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The Gateway

Modern day witches: an i

"The Occult" — a catch-all phrase for what practices and ways of life we have little, distorted, or a paralyzed understanding. The word "occult", leaving no explanation behind it, even after several thoughtful pronouncements, prompted me to investigate its very source or at least how it got confused in modern English usage.

Via coincidence or fate I established correspondence with whom you might call modern day "witches" or magicians — not to be confused with those who pull rabbits out of top hats. Their names are David and Ana Morgaine. They would neither agree nor disagree to be referred to as "witches", "pagans", or "modern day magicians."

I decided that the best medium for investigation would be an interview with them, much to the benefit of myself and hopefully to you, the reader. But first a little interjection of history.

"THE O.T.O. IS A SERIOUS AND SECRET ORDER, pledged to the high purposes of securing the Liberty of the Individual, Knowledge and Power through Beauty, Courage and Wit on the Foundation of Universal Brotherhood." These were the first words I encountered out of a book kindly lent to me by David and Ana. The letters

O.T.O. stand for Ordo Templi Orientis, or Order of the Temple of the Orient, to which both David and Ana belong. As this interview will reveal, the Order is the culmination of at least a thousand years of cultural transmissions. Its present name and philosophy owe themselves mainly to Karl Kellner (1850-1905) and Aleister Crowley (1875-1947).

Kellner, a wealthy Austrian industrialist, papal chemist, and high grade Mason founded the O.T.O. basing much of it on specific magical practices he encountered in his travels to the East. However, it was Crowley who was responsible for fostering a few strong leaders in North America and to him that the O.T.O. owes a great deal of its survival in the English-speaking world. The Order's many chapters and lodges spread through Canada, the U.S., and Europe regularly perform "the O.T.O. Gnostic Mass" a group ritual Crowley calls "the central ceremony of its [the Order's] public and private elaboration." A central tenet of the O.T.O. purists is that Divine consciousness is experiential and that certain techniques are of value to induce the experience.

(NOTE: The terms with superscript numbers are defined in the glossary on page 10)

I will let the rest speak for itself in this interview.

David, I think it would be best to begin this interview by discussing in general terms the meaning of the word pagan and what it refers to in order to provide some sort of working definition for the reader of this interview to use.

David: The word pagan comes from the Latin paganus meaning a person who lives in the country. The pagan "religion" originally referred to what one might call a folk religion of the countryside outside the civilized areas and the ancient Mediterranean.

And now, in today's world, who are the pagans and what are some of their aspirations?

The modern pagan movement in its various forms of Wiccan, Druid and whatnot are trying to revive a lot of the more positive aspects of the primitive, tribal communities, in essence, by maintaining a closeness to nature by deifying the forces of nature. They see modern Western culture as being very artificial and seek to become an organic part of the world as opposed to man conquering and raping nature.

How closely linked is the modern pagan movement to ancient European folk religions?

To say modern paganism has an actual direct link with ancient European folk religions would be stretching things somewhat. With the Christianization of Europe the pagan traditions were more absorbed than continuing separately. What the Catholic Church did to a very large extent — we especially see it in Latin America where it is a little more recent — was to amalgamate elements of pagan traditions into their own rituals rather than completely cutting off a converted community from its past. One will always find traditions of folk medicine and magical practices of various sorts connected with superstition that have their antecedents in ancient religious practices, but they were not really organized or a continuing movement.

Is there at least some sort of trans-historical mythology that is being kept alive by pagan revivalists today or in other periods in history?

Not really in an organized sense. I mean, these ideas keep reoccurring and people have experiences that will be interpreted generally in the context of the prevailing religious beliefs. For example, in late eleventh century England there was a really big thing about the Druids — that Stonehenge was an ancient Druid temple. The idea circulated that Christ had, at some time, founded a Druidic school at Glastonbury and that the Druids were sort of the original Christians in the sense of the Enlightenment, which was part of what was happening in late eighteenth century ideas. Anyway, the Druids were seen as being very appropriate ancestors for eighteenth century humanistic Christians to be. However, there is no historical connection whatsoever. The modern Druids, who up to a few years ago — I think they may be still allowed to do it, I am not so sure, although I do know the authorities have stamped down somewhat on their access to Stonehenge — anyway these so-called Druids would have their summer solstice ritual at Stonehenge every year — and that is definitely a late eighteenth century creation that probably has little or nothing whatsoever to do with the ancient Druids of whom we really know next to nothing except that the building of Stonehenge predated them by several thousand years.

So you're saying that there are people out there who would like to believe that their practice of ritual claims a direct descendancy to ancient religions.

Yes, and they make a sort of backwards reconstruction to the early folk religions when it is really a modern creation. With archeological research, any things that are discovered in retrospect about these ancient practices are drawn in and incorporated. There is nothing wrong with that, I just think that it is somewhat misleading.

How is it misleading?

Well, there is nothing wrong with claiming ancestry in the sense of saying this is what we think those people were doing and we would like to do the same thing. However, it is very different to say that we are continuing what they are doing directly. So I am saying

Interview by Chris Herodek
photos by Bruce Gardave

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