

Secular pilgrimage events: Druid Gorsedd and Stargate Alignments

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Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century the imminent demise of religion was hailed by a number of distinguished figures, including Sigmund Freud, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim.¹ This proposition is known as the 'secularisation thesis'. It is generally understood that secularisation is 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols'.² This thesis was at the height of its influence in the 1960s, but since then it has lost authority as a new generations of scholars have suggested that instead the world is in the process of resacralisation.³ While observance of traditional religion has declined in developed countries, the resurgence of traditional religious pilgrimage, the increase in new religious movements (NRMs), and the gradual acceptance of 'New Age' beliefs by the mainstream of Western society are cited as evidence of this change.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the quest for the sacred being pursued through less traditional, more 'secular' avenues. In the West this is the era of the 'supermarket approach' whereby individuals who are not strongly affiliated with one religion can sample and combine a smorgasbord of many religious forms and contents. This would suggest that, with reference to the secularisation process, sectors of society may have been removed from the domination of religious *institutions*, but not from the domination of religious *symbols*. In fact, increasing multiculturalism means that the range of symbols which may be employed is far greater than ever before.⁴ Therefore, it seems that the reality of the secularisation process is that the

¹ Rodney Stark, 'Secularization, R.I.P.', *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, p. 250.

² Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, London, 1969, p. 107.

³ Yves Lambert, 'Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?', *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, p. 303.

⁴ Carsten Colpe, 'Syncretism and Secularization: Complementary and Antithetical Trends in New Religious Movements', *History of Religions*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1977, pp. 158-76.

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normative religion of the West, Christianity, has relinquished its dominance; however, religion has not actually receded, as new forms have arisen to satisfy modern and postmodern spiritual needs.

This vibrant new religious *milieu* is characterised by the continual production of new combinations of religious and spiritual elements from across vast time-spans and geographical areas. These new combinations depend, in part, upon the emergence of the global information technology industry, which has aided the process of resacralisation through the Internet. Cyberspace is revolutionising the way in which new religions promote their beliefs and reach out to potential converts.¹ Within the NRM and New Age *milieu*, 'secular' or substantially 'secularised' alternatives to traditional religious beliefs and practices are being developed.

Where traditional religious beliefs and practices tend to be public, communal and regulated, these 'secular' equivalents are private, individual and unregulated. Thus they tend to conform to Luckmann's characterisation of 'invisible religion'.² However, Luckmann believed that private religiosity cannot, almost by definition, generate the kind of religious convergence that would seem to be a condition for the possibility of the broad social influence of the religious modality.³

The emerging religious *milieu* in the West would seem to give the lie to this argument, as union is sought amongst the various 'New Age' spiritualities not through uniformity of doctrine or ritual, but through broad commonalities in world-view. This has often been linked to the philosophical movement of postmodernism, which has various manifestations, all of which assert the decline in relevance of 'metanarratives' (totalising ideologies allied to universal meaning; for example, Christianity) and hail the pluralist culture, where micronarratives provide non-universalist meanings for subcultures.⁴

Other important features of new forms of Western spirituality include a tendency to be world-affirming, rather than world-denying; to disdain doctrine and embrace personal spiritual

¹ Clark Strand, 'CyberSpirituality', *New Age*, July/August 2000, pp. 86-124.

² Thomas Luckmann, *The invisible religion: The problem of religion in modern societies*, New York, 1967.

³ Peter Beyer, 'Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization: A Response to Dobbelaere', *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 1999, p. 296.

⁴ See Walter Truett Anderson (ed.), *Fontana Post-modernism Reader*, London, 1996, for an overview of postmodern philosophy and its applications.

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variations; and to focus on experience and the body, rather than the intellect and a non-physical metaphysical reality.¹

Modern Secular Pilgrimage

Secular pilgrimage, in the mould of traditional religious pilgrimage, is one way that people have been able to regain a sense of the sacred which was lacking in other aspects of their lives. This paper discusses two modern pilgrimage events: a Druid summer solstice Gorsedd at Uffington White Horse, England, and Stargate Alignments at Rainbow Beach and Uluru, Australia. The two events represented an 'act of faith' for most of those attending, and featured other elements which are integral to traditional religious pilgrimage. Moreover, the central elements in Victor Turner's influential analysis of pilgrimage, *communitas* and a sense of the ludic, were found to be present at these events, heightening their parallel function to traditional religious pilgrimage.

Turner argued that pilgrimage was a religious practice in which people left the confines of their profane lives and entered a liminal state, where they experience fellow-feeling - *communitas* - with other pilgrims, in a temporary suspension of normal social restrictions.² Joyousness and a 'sense of the ludic' accompany this unusual, religiously sanctioned freedom.³ These qualities are seen by some as lacking in modern traditional religious pilgrimage, yet are present in modern secular pilgrimage.

This would support the view that, despite hedonistic and materialistic perspectives dominating Western culture, a resacralisation of society is in progress.⁴ One indicator of this trend reversal is pilgrimage which, as both a religious and a secular phenomenon, is attracting more and more pilgrim-tourists worldwide. They are all on that often elusive quest for a mystical or magico-religious experience that can be described in any number of ways: transformation, encountering the transcendent, life-consciousness changing event, hierophany, and enlightenment.

¹ Lynne Hume, 'New Religious Movements: Current Research in Australia', *Australian Religion Studies Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Autumn 2000, p. 29.

² Victor Turner, 'The Centre out There: Pilgrim's Goal', *History of Religions*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1972, pp. 191-2.

³ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, Oxford, 1978, p. 35.

⁴ Franco Ferrarotti, 'The destiny of reason and the paradox of the sacred', *Journal of Social Research*, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 648-81.

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Whatever touches the individual, it will be such that they will be able, usually instantaneously, to distinguish between a 'mere experience' and 'an experience'¹. This distinction is Turner's, where he notes that 'mere experience is simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events [whereas] an experience, like a rock in a Zen sand garden, stands out from the evenness of passing hours and years'.² There is also expected to be a linkage between the pilgrim visiting a site or attending an event, and their cosmology, so that their motive for travel could be seen as 'an act of faith'.

The Gorsedd and the two Stargate Alignments, which represented 'an act of faith' for those attending, featured other elements that would be expected in traditional religious pilgrimage. Most importantly, Turnerian *communitas* and a sense of the ludic were evident at the events. The *communitas* phase of pilgrimage, as variously described by Turner, has two elements: an observable egalitarianism which sees pilgrims mingling freely, regardless of status (a qualitative element), and a desire to be with like-minded people, sharing interests and experiences (a quantitative element). Turner lamented the delimitation of Christian liturgical ritual, where the solemn has been stressed at the expense of the festive, playful element.³ Modern leisure, for Turner, allows people to regain this lost sense of ludic liminality with freedom to indulge in play. Liminality is a crucial element of the pilgrim experience for Turner, as the pilgrim has moved out of everyday reality and crossed the threshold into the sacred.

Other features common to both these events were the presence of votive offerings, commensality (pilgrims dining together either formally or informally), consecration of the site, and significant use of magico-religious ritual. At all three events there was qualitative (participant observation) and quantitative (administration of self-complete surveys) data collection, and this material was collected as part of Digance's doctoral research in Studies in Religion, University of Sydney.

¹ Victor Turner, 'Dewey, Dilthey and drama: an essay in the anthropology of experience', in V. Turner and E. Bruner (eds), *The anthropology of experience*, Urbana, 1986, *passim*.

² *Loc. cit.*

³ Victor Turner, 'Variations on a theme of liminality', in Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (eds), *Secular ritual*, Assen, The Netherlands, 1977, pp. 36-52.

Druid Gorsedd: Uffington White Horse, England

Contemporary Druidry is part of the Neo-pagan or Pagan movement. Neo-paganism is a term which is used to denote the awakening interest in paganism that occurred in America and Europe from the nineteenth century onward. Today, from all accounts, numbers of pagans in the West are increasing: in 1993 it was estimated that there were five thousand practising pagans in Australia, and the preliminary data from the 1996 Census suggests that this total has risen significantly since then.¹ Celtic paganism is one strand of Neo-paganism, which includes worshippers of deities from most polytheistic pantheons.

Celtic society and the role of the Druids were first observed and recorded by Greek ethnographers from the sixth century B.C.E and throughout the Greco-Roman period.² Julius Caesar, in his *Gallic War* (written between 50 and 44 B.C.E.) states that:

In all of Gaul there are two classes of men who are of some rank and honour... First, the Druids, and second, the warriors with horses. The Druids intervene in divine matters; they look after public and private sacrifices; they interpret religious matters; to them a great number of young men rush together for the sake of instruction, for the Druids are great in honour before them.³

Other Classical authors suggested that the Druids taught a doctrine of reincarnation and were a formal priesthood akin to the Brahmins of India.⁴

It is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of the reports provided by the Greek and Roman writers, but in the case of modern Druidry, many practices reported in the texts have been adopted. Literary references to Druids in Gaul and Britain had ceased by the fifth century C.E. following their persecution under the Roman Empire and the gradual encroachment of Christianity. Revival of interest in the Druids occurred between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries,

¹ Julian Cribb, 'Pagan Cults Feed Mystique Hunger', *The Australian*, 22 September 1993, p. 16; also Chris Griffith, 'Paganism "more fun"', *The Sunday Mail*, 19 October 1997, p. 23.

² J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. 60, section C, Dublin, 1959-60, pp. 189-275.

³ Julius Caesar, *Gallic War*, in John T. Koch and John Carey (eds), *The Celtic Heroic Age*, Malden Massachusetts, 1995, p. 28.

⁴ Stuart Piggott, *The Druids*, Harmondsworth, 1974, p. 86.

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portraying them in romantic, idealistic terms as simple but noble mystics.¹

On 21 June 1792 the Gorsedd Beirdd Ynis Prydain (Assembly of the Bards of Britain) was inaugurated by Iolo Morganwg, a radical poet and Welsh nationalist. The three classes of Druids, Bards and Ovates were clad in white, blue and green respectively, which is still the case with modern orders such as the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) and the British Druidic Order (BDO). These orders have been very successful in winning followers.² The British Druid Order (BDO) was established by Philip Shallcrass in 1979. It emphasises native (endemic to the British Isles) spirituality as a way of connecting to the divine in nature. The Order, which promotes the bardic ideals of Druidry, has the practice of Druidry as a living faith as its primary goal.³

On 21 June 1997 the BDO inaugurated a new Gorsedd (The Gorsedd of Bards of Caer Rhiannon)⁴ at the Uffington White Horse which overlooks the Vale of Pewsey near Wantage, Oxfordshire. The hundred metre long by forty metre high horse is carved on the side of a chalk hillside near the Ridgeway, 'the oldest trackway in Britain dating back to the Mesolithic period'.⁵ Annual summer solstice (or Midsummer's Day) ceremonies were held here some two centuries ago when it appears that the ritual of scouring or cleaning the horse was followed by various manly games and celebrations. Erroneously attributed to the Celts, recent datings place the site around 1400-1600 B.C.E. but there are also many legends which surround the White Horse, including that the horse is the dragon slain by St. George. To consolidate this legend, lying directly below the carving is a small flat topped hill called Dragon Hill, where the blood of the dragon was allegedly said to have spilled and where no grass grows on the patch of exposed chalk on the top of the hillock.

¹ Miranda J. Green, *Exploring the World of the Druids*, London, 1997.

² Peter Berresford Ellis, *The Druids*, London, 1994, p. 269.

³ Philip Shallcrass, *Druidry*, London, 2000.

⁴ *Gorsedd* is a Welsh word for assembly place, traditionally associated with enthronement and usually denoting a Druid assembly; and in contemporary Paganism Rhiannon is the ancient Mare Goddess who rides between the worlds, the British Goddess of Love and a Queen of Faerie. Her festival is Beltane which is usually celebrated at the end of April, see Kathy Jones, *The Ancient British Goddess: Her Myths, Legends and Sacred Sites*, Glastonbury, 1991.

⁵ British Druidic Order, The Gorsedd of the Bards of Caer Rhiannon, programme distributed at the ceremony on 21 June 1997, p. 14.

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Thirty people met at around noon on summer solstice day. The ceremony on Dragon Hill was described by one of the facilitators as 'a series of rites of passage, starting with honouring of the spirits of place, followed by handfastings, blessings for children, initiation into the Gorsedd, honouring of the dead and offerings to the gods according to the season of the year, ending with an eisteddfod'. At the conclusion of the ceremony, participants were surveyed and twenty-four responses were obtained. It appears that the survey data could be said to be representative of Druidic events in England, if not in the Western world as a whole.

A variety of demographic questions were asked, along with the principal reasons why people attended the Gorsedd. The primary motivation for those coming to the Gorsedd was that they were there on 'a spiritual quest'. Six of the seven participants who had been to previous Druidic events described themselves as practising Druids and saw their attendance as being 'an act of faith'. Interestingly, those surveyed generally did not see attending as 'an act of faith' (ranked fifteenth) as a strong motivator, and perhaps this may be explained in that these people chose to practise their cosmology in line with BDO's primary goal noted above. To 'live' their cosmology on a day-to-day basis is perhaps the most important element within their belief system, and attending events such as the Gorsedd, while considered important, are no more than opportunities for social networking and catching up with old friends and acquaintances. The second ranked motivation was 'to get involved and participate' which indicated that nearly all of those surveyed displayed a sense of ownership about their individual spiritual quest. They did not merely want to sit back and passively have their 'spiritual placebo' administered, but rather chose to actively engage with their cosmology in their search for mystical experience. Being there with like-minded people (quantitative *communitas*) ranked fifth in the twenty-eight motivational questions surveyed.

Based on participant observation, the ceremony itself (with the sharing of mead and bread, and the eisteddfod at the conclusion of the ceremony) provided a sense of the ludic. There were also elements of qualitative *communitas* in the ceremony, but all participants were not equal in terms of knowledge (two-thirds had been to previous Druid events and one-quarter were practising Druids) and attire (four, including the three facilitators, had 'creatively' dressed for the occasion which certainly added ambience and an element of authenticity to the event). The ceremony was redolent with magico-religious ritual; the site was

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consecrated at the beginning of the Gorsedd; votive offerings such as mead, bread and flowers were involved in the ceremony, and commensality was also observed.

Stargate Alignments: Rainbow Beach and Uluru, Australia

In March 1994, Chandara, an American housewife living in Maryland, commenced facilitating events she terms 'Stargate Alignments'. These are held at special sites around the world at equinoxes and solstices where Chandara's followers gather to act as a form of conduit between earth energies, and energy fields in interstellar space which are connected with previous times and civilisations such as Atlantis and Lemuria. Chandara could not be termed as 'guru', but rather sees herself as a facilitator, enabling individuals to connect with these special energies as part of their spiritual journey. She formed the Earth Link Mission (ELM) in 1995, and the cosmology of the organisation is based on channelled messages from Ascended Masters, etheric beings who are not of this world but located somewhere in space.¹

Religious movements with their focus on beings from outer space are often traced back to the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the Swedish mystic and visionary, author of *Heaven and Hell* (1758) and *The True Christian Religion* (1771).² However, it was in the twentieth century, with the rapid expansion of technology fuelling new popular culture genres such as science fiction and fantasy, that such religions came of age. In 1954 L. Ron Hubbard founded Scientology, a new religious movement with a pronounced emphasis on alien life forms and interplanetary worlds; other groups grew up in the 1950s around flying saucer or UFO 'contactees' such as George King and George Adamski,³ and in the 1970s sociologist Robert Balch traced the beginnings of what was later to become Heaven's Gate.⁴

¹ See James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Gods Have Landed: New Religions from Other Worlds*, Albany, 1995.

² Michael Stanley (ed.), *Emanuel Swedenborg: Essential Readings*, Sydney, 1993, pp. 24-5.

³ Christopher Evans, *Cults of Unreason*, Frogmore, 1974, *passim*.

⁴ Robert Balch, 'Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult', *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 137-43; and "'When the Light Goes Out, Darkness Comes": A Study of Defection from a Totalistic Cult', in Rodney Stark (ed.), *Religious Movements: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers*, New York, 1985, pp. 11-64.

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There is a great diversity of beliefs among UFO- or alien-based religions, and many conform to the general new religious movement characteristics: borrowing elements from older religions (including stories about vanished worlds, such as Atlantis, Mu, or Lemuria); the 'reinterpretation' of the doctrines of major world religions (Christianity in the case of Swedenborg, Heaven's Gate, and the Raelians); and an apocalyptic and millenarian element which focuses on a transformed future for humankind (usually viewed in terms of a transformed relationship with extra-terrestrial beings, as in the case of the Brotherhood of the Sun, the Raelians and Heaven's Gate).¹

Central to the spread of UFO- and alien-based religious movements is global communications technology. The Earth Link Mission (ELM) has effectively used the Internet in not only spreading its message, but also in gathering support for and attendance at the Stargate Alignments via their on-line forum and chat list. Themes which emerge from monitoring this chat list over 1999-2000 include the belief that the meditations of ELM Lightworkers are saving Earth from destruction, a concern that the present 'system' works against the efforts of the ELM, and anxiety regarding the ELM website being scrutinised by non-believers.

In September 1997, Chandara facilitated the first ever Triple Australian Stargates at Rainbow Beach (three hours north of Brisbane on Queensland's Sunshine Coast), Uluru (Ayers Rock, central Australia), and Hamelin Pool (near Denham, Western Australia). Participants at the first two sites were surveyed at the conclusion of the ceremonies. However, Digance was only able to attend the ceremony at Rainbow Beach. The survey instruments were largely identical to the one used at the Druid Gorsedd, except for slight modification of the motivational questions so as to reflect particular differences between the two groups. At Rainbow Beach, the ceremony involved thirteen people, and was held on a long

¹ See John A. Saliba, 'The Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena', in James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Gods Have Landed*, State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 15-64; Bill Hoffmann and Cathy Burke, *Heaven's Gate*, New York, 1997; Andreas Gruenschloss, "'When we Enter into my Father's Spacecraft": Cargoistic hopes and millenarian cosmologies in new religious UFO movements', *Marburg Journal of Religion*, Vol. 3, No. 2, December 1998, online journal <http://www.uni-marburg.de/fb11/religionswissenschaft/journal/mjr>; and Garry W. Trompf, 'The Cargo and the Millennium on Both Sides of the Pacific', in G. W. Trompf (ed.), *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, Berlin: New York, 1990, pp. 35-94.

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sweeping beach backed by high cliffs of coloured sands just south of the little seaside village of Rainbow Beach.

Twenty-five completed surveys were obtained and returned to Digance from the Uluru event, and it appears that the ceremony was conducted on a small hill midway between Kata Tjuta (the Olgas) and Uluru. The quantitative results of both events are similar and thus will be discussed together. At both events, the main reason for attending was being there as part of a spiritual quest. At Uluru, 'an act of faith' ranked second as a motivation, whereas as it was fifth at Rainbow Beach. Those who subscribe to the cosmologies associated with the Stargate Alignments and ELM call themselves 'Lightworkers'. They believe they are on this planet for altruistic purposes, and this motivation ('contributing to universal group consciousness') ranked second at Uluru and third at Rainbow Beach. Being with like-minded people (*communitas*) ranked seventh at Uluru and sixth at Rainbow Beach in the twenty-eight motivational questions asked.

At both ceremonies, almost without exception, those surveyed were attending their first Stargate Alignment. This statistic is less significant when it is remembered that Stargate Alignments take place only when Chandara is present, and that she travels the world, somewhat in the fashion of the Dalai Lama (though on a more minor scale) in order to facilitate them. Like the Druid Gorsedd, there was definitely a subtle sense of the ludic at the event, and there was observable *communitas*, commensality, much magico-religious 'New Age' ritual and votive offerings. The site was also consecrated at the beginning of the event by 'casting the circle' and by placing a large quartz crystal, along with votive offerings, in the centre of the circle over the Stargate that was to open at noon.

Comparison of the Two Events

Both the Druid Gorsedd and Stargate Alignments were modern, secular pilgrimage events where most surveyed were motivated to attend because they were on a spiritual quest, with attendance at the latter events being seen as 'an act of faith'. Turnerian qualitative and quantitative *communitas* were evident at both events, and a sense of playfulness or the 'ludic' was also noted, particularly at the Druid event where an eisteddfod, involving music and recitations, closed the ceremony. Other indicators characteristic of traditional religious pilgrimage were also present; votive offerings,

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commensality, consecration of the site, and the use of magico-religious ritual in the ceremony itself.

There were also other similarities worthy of note: all events were staged in spectacular outdoor settings; they were somewhat informally and flexibly structured, and choreographed by facilitators not priests or gurus; and many of those attending were first timers. Both the Druid Gorsedd and Uluru were sites that had a long history of usage by earlier peoples. The formation of the coloured sands at Rainbow Beach is described by local indigenous legend, but there is no indication of the extent of prior site usage by local Aborigines.

Whether or not the two organisations could be considered 'new religious movements' is open to debate. Contemporary Druidry is a small sub-section of the broader Neo-pagan movement, which itself is often viewed as a sub-section of the New Age movement. The New Age movement has variously been characterised as a revival of the Western Esoteric tradition;¹ a 'celebration of the self' and of modernity;² and as a 'benign conspiracy' growing out of the counter culture of the 1960s.³ While Druidry and UFO- and alien-based religion could fit all three categories, they are at present too 'fringe' to predict whether they will grow into viable future religions.

This dilemma reveals the extent to which the religious landscape of the Western world has changed. Prior to the 1960s, the 'success' of a new religion depended on whether it acquired a large following through mission and evangelisation, and eventually became a 'world' religion.⁴ The last new religion to achieve this was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly known as Mormonism), founded by Joseph Smith Jr in the early 1800s.⁵ At the dawn of the third millennium, it appears that the doctrinal solidity which results in large-scale conversion and globalisation has been abandoned by most of the significant 'new' religions of the second half of the twentieth century.

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age religion and Western culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, Leiden: New York, 1996.

² Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: the celebration of the self and the sacralization of modernity*, Oxford, 1996.

³ Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Los Angeles, 1980.

⁴ Eileen Barker, Department of Sociology, London School of Economics, *pers. comm.*

⁵ Steven L. Shields, 'The Latter Day Saint Churches', in Timothy Miller (ed.), *America's Alternative Religions*, Albany, 1995, p. 47.

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For example, the Church of Scientology has a strong doctrinal base, but realistically identifies with other minority religions to encourage solidarity within the 'minority religion' continuum. This is interesting when related back to the late Roy Wallis' influential typology of religions, which proposed that there were two axes of assessment of religious movements, one internal and one external. The external axis considered whether the group was perceived by society as deviant or respectable, and the internal axis considered whether the group regarded itself as uniquely legitimate or pluralistically legitimate.¹ The British Druidic Order and the Earth Link Mission are probably still regarded as 'deviant' (although it is worth noting that much which was deviant in 1980 has gradually become mainstream at the close of the century, through the popular culture success of television programmes such as 'Star Trek' and 'The X Files' and marketing exercises like the Mind, Body, Spirit Festivals), and would certainly regard themselves as 'pluralistically legitimate'.²

In this pluralistic reality, the Internet allows many different groups to communicate and identify their similarities while upholding their differences.³ This raises significant questions about the nature of 'belief'. The belief that many Neo-pagans have in the gods differs profoundly from that of believers in traditional religions. It has been said of the gods that:

Most Pagans embrace these entities with a combination of conviction and levity, superstition, psychology, and hard-core materialism. Some think the gods are as real as rocks, some remain skeptical atheists, some think the beings have no more or less actuality than Captain Kirk.⁴

However, this does not mean that their beliefs and practices are frivolous, or may be dismissed easily. Neo-paganism may be a grassroots organisation, but its stance is supported by several distinguished postmodern philosophers, most importantly Lyotard, who speaks of 'lessons in paganism', while asserting that the most

¹ Steve Bruce, 'Cathedrals to Cults: The Evolving Forms of the Religious Life', in Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, Oxford, 1998, p. 21.

² Robert Wright, 'Can Thor Make a Comeback?', *Time*, 16 December 1996, pp. 82-3.

³ Jules Marshall, 'Zen and the Art of Techno-Hedonism', *Good Weekend*, 6 August 1994, p. 24.

⁴ Erik Davis, 'Technopagans', *Wired*, July 1995, p. 174.

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important lesson that it can teach us is to be 'godless in things political'.¹

In the current religious climate the secular and the spiritual have moved far closer to each other. One way of resolving their relationship is to shift concentration from beliefs to practices. The modern secular pilgrimage discussed in this paper demonstrate that whatever individuals think about religion, there are certain things which they do which may be observed. The Druid Gorsedd and the two Stargates were able to attract people, particularly the uninitiated, who were in search of a spiritual or mystical experience which was more often than not linked to their own individual cosmology. However 'implausible' the belief systems of the BDO and the ELM may appear to the 'mainstream' religious community, it is important to note that research has suggested that belief systems range from

the tightly integrated (high system) to the loosely coupled (low system), and from the empirically pertinent (high empirical relevance) to those belief systems for which the empirical world is almost totally irrelevant (low empirical relevance).²

The most fragile and vulnerable belief systems are those which are 'highly systematic and directly empirically relevant'.³ The cosmologies of the BDO and the ELM are of the low system, low empirical relevance type, which implies that interested potential converts and members will find the rest of their lives offer few reasons to abandon their religious practices. They can combine tourism with pilgrimage, materialism with spirituality, and high-tech careers with personal religious beliefs which 'contradict' Western science. The Druid Gorsedd and the Stargates offered a sense of theatre in natural outdoor settings conducive to *communitas* and the ludic; the incorporation of other elements integral to traditional religious pilgrimage; and an opportunity to commune with the Other at an Eliadean *axis mundi*. It is therefore unsurprising that spiritual seekers recognised in these ceremonies attractive, authentic spiritual events.

¹ Quoted in John Milbank, 'Problematizing the secular: the post-postmodern agenda', in P. Berry and A. Wernick (eds), *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, London: New York, 1992, p. 30.

² David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, 'On the Presumed Fragility of Unconventional Belief Systems', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1982, p. 19.

³ *Loc. cit.*

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