

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: D33 Theology and Religious Studies

Title of case study: Understanding alternative and vernacular religions and spiritualities

1. Summary of the impact

This case study assesses the impact of research in two spheres:

- the self-presentation of practitioners of alternative religions and spiritualities
- the decision making of policy-makers in relation to them.

In the first sphere, the research has helped practitioners of 'alternative' and 'vernacular' religions (especially those identifiable as 'animist Pagans' and 'New Agers') to achieve a more confident and better understood public presence.

Research in the second sphere assisted the Druid Network UK to gain charitable status, and helped councillors and 'alternative' and mainstream businesses to understand better Glastonbury's international importance as a pilgrimage site, and the economic benefits thereof.

2. Underpinning research

Alternative religions (especially 'New Age' and Paganism) have been a significant focus of the Unit's research since the creation in 1999 of the 'Belief Beyond Boundaries' research group by Marion Bowman, Jo Pearson and John Wolffe. Work by Bowman and Harvey has spearheaded international research in this area, 'normalising' the inclusion of associated debates within the discipline. Their research (largely conducted by ethnological methodologies) has also engaged with vernacular Christianity and indigenous religions (e.g. in Newfoundland). Bowman's Glastonbury research and Harvey's animism research are widely cited internationally and have shaped undergraduate curricula and research agendas.

Bowman has applied insights from folkloristics and ethnology to both contemporary Celtic spirituality and Glastonbury's vernacular religion and 'alternative' spirituality, e.g. highlighting the role of narrative, material culture, the creation of tradition and elective identity. She has revealed continuities amidst apparent change, focusing on the heterogeneity of lived religion in both traditional and emergent forms of religiosity, and articulated competing paradigms of sacred place. Her work on Glastonbury's spiritual economy exemplifies current debates on, and reappraisal of, commodification within the neoliberal economic sphere. Bowman's longitudinal research on Glastonbury (a heterotopic site emblematic of religious, healing and economic trends found in lesser concentration elsewhere in Europe) has fostered international scholarship on and multidisciplinary engagement with worldviews and praxis within the contested contemporary religious milieu.

Harvey's fieldwork among Pagans internationally has concerned the diversity of Pagan movements, their involvement with contemporary culture, definitional tensions between ritual and belief, and the significance of performance and interiority. Partially influenced by his research among indigenous peoples (particularly Anishinaabeg and Maori), he has paid particular attention to the ongoing rise of animism in framing how people relate to 'other than human persons' and related ontological / epistemological debates among Pagans. His work shapes multidisciplinary international debate about animism.

Parallel to Bowman's work, Harvey's research maintains a focus on the permeable boundaries of lived and vernacular religion. Attention to animistic and esotericist currents (among others) in the continuing evolution of Paganism is important to understanding the diversity of Pagan environmentalism, ritualism, origins-myths, gender constructions and activism. Related contributions to methodological debates include Harvey's influential 'guesthood' proposal as a contrast to the dichotomy 'insider/outsider'.

The key insights from this body of work are:

- Critical revision, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, of a conventional narrative of

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the marginality and eccentricity of 'alternative' religious currents.

- Enhanced awareness of the significant contributions made to popular culture and civil society by Pagans and New Agers – including in therapeutic, cultural heritage, performance and new entrepreneurial realms.
- Revision of understanding of 'animism', both as a scholarly category and as an increasingly popular practice or lifestyle.
- Methodological innovation in focusing on vernacular, performance and material cultural issues in the study of religions.
- Challenging Protestant Christian emphases on beliefs, texts and transcendence in the definition and debate about 'religion'.

3. References to the research outputs

Bowman, Marion (2000). More of the same? Christianity, vernacular religion and alternative spirituality in Glastonbury. In: Sutcliffe, Steven and Bowman, Marion eds. *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 83–104. ISBN 0-7486-0998-9, 978-0-7486-0998-7

Bowman, M. (2005) 'Ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem, Heart Chakra of Planet Earth: localisation and globalisation in Glastonbury', *Numen*, 52 (2): 157–190. ISSN 1568-5276

Bowman, M. (2006) 'The Holy Thorn ceremony: revival, rivalry and civil religion in Glastonbury', *Folklore* 117, pp.123–140. ISSN 1469-8315

Harvey, G. (1997) (second, revised UK edition 2006) *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press (London: Hurst & Co).
[Simultaneously published by New York: New York University Press (NYUP) under the title, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth*. Second, revised NYUP edition, September 2011, with revised title: *Contemporary Paganism: Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists*.]

Harvey, G. (2005) *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, London: Hurst & Co; New York: Columbia University Press; Adelaide: Wakefield Press. 251 pages; UK ISBN: 9781850657583

Harvey, G. (2005) 'Performing and constructing research as guesthood', in Lynne Hume and Jane Mulcock (eds), *Anthropologists in the Field: Cases in Participant Observation*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp.168–82. ISBN: 0231130058

Grants

2003: £2,000 British Academy Conference Organisation Grant awarded to Marion Bowman, for Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies (ASANAS) Conference, Open University.

2006–07: £7,500 awarded by the British Academy to Marion Bowman, for a project entitled 'Understanding the Spiritual Economy of Glastonbury'.

2010: £6,123 awarded by the British Academy to Graham Harvey, for a project entitled 'Food, Sex and Strangers: Redefining Religion'.

2013–16: £34,504 awarded by the Norwegian Research Council to Graham Harvey and Paul Tremlett, for sub-projects of a project entitled 'Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource'. The sub-projects are called 'Ritualising Diaspora and Re-occupying Kåfjord' and 'The Rites of Citizenship: Occupy London and Hong Kong'.

4. Details of the impact

The underpinning research has generated impact in two main spheres: religious practice and third-sector awareness and policy.

Impact has been enhanced by the UoA's commitment to dialogical methods in fieldwork and its policy of hosting conferences with contributions by research users alongside scholars. (Papers from ASANAS and other scholarship on the field made freely available through *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies* (2005-11)).

Religious practice

Impact is particularly evidenced by the adoption and re-articulation of terms and knowledge drawn from Bowman and Harvey's outputs and public engagements.

During her long-term research in Glastonbury, Bowman has given public lectures to a cross-section of townspeople, and participated in symposia exploring the relationship between academics and the town. She has had on-going engagement with a range of practitioners, e.g. Christians, Goddess devotees, non-aligned Pagans and spiritual seekers, and people involved in the 'pilgrim economy'. Their access to her writing, and in some cases their participation in films for the Unit's undergraduate modules, have impacted on practitioner self-awareness and self-presentation, and their contextual awareness of broader spiritual trends. People involved in Glastonbury's 'spiritual' or 'pilgrim economy' have used her work to counter the more cynical critiques of such activity, articulating their business in terms of 'calling', bringing spiritual values to the marketplace, and increasingly reflecting such insights in their websites and discourse.

Bowman's work has also focused on contemporary Celtic spirituality. Her term 'cardiac Celts', for those whose Celtic self-identity results from 'elective affinity', has been adopted by practitioners, including the Cyberwitch website, which cites Bowman's 'brilliant essay on the topic' (<http://www.cyberwitch.com/wychwood/library/WhenIsACeltNotACelt.htm>).

Harvey is regularly invited to talk at Pagan venues and events, e.g. an annual talk at the Milton Keynes Pagan moot and at the Rainbow Future's Druid Camp. Interviews on Paganism or animism have been posted on websites and YouTube, e.g. by Keltoiradio (Italy) and the Earth Medicine Alliance (USA).

Reception of Harvey's research among religious practitioners has inspired increased confidence and even the adoption of ways of defining, speaking about and experimenting with animism. The Earth Medicine Alliance (USA) website (<http://earthmedicine.org/voicesoftheearth>) notes that '*Animism: Respecting the Living World* helped inspire the founding of the Earth Medicine Alliance'. The Bioregional Animism website (Germany) (www.bioregionalanimism.com) comments, 'We quote you for a damn good reason! Why reinvent the wheel!' Their definition of animism as focused on inter-species relationality rather than as 'belief in spirits' demonstrates the impact of Harvey's argument. Similarly, the founders of the UK's Midwinter Bear Feast (a core event for a self-identified 'animistic spirituality group') emailed Harvey to say that, 'This now established religious Rite was inspired in a large part by your research and writings', and that 'We always refer to your work when explaining the origins of the Midwinter Bear Feast'. This is corroborated in their website (www.ancientmusic.co.uk/bear_tribe/about.html).

Third-sector awareness and policy

Among alternative and mainstream business people in Glastonbury, Bowman's 'spiritual economy' work is recognised as having provoked more nuanced academic and popular understanding of spirituality as a positive economic force.

Having addressed the Glastonbury Chamber of Commerce, she has been thanked for helping to raise awareness among local councillors of Glastonbury's international importance as a pilgrimage site, something that had not previously been fully acknowledged. This will influence how the town promotes itself in future, both in terms of conventional and spiritual tourism. Her work, like Harvey's, has promoted broader understanding of changes in religious expression and new forms of interpreting, presenting and interacting with cultural heritage.

Harvey's research played a key role in the Druid Network's 2009 application for UK charitable status, a striking example of how work of this kind has informed and influenced practice among policy-makers. Following the Charity Commission's rejection of an earlier case, the Druid Network approached Harvey for a supporting statement on the grounds of the high value placed on his work by Pagan movements. Harvey's statement is cited by the Charity Commissioners

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(www.charitycommission.gov.uk/media/92221/druiddec.pdf) both for what it says about Druidry and Paganism, and also for its comment on the inherent diversity of all lived religions (further illustrating the UoA's importance in foregrounding vernacular practice). The Druid Network's website (druidnetwork.org/about-the-druid-network/charitable-status) includes an acknowledgement by the chair of the charity's trustees that 'Harvey's report went a long way in helping' resolve the Charity Commissioners' concerns about 'cogency, coherence, seriousness and importance'.

In addition to the Druid Network being awarded charity status, impact also includes a 2012 request by a Plymouth Brethren Christian Church group for advice and supporting statements to aid in their ongoing application for charity status.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Bowman: public lecture in Glastonbury 26/04/2007 available on DVD:
<http://glastongroup.org/spiritualeconomy.htm>

Bowman: Public lectures in Glastonbury: http://glastongroup.org/?page_id=16

Bowman: Participation in Glastonbury Symposium: http://www.glastonbury-pilgrim.co.uk/userfiles/Glastonbury_Academic_Symposium_Apr.17.2011.pdf

Harvey: Statement to Charity Commissioners:
www.charitycommission.gov.uk/media/92221/druiddec.pdf

User groups / beneficiaries who could be contacted:

Manager, Pilgrim Reception Centre, Glastonbury.
Town Councillor, Glastonbury Town Council.
Founder Member, Pilgrim Reception Centre, Glaston Group.
Leader, Bear Tribe Animistic spirituality group.
Chair of Trustees, The Druid Network.