CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM BY THE NUMBERS

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There are a growing number of ethnographic studies of Neopaganism (see for example; Berger 1999, Bado-Fralick 2005, Hume 1997, Luhrmann 1989, Magliocco 2004, Pike 2001, Salomonsen 2002) but only a few that are quantitative and those that do exist are concentrated in North America (Berger et al. 2003, Orion 1995, Jorgensen and Russell 1999, Adler 1986, CoG 2005, Reed 2001). None of these studies is based on random samples, nor with a population as dispersed and at times secretive as Neopagans is it possible to have a random sample. Nonetheless, these studies even with their flaws provide us with important information about the demographics, distribution, and some aspects of the belief and practices of Neopagans. Internationally, census data exist that provides a sense of the extent of Paganism in different nations. Religious affiliation is not included in the United States census but the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) produced by The City University of New York (CUNY) provides similar data for the United States. This essay explores what the numbers tell us about Neopagans as well as the limits of these studies.

How Many Pagans Are There?

In 1992 Aidan Kelly estimated that there were 300,000 Neopagans in the United States. His estimate is based on an extrapolation from festival attendance and subscriptions to Neopagan journals, and by using the number of covens in San Francisco as a template for the nation, estimating that there were about ten people per coven. There are some problems with Kelly’s process of estimation. Possibly the most egregious is his extrapolation from the number of covens per capita in San Francisco to the nation as a whole, as California has a higher percentage of Neopagans than most of the country (Berger 1999, Covenant of the Goddess 2005). Furthermore, the estimate of ten people per coven may be high—many covens have fewer than that and only a minority have more. This latter point is somewhat mitigated by the fact that he does not count solitary practitioners. Although imperfect, Kelly does
offer a method of estimating the contemporary Pagan population using a number of different criteria.

During this same period CUNY, in its National Survey of Religious Identification Survey (NSRI), based on phone interviews with 133,723 people gathered by random dialing of phone numbers throughout the United States found that there were 8,000 Wiccans in the United States. They reported no other form of contemporary Paganism. The large discrepancy between Kelly’s estimate and the NSRI findings may in part be explained by some contemporary Pagans not feeling comfortable stating their religious affiliation, and therefore lying, others who combine their Pagan practices with more traditional religions reporting only the latter, and the fact that in relatively small samples, such as that in the first CUNY religious affiliation survey, small populations can be missed or under-represented. Nonetheless, it does suggest that Kelly probably over-estimated the number of Neopagans in the United States.

The difference in estimates between Kelly’s method and CUNY’s random sample highlights the problem of trying to determine the number of contemporary Pagans in the United States and worldwide. Contemporary Pagans’ and researchers’ sense of the population is normally higher than that presented in census data and surveys. The researchers’ sense of the extent of the population may be influenced by their being in the midst of a vibrant community that they mistakenly believe is larger than it is, but it also influenced by more objective criteria, such as the number of books sold on Pagan subjects. For example, Jone Salomonsen (2002) notes that *The Spiral Dance* (Starhawk 1979) has sold over 300,000 copies. A Barnes and Nobles executive estimates that there are ten million individuals who buy books on Pagan topics (Lewis 2002). Although not all of these individuals are Pagans—some are merely interested in the topic, students assigned a book in a course, dabbler who have not and may not commit to the religion, researchers of Paganism who are not practitioners—it still suggests a larger population than reported in censuses and surveys.

James R. Lewis (2007) relying on the census data from Canada, The United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, all of which record religious affiliation at least in some years, as well as reviewing the data from both the NSRI and ARIS, argues that there has been a spectacular increase in the numbers of Pagans since the 1990s. He notes an increase in Canada from the 1991 census which reported 5,530 Pagans to 21,085 in the 2001 Census, The United Kingdom census reported 42,336 Pagans in 2001 but had not included the question of