Margot Adler’s influential book, *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) contains a chapter titled “A Religion without Converts.” In it, she relates her own spiritual journey towards paganism, and elaborates those of others she has met and interviewed. Superficially, Adler’s assertion that people do not convert to contemporary paganism is problematic because it is clear that most people do not begin their lives as pagans and even fewer had done so in the seventies than might be the case today.1

The original empirical research presented here is derived from a survey of Canadian pagans I conducted in 1995 (n = 187) and semi-structured interviews done with 10 percent of that survey sample (n = 18) in 1998. The survey was open to those residing in Canada, who were over the age of 18, and who would self-identify as practitioners of paganism, neopaganism or witchcraft, under any of the many labels or descriptions by which these are named. The main distribution vehicle was the now-defunct Canadian pagan magazine, *Hecate’s Loom.* Questionnaires were also distributed through the auspices of personal contacts and through public pagan groups. While this method produced a convenience sample, obviously unsuitable for complex statistical manipulations, it has proven adequate to yield preliminary insights.

Adler’s rejection of the language of religious conversion remains prevalent in the pagan community, even 30 years later. Having had a sense of this before I began, I studiously avoided the use of the word ‘conversion’ throughout the surveys and interviews unless I was specifically questioned about the academic context of my research. ‘Conversion’ is a loaded and pejorative term among contemporary pagans and not one they use to describe their own experiences. This rejection is based upon a particular understanding both of conversion and of other religions more generally.

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1 Among my survey respondents, only three indicated that they had been raised in pagan families.
Eugene Gallagher (1994) takes issue with Adler’s assertions about conversion and contemporary paganism. He examines Adler’s material and notes “…how strongly Adler’s accounts of those who have made the journey into neo-Paganism resemble the tales of converts from other religious traditions” (1994: 851). Gallagher suggests that Adler’s rejection of the term ‘conversion’ to describe the process through which individuals come to identify themselves as contemporary pagan practitioners is fundamentally rooted in a construction of conversion that presupposes a passive self. This idea that ‘conversion’ is essentially something that happens ‘to’ someone, that is orchestrated from outside and involves both elements of threat and duress (you will burn in hell as an unbeliever) and that involves an individual having to renounce certain beliefs or aspects of their pre-conversion self in order to conform to a worldview and moral order determined independently of them, is pervasive among contemporary pagans. In interviews, individuals specifically chose to highlight aspects of conjunction and continuity between paganism and their previously existing identities and beliefs, and to emphasize the freely chosen and self-reflexive nature of their path.

The philosophy, in general, was what I believed anyways. The Craft gave me a way to talk about what I already believed. Sure, not all of it was familiar…there was a learning curve as I picked up elemental correspondences and sabbats and mythology and all the rest of the things that go into the Craft way of talking about the universe, but none of it seemed really alien, it just wasn’t stuff I might have come up with on my own. (Carrie)

…when I came to paganism…there is a sense of coming home, there is a sense of actually being able to place a name onto a way of thinking and a way of looking at the world that you’ve had, that I’ve had for, a number of years, and just didn’t realize that there was a way of describing it…(Don)

…I don’t have the experience of having joined Craft…. I don’t have the sense of being converted…convinced, maybe, but not converted. I’ve had beliefs affirmed, challenged, but certainly not imposed on me. (Francine)

I wonder if that sense of having been that way all along is why most Wiccans don’t like the term ‘conversion’…because they haven’t changed anything…? (Andrea)

Gallagher notes that there are models of conversion that presuppose an active self; he cites William James (1903) and Stark and Bainbridge.