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*Coming to the Edge of the Circle : A Wiccan Initiation
Ritual (review)*

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(Review)

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Reviews

NIKKI BADO-FRALICK. *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. x + 181.

This book begins by asking a simple question: is Arnold Van Gennep's tripartite template of initiation (separation, liminality, and reincorporation), which has been the basis of anthropologist and folklorists conceptualization of initiation for a hundred years, accurate or sufficient? In answering this question the author gives a lively and informative description of her own route to becoming a Witch, raises issues of insider and outsider studies of religions, and provides a sense of how Witches practice their religion. Bado-Fralick has studied folklore, performance studies, philosophy, ritual studies, and feminism, and to varying degrees brings all these to bear on her analysis of her own initiation as a Witch thirty years ago and her initiation of others in her role as a high priestess of a Wiccan coven, Merry Circle.

Bado-Fralick believes her own route to Witchcraft began in her childhood, in which her mother taught her the folkways of her native Serbia and her father alternative healing practices, and in her Serbian Orthodox church where she grew to love ritual and mystery, although not the gender divisions between exclusively male priests and practitioners. However, it is not until she enters college that she meets Sam, the man who will teach her about Witchcraft and initiate her into the religion, and Lauren, a fellow initiate with whom she subsequently forms Merry Circle Coven.

Through her discussion first of her own dedication ritual—the ritual that signifies an individual's desire to join a coven and begin the process of training to be Witch—her subsequent initiation, which typically takes place a year and a day after dedication but may be longer, to her becoming a high priestess who initiates others, she takes us on her personal journey while at the same time looking at the details of these rituals, their meaning to the individual, and their implication for understanding the larger question of the initiation process.

She argues that initiation into Witchcraft must be understood not as three distinct periods but as a process of learning. Using Wittgenstein's concept of language game she contends that becoming a Witch is a process of learning a new discourse, which involves both skill and practice, not just learning rules

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but learning how and when to use those rules. This learning for Witches is not just intellectual, but is embodied. She suggests that learning to drive a car is an apt analogy, as one first must learn the rules of the road, but learning them and how a car works does not make you a driver. Practicing over and over does, and with time one becomes a better driver. Learning to drive is not just an intellectual act but one that is learned in the body itself. One learns to “automatically” step on the brake when a child runs in front of the car. Driving, particularly for an experienced driver, becomes a matter of instinct as much as of thinking.

The combination of intellectual and somatic learning is particularly important for Bado-Fralick’s discussion of Wiccan initiation rituals, as Wicca is an embodied spirituality. She does an excellent job of describing what it means to have an embodied spirituality—it means that the body itself must learn to act and respond. The body is not separate from the divine but is part of it, particularly within ritual as she notes this is not a natural state but an achieved one. For her the most central part of this is learning to control one’s breathing. It is through what she terms “body-in-practice” that Witches existentially transform themselves both in ritual and out of it.

Relying on Kaulis she describes part of this transformation to becoming a Witch as a move from integrity to intimacy—that is, a change in the way of knowing and interacting in the sacred circle, magically and in life. Integrity is objective, public, and does not involve affective or somatic elements. Intimacy to the contrary is private and is based on affection and somatic knowledge. Scientific learning would be a good example of the former. The latter is exemplified by parents knowing that their child is unhappy without the child having the usual signs of distress—crying, frowning, complaining. Parents, more often mothers, sometimes state that they can feel in their bodies that something is not right with their child. They may be picking up subtle cues that the child is not quite his or her normal self. It is this sense of knowing and interacting that Bado-Fralick sees as an important element in a Witch’s magical training. The body, she argues, must become intimately attuned in the circle to the gods and to one’s fellow participants.

Bado-Fralick uses one initiation ritual in which she served as high priestess to discuss the role of the timing and place of the ritual in emphasizing the initiate’s relationship with the Goddess and with viewing nature as a “person” and an important player in the ritual. By holding the ritual at the full or waxing moon the group is making the initiate aware of the importance in ritual of the Goddess in her three aspects of maid, mother, and crone. As far as possible the rituals in Merry Circle Coven were held outdoors, placing the initiate within nature. She or he is placed alone to meditate within nature, to

come to see nature as alive. This would have reinforced teaching that preceded the initiation, as there is nothing automatic or natural about being in nature and coming to view it as a person to be interacted with. Neither the initiate nor the coven meets nature in its natural state because as Bado-Fralick notes they first put on insect repellent, although this aspect of ritual preparation is not analyzed by her.

Bado-Fralick's discussion at the beginning of the book about the insider-outsider debate within scholarship on new religions covers the basic points. It at times seems defensive as she justifies herself as scholar-practitioner. This is unfortunate but possibly necessary for scholars who are practitioners of minority religions. It is common for practitioners of mainline religions to study their own religions without raising a question of the validity of their research. Witches and others of minority faiths are often not accorded the same good will. Bado-Fralick's very intimate insider's view of initiation could only be written by a Witch. One or two times Bado-Fralick does take a partisan position of issues within the Witchcraft community, such as her criticism of feminist Witchcraft, but this is rare.

Bado-Fralick, through her insider analysis of Wiccan initiation rituals, brings into question Van Gennep's template of the initiation process. She suggests not that he was completely wrong, but that the process of separation, liminality, and reincorporation is not something that occurs as three distinct stages that are consecutively completed. Rather the individual moves among these throughout the initiation process, returning again to separation, liminality, and ultimately reincorporation. As a first person account this is a very readable book and therefore would make an excellent addition to an undergraduate course in Pagan Studies, Sociology of Religion, Folklore, or Introduction to Anthropology. It will also make a contribution to the growing literature on Wicca.

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WOLFGANG BEHRINGER. *Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. Pp. xxi + 337.

When Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas reinvigorated the study of historical European and particularly English witchcraft in the early 1970s, they were heavily influenced by studies of witchcraft in Africa, particularly the work of E. E. Evans-Pritchard done decades earlier. While they did not pri-