.<sup>6</sup> The two main concerns that run throughout these debates are the moral standing of magic and its ability to provide access to knowledge and ontological truth (Wax 495).<sup>7</sup> It is from these debates that the Western understanding of magic has its foundation. Below is a brief analysis of some of the historical positions that occur in the debates.

Early on the debate centered specifically upon the relationship between magic and religion. One position put forward placed a moral bias upon the dichotomy between magic and religion. Within this dichotomy, magic is immoral or deviant behavior and religion is moral and correct. This viewpoint does not wish to deny the power, or ontological status, of magical practices but rather wishes to attack magical practices on the grounds that they are sinful (Wax 497.) Wax traces this viewpoint all the way back to the Middle Ages and the influence of the

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that not all Neo-Pagan traditions have a belief in magic nor do they all emphasize its use. Furthermore, there are some Neo-Pagans that see magic and religion as separate spheres. In other words, one need not be Neo-Pagan to do magic, nor even a religious practitioner. However, since the Neo-Pagan scholar must encounter all types of belief in magic the thesis of this paper remains relevant.

<sup>4</sup> I am assuming for the purpose of this paper that the scholar wishes to both understand and present Neo-Paganism holistically. There are times when a scholar may not wish to offer a detailed description of magic when writing on Neo-Paganism, possibly due to a limited focus or other concern. However, the Neo-Pagan scholar should still strive to gain an understanding of magic as it is used within the Neo-Pagan tradition that they are studying.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Scholars’ here is used in the broadest sense of the world and includes philosophers, anthropologists and theologians alike, amongst others.

<sup>6</sup> Wax actually presents two dichotomies, magic/religion and magic/science, in his discussion of the historical development of the Western definition of magic. However, for simplicity, I have chosen simply to combine them under one heading. Regardless, the reader should be made aware by the discussion offered that, historically speaking, magic was first compared to religion and only later compared with science. The focus of these comparisons reflects a move from scholarship based upon religion to one based upon the scientific paradigm. However, I do not believe that this means that either comparison has been entirely done away with. Both comparisons are still in use by Western scholars and Western society in general.

<sup>7</sup> Wax presents these concerns as intellectual and moral ones.

Roman Catholic Church upon the debate. “Rather than characterizing magic as an empirically inaccurate or logically fallacious system of philosophy, the Christian saw it as impious, evil and blasphemous perversion of religiosity (Wax 497).”

However, this moral distinction between magic and religion did not end in the Middle Ages. Wax argues that this dichotomy was fundamental in Emile Durkheim’s approach to magic. For Durkheim, magical practice was “utterly and absolutely immoral, and its proper synonyms would be witchcraft and sorcery, i.e., *black magic*.” (Wax 497). Durkheim’s dichotomy enhances the differences between magic and religion by claiming that magic is always focused on the individual and it is always essentially divisive. Religion on the other hand, is a single community, which revolves around one moral code (Wax 497.) In “Magic: A Problem of Semantic,” Dorothy Hammond echoes Wax’s reading of Durkheim. She states that for Durkheim, “religion involves the community and establishes a church, but magic concerns individuals and forms only clientele (Hammond 1351).<sup>8</sup> In short, magic represents the immoral and deviant behavior and, as such, it always takes place at the edge of a society, marginalized from the normal everyday life of upstanding citizens.

Another position within the magic versus religion versus science debates, one which was based on intellectual concerns, argued that magic and religion have different kinds of beliefs or ways in which the practitioners interact with the ‘other’, whether the ‘other’ is the God of Christianity or other numerous spiritual beings (Wax 496). Therefore, arguing that magic and religion focused on the same things or offered similar insights would result in a faulty understanding of both. The adherents of this perspective, such as James G. Frazer, argued that magic and science were “characterized as assuming immutability or regularity to nature (Wax 496).” On the other hand, religion “was characterized... as assuming a variable nature subject to the arbitrary will of supernatural powers (Wax 496).” Put another way, magic assumes a constructed world in which the ‘magician’ can use natural law to bring about the ends for which they strive. In turn, religious practitioners could only ask for divine intervention to achieve ends. Simply put, magic involves manipulation; religion involves supplication (Wax 496).<sup>9</sup> Frazer makes his position clear when he states:

The analogy between magical and scientific conceptions of the world is close. In both of them the succession of events is perfectly regular and certain, being determined by immutable laws and operations which can be foreseen and calculated precisely; the elements of caprice, of chance, and of accident are banished from the course of nature (Wax 496)”

Frazer’s claim that magic and science use the same types of methods to gain knowledge resulted in bringing science into the debate, which had until then solely focused on magic and religion. Within these debates, focus shifted from one of whether or not magic was moral to a discussion about whether or not it could really be relied on to give the same kind of certain of knowledge that science could offer. There were two main positions that evolved from this

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Wax states that Durkheim was aware that his dichotomy did not work when applied to the Ojibway in his field study. Nonetheless, he provided an ad hoc solution and ignored the discrepancy. See Wax 497 for details.

<sup>9</sup> It may prove interesting to note that “Frazer’s language is differentiating magic and religion was sometimes intriguing in its emotional connotations: the magician was somehow masculine and adventurous; the religious feminine and sycophantic (Wax 496.)”

debate. One position views magic as a part of the evolution of humankind and considered it as a form of immature scientific thought. The other holds that science is distinct from magic (and religion) and that the two have nothing in common (Wax 495).

Scholars such as Edward B. Tylor argued the first position. Following Frazer's lead, he argued that magic was intimately linked with science. However, unlike Frazer's, this position considered the relationship between magic inferior to science. For instance, Tylor stated, "Magic was 'an elaborate and systematic pseudo-science,' by which man attempts to 'discover, foretell, and cause certain events.' (Wax 495)." While Tylor asserted that magic was like science, he argued that its use resulted in error and 'hurtful superstition' (Wax 495). Furthermore, Tylor did not necessarily equate magic as belonging to the 'other' of another culture or tradition. As such, he argued urgently that magical practices must be given up for fear that magical superstition would once again come to dominate Western Culture (Wax 495).<sup>10</sup>

The second position in the debate concerning magic and science was embraced by scholars such as Alexander Goldenwieser and Max Weber. Goldenwieser argued that while there may have 'some superficial likeness' in the way magic and science operated; there was no similarity between either the worldview of the magician and the scientist. Therefore, their expectations and techniques could never truly be similar. He goes on further to refute Frazer's claim that both magic and science claim nature as their ultimate end. Goldenwieser states, "The magician's expectation that a similar act will evoke identical results whenever repeated does not involve the conception of uniformity in Nature... (Wax 496)." Conception of the uniformity of Nature is only found within a scientific paradigm. This is in contrast to the magician's approach that uses Sympathetic magic or Contiguous magic, which Frazer argued to be akin to a scientific approach.<sup>11</sup> Goldenwieser concludes his position in claiming that magic was concerned with the same matters as religion (Wax 496).

Weber takes a slightly different approach from Goldenwieser and argued that magic was "the guardian of the irrational" and science is always considered to be the epitome of intellectual, rational endeavors (Wax 501). However, Weber did not deal with magic solely at an abstract level. He argued that the magic was a "social entity that armored the traditional conduct of life with supernatural sanction" (Wax 501). In other words, belief in magic was the force that allowed institutions or individuals to remain superstitious in the face of rational technological and economic advances. A belief in magic allows magicians and their institutions to maintain a powerbase that they would have to give up in light of a new understanding of the world based upon scientific and rational outlook (Wax 501). Weber presents magic more as a social force that allows for the enforcement of traditional cultural norms. The magician holds onto the irrational beliefs because they uphold the traditional lifestyle of his or her culture, regardless of the advantages that rational thought or enterprise can give to the culture (Wax 501).

A brief recap of the positions presented by the aforementioned scholars reveals that Western scholarship has had a variety of definitions of magic, the vast majority of them negative. It becomes clear that magic has been previously defined as both an immoral and

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<sup>10</sup> This presents an interesting question of just where Neo-Paganism fits when scholars choose to divide up the world religions or cultures into Western and Non-Western categories. I see that it could be argued that it might fit into either category or possibly bridge the two. However, this issue will not be dealt with within this paper.

<sup>11</sup> See James H. Leuba's work, "The Varieties, Classification, and Origin of Magic," for an in-depth presentation and critique of Frazer's categories of magic. See works cited for reference.

divisive act, and as something that leads society astray and allows for stagnation of cultural progress. At its best, it has been labeled as something akin to science and, as such, possibly allows for a greater understanding of the world; at its worst, it is illogical and misleading.

The positions offered above also allow for a glimpse into the worldview of the scholars that entered the debates. Some scholars equated magic with religion, and others, science and religion. As mentioned above, many of their positions arose from either a need to understand magic from a moral standpoint or with a focus on the type of knowledge it offered. However, regardless of the arguments as to how magic should be defined, the majority of the scholars presented above may not have understood how their cultural worldview influenced their perspective on magic. Both Wax and Hammond argue throughout their works that historical scholarship has resulted in theories are all essentially ethnocentric; based upon Western concerns which place emphasis on Judeo-Christian morality and scientific approaches. In Wax's conclusion, he states:

“Our historical review of the characterizations of *magic* formulated by Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim and Malinowski, and long customary within social theory, has demonstrated that there are inutile and even misleading when applied to non-Western societies. In particular, the traditional dichotomies of natural/supernatural, manipulation/supplication, and the categorizations of magical as ‘practical,’ ‘immoral,’ or ‘pseudoscience’ should be discarded from social scientific literature, at least as purporting to characterize other cultures (Wax502).”

When this contemporary scholarship is also looked at through a lens that focuses on cultural bias, it is easy to see many of the effects that the debates have had on Western culture. For many, magic still has the negative connotations and definitions placed upon it in the debates. For instance, it pertains to all that is immoral and threatening to society. Those that practice it do not have the humility to pray or the rationality to understand ‘Truth’. Proof of this standpoint is easy enough to find, all one must do is go to a popular bookstores and they will often find Satanism placed with books on Neo-Paganism traditions, whether they specifically focus on magic or not.<sup>12</sup> It remains to be seen how far away the Western scholar can completely go from his or her cultural roots. Contemporary scholarship, although making headway in addressing Neo-Paganism and magic, still has a great deal of work that needs to be done in exploring magic.

Thankfully, there has been advancement in understanding, at least among scholars, that it may not be the purpose of academia to make moral claims.<sup>13</sup> This is especially true for the scholar of religious studies whose purpose is to present religion as it ‘is’ and not how it ‘ought to be’. The religious studies scholar is not a theologian and, as such, should not enter into the moral debate surrounding magic and its usage. Therefore, the definition of magic as immoral

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<sup>12</sup> This comment is based upon personal experience. It had not immediately occurred to me until a Neo-Pagan practitioner pointed it out. That was about five years ago and I find that it is still often the case that topics of Satanism are found in sections where Neo-Pagan works are placed even in bookstores that have a separate section for Christianity. I contend, as did my informant, that this points to a link between Satanism and Neo-Paganism within popular culture.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, there are forms of scholarship that do deal with Ethics, such as Philosophy. However, their purpose is expressly different from the area of study that we are concerned with here.

behavior will not be dealt with in this paper nor will its definition of deviance.<sup>14</sup> However, the scholar should be aware of the debate about its morality that still rages in many parts of Western culture.

While the moral debate surrounding magic may be easily set aside by the scholar, there remains the debate about its rationality. The main result of the debates seems to be that magic, whether it is directly aligned with religion or not, is not a scientific paradigm and, therefore, results in an irrational paradigm. This presents a dilemma for the Neo-Pagan scholar who wishes to present a truthful holistic picture. On one hand, the scholar must let go of their cultural assumptions in order to truly gain an honest understanding of their informants' worldview. They must give up the idea that the practitioners' paradigm is inherently irrational because the truly 'irrational' can never be fully described. On the other hand, if the scholar is truly able to allow themselves to understand their informants' worldview, they are considered to have 'gone native' by their peers and their scholarship is considered biased and unreliable.

As a result of this dilemma, modern scholarship has chosen at least two ways in which to deal with magic when it is encountered: ignore its importance or ridicule its practice. A good example of an author ignoring its importance is Helen A. Berger. In *A Community of Witches*, Berger explores a Wiccan community over the course of ten years of field study. She presents some interesting explorations of how her Wiccan informants have changed over that period and the problems that have arisen as they try to raise children in a predominantly Christian society. However, she fails to address magic in any significant way. In her one hundred and thirty page work, she deals with it specifically in a mere three pages and usually in the vaguest of terms. For instance, she states, "Witches practice magic. Wishes, or spoken words particularly when part of a ritual done by those who developed their magical skills, are believed to have a direct effect on the world (Berger 18.)" Furthermore, the majority of Berger's discussion about magic, and its use of occult knowledge, seems to stem from the perspective of Western scholarship rather than from information obtained from her informants. Overall, her discussion leaves the reader unsatisfied with her presentation of magic.

Part of Berger's failure may be that her methodology, which focuses mainly on social concerns, does not adequately allow her to look at magic itself in any real depth. As such, her choice of methodology is surprising because she does make the claim that magic arises from a Wiccan worldview and yet her methodology makes it appear that she feels it to be a minor part of the lives of her informants.

While Berger's work fails to deal with magic comprehensibly, at least she does not appear to have an antagonistic view of it. This does not appear to be the case for the majority of Western scholarship. As alluded to above, contemporary Western scholarship teaches that the scholar should always maintain a scientific worldview. Therefore, to actually present either magic (or religion) as viable alternatives amounts to either 'going native' or believing the irrational. This has caused a great deal of misinterpretation on the part of contemporary scholarship, not just when researching Neo-Paganism. It also greatly limits the ability for scholars to do honest and reflective fieldwork.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that there is serious debate among Neo-Pagan practitioners as to how magic ought to be used. This debate should help to prove to academia that magic is integral to Neo-Paganism because you do not have ethical debates about something that is not important. See [www.witchvox.com](http://www.witchvox.com) for many articles by Neo-Pagan practitioners on this subject.

Tanya' Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* illustrates the limitations of such an academic viewpoint and shows the need for further reflection on the topic of magic and methodologies that allow for its exploration. Luhrmann states that the goal of her work is "to describe the process by which the [belief in magic] happens, and the particular experiences, linguistic transformations, analytic mutations, and intellectual strategies which seem central to the transformations (Ezzy 118.)"<sup>15</sup> This goal seems a lofty and worthy one. However, it is the way that Luhrmann goes about it that reveals its bias. As a result, it is among the most criticized works of those dealing with Neo-Paganism and magic, by both scholars and practitioners.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Melissa Harrington, and by extension K. P. Ewing, say of Luhrmann's approach, "Luhrmann did not question her own rationality and produced theory 'embedded with atheistic hegemonic discourse in which anthropology participates,' and that she insulted the people she worked with: 'her denial is to make claims of respect for the people she worked with sound hollow' (Harrington 75)"<sup>17</sup> Douglass Ezzy mirrors this criticism in *Religious Ethnography: Practicing the Witch's Craft* by stating:

"Luhrmann rejects belief [her own acceptance of magical belief] not because of her own experience or evidence, but because of the paradigms of acceptable practice among academics. The methodological atheism at the heart of Luhrmann's thesis does not derive from an attempt to sensitively understand the experiences of Witches, but from her enforced adherence, on pain of significant social sanction, to atheistic tenets of academe (Ezzy 119)."

The criticisms of Luhrmann offered above point out that her approach is often questioned because she never appears to hold her informants beliefs as equal to her own. One of the questions that might be raised about her work is why she chose to take the approach to her subject that she did. Why did she not approach them as equals? She states:

"The very purpose of my involvement – to write an observer's text- would have been undermined by my assent to truth of magical ideas... I stood to gain nothing of belief except power which I was told I could exercise unconsciously even if I made no explicit acceptance, but I stood to loose credibility and career by adherence (Ezzy 118.)"<sup>18</sup>

The examples of Berger and Luhrmann can be put forward as evidence of the impact that the historical definitions of magic have had on contemporary scholarship. It should be clear by this point that while the Western connotations of magic as immoral may be easily dismissed, the definition of magic as irrational is still a stumbling block

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<sup>15</sup> This quote appears in Ezzy's work and he cites it as (Fuhrman 1988, 11).

<sup>16</sup> Much of this criticism actually centers on her treatment of the practitioners she used as informants. I have seen it said in many reviews that she presented herself as a practitioner not as a scholar and betrayed the trust of her informants. If this is true, then it begs the question of how she truly viewed the people she was studying. Did she view them as people or as rats?

<sup>17</sup> Harrington cites her quotes as Ewing 1994, 573.

Ewing, K. P. "Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe." *American Anthropologist* 96(3):571-83

<sup>18</sup> This quote appears in Ezzy's work and he cites it as (Luhrmann 1989:3 20-21).

Luhrmann, Tanya. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989

for those that wish to address belief systems that embrace it honestly and without cultural bias. What remains is to address the issue of how magic might be addressed honestly and why it is important for the scholar to do so.

In order to address this issue, let's return to the historical conclusion that magic is irrational. The definition of just what rationality is may prove extremely misleading. In "Rationality," Paul Stoller talks about the bias approach that such a label may have when dealing with issues that appear within religious studies. He begins his discussion on rationality by pointing out that "the concept of rationality lies at the core of the Western epistemology (Stoller 240)." As such, Western scholars use rationality as the foundation for their explorations of *all* cultural phenomena. There are two schools of thought that have arisen: universalism and relativism. Universalism holds that there is an underlying logic that is free of cultural context and from which all things can be judged (Stoller 240, 243). Relativism, on the other hand, argues that all rationality is contextual and one form of rationality cannot be, or should not be, used to judge another (Stoller 240, 242).

Stoller argues that both of these perspectives on rationality are lacking. One major criticism of universalism is that while it is a nice system, it does not correspond to reality (Stoller 248). Relativism, on the other hand, would render the use of comparative study impossible (Stoller 245). While there are more criticisms of both universalism and relativism, it is clear Stoller believes that neither really captures the essence or reality of experience (Stoller 248).

Stoller argues that a third perspective, that of phenomenology, can allow the scholar to appreciate the reality of a situation that is lost on both the universalist and the relativist. This process would include a realization by the scholar that there are multiple ways to explain an experience. Inherent in these explanations is a form of rationality (Stoller 250-251). Part of this process would be to realize that there is an embrace of both the person's place in culture and in history. In other words, both the observed and the observer in a situation have their own rationality that is influenced by their own culture and times (Stoller 251-252).

Stoller suggests that this will have an impact on the field of religious studies, as well as others, because it allows for a way to accept those forms of rationality that appear different from our own. There is an opportunity for academic growth and understanding if the scholar tries to understand an experience that is usually dismissed as irrational.

It should be noted here that the scholar need not adopt the worldview of the people that they are studying. Rather, the scholar needs to be aware that labeling a religion's tradition, or an aspect of a religious tradition, irrational leads to the forgone conclusion that it is somehow deranged or that the worldview it offers can simply be dismissed. If these systems truly were illogical, meaning that they really had nothing correct to say about the world, then there would be no point in studying them.<sup>19</sup> However, it is clear that there is something gained by scholars through their interactions with their informants; and, therefore, it seems reasonable to suspect that this interaction would be more fruitful when approached with the understanding on both sides, that they each have something valuable to say.

For the scholar that must deal with magic, Stoller's discussion is illuminating. It presents the possibility that the scholar can approach a belief system that embraces magic as on par with his own, even if the scholar must adhere to a standpoint that emphasizes rationality. It can be argued that magic is indeed a rational enterprise within a given paradigm, although not

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<sup>19</sup> It might be offered that they should be studied because they are mere curiosities. I find this explanation dissatisfying.

necessarily a Western one. For instance, in their statement *Principles of Wiccan Belief*, The Council of American Witches states:

“... We recognize both our outer and inner, or psychological, worlds sometimes known as the Spiritual World. The Collective Unconscious, Inner Planes, etc. – and we see in the interaction of these two dimensions the basis for paranormal phenomena and magickal exercises. We neglect neither dimension for the other, seeing both as necessary for of fulfillment (Stepanich 299.)”

It is obvious from this statement that their belief in magic and their metaphysical worldview are not only closely interwoven but also important.

At this point, a further exploration of how magic is viewed within a specific Neo-Pagan may prove useful in illustrating the full importance of magic. In *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, Starhawk goes into great detail to emphasize magic’s place within what has come to be known as Reclaiming Wicca. Magic, for Starhawk, is “the craft of shaping, the craft of the wise, exhilarating, dangerous – the ultimate adventure (Starhawk 136).” Throughout her work, various discussions on spells, incantations, chant, blessings, etc. take place that argue for of magic’s place within the tradition. It becomes clear that magic’s importance can be seen through her description of its close connection with the worldview she presents and also by the ethical code that has developed around its use.

In describing her worldview Starhawk states:

“The mythology and cosmology of Witchcraft are rooted in that ‘Paleolithic shaman’s insight’: that all things are swirls of energy, vortexes of moving forces, currents in an ever-changing sea. Underlying the appearance of separateness, of fixed objects within a linear stream of time, reality is a field of energies that congeal, temporarily, into forms...(Starhawk 42.)”

However, this metaphysical schematic is usually hidden behind the world of ordinary consciousness, behind those things that are often seen as real. Through various techniques, some magical, some not, Starhawk say this perspective is revealed to the Reclaiming practitioner. The utmost concern of magic, sometimes referred to as Witchcraft or, simply, the Craft, is to reveal, maintain, and learn to understand this perception. This perception, which she labels the ‘starlight vision,’ allows for magic to be done intentionally and with understanding of its effects and consequences (Starhawk 42).

The connection between this understanding of the world and magic is quite clear. Starhawk states:

“The primary principle of magic is connection. The universe is a fluid ever-changing energy pattern, not a collection of fixed things: All is interwoven into the continuous fabric of being. Its warp and weft are energy, which is the essence of magic (Starhawk 155.)”

From this worldview, Starhawk states that there are many disciplines of magic. The simplest form of magic is nothing more than the ‘art of moving energy.’ This entails simply being aware of energy, to ‘feel it flowing, and it flows, cleansing, healing, renewing, and revitalizing as it

passes (Starhawk 155.) Another discipline is spell craft. Spells, which she considers a minor form of magic, work in two different ways. The first way is to change something within a person, usually the caster herself, which will allow her to heal or improve herself or change her impact upon the world. The second way is for the witch to cast a spell that changes something within the external world that in turn will impact her and change the way the world interacts with her. Starhawk explains this interaction by stating, “If we cause a change in the energy patterns, they in turn will cause a change in the physical world – just as, if we change a course of an underground river, new series of stalagmites [*sic*] will be formed in new veins of rock (Starhawk 139.)”

There are three types of energy, which the disciplines of magic work with and that are derived from the Reclaiming worldview. The first type is elemental energy and it is the energy that sustains the body. The second type of energy is astral energy. Astral energy is the energy that makes up the astral plain, or “the hidden reality behind appearances, the dream realm, sometime called the... Other side.” The third type of energy is the energy of the Gods. It is the most powerful and its use results in the greatest form of magic, ‘mystical ecstasy’ (Starhawk 161-162.)

If this isn’t enough to convince scholar that magic needs to be seen as an integral part of Reclaiming Wicca, then a discussion about its ethics might persuade them of its seriousness. After all, ethics are not developed for things that are considered minuscule or irrelevant. Starhawk stresses the importance of ethical conduct in Witchcraft repeatedly. She states:

“You must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on the act. The world is in balance... A Wizard’s power of changing and summoning shake the balance of the world. It is dangerous that power, It is most Perilous (Starhawk 155.)”

Starhawk goes further to emphasize the need for responsibility on the part of those that practice magic. She explains the Craft is self-regulating. “The Craft does not foster guilt, the stern, admonishing, self-hating inner voice that cripples action. Instead it demands responsibility. ‘What you send, returns three times over (Starhawk 36.)’”<sup>20</sup>

With the consequences of doing magic incorrectly so dire, it is not a surprise that Starhawk describes the learning of magic as a sort of development of the magical will or ‘character.’ A person that wishes to enter into magical practice should be a person of good character. In order for a person to have the correct character, he or she must be honest, self-disciplined, have conviction and able to commit. Only when a person has all of these characteristics will a person really be ready to practice magic (Starhawk 138).

From this foundation, Starhawk offers some limitations on magic’s use. She does not say that magic cannot be used as talked about below, but simply that it shouldn’t be. Magic should not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, it should be done for a specific purpose that will help an individual or the community. Magic use should not be self-absorbed. It should not be used to for mere pleasure or amusement or for the wrong reason. This could lead to, as she puts it, “spiritual self-destruction” (Starhawk 221.) It should not be used to gain power over others because “they inevitably backfire and complicate one’s life beyond belief” (Starhawk142).

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<sup>20</sup> This quote comes from the section where Starhawk answers the question of how ethics can appear in a system so unlike Christianity. This is used to counter the assumption that without sin or God, morality and ethics have no foundation.

For those scholars interested in blessing, healing, hexing, and cursing, there is a large amount of literature on the various discussions of the ethical uses of magic, both within the Reclaiming community and in the larger Neo-Pagan community<sup>21</sup>. Starhawk herself acknowledges that there are differences in opinion about the ethical use of magic. She says, “Some traditions expressly forbid hexing, cursing, or even healing another without their consent. Other Witches feel strongly that ‘a Witch who cannot hex, cannot heal.’ (Starhawk 141.)” What becomes clear from her presentation is that it is an important topic in a heated debate.

It should be clear at this point that the worldview of Reclaiming Wicca embraces the concept of magic and that the use of magic gives rise to a moral code of behavior. It stands to reason that a scholar who wishes to provide an accurate description of the tradition must include it. Furthermore, as we have seen, an approach that puts emphasis on its irrationality may lead to a misrepresentation of the belief system that either omits magic or calls into question the mental state of those who adhere to it, neither of which should be acceptable to contemporary scholarship.

Taking the example of Reclaiming Wicca, it stands to reason that the Neo-Pagan scholar needs to reflect upon his or her preconceived notions of magic if they are to gain an honest understanding of the Neo-Pagan world. Even if they choose not to focus on a tradition that embraces magic, they will ultimately encounter subject matter that does due to the interrelation of the Neo-Pagan traditions themselves.

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<sup>21</sup> For examples of this see [www.witchvox.com](http://www.witchvox.com)

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