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# Three Paradigms in Emerging Christian Witchcraft

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Over the past five years, the emergence of something called Christian witchcraft has alarmed many who have heard of it. Ethnographic research has shown that it is a product of many things: religious deconstruction, decolonization, and even popular culture, but the effect seems to have been one of empowerment for women and queer folk, a healthy respect for other religions, an assertion of agency and consent within religion, and a decentralization of authority in those places where it exists. The informal, popular form of religious deconstruction has created this room for Christian witchcraft, but religious decolonization has played a key role in how the various forms of Christian witchcraft have categorized themselves, and these categories have closely mirrored pre-existing categorizations developed by Dorothee Sölle: orthodox, liberal, and radical.

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In the early 2000s, a newspaper article focused on an occult bookstore owner in Dover, Delaware, who participated in the City of Dover's Pagan Pride Festival as a Christian Wiccan. At that time, I was involved in ministry in a fairly conservative setting and doubted that a Christian could also be a Wiccan. But more than a decade later, while I was going through my own religious deconstruction, I recalled that article and wondered if, perhaps, in light of all the things I now believed I had been wrong about—LGBTQ rights, original sin, pluralism—if I hadn't judged her too quickly, too harshly, and I began to wonder: Could a Christian witch truly exist?

At the beginning of 2019, before I enrolled in the Masters of Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University, I inadvertently stumbled into a Facebook group that claimed to be an online meeting place for Christian witches. Upon further searching, I found several more scattered across various social media outlets and requested to join nearly all of them. Surprisingly, as I was accepted into these groups, I found that there was more substance to them than I had initially expected.

This left me with a question: Had I, in the process of rethinking my own beliefs, completely bypassed a surprisingly wide and seemingly viable revolution in the theology and doctrine?

Before going any further, a brief word about how I define "modern Christian witchcraft" in this paper:

What I am studying is the modern, first and second-generation of Christians coming out of mainstream Christianity, who choose to incorporate some form of witchcraft as a spiritual discipline. In this study, I have intentionally excluded synergistic religions like Vodou and Santeria, not because they are unimportant, but because they are belief systems unto themselves, and do not represent a paradigm shift coming out of mainstream Christianity. Additionally, I have excluded those who practice the Solomonic magic which comes from the works of people like John Dee. This too is its own tradition, predating the evangelicalism that modern Christian witchcraft seems to have developed in response to. It is my hope that these groups' exclusion is understood as a respect for their own boundaries and not as my deeming them unimportant or uninfluential.

The additional lines which I had to draw in order to define what makes someone a Christian witch may seem almost arbitrary, given the access to knowledge about mysticism and world religions that are available to people via the internet. Without boundaries, however, this ethnographic study could have continued indefinitely. In truth, nearly as much has been left out as has been included. Primarily, I relied on Christian witches to define themselves through simple self-identification, because the task might have been impossible otherwise. The Baptist who privately invokes saints may see themselves as a witch, even

though the Catholic who invokes them simply considers themselves to be a good Catholic. The Pentecostal woman who learned from her Appalachian grandmother how to make a poultice from foraged herbs might keep her secrets from everyone at church, but open up in a group of pagans online. Things that my own grandmother used to say—superstitions from the watermen of the Chesapeake Bay—came back with surprising familiarity, and she would *never* have called herself a witch. Christianity itself, the miracles, the rituals, transubstantiation, speaking in tongues, can be seen as magical. Even the pronouncement of salvation at baptism is as much a locutionary utterance as “So mote it be.” More than once, I had the uncomfortable sensation that some of my own mystical leanings might not be witchcraft merely for the reason that I hadn’t called them such.

Practically, the typical Christian witch attends church, perhaps even a conservative church which would frown upon their practices as a witch. In private, there is little difference between prayer and spell-casting. Some even describe spell-casting as a type of prayer performed as a private theatre. In my research, personal altars, candles, wands, sigils, potions, are all employed to various degrees. Depending on the type of Christian witch, other beings may be invoked, but rarely if ever, would they be demonic.

There is a problem of ambiguity when it comes to discussing witches. Assumed definitions of words like *witch* and *witchcraft* share certain qualities in different places in the world, but not all definitions are totally commensurable. Whereas E. E. Evans-Pritchard describes witchcraft among the Azande as both an impersonal force and an inherited trait (1976, 1-7, 13), and Robert J. Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Timothy Stabell primarily describe it as a malevolent, powerful, misfortune-causing characteristic (2020, 6), this paper will deal with witchcraft in the alternative sense described by Priest *et al* (2020, 6): the contemporary American and European context which is found among Wiccans and neopagans (though Christian witches are not necessarily either of these). A key difference is the prevalence of intentional, often benevolent, learned or invented spiritual practices which are meant to bring about change in reality either through some elemental power or non-human entity.

As I chose this topic for study and began my ethnographic research, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. These were groups that existed primarily online, and moreover, it appeared to be a fringe movement. I worried that the demographic I had

chosen would turn out to be just a niche assortment of beliefs with no real rhyme or reason to them. On the contrary, what I found was that: 1) all of these people were deconstructing their faith, at least in an informal sense of the word, but 2) there was definitely a spectrum of theological development, and that the spectrum was oriented around decolonization.

That being the case, we will need to determine what is meant by the terms “deconstruction” and “decolonization” when they are used by Christians practicing witchcraft.

Jacques Derrida, in his book *On Grammatology*, uses the term *deconstruction* to discuss the process by which information moves from the brain into speech or writing, and then from speech and writing back to the brains of the audience. This is already too in-depth a definition for the purposes of most Christians who are deconstructing their faith. It isn’t that they lack the intellectual prowess to consider deconstruction on Derrida’s terms, but rather, they lack the immediate necessity. Popularly, the term is simply used to indicate that long-held or long-asserted beliefs are being weighed and measured, then re-embraced, modified or else discarded wholesale. Many Christians find their faith strengthened by this process. Other Christians abandon their faith when it is found wanting. Others still find their faith changed into something almost entirely new. Of this last category, a surprising number of Christians have openly and intentionally found value in incorporating a degree of witchcraft into their faith. For many, witchcraft is one way of re-discovering God, using rituals, practices, and holding beliefs which have, typically, been foreign to mainstream Christianity. Here we have a strange paradox, though: In the past, women accused of witchcraft were generally not actual, practicing witches. Adopting the label for oneself today can bring on a sense of liberation from certain expectations of Christianity, but it also opens one up to ridicule and ostracism, and so practitioners use witchcraft secretly and with a certain frame of mind, but most of them are not “out” as witches to their friends and families because the dangers of being associated with witchcraft are still enough to jeopardize one’s home, family, or ministry. In some cases, the mere association with the subject matter is enough to jeopardize one’s career—as I personally discovered and will later detail in this paper.

One witch explained to me that it was the Bible itself which led them on this path of deconstructive discovery. They said,

It involves close examination of Scripture and going back to the original language. Then I started questioning stuff like “why is it so wrong to be gay?” and realizing it takes a lot of mental gymnastics just to say the Bible doesn’t contradict itself. From there: examining all kinds of things that don’t make sense; eventually: becoming universalist (or at least, having a broad view of who doesn’t go to a punitive hell), looking at and embracing the pagan roots of Christianity, examining why I believe in God/Christ at all and why should I go on believing.

Many conservative Christians have taken umbrage with the term “deconstruction”, but alternative suggestions such as reconstruction, remodeling, or reforming, are all functionally synonyms as far as a construction trade metaphor goes.

What matters, with regards to our definition of deconstruction, is that beliefs about God, the Bible, salvation, authority structures, and many others are being re-evaluated with the help of seminary education, scholarly and popular books, and respected educators.

The process of decolonization, or else the lack of such a process, is what tends to shape the form that a Christian’s witchcraft will take. For the Christian witches I observed, decolonization could be defined as the undoing of colonialism. More specifically, decolonization de-centers imperial and colonial presuppositions about how the world works and what is seen as normal versus what is seen as exotic or aberrant. It is an intentional rejection of the established power as the status quo. For decolonizing Christians, this may mean reconsidering things like biblical lineages and whether fictive ancestors can be as true an ancestor as one’s genetic ancestor. It may mean reconsidering the substance of things like inerrancy, original sin, and idolatry in a global context as opposed to a Western (mostly European) view.

When primarily directed at Western colonialism, decolonization for those who choose to remain in the Christian faith, also means directly seeking to undo the religious domination that had forced indigenous practices underground and towards extinction and also the commodification which is so frequently present in capitalist societies.

If deconstruction demolishes theological barriers to God and to reality, decolonization demolishes cultural norms which bar one from their own history and place in the world. Decolonizing Christian witches seem to have two main goals: 1) to discover, evaluate and

potentially embrace those practices which were indigenized to a people group (usually their ancestors) before their first contact with Christianity, and 2) to examine the religious and cultural practices one already has and determine if they have been culturally misappropriated from somewhere else, and then to abandon them if necessary and make amends for any harm done. In other words, many Christian witches see the cultural and religious practices of pre-Christian and non-Christian groups as a collective reflection of the *imago Dei*, or at least they ought to be respected by Christian witches as such. It is important to note here that how this manifestation of the image of God takes place is defined differently by different groups of Christian witches, and this will be further elaborated on later in the paper.

What is happening right now in Christian witchcraft is a dynamic sorting of beliefs. Without intentionally creating denominations, Christian witches still tend to gravitate into one of three predominant forms (described below).

In his landmark work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn talks about the paradigms which will cement a group together and the paradigms that will cause it to divide into smaller sects (2012, xxiv). Christian witchcraft is no exception to the theory he lays out. Within the first six months of observing some of these groups online, it became very clear which paradigms were being adopted to align these Christian witches with one another, and also which paradigms were dividing them into groups. Christian witchcraft is united by a paradigm of decentralized power in the Church and by seeing God’s interactions with humanity *outside* of a church building or formal congregation as equal to or even preferred to those interactions within a church or congregation.

The crisis which faces the Church, in the eyes of these Christian witches, is the friendly co-existence of theological orthodoxy with moral corruption. Like the sciences, theology and biblical study must reckon with emerging cultural issues, and in this case, the issue is the repeated inability of mainstream evangelical Christianity to answer questions of equality, integrity, and compassion, which calls into question the pre-existing theological model. Most of these Christian witches began their process of deconstruction after becoming angry, hurt, or frustrated by their church’s handling of racial tension, LGBTQ+ issues, or sexual exploitation and the covering up of the same. For them, the puzzle to be solved is how the presence of

the Holy Spirit and such harmful behaviors can co-exist for generations without resolution. Christian witchcraft is not a novelty, but a passionate attempt to save one's faith from the belief-ending contradictions one has experienced.

In addition to the motivating aspects, there are certain tools of the trade which seem ubiquitous across all groups of witches, such as the altar. The altar has played a role in Christian churches for as long as Christianity has existed, and home or family altars have been popular among more wealthy or devout Christians for almost as long. Most Christians in North America do not tend to have altars within their homes, but for Christian witches, the personal altar is one of the first steps one takes in becoming or accepting oneself as a witch. The altar serves as a place of worship and prayer, as well as for spell-casting, but it does not indicate a place of conversion, as in so many Protestant traditions.

The altar is a private, and sometimes single-purpose location, frequently the top of a piece of furniture. Though there are no rules about what constitutes an altar, and the implements of practice vary greatly from one witch to the next, there are certain items which can generally be found there: candles, either as an offering or for use in candle-magic; statues and icons representing Jesus, saints, angels, ancestors, and even other deities; wands used for focusing magical intentions; a Bible or individual scriptures; sigils; crystals; grimoires or a book of shadows; incense; tools of divination like Tarot and Oracle cards; active spell jars or other works in progress; as well as ingredients for spells. Some witches often employ a travel altar, which may be as simple as a decorated piece of cardboard tucked in a binder, or they may simply use a piece of cloth.

How one adorns or decorates one's altar changes as one's practice grows, but generally reflects an aesthetic that is unique to that person. I have seen pictures of altars on which every spare inch is filled with candles and other articles, and I have seen other altars which have only a single candle or crystal, and everything else is organized neatly into a small box to the left or right of it. One witch described a desk which served as an altar, and their magic informed and influenced the writing and other artistic work they pursued there. The altar is as unique as the witch who cares for it.

The practice of divination is common across all forms of Christian witchcraft, but how and why it is practiced varies greatly. Some Christian witches see it as a form of prophecy, while others believe that other,

more elemental, powers are at work. There is also some debate over who can practice which kinds of divination, but that discussion is too long and still too undecided to be included here.

No single explanation summarizes how all Christian witches find permission within themselves to embrace something as seemingly contradictory or apparently anti-biblical as witchcraft. In my ethnographic studies, I discovered and elucidated three very different approaches to justifying at least some form of witchcraft.

For ease of discussion, I have termed these three clearly distinct paradigms within Christian witchcraft: Liberationist, Liberal, and Adventist. These three groupings exist on a spectrum or axis which moves from left to right, going from actively decolonizing to disinterested in or even suspicious of decolonization. In my research elsewhere, I referred to this as the Liberation-Adventist Axis (or LAA) (McNabb 2021).

A brief note about the choice of names: The liberation group is so named because liberation theology and indigenous liberation inform much of their hermeneutic and interpretation. For the most part, they do not label themselves as such, though many are openly admiring of such writers as James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Rosemary Radford Ruether—all liberation theologians. The liberal group is, generally, in line with most popular conceptualizations of what it means to be liberal. Their view of truth tends to be subjective and their expectation of God is that he is graciously permissive and forgiving of all trespasses, and they, in turn, are more open to magical exploration, even if it defies biblical or cultural rules. The final group, Adventist, represents the largest social media-based group of Christian witches. It was one of the earliest groups of Christian witches to have a presence online and is administrated and moderated by a disproportionate number of Adventist Christians who have incorporated their distinctive beliefs into their witchcraft. This is just the briefest of descriptions. These groups, their beliefs and justifications, will be described in greater detail below.

As surprising as it may seem, Christian witches, upon stepping into social media groups in order to be part of a community of Christian witches, tend to decide very quickly whether that particular group is a good fit for them. Here is a brief description of the three forms of witchcraft they will likely encounter.

## Liberation

Christian witches who are liberation-minded have already been introduced as Christian witches who are decolonizing their practice, abandoning Western religious frameworks, and returning to traditional or ancestral practices, and whose tradition or ancestral practices are seen as a fulfillment of the *imago Dei* or the “image of God.” To them, these practices can draw them closer to God rather than drive them away, as Western Christianity has so frequently taught.

It bears explaining that there is a difference in saying that all cultures bear the *imago Dei* and saying that those within a Christian tradition should treat all cultures *as though* they bear the *imago Dei*. In the first scenario, there is an implication that all the good in a non-Christian culture actually comes from a creating deity that they do not know. It becomes a way of robbing a culture of the credit for all the good they do, and condemning the rest. The preferred phrasing acknowledges that within the Christian tradition, we believe God is the creator of all, and we respond accordingly, treating every culture with the dignity that is due to them in such a worldview. In a way, the phrase “created in the image of God” becomes a statement about the worthiness of all people, their cultures, and their personal agency to have our utmost respect as Christians.

Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, in their book, *The Biblical Foundations of Mission*, describe the occupation of the missionary as follows: “The gospel comes in the person and the message of the missionary as a free and respectful invitation. The gospel-bearer must be aware that he or she is not the proprietor of all truth but bears a gift of God’s salvation that, in many ways, the non-Christian has *already experienced*” (Senior & Stuhlmueller 1999, 3) [emphasis added]. Those cultures which missionaries encounter, and therefore the religions belonging to the ancestors of missionized and colonized people, have already experienced what Christian witches of this type would likely call a gift of God, or perhaps the *imago Dei*.

Scott Sunkuist writes in *Understanding Christian Mission: Participating in Suffering and Glory*, that all cultures, being made of people marked by the *imago Dei*, must therefore have within them the capacity to glorify, point to, and communicate with their creator (2013, 248-249).

Liberation-minded Christian witches are not seeking to dismantle the gospel-bearing aspects of

Christianity in order that ancient, pagan ways may resurface, but rather that the unbiblical coercion and imperial colonization which has masqueraded as soul-saving work, often as a precursor to industrial development, may be cleared out of the way so that the naked gospel—the rebalancing of power and agency on behalf of those at the margins—may take place. Importantly, this decolonization is not something which has done harm to Christianity by infecting it, but rather, this decolonization is often born out of a gospel-minded mission, once one’s political or imperial motives have been done away with. To the colonized, the naked gospel can be a liberating and decolonizing force, even from the Christians they have encountered in the past.

To summarize a very long exegetical portion of my research, the biblical condemnations of paganism and witchcraft, for the Liberation-minded witch, are condemnations of the *imperialism* which has venerated itself with the local religion, and the imperialism itself must be condemned because it represents powerful people and structures which have set themselves against the poor and the vulnerable. In their view, the biblical authors were not attempting to address the folk magic of rural or oppressed peoples.

## Liberal

In the middle of the LAA, we have those Christians who I have categorized as Liberal Christian witches. The usage of liberal is not meant to be pejorative, but rather a description of their generally subjective view of truth. Many Liberal Christian witches are not too concerned with issues of cultural appropriation; neither are they beholden to the worries of heresy or apostasy that mainstream Christians and Adventist Christian witches tend to be. Overall, their approach to witchcraft seems to be that God’s grace is big enough to cover any missteps or sins one might commit while exploring magic for oneself. Because of this, an individual witch within the Liberal group may have a larger repertoire of spells and magic available to them than their counterparts to the left or right. There is an interesting comparison which is often drawn by witches of this type. Their general dislike of the legalism found in mainstream Christianity often informs their displeasure at the assertions of more liberation-minded witches that some of their practices are misappropriated from vulnerable cultures. To them, this too is legalism.

Another nearly universal quality of liberal Christian witchcraft is the belief that God is a universal figure, playing the role of god and goddess in every other religion. For this group, inclusion frequently means believing that other gods—Allah, Zeus, Odin, etc.—are the Christian god behind a veil. The liberation-minded group would take exception to this as a form of spiritual colonization. In other words, telling a Norse pagan, for instance, that their god is secretly the Jewish or Christian Creator, implies that Christian witches have a deeper understanding of the Norse god than his own followers do, that they are somehow privy to a secret about Odin which had been kept from Norse pagans.

One interesting revelation while working with these two groups is that the deities of other religions do not generally have a salvific role as Jesus does in Christianity, nor are they as interested in seeking worship. They do not possess the jealous monotheism of Christianity and can be completely content “working with” a witch without receiving worship.

The majority of my previous research revolved around Liberal and Liberation groups of Christian witches, as they present the greatest distinction from mainstream, evangelical Christianity. Liberal Christian witches largely discard much of evangelical Christianity’s core beliefs, whereas Liberation-minded witches bypass popular evangelicalism with an alternative spiritual paradigm of liberation theology.

### **Adventist**

In early drafts of my ethnography (2021), *Fast Falls the Eventide: The Emergence of Modern Witchcraft in Response to Mainstream Moral Crisis*, I referred to the group on the right of the LAA as “Bible witches,” a name that was chosen by one of the smaller groups I observed on social media. I discovered, however, that one of the largest groups, with more than 1,000 members, is heavily influenced by Seventh-Day Adventism, and in some cases actually referred to themselves as Adventist, the major similarity being the emphasis on a Saturday Sabbath or Sabbat.

This group, as a whole, has deconstructed enough to accept and encourage women in leadership roles, and is more often than not LGBTQ+ affirming, but they have more in common with mainstream evangelicalism with regards to their soteriological beliefs. Unlike both Liberation and Liberal Christian witches, Adventist witches do not work with metapersons other than the Christian Trinity. They do

not work with (and in some cases forbid even discussing) angels, saints, other gods, demons, and other supernatural beings. While they employ both astrology and Tarot, they view these practices as a type of prophecy—a Christian spiritual gift mentioned in I Corinthians 14:1—which should be accompanied by prayer, and should not involve Tarot or Oracle decks which depict pagan pantheons or demonic imagery. Many hold to a Young Earth Creationist position, though this is hardly unanimous, and many, if not most, still believe in Hell. This group represents less of a paradigm shift from evangelicalism than a careful reinterpretation of how the Holy Spirit moves among Christians.

While the previous two groups contain a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, Adventist Christian witches tend to be white, and practices borrowed from cultures from the Global South tend to be viewed with suspicion, whereas “celtic” magic (a term so broad as to almost be useless) and Appalachian magic are seen as more acceptable.

According to my observations, when one chooses to participate in Christian witchcraft, one can begin at any point on the LAA, depending on one’s convictions. Bear in mind that the LAA is a classification I have assigned to a consistent series of automatic self-groupings among Christian witches, but it is not something that is presented as a clear or intentional choice in any of the groups I observed. Those who begin with Adventism may move further to the left over time, into Liberal or even Liberation forms of witchcraft, but it is incredibly rare for a Christian witch to move from Liberation into Liberal or Adventist witchcraft. The motion tends to be from right to left. Occasionally, a liberal Christian will experiment with the restrictions that fall on them by moving left, but this move is not always permanent.

While finishing up my ethnographic research with Christian witches, I skimmed through Dorothee Sölle’s *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (1990), and landed on her discussion of the three biblical frameworks or paradigms that she uses when speaking about Christianity. She also cites Kuhn’s definition of paradigm as, “a “constellation of convictions, values, and modes of existence which are shared by a particular community” (1990, 7). The categories that she works with, namely, Orthodox, Liberal, and Radical, bear an uncanny resemblance to my own categorization of Christian witchcraft.

The paradigm shifts which are required to justify both Liberal and Liberation Christian witches start

with a perceived problem: Why does mainstream Christianity allow abuses against marginalized people to flourish within its community? Put another way, why is the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control mentioned in Galatians 5:22) not evidenced in the community where the Holy Spirit is said to reside?

For most mundane (non-witch) and non-deconstructing Christians, this question isn't a problem. Most assume that they are, in fact, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, or else they argue that Christians who do not bear the fruit of the Spirit are not living as they should. At the beginning of their deconstruction, many witches and deconstructing Christians were told not to follow Christians (who are flawed) but to follow Christ (who is perfect).

For many, this simply sidesteps the problem. The theological solutions which they are presented with often fail to resolve the reality that they are witnessing with their own eyes and ears. In many cases, the trust they placed in the Bible, in God, in truth, is the beginning point of their deconstruction. They come to believe that the Christian community is not living up to its own standards. Church scandals, non-affirming theology, racial tension, political division, and personal slights all appear to be anomalies in a theory that says Christians should manifest the aforementioned fruit of the Spirit. This leads to a crisis that threatens the status quo of the deconstructing or pre-deconstructing believer; it may even threaten the stability of their faith. The incommensurability of these anomalies requires more than another reinterpretation of old beliefs. Instead, these Christians find themselves in a kind of liminal state where their former beliefs are no longer solidly reliable, but the answers that they do latch onto seem to be little more than an undeveloped notion or hunch.

The deconstruction and perhaps even adoption of witchcraft which follows this crisis is nothing less than a personal revolution, and as Christian witches and deconstructing Christians find one another and begin to compare stories, they find other people who were experiencing the same anomalies across towns, states, nations, and even continents. These anomalies become intractable; Christians who become aware of them lose the ability to simply set them aside.

Before this crisis, the Bible, and specifically verses like Galatians 5:22 (already mentioned) are held at a distance without a great deal of scrutiny. The verses transcend the reality which Christians are experiencing. This transcendent quality allows for a

centralization of faith to take place, centering the Christian belief on the Bible or on the teachings of various religious authorities. During deconstruction and decolonization, Christianity loses much of its transcendence and instead, becomes immanent. Doctrinal belief, interpretations of scripture, and sermons are expected to tangibly relate to the lived experience of the deconstructing believers. When they do not, those doctrinal statements, interpretations, and teachers can be discarded, much in the same way that some pagan and indigenous groups will destroy an idol when it fails to stop a famine or blight.

As far as puzzling out the problems of patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity go, this shift towards immanentism proves itself up to the task, as Strathern (2019, 64) and Hefner (1993, 13-16) have argued. Not only does deconstruction create pressure towards immanentism, immanentism then plows the way to creative re-construction and reformation. Codified texts produce a clerisy who are invested in keeping their congregation's eyes, and the eyes of other Christians, upon the text which authorized them, but a religion that adopts a more fluid handling of its sacred texts and possesses no clearly delineated authority structure will allow erupting movements to grow and change without a status quo or infrastructure to be threatened.

Christian witches, by defying the obvious strictures of Christianity by adopting the term *witch*, in some senses, make it plain that they are no longer concerned with gatekeepers of doctrine or congregations. For many, allowing witchcraft a place in Christianity would represent dirt in the Church's carpet. Formlessness, interstitiality, and liminality are characteristics of Christian witchcraft, which generates an uneasy anticipation, both in witches and in the mundane. One knows what to expect from a person carrying a package up to your front door, or carrying a Bible up to a pulpit, or taking a toilet plunger into the bathroom, but there is an uncertainty about a person wearing a pentagram or concealing a wand. This open-ended expectation grants the witch power.

So too, an intellectual witch's theological statements or descriptions of practice, including an ethnography like the one I published, can generate unease because they represent, for most Christians, the road left untraveled. In my experience, few things have been more unnerving to those trying to reconvert a witch than a witch who wields intimately familiar scriptures in an unfamiliar way.

As a brief example of how this unfamiliarity works itself out in the lived experiences of deconstructing people, I have a personal anecdote. While working on my ethnography, I applied to and interviewed for a pastoral job at a church. During the interview process, I had a very good experience with the church elders, then a very good secondary interview with various parents and teenagers. The senior pastor and I had discussed liberation theology and church history, which were two passions that we shared. A third and final, in-person interview was a formality, I felt, and I would not have been surprised if they were prepared to offer me the job before I left.

I was the first to arrive at the church for the interview. Sitting in my car, I kept an eye out for the faces of those I had met through Zoom meetings. Once they started arriving, I made my way to the same entrance they used, but being nervous, I didn't see a puddle in the parking lot and I managed to get dirt on my dress shoes. I shook it off as best I could, scraped off whatever was left on the doormat outside the church, but still managed to carry a small amount into the church's foyer.

"No worries," said my host. "It's just a little dirt."

We all sat down, re-introduced ourselves, even though we had spoken several times already, and chatted naturally about church growth, teenage problems, and team dynamics. They asked about my background, my schooling, and then they asked, "So what is Theological & Cultural Anthropology?"

That was easy enough to answer, but I wasn't expecting the next question.

"What was your master's thesis on?"

I told them that I studied the emergence of modern Christian witchcraft, and the next questions came faster than I could satisfactorily answer them:

"What makes a witch Christian?"

"At what point are they just a witch?"

"You're not a witch, are you?"

"What are you doing to make sure that their souls are right before God?"

The worried intensity of the exchange made me regret exhausting all the other possible topics of conversation so early. The interview ended on the topic of Christian witches and that was a little unsettling. Despite all the positive experiences I had had leading up to that point—with the pastor, with the elders, with the students and their parents—I felt rushed off a little too quickly.

And I was right.

The day after my job interview, I received an e-mail from the hiring committee. It said something to the effect of, "Thanks for interviewing with us, but we've decided to go with one of the other candidates."

A few days later, the job listing showed up again. They hadn't chosen a different candidate over me; they had simply rejected me in the easiest way they knew how. Merely studying the topic of Christian witchcraft had cost me an opportunity to further my career. My proximity to Christian witches actually drew me into the effects of marginalization that I had been recording in my ethnographic work. To be sure, the degree to which this discrimination affected me was minor in comparison to what many witches have experienced, but it was a pattern that I would see repeated over and over as my research and writing continued.

Mary Douglas wrote in *Purity and Danger*, "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror . . . Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (Douglas, 1966, 2).

When I stepped into that New Jersey church to meet what might have been my future team members, little did I know that I had tracked two kinds of dirt into their building that day. There was the dirt on the bottom of my shoe from the parking lot, but there was also the dirt—the theological disorder—of Christian witchcraft that I tracked in with my mind and my history of study. The first, they knew what to do with; it could be dispatched with a broom or vacuum. They weren't equipped to deal with the second, other than to put as much distance between their impressionable teenagers and myself as possible.

Christian witchcraft is seen as a violation of the usually agreed upon barrier between theology and witchcraft. For many, it would represent an irremovable stain in the Church's carpet. This illustrates the strength of the "normal" theological view in the West; the strength of the current paradigm is such that even a group with a coherent and internally consistent theological stance, such as the liberation theology of the liberation-minded Christian witches, looks like mental gymnastics or nonsense to those who aren't familiar with it. Thomas Kuhn once said that in order to make a paradigm work, chemists had to beat nature into line (2012, xxix). Whether we're talking about Christians on opposite sides of the issue of



witchcraft, or on opposite sides of the Calvinist/Arminian debate, or even among the three groupings within Christian witchcraft itself, it is tempting to see the other side or sides doing something similar—bending the scriptures and metaphysical reality they describe into an acceptable shape.

The differing paradigms that appear in Christianity do not exist in a vacuum, not even from one another. There is now and has been, historically, interplay between the opponents of every major controversy in church history. In the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, we see a response to Arianism. In the debates between Augustine and Pelagius, we see their conclusions being narrowed and sharpened by their disagreement with one another. There is no Protestant Reformation without Johann Tetzel, and no Counter-Reformation without Martin Luther. So too, there is no modern Christian witchcraft (at least of the sort I studied) without the rigidity of modern evangelicalism, or perhaps even without the specter of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. What all of these traditions have in common, however, is a belief that chasing their own distinctions is at least partially guided by the Holy Spirit working within them.

To work out one's salvation with faith and trembling in the Christian tradition, as described in Philippians 2:12, is to invoke an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Michael Welker, of the University of Heidelberg, in his 2019/2020 Gifford Lectures addresses this directly:

Let us concentrate on the notion itself of the outpouring of the Spirit. This phenomenon implies that the divine Spirit can be “invoked”—that is, petitioned to descend upon human beings—but also that those receiving this outpouring are in their own turn “summoned” to respond in a life-changing way. The outpouring of the Spirit is a realistic event that within the context of natural theology can be conveyed particularly by way of its effects on human circumstances. (Welker 2021, 23)

Welker describes a life-changing, or perhaps paradigm-shifting, event that follows the moving of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. The conclusions that a discerning Christian makes, the new paths they follow, the old paths they reject, are in some way a reflection of the Holy Spirit's work in their mind and soul. This makes no claim of inerrancy or infallibility with regards to their choices, but it highlights that which the Spirit has revealed to them.

Coming back to the idea of paradigms as constellations of ideas, Welker elaborates that there are often multi-polar constellations, where two or more ideas are centered in the movement. In Christian witchcraft, infallibility of scripture is centered in the Adventist group, grace-filled freedom is centered in the Liberal group, and God's liberating work is centered in the Liberation group, but all are moving together as a single constellation towards the goal of a church which is experiencing equality of race, of women, of LGBTQ+ folks, and of religious dissenters.

More broadly, I hope it can be said that Christianity as a whole has many poles or paradigm centers, but that the constellation as a whole is moving towards a kingdom of righteousness and holiness, however that may be defined. The people who make up the Church are acting, thinking, and believing together, under the influence and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, even when they sometimes act in conflict with one another. This is the iron which sharpens iron. This back-and-forth dialogue between those who are called orthodox and those who are called heterodox moves the church forward with greater understanding of itself, but also requires an increasing degree of humility.

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