



Coming Home to Paganism: Theory of Religious Conversion or a Theological Principle?¹

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Abstract

The so-called “homecoming” is one of the most (if not *the* most) popular ways of depicting the process of becoming a follower of Neo-Paganism found in literature, from Margot Adler’s classical *Drawing Down the Moon* (1979) to contemporary authors, like Graham Harvey. It is interesting that “homecoming” simultaneously occurs in Neo-Pagan literature, as the common way of becoming Pagan, seen as opposite to the process of conversion (usually as a rapid change of religious beliefs). The critique of the “homecoming” defined in the academic field concentrates on showing that there is a possibility it may be more a theological notion, rather than a model of religious change to contemporary Paganism. The broad definition of religious conversion, understood as change in religious behaviour and beliefs, does include “homecoming” as one of the possible conversion narratives. Therefore, we may speak of a “coming home experience” as one of the main themes – but certainly not the only one – that is present in the histories of conversion to contemporary Paganism.

Keywords: Neo-Paganism, Homecoming Hypothesis, Religious Conversion

Słowa kluczowe: neopoganizm, hipoteza „homecoming”, konwersja religijna

The estimated number of Neo-Pagans in the United States ranges from 250,000 to 1,000,000 followers², and the number is probably more or less the same in Europe. The basic problem with estimating numbers of contemporary Pagans is that many of

¹ This article was prepared as part of the research project 2011/01/N/HS1/02667 funded by the National Science Centre, Poland; Project coordinator: Adam Anczyk.

² D. Jorgensen, S.E. Russell, *American Neopaganism: The Participants’ Identities*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 1999, no. 38 (3), pp. 325–338.

them resist the idea of organising in an official way³. Even when we take into account the more “liberal” estimation of the total number of contemporary Pagans in USA, they are still a very small minority (0.3%) in the American religious landscape (the same applies to Europe). Yet they form a visible minority – the Neo-Pagan movement has had a major impact on the scene of alternative and emergent religions and it is an interesting phenomenon when we think that there is no such thing as “mainstream” Paganism, only branches of one Pagan tree (with many, many leaves). Researchers have proposed various hypotheses concerning the increasing popularity of Paganism and ways people are becoming followers of Neo-Paganism. The so-called “homecoming hypothesis” is one of the most popular (if not *the* most). The main idea of this article is to present the hypothesis, starting from the definition of “home” and tradition in contemporary Paganism, moving to the discussion on conversion to Paganism in literature and the critique of the hypothesis, and ending with some remarks on how “homecoming” can be included in research on conversion to contemporary Pagan movements.

One of the main features of contemporary Paganism is that this religion is in a way both “New” (or “Neo”) and “Old”, as it refers, to a greater (in the case of Pagan reconstructionists) or lesser extent (in the case of Wiccans), directly to the historical religions of pre-Christian Europe. As the movement grew alongside other new religious movements, the comparison between Paganism and other alternative or emergent⁴ religious denominations seemed inevitable. The denying or at least sceptical attitude of Pagans towards New Age ideology⁵ and the movement as a whole reflects the idea that a religion should have its sources in tradition. For many Pagans the New Age is stripped of tradition, and has no roots, either in history or in a particular cultural background. Therefore, the whole New Age movement can be seen by Pagans as – metaphorically and literally speaking – “weekend spirituality”, as it may not have a major influence on the social behaviour, ethics or political opinions of its followers⁶. Paganism is seen as opposite to the New Age in that matter, as it offers not another week-long spiritual training programme that will lead its adherents to enlightenment, but a worldview that shapes the social attitudes and identity of the followers. There are cultural themes that are similar in New Age and Pagan beliefs, namely reverence for Nature, focus on spirituality and personal development, universal understanding of symbols etc.⁷ – and this is certainly true for many Pagans and Pagan movements, but on the other hand there are Pagan groups that are far away from these themes, and we can locate them especially in Slavic and Scandinavian

³ C.S. Hawkins, *Goddess Worship, Witchcraft and Neo-Paganism*, Michigan 1998, p. 26.

⁴ D.G. Bromley, J. Gordon Melton, *Reconceptualizing Types of Religious Organizations: Dominant, Sectarian, Alternative and Emergent Tradition Groups*, “Nova Religio” 2012, no. 15 (3), pp. 4–28.

⁵ G. Lundskow, *The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach*, Thousand Oaks 2008, p. 312.

⁶ S.M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 2001, p. 145.

⁷ W.J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, New York 1998, pp. 77–79.

countries⁸. Moreover, those groups that are focused on a particular cultural tradition, that embrace historical and ethnic heritage, that set aside belief in magic in favour of embracing the “pagan ethos” and tradition, form the mainstream of Paganism in countries like Poland, Lithuania and Russia. In many ways they are far from what we can call “New Age” ideology. From the *etic* perspective in research, there are some similarities between New Age and Paganism, such as privatisation of religions, individualisation of beliefs, usage of “spiritual, spirituality” or some notions on “perennial philosophy,” that had been lost during the centuries, and need to be restored⁹. But from the *emic* perspective the situation is quite different, because many Pagans distance themselves from the New Age; as Melissa Harrington writes, “in the most simplistic terms it must be noted that most Pagans do not see themselves as New Age, and do not aspire to the coming of the Age of Aquarius or any future golden age”¹⁰. The main point of critique of New Age ideology that came from the Pagan movement is that of the cultural mishmash it presents – and this may sound awkward when we imagine ourselves at a statistical wiccan altar with statues of Athena, Isis, Lakshmi or Amaterasu (and sometimes even the Virgin Mary). Syncretism is strongly present in the Pagan movement, but it often consist a strong mythological basis, a *bricolage* of traditions. Secondly, when we think about the nomenclature of both movements, we can see that the adjective “New” is used: in reference to Paganism in the first, and to the “Age” in the second. It is important to note that some Pagans reject the term Neo-Paganism to describe their beliefs, preferring (as some scholars do) the term “contemporary Paganism,” and as worshipers they wish to be called “Pagans” or use a term that is not associated with the word “Pagan” (because of the Christian background of the usage of *paganus*), such as *rodzimowierstwo* in the case of *Rodzima Wiara* from Poland¹¹ or *hellenismos/dodekatheism* in Hellenic movements¹². It is interesting that the oppositions between Paganism and New Age are seen more acutely by followers of traditions in which there is an emphasis on the notions of cultural heritage and identity (e.g. Slavic and Lithuanian movements, or in many ways ADF druidry in the USA). To sum up the arguments of followers: in Paganism, the focus is almost always on the historical times, with some reference to the present. New Age or other New Spirituality movements are about going global with one’s spirituality, unifying beliefs and practices, joining them in the pursuit of world understanding and reaching new levels of spiritual development. Contemporary Paganism in such

⁸ The fact that we can trace the roots of both movements in many cases to the same cultural phenomena (like ceremonial magic, theosophy) is probably one of the main reasons that the debate on the historical Pagan-New Age relations has been ongoing for a few decades, because accurate data can be quoted in order to support different theories.

⁹ See e.g. A.E. Kubiak, *Jednak New Age*, Warszawa 2005, pp. 103–118.

¹⁰ M. Harrington, *Paganism and the New Age* [in:] *Handbook of New Age*, D. Kemp, J.R. Lewis (eds.), Leiden 2007, p. 449.

¹¹ See: S. Simpson, *Strategies for Constructing Religious Practice in Polish Rodzimowierstwo* [in:] *Walking the Old Ways: Studies in Contemporary European Paganism*, A. Anczyk, H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska (eds.), Katowice 2012, pp. 11–36.

¹² M. Job, *The Rebirth of Ancient Greek Religion: Prolegomena to the Hellenic Polytheistic Reconstructionism* [in:] *Walking the Old Ways...*, pp. 69–70.

an “ethnic” form is rather about the local than the global, and also embraces cultural diversity that should be maintained.

The religions of pre-Christian Europe form a “home” to which every actual or potential adherent of the Pagan movement can come back. The attitudes towards tradition and cultural heritage in contemporary Paganism may be portrayed in a continuum, starting from the Ethno-Pagan movements popular in Slavic or Greek Paganism, then moving on to the druidism of *Ár nDraíocht Féin: A Druid Fellowship*, which is concentrated on Indo-European religious traditions, and ending with Eclectic Wiccan movements or the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, which define themselves as rather a spiritual than a religious path¹³. But the reference to the past is always a major feature of the whole Pagan movement. It is worth noting that the past in contemporary Paganism is often more mythical than historical in character. And this “myth of Paganism” often attracts people who start to associate themselves with Pagan cultural themes, symbols, beliefs and rituals. We could state that this myth of the “Pagan past”, built on historical data, is the key concept in the metaphor of “coming home”.

Homecoming hypothesis and religious conversion

Besides the above, the metaphor of “coming home” is also used to express the process of becoming an adherent of Paganism, as Pagans supposedly do not “convert” to Paganism, but are simply “finding a name for their pre-existing spirituality.” The hypothesis claiming that this process should be described as “coming home” rather than “conversion” was first introduced by Margot Adler in her famous book *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, originally published in 1979. In a chapter called “A Religion without Converts”, she claimed that

Neo-Pagan groups rarely proselytize and certain of them are quite selective. There are few converts. In most cases, word of mouth, a discussion between friends, a lecture, a book, or an article provides the entry point. But these events merely confirm some original, private experience, so that the most common feeling of those who have named themselves Pagans is something like “I finally found a group that has the same religious perceptions I always had.” A common phrase you hear is “I’ve come home,” or, as one woman told me excitedly after a lecture, “I always knew I had a religion, I just never knew it had a name.”¹⁴

The usage of this hypothesis can also be found in more recent works of respected scholars in the field of academic study of religions – e.g. Graham Harvey writes that

¹³ David Waldron distinguished four attitudes towards history found among contemporary Pagans (his typology was probably produced using the example of Wiccan movement), namely antiquarists, who focus on historiography; traditionalists, focused on traditional witchcraft like Gardenian wicca, New Age/Eclectic ones, connected with the Jungian universal understanding of symbols and archetypes; and eco-feminists, who are concentrated on feminist themes; D. Waldron, *Post-Modernism and Witchcraft Histories*, “The Pomegranate: A New Journal of Neopagan Thought” 2001, no. 15, pp. 36–44.

¹⁴ M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, New York 2006 [1979], p. 13.

Pagans do not speak about realizing the correctness of Pagan beliefs, or of experiences which require rapid changes of world-view. More typically they discover that the name for their existing sort of spirituality is Paganism. They find that they are not alone in the world but that there are books, groups and world wide web sites devoted to the exploration of this spirituality¹⁵.

Another example represents the study of Melissa Harrington, who tried to fit the Coming Home concept to the conversion motifs of Lofland and Skonovd – Harrington added a new motif into Lofland and Skonovd’s concept of conversion motifs (*intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive*¹⁶) – that of *recognition*. However, the concluding words of her study show that she had in fact not moved much further from Adler’s and Harvey’s understanding of the issue – “(...) whatever social and psychological processes may be coming into play – Wiccans do not convert, they come home”¹⁷.

Ever since the homecoming hypothesis was first introduced by Adler in 1979, several scholars have argued against it – most notably Eugene Gallagher in 1994¹⁸, Siân Reid in 2009¹⁹, and – in perhaps the most comprehensive examination and critique of the hypothesis – Gerhard Mayer and René Gründer in 2010²⁰. All these authors agree that claims that, for example, Paganism is a “religion without converts,” and that Pagans are “coming home” rather than converting, are caused by Adler’s and others’ narrow understanding of conversion. That seems to be limited to an older paradigm in the psychology of religion suggesting a model of rather sudden and passive conversion²¹, which is often called “Pauline” as it corresponds to the conversion of Paul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus as described in the New Testament.

Reid notes that Adler’s rejection of the term “conversion” is still prevalent in the Pagan community. She claims that “‘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”²². In her own research among Canadian Pagans, Reid’s interviewees also claimed that in Paganism they found expressed the essence

¹⁵ G. Harvey, *Coming Home and Coming Out Pagan but not Converting* [in:] *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies (Issues in Contemporary Religion)*, C. Lamb and D. Bryant (eds.), London 1999, p. 234.

¹⁶ J. Lofland, N. Skonovd, *Conversion Motifs*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 1987, no. 20 (4), pp. 373–385.

¹⁷ M. Harrington, *Conversion to Wicca?*, “Diskus” 2000, no. 6. Available online: www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus1-6/Harring6.txt [accessed: 25.04.2013].

¹⁸ E. Gallagher, *A Religion without Converts? Becoming a Neo-pagan*, “Journal of the American Academy of Religion” 1994, no. 62 (3), pp. 851–868.

¹⁹ S. Reid, *A Religion without Converts? Revisited: Individuals, Identity, and Community in Contemporary Paganism* [in:] *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, J.R. Lewis, M. Pizza (eds.), Boston 2009, pp. 171–191.

²⁰ G. Mayer, R. Gründer, *Coming Home or Drifting Away – Magical Practice in the 21st Century*, “Journal of Contemporary Religion” 2010, n. 25 (3), pp. 395–418.

²¹ See e.g. R.W. Hood, P.C. Hill, B. Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (4th ed.), New York 2009.

²² S. Reid, *op.cit.*, p. 171.

of what they already believed in. However, she points out that “[i]t is not possible to tell, simply by examining participant narratives, to what extent the priority in time given to existing adherence to the principles of contemporary Paganism would be observably the case to an outsider, and to what extent the acquisition and utilization of this narrative element is socialized by the norms of the group”²³.

Gallagher examined Adler’s examples of how people become involved in contemporary Paganism. He shows that these examples (which Adler originally intended to support her claims) can fit nicely into other concepts of conversion, demonstrating this for example by using the story of Alison Harlow – Gallagher argues that if read differently from Adler’s intentions, one can see that it closely resembles the model of sudden conversion introduced by William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: “Her intense visionary experience changes the focus of her religious attention and energy and the subsequent course of her life. In James’ terms, ‘religious ideas, previously peripheral in [her] consciousness, now take a central place’”²⁴.

Gallagher also compares the conversion narratives provided by Adler with some anecdotal accounts of members of the Unification Church and their “conversion careers.” He comes to the conclusion that “[d]espite Adler’s protestations that Neo-Paganism and contemporary cults have little in common, however, some converts to the Unification Church have made similar claims”²⁵. To complete Gallagher’s conclusions – the narrative of coming home experience (CHE) is not limited to contemporary Paganism and not even to contemporary cults only – testimonies of conversion feeling like a return home can be found in various traditions, including the major ones; one anecdotal example could be the story of the Jewish convert Sara Eiser published in *Intelligencer Journal*²⁶ – after being raised Catholic, exploring Protestantism thanks to a college affiliated with the Church of Brethren, and seeking a fitting spirituality within the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain and Islamic religions, she finally discovered Judaism. She said “When you’re in the right group, it’s like coming home. That’s how Judaism felt to me. While there are so many things I loved about Catholicism, it never felt like home.” In the light of these facts we must now reject Adler’s inexplicit assertion that it is the way of becoming involved in contemporary Paganism that makes it special and differentiates it from other religions. In the modern Pagan movement, however, it seems that the CHE has become a sort of theological principle – Gerhard Mayer and René Gründer demonstrate this with the example of Wicca: they show the first five results from a Google search for the terms “coming”, “home” and “Wicca.” Among these is, for example, an entry showing an answer to the question of how to become a Wiccan: “Becoming interested in [W]icca is like coming home, coming back to where you (humanity) started. Welcome back”. Another illustrative statement that Mayer and Gründer show says: “One is not ‘converted’

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

²⁴ E. Gallagher, *op.cit.*, p. 855.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 856.

²⁶ J. Kern, *Conversion like “coming home,”* “Intelligencer Journal” (Lancaster Newspapers, Inc.) 2011. Available online: http://lancasteronline.com/article/local/465856_Conversion-like--coming-home-.html [accessed: 20.04.2013].

to Wicca, rather, the new comer feels a sense of ‘Coming Home’, or, more poetically, ‘The Goddess calls to Her own’²⁷.

According to Mayer and Gründer these results:

...demonstrate how the CHE is defaulted and transmitted to newcomers (3), and how it gains the status of a theological principle in Wicca: only those who have the experience of “coming home” are chosen by the Goddess. Therefore it does not come as a big surprise that one can provide empirical evidence for the CHE if one asks for it more or less directly – as done by Harrington (...) ²⁸.

Although the authors did the very same thing, they upbraid Harrington for what they searched for these particular terms and the reliability of such a method is highly disputable, there is evidence to support their argument: contemporary Pagans often draw upon academic literature in their practice²⁹, and many of the most respected scholars in the field are themselves members of the modern Pagan movement – as such they have a huge influence on the practice of contemporary Paganism. It is no exaggeration to say that many Pagan scholars are actually Pagan theologians, and the homecoming hypothesis, i.e. a non-critical use of the coming home experience as an analytical category, represents a result of this issue. As Marcus Altena Davidsen points out in his highly critical account *What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?*,

These examples illustrate a loyalist tendency of pagan scholars to not question insider interpretations, but to present them as if they were bare facts. They further show that this loyalism supports the ontological essentialism and exclusivism discussed above: Pagan scholars insist on paganism’s distinctiveness to a degree where pagans ‘come home’ where others “convert,” pagans use Goddess-given tests of devotion where sect-leaders abuse power, and pagans invent where others appropriate³⁰.

We may therefore come to the conclusion that contemporary Pagans are likely to be influenced by the homecoming hypothesis presented by Adler, Harvey and other Pagan theologians; that it became a paradigm, a theological principle – a norm of how one becomes involved in contemporary Paganism. This concept, non-critically reflecting the conversion narrative of the coming home experience, is just one drop in the sea of romanticisation of contemporary Paganism within Pagan studies that is given by the inability of Pagan scholars, themselves often affiliated with the modern Pagan movement, to produce a critical attitude towards their own beliefs and the subjects of study with whom they, in many cases, have become close friends. It is only fair, though, to point out that this issue is not limited to Pagan studies only – the same problems connected with insider/outsider research and emic/etic attitude concerns the academic study of religions globally, and probably all the disciplines of the social sciences as well. Abandoning such romantic, theological concepts as the homecom-

²⁷ G. Mayer, R. Gründer, *op.cit.*, pp. 399–400.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 400.

²⁹ See e.g. B.J. Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, Plymouth 2007, pp. 105–124.

³⁰ M.A. Davidsen, *What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?*, “Method and Theory in the Study of Religion” 2012, no. 24, pp. 183–192.

ing hypothesis represents an important step we have to take if we desire to abandon “Pagan studies” and become a truly “academic study of contemporary Paganism”.

The question whether the researcher in the field of humanities and social sciences should be somewhat engaged in the phenomena he or she researches is probably as old as the disciplines themselves. This dilemma was especially crucial for anthropologists, as their fieldwork was and is in many cases an encounter with cultures different from the researcher’s cultural background³¹. The issue of researchers’ attitudes towards the subject of research is a subject of enquiry in the field of methodology, starting from the classical distinction made by Kenneth Pike, who described two ways of methodological approaches: *etic* – a description of social behaviour made “from distance,” by an observer – and *emic* – an insider looking into the research content³². The *etic* approach is commonly referred to as a way of describing behaviour that is somewhat “neutral” and uncommitted. In contrast, the *emic* approach is used to denote the way of examining cultural phenomena focused on understanding and describing culture with the acknowledgement of its own terms and notions. In the field of religious studies choosing *etic/emic* attitudes in the research may sometimes be influenced by the religious beliefs of the researcher. It may be the case that many scholars from the field of Pagan studies are simply “too much emic”, which can result in opinions like those found in Egil Asprem’s and Kennet Granholm’s most recent edited book on contemporary esotericism:

So called “pagan studies” is a problematic field, which often seems more interested in developing (neo)pagan theology than conducting unbiased and critical scholarly investigation³³.

From homecoming hypothesis to coming home experience: a conversion narrative

There are many ways of becoming acquainted with contemporary Paganism. It is interesting to note that contemporary Pagans tend to be well-educated, white and relatively young (with the average age in USA around 35-40 years)³⁴. As Margot Adler pointed out, they are also keen readers³⁵. These observations can help us to understand the sources of familiarity with the phenomenon of contemporary Paganism. Books, journals, and the Internet have been and remain a major source of knowledge on Paganism, but nowadays there are more organizations that affiliate themselves

³¹ Probably the best-known persona in the history of anthropology who did not have that dilemma was Frazer – who probably never encountered any “savage” nor witnessed any of the ceremonies or customs described in *The Golden Bough* – this was eventually a main point of critique of his work.

³² N. Jardine, *Etics and Emics (Not to Mention Anemics and Emetics) in the History of the Sciences*, “History of Science” 2004, no. 42, p. 241.

³³ E. Asprem, K. Granholm, *Introduction* [in:] *Contemporary Esotericism*, E. Asprem, K. Granholm (eds.), Sheffield 2013, p. 1.

³⁴ See: H.A. Berger, E.A. Leach, L.S. Shaffer, *Voices From the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States*, Columbia 2003.

³⁵ M. Adler, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

with the Pagan movement than in Adler's times. Therefore, these groups can also be an important source for acquisition of knowledge of the religious denomination, as an encounter with the follower of the movement can be a trigger for conversion. One of the main factors that brings people to Paganism is the focus on the religious traditions of pre-Christian Europe. The feeling of "coming home" is often associated with the founding of "roots", religious traditions that not only fulfil some spiritual needs, but are also an important factor for determining or creating one's identity. In the times of globalisation, standardisation and unification of social life, there are some cultural tendencies which focus on preserving cultural heritage in the global village. These are often supported by the official politics of international organisations, starting from such issues as promoting traditional and local food, supporting cultural activities of ethnic minorities, preserving languages that are on the brink of extinction etc. Paganism in many European countries is strongly connected with the issues of cultural identity, and "European" Pagan traditions in the USA can work in the same way for ethnic minorities and migrants (the case of Hellenic Neo-Paganism). "Coming home" to Paganism in religious or spiritual terms can be connected with finding one's cultural identity. The need for roots can be described by the term "ancientisation", as proposed by Michael T. Cooper³⁶, a notion that describes the process of the in-depth quest for the cultural anchor, that is both authentic and ancient. The importance of traditional and cultural roots is clearly notified in the field of contemporary Polish Pagan traditions³⁷. In her brief research on the motifs of conversion to *Rodzima Wiara*, the Polish Native Faith religious group, Maria Libiszowska-Żółtkowska noticed that one of the main reasons for turning to this kind of Pagan beliefs is its "local" aspect. Tradition was understood not only in a religious but also in the ethnic way, as the followers of *Rodzima Wiara* stated that they had found their religious and ethnic identity within the group³⁸. Therefore, joining the movement helped them to create a coherent identity. Friends, books and the Internet were pointed out as sources of the first account of encounter with contemporary Paganism. The disconnection and dissatisfaction with Catholicism was also mentioned as a reason for the spiritual search, and adherents have seen their faith as opposite to Christianity³⁹. Major Western religious traditions can therefore be connected with the globalisation process, and Eastern religious traditions may seem inadequate for Westerners. This, indeed, is the point, when Paganism – a movement that is neither mainstream nor extraneous, can fulfil the need for cultural identity, also in the matter of religious beliefs. Tradition can also be a form of authority in Paganism, as the movement as a whole "has neither central administration nor ecclesiastical council"⁴⁰ and the notion of referring to tradition is deep-rooted in the theology of the movement. Of course, we must not

³⁶ M.T. Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*, Salt Lake City 2010.

³⁷ E. Szczecińska-Musiela, *Antropologiczne i socjologiczne aspekty „korzeni”* [in:] *Przeszłość i tożsamość. Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty polskiego neopogaństwa*, P. Wiench (ed.), Warszawa 2008, pp. 35–47.

³⁸ M. Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, *Konwertyci nowych ruchów religijnych*, Lublin 2003, p. 268.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 267, 269.

⁴⁰ M. York, *Defining Paganism*, "The Pomegranate: A New Journal of Neopagan Thought" 2000, no. 11, pp. 4–9.

forget that there are Pagans and groups (like OBOD for instance) that are focused on syncretism and universalism, which leads us to the conclusion that the process of becoming Pagan is as complex, differential and sundry as the movement itself.

Some people who join the movement are really searching for “home,” a religious or spiritual way that suits their needs. It is important to say that the road home is not an open and empty highway which eventually ends at the destiny point, but is rather one of the main city arteries, crowded with traffic. Many followers of contemporary Paganism tell rich histories of their way to “the Old Faith”. They usually reject the religious tradition in which they have been raised, and often turn to alternative spiritualities. If we look at the biographies of leaders of the Pagan movement, we can clearly see that most of them had experiences with other religions or spiritualities before they found their own “home”, the most influential ones being Western esoteric tradition with all its branches, Buddhism, Daoism and Hinduism. Also, we must remember that there are people who converted to other religious traditions after associating with Paganism. We may encounter some difficulties with portraying the dynamics of such kind of changing religious beliefs when we use the homecoming hypothesis alone to describe the process of becoming Pagan.

The “coming home experience” fits within the most basic definition of conversion, which can simply be described as a “change (with differential dynamics) of one’s religious beliefs and behavior”⁴¹. The experience of coming home can be identified as a leading motif that occurs within the conversion narrative of some Pagans (and certainly it can be adequate in some cases to describe in details the way of becoming Pagan), but the process itself is often more complex. The situation becomes even more complex when we take into account the fact that “homecoming” often takes the form of a theological postulate in many Pagan movements – it is not only experienced, but it is postulated to be experienced. It is not surprising that many contemporary Pagans describe or interpret their way to Paganism in terms of “homecoming”; therefore, purely “emic” research on conversion to Paganism that recognises “homecoming” as the only way of becoming Pagan may omit other aspects of the process. Certainly, it can often differ from conversion of born-again Christians, but as it is today description of the process of conversion solely as a rapid and sudden change is considered historical⁴², therefore not the only way to describe a change in religious belief or behaviour. Moreover, the “coming home experience” can be a part of the conversion narrative to other religious traditions than contemporary Paganism.

⁴¹ H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, *Religia a kultura. Wybrane zagadnienia z kulturowej psychologii religii*, Kraków 2004, p. 116.

⁴² R.W. Hood, P.C. Hill, B. Spilka, *op.cit.*, p. 212. One of the reasons that the “homecoming” experience is often used to describe a way of becoming Pagan may also be that researchers focus on these narratives, as previous researchers focused on the radical changes of religiosity.

Conclusion

In the academic discussion on issues of New Age/Paganism presented at the beginning, we could observe the clash between etic and emic perspectives in Pagan studies. The temptation to make sharp differentiations and ultimate conclusions is one of the dangers of being truly devoted to one side or another. This leads to statements or “bad press”, such as the aforementioned opinion of Asprem and Granholm, which we may illustrate with the metaphor that Pagan studies is no more than Pagan theology in disguise, and a researcher in the field is a person dressed in an apron from which colourful ritual vestments protrude. In order for Pagan studies to be recognised in the field of religious studies, researchers from both a confessional (Pagan or other) and non-confessional bias, must put an emphasis on methodological issues, critical thinking and openness to new ideas, as the academic research on contemporary Paganism is still a young discipline. Marking sharp borders between etic and emic research and researchers, between Pagan- and non-Pagan-biased academics, does not help in any way to develop the discipline. Diversity and plurality of views enrich our research. Dialogue and critique from both sides is a tool for making Pagan studies more recognised in a broader academic context.