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Historiography and New Religious Movements The Case of Modern Italian Witchcraft

I examine the influence of historiography on neo-Paganism and in particular on modern Italian witchcraft. I show how historiographical narratives have influenced some aspects of contemporary religious ideology, particularly the case of the influence of the theses of Charles Godfrey Leland and Margaret Alice Murray on the doctrine of modern Italian witchcraft. The appendix records an interview with an anonymous Italian writer on witchcraft, Dragon Rouge.

THE AIM of this study is to reflect on how historiography can influence the emergence and formation of new ideological movements, which in this specific case are religious. In this article, I show that historiography has played a central role in the ideological construction of Italian witchcraft, as well as in other neo-pagan movements. The historiographical narrative legitimates the present condition of the new religious movement, gives a history to it, and creates a link between past and present. Specifically, I show how

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historical research—regardless of its actual validity—has influenced both the doctrinal and ritual formation of Italian witchcraft, which purports to have its own roots in the Middle Ages and in some cases lays claim to direct filiation with this specific era.

Margaret Alice Murray is renowned for having put forward a thesis in which medieval witchcraft is described as a real structured and organized covert religion¹ with roots in the pre-Christian fertility cults.² Regarding the nature of the cult, Murray states that:

In common with many other religions of the Lower Culture the witch-cult of Western Europe observed certain rites for rain-making and for causing or blasting fertility.... The charms used by the witches, the dances, the burning of the god and the broadcast scattering of his ashes, all point to the fact that this was a fertility cult; and this is the view taken also by those contemporary writers who give a more or less comprehensive account of religion and ritual.³

The theme of the unbroken continuity of the “Old Religion” also has a key role in the Charles Godfrey Leland’s most famous work, *Aradia, or, The Gospel of the Witches*. Published in 1899, Leland said that in 1886 a Tuscan witch had told him the content of the work. In the *Addendum* of this work, Leland considers the expression “Old Religion” as an appellation conferred by the congregations of witches in Northern Italy in the nineteenth century to themselves.⁴ Therefore, it is interesting to discover that the term was not coined by outside individuals, such as researchers etc., but by the alleged witches themselves, whom Leland is supposed to have met.

In Leland’s work, the antagonistic value attributed to the religion of *Aradia*, the daughter of Lucifer and Diana, is very marked, to the extent that in some extracts it is represented as being almost an ideology for the oppressed,

¹ Margaret A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967 [1921]), 124–85 (rites), 186–204 (organization).

² On the continuity of the ancient pagan cult: *ibid.*, 19–27.

³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴ Charles G. Leland, *Aradia, or, The Gospel of the Witches* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1899), 116. *Aradia* is presented by Leland as a work written by an Italian witch called Madalena, and of which he was only the promulgator. Cf. Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 141–50.

underlining the struggle between the rich and the poor.⁵ It should be remembered that Leland was an anarchist. Quoting an example from the first chapter of *Aradia, or, the Gospel of the Witches*, we find following:

The rich made slaves all the poor. In those days were many slaves who were cruelly treated; in every palace tortures, in every castle prisoners. Many slaves escaped. They fled to the country; thus they became thieves and evil folk. Instead of sleeping by night, they plotted escape and robbed their masters, and slew them. So they dwelt in the mountains and forests as robbers and assassins, all to avoid slavery.⁶

Immediately after this passage, Diana herself speaks to her daughter Aradia in the first person, in Italian:

<p><i>Tu sarai (sempre) la prima strega, La prima strega divenuta nel mondo, Tu insegnerai l'arte di avvelenare, Di avvelenare (tutti) i signori, Di farli morti nei loro palazzi, Di legare il spirito del oppressore, E dove si trova un contadino ricco e avaro, Insegnerai alle streghe tue alunne, Come rovinare il suo raccolto Con tempesta, folgore e balen, Con grandine e vento.</i></p>	<p>You will (always) be the first witch, The first witch in the world, You will teach the art of poisoning, Of poisoning (all) the lords, Of killing them all in their palaces, Of tying up the spirit of the oppressor, And wherever a rich and mean peasant is found, You will teach the witches who are your novices, How to ruin his harvest With gales, thunder and lightning, With hail and wind.</p>
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Finally, apart from the themes of social revenge by the oppressed against the oppressors, the *Addendum* contains elements that clearly resonate with feminist thought:

⁵ Marco Menicocci, "Le Radici della Luna: Storia del movimento neopagano", *Antrocom* 1, no. 2 (2005): 191–98, particularly 191, <http://www.antrocom.net/upload/sub/antrocom/010205/08-Antrocom.pdf>; "Identità e valori nel movimento neopagano", *Antrocom* 1, no. 3 (2005): 213–22, <http://www.antrocom.net/upload/sub/antrocom/010305/01-Antrocom.pdf>.

⁶ Leland, *Aradia*, 1–2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2–3. The spelling mistakes in this quotation are present in the edition I used for reference, and, therefore, are ascribable to Leland himself.

It is in studying the epochs when woman has made herself prominent and influential that we learn what the capacities of the female sex truly are. Among these, that of Witchcraft as it truly was—not as it is generally quite misunderstood—is as deeply interesting as any other. For the *Witch*—laying aside all question as to magic or its non-existence—was once a real factor or great power in rebellious social life, and to this very day—as most novels bear witness—it is recognized that there is something uncanny, mysterious, and incomprehensible in woman, which neither she herself nor man can explain.

“For every woman is at heart a witch.”⁸

These passages clearly illustrate a marked interest for the fate of the oppressed and of their forthcoming redemption. Witchcraft, it seems, defeats the masters, while at the same time it is a weapon women can use to bring an end to male power.

Leland writes about the Italian popular traditions, but if we want a complete and reliable account of the problem, we must read the works of Ernesto de Martino. About the Italian popular traditions, the anthropologist is without doubt the scholar who more than any other has documented and explained these phenomena of “magic Christianity in Southern Italy” in his works such as *Sud e Magia* and *La terra del rimorso*.⁹ De Martino studied not only the ritualistic dimension of “magic Christianity,” but also the ideological aspects of popular religion in South Italy. He showed how the christianization of this popular tradition was in many cases only a superficial phenomena. His studies are an excellent example to better understand the real outcome of the meeting between a religion brought from the high culture (Christianity) and popular religion.

However, for the purposes of this essay it is not necessary to dwell and enlarge on the problems relating to the validity of such historiographic theories. This problem is irrelevant when exploring the development of new religious orientations, which seem to develop new essence and lifeblood partly from historical reconstruction (regardless of whether these are true or false). Therefore, the debate regarding Murray’s and Leland’s theories is only referred to here in order to analyze on what Italian witchcraft is actually founded. The object of this study is confined to the inquiry into how and why studying

⁹ Ernesto de Martino, *Sud e magia* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1959); *La terra del rimorso: Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1961).

history and considering its repercussions can have such a strong influence on the present, leading to the birth of new (or old?) religions, which more or less lay claim to being the heirs to a past which is uncovered by historical research.

Particular attention will be focused on the view expressed by modern Italian witchcraft regarding the historical relations which existed between Christianity and the “Old Religion”; in my opinion, it is precisely in this aspect of the question that the influence of Margaret Murray and Charles Godfrey Leland is most evident. In the reconstruction of its own roots and origins, modern Italian witchcraft has rested heavily on Murray and Leland’s theses but it also differs from Gerald Gardner’s tradition and that of the various currents of Wicca. Wicca was born in 1954, when Gerald Gardner wrote his famous book, *Witchcraft Today*, in which he presented himself as an initiate in a traditional English witch cult.¹⁰ Modern Italian witchcraft, by contrast, is ideologically influenced by the magic rural traditions of southern Italy (Leland claimed to have come in contact with cults existing in Tuscany) which survived until recently in regions such as Basilicata, Calabria, and Apulia, and of which we can still find traces today. This influence marks the Italian tradition as distinct from Gardnerian Wiccan practices usually found in the UK, the US, and Australia.

I supplement these historical interpretation problems with a debate on modern Italian witchcraft, as it is presented in the works of some of its exponents; some of the ideological aspects of the cult, which are present in Murray’s and Leland’s theories, are specifically taken into account. This essay concentrates especially on the topics of the Old Religion and of the Horned God, as well as the concepts contained in these expressions, which seem to be a series of ideas which are antithetical to something else: Christianity and its God. These two concepts help us to better understand the old-new-old dialectics, typical of the neo-pagan religions. The rebirth of an ancient tradition is a fundamental characteristics of modern witchcraft’s historical conception, because after many century of underground exile, the old (the Old Religion) rises against the new (Christianity).

The debate regarding the existence of the cult of witchcraft in the Middle Ages is very extensive and cannot be tackled here. On the contrary, I think it should not be tackled at all. In the light of what will emerge later, it is clear that the scientific truth or falsehood of certain historiographic theories is only

¹⁰ On Gerald Gardner, see Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 205–40.

of relative, if not marginal, interest to the followers of the cult. For followers such as the anonymous Italian writer Dragon Rouge, history (even that written by academic historians) is simply a narrative support for a supra-rational truth, something which for them does not require (or does not exclusively require) historiographic evidence. The theories on medieval witchcraft set out by Murray, in works such as *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches*, have become very well-known in the neo-pagan circles, even though they have been heavily and repeatedly criticised by scholars.¹¹

In the introduction of his *Storia notturna*, the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg expresses several critical observations on the subject of Murray's works, provoking something of a controversy. He summarizes some of the main points of Murray's theory as follows:

In her famous book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) M. Murray claimed, widely basing herself on these trials [the trials which took place in Essex in 1645], that the witches' Sabbath (*ritual witchcraft*), distinct from Common Spells (*operative witchcraft*), was the main ceremony of an organized cult connected to a pre-Christian fertility religion which was widespread in Europe.¹²

And then:

In her book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* Murray, an Egyptologist and anthropology scholar in the wake of Frazer, claims: 1) that the descriptions of the witches' Sabbath in the witch trials were neither lies extorted by the judges, nor more or less hallucinatory accounts of inner experiences, but accurate descriptions of rites that had actually taken place; 2) that these rites which the judges had fiendishly distorted, were in fact connected with a pre-Christian fertility cult, which may date back to prehistory, and which has survived in Europe up to the modern age.¹³

¹¹ Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001 [1975]). For a recent discussion of the witch hunt: Marina Montesano, *Caccia alle streghe* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2012).

¹² Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna: Una decifrazione del sabba* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008 [1989]), xvi

¹³ *Ibid.*, xxi

In the wake of several other historians, Ginzburg criticizes Murray's theory as well, pointing out various amateurish implications, as well as the more or less intentional manipulation of the sources in order to structure her conclusions more methodically.¹⁴ According to Ginzburg, there is nonetheless a "kernel of truth":

It consists, more in general, against all rationalist reduction, of the decision of taking the witches' confessions seriously... But her volition, which was just as rationalist, of looking for accurate descriptions of the rites in those confessions pushed Murray down a blind alley. In addition to this was her inability to set apart the encrustation produced over the centuries by practical and doctrinal intervention on the part of judges, inquisitors and demonologists. Rather than attempting to distinguish, the older layers from the ones added later, Murray uncritically accepted (apart from the aforementioned textual manipulation) the now well-established stereotype of the witches' Sabbath as the basis for her interpretation, and thus rendering it completely implausible.¹⁵

The reason for Ginzburg picking out this part of truth in Murray's theory was the discovery of documents relating to the trial of an agrarian cult practiced in the Friuli region by the so-called *benandanti* which flourished in around 1500–1600.¹⁶

The research carried out by Ginzburg on the *benandanti* led the famous religious historian Mircea Eliade to put forward interpretative hypotheses regarding the nature of the beliefs and practices of medieval witchcraft in his work entitled *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*. He referred in particular to the orgiastic rites the witches were accused of, and Eliade states that we must be especially wary when reading these declarations, as the boundary between belief and practice is never completely clear in these cases.¹⁷ Eliade claims that in the event of them actually

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi–xxii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xxii–xiv; Carlo Ginzburg, *I Benandanti* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966).

¹⁷ With regard to Murray's theory, Ginzburg points out how there is sometimes an overlap between myths and rites, which are often juxtaposed uncritically. This is probably the case with the so-called witches' night flights and bestial transformations, which are not mentioned by Murray (Ginzburg, *Storia notturna*, xxi–xxii).

taking place, they were a form of socio-political protest against the dominant religion (Christianity), in an attempt to recapture an archaic perfection which had been lost. The same can be said regarding the satanic aspects of the rites, which are very probably a projection on the part of the inquisitors; these can also be read as a form of protest against the Christian institutions' religious and cultural hegemony, if indeed they can be attributed to witchcraft.¹⁸ So, briefly, and in keeping with Eliade's interpretation of many myths and rites, the nostalgia for origins and the attempt to re-actualize an archaic era are the hermeneutical keys to understand the orgiastic ritual.¹⁹

Rather than dwelling on the accuracy of Eliade's interpretation of medieval witchcraft—as a form of religiosity characterized by elements of opposition to the dominant culture and religion—in the medieval historical context, I will demonstrate how this interpretation can be used in the reading given to modern Italian witchcraft by its contemporary initiates, from an insider's point of view. So, in a few words, the fundamental hermeneutical key is the conflictual relation between the Old Religion and Christianity. This relation is used by Leland, Murray, and in part by Eliade to interpret the historical role of witchcraft in the Middle Ages; subsequently the neo-pagan movement, and in particular modern Italian witchcraft, have used this interpretation for constructing their religious ideologies.

The socio-political, feminist, and ecological themes in the neo-pagan movement and Wicca have already been disclosed by Vittorio Lanternari in his work *Ecoantropologia*. In particular, the chapter entitled "Ecology and Religion: Neo-paganism and Ecological Feminism" makes interesting observations on the socio-political undercurrents of various neo-pagan factions.²⁰ In neo-paganism, Lanternari identifies elements of radical criticism, if not of real breaking-off from certain aspects of Western culture, which he expresses in passages such as the following:

¹⁸ However, in my opinion, Eliade's interpretation of an alleged satanic aspect seems to be very much influenced by a form of contemporary Satanism which tends to present itself as the antithesis to the culturally hegemonic religiosity of the West, if not, as in the case of La Vey, as an exaltation of reason over religious obscurantism in general, and that of Christianity in particular. In brief, this interpretation is likely better ascribed to the Enlightenment than to a medieval context.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 89–92.

²⁰ Vittorio Lanternari, *Ecoantropologia: Dall'ingerenza ecologica alla svolta etico-culturale* (Bari: Dedalo, 2003), 181–213.

It is therefore a social-religious movement for the revindication of rights—but for the first time these are social rights of a kind closely related to cultural rights that are environmental—that is for the defence of nature.²¹

In the above excerpt, two key elements of neo-paganism are underlined, one of which has already been mentioned in the examination of Leland's work. These are feminism and environmentalism. Later on, Vittorio Lanternari touches on the more political aspects, referring in particular to Starhawk, whose name is one of the best known in North American witchcraft and the neo-pagan movement, and who is renowned for her stand regarding the campaign in Seattle during the World Trade Organization talks in 1999.²²

An outline of the characteristic social, cultural and political features of neo-paganism can be found in another excerpt, where Lanternari identifies a key element of rupture: to organize the "movement" in a way that is ideologically antithetical to the Church:

At this point, apart from the alleged charismatic communities, which were already present, and the New Age communities, there is the appearance on the scene of Western civilization of the new, bold, complex and articulated neo-pagan movement. This is a religion which represents a radical break-up from the Judaic-Christian and the Church, due to both the latter's indifference regarding nature as the primary source of life, as well as because Man is seen as an object separated from his own earth, an object of his own spiritual interest and isolated from his natural environment.²³

Lanternari states that this is a break from "Judaic-Christian" civilization and a return to something older, which would continue to be present in the history of the Western World in a more or less hidden manner, regardless of the cultural and religious hegemony of Christianity. Therefore, it is clear that the stance of the neo-pagan movement in general, and in particular that of witchcraft, corresponds to specific needs of the historical context in which we are living. The English historian Ronald Hutton has repeatedly and clearly

²¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

²² *Ibid.*, 206–13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 187.

expressed his opinion as regards the alleged underground links between ancient paganism and present-day witchcraft: according to this scholar, there is no direct filiation or continuity between the two cults.²⁴

The concept of the “Old Religion” takes on generic socio-political undercurrents in Murray’s work as well, even if real class antagonism never emerges, unlike the examples quoted in *Aradia* have shown. The Old Religion is essentially presented as the religion for the uncultured popular masses (which is the reason that there are no surviving written documents) opposed to Christianity, the dominant religion among the ruling and educated classes. According to Murray, this ancient religion is not only a characteristic of Western Europe alone, but is also present in the Orient, where it has survived the advent of Islam in an underground form.²⁵ For example, in *The God of the Witches*, an excerpt regarding the advent of Christianity in Great Britain states that:

The desolation of the country by the Conqueror would not increase the estimation of Christianity in the eyes of the unhappy population, and Old Religion must have survived if only as a protest against the horrors inflicted by the worshipper of the new God. The number of times that the “Devil” is said to have appeared in the reign of Rufus is very suggestive of this.²⁶

This passage exemplifies the way in which in Murray’s work the Old Religion survives the advent of the new religion, which was imposed from above, taking on not only the characteristics of a form of religiosity which was different from the dominant one, but organizing itself as a socio-cultural movement opposed to Christianity. According to Murray, the god of the Old Religion became the devil of Christianity, and therefore brought about the process of demonization of the ancient pagan cult. The title and subhead of the second chapter of *The God of the Witches* are programmatic in this way:

²⁴ Ronald Hutton, “Paganism and Polemic: The Debate over the Origins of Modern Pagan Witchcraft”, *Folklore* 111 (2000): 103–17; cf. Lanternari, *Ecoantropologia*, 201–3. The correspondence between Hutton and Jani Farrell-Roberts, an exponent of the neo-pagan movement, regarding the problem of continuity with ancient paganism, where the scholar once again states his position of denying any form of connection, is available on the web: [http://www.sparks-of-light.org/Murray and the Professor.html](http://www.sparks-of-light.org/Murray%20and%20the%20Professor.html) (complete article and debate between Farrell-Roberts and Hutton), <http://www.the-cauldron.org.uk/> (site of the online magazine where Farrell-Roberts published the article).

²⁵ Margaret Murray, *The God of the Witches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

“The Horned God: The God of the Old Religion becomes the Devil of the New.”²⁷

Dragon Rouge and the Old Religion

These brief, general observations regarding neo-paganism and witchcraft, together with the analysis of some of the passages of the works of Leland and Murray, will now serve as a framework in which to insert specific observations regarding Italian neo-paganism and witchcraft. In what follows, I will use Dragon Rouge’s text and the answers the author himself kindly provided to questions I sent him via e-mail, as a concrete and practical example.²⁸ The decision to turn to Dragon Rouge was taken for the following reasons. First, the quantity of texts the author has produced in the last few years;²⁹ second, the widespread circulation of his works in specialized bookshops and public libraries; and, third, the author’s willingness to engage in dialogue and the exchange of knowledge. As already indicated, issues of an ideological and theoretical nature will be examined in turn, in the sense that queries regarding the cult will be discussed. The conflictual relation between the Old Religion and Christianity and the resurrection from the underground of the former is the fundamental topic of Dragon Rouge’s religious ideology.³⁰

From the perspective of this article, Dragon Rouge’s most interesting book is probably the one entitled *La Vecchia Religione* (The Old Religion); in fact, this work contains a very clear example of this conflictual relation between the Old Religion and Christianity and it shows the ideological effects of this clash.

A first reflection on this relationship can be found in the introduction, where the author uses the following words:

²⁷ Ibid., 22.

²⁸ I sincerely thank Dragon Rouge for the patience, willingness, and thoroughness he displayed in the course of our exchange of emails.

²⁹ Dragon Rouge, *La Vecchia Religione* (Brescia: Aradia Edizioni, 2004); *Autoiniziazione alla Vecchia Religione* (Brescia: Aradia Edizioni, 2005); *Vivere la Vecchia Religione* (Brescia: Aradia Edizioni, 2006); *L’antica stregoneria italiana* (Brescia: Aradia Edizioni, 2007); *Striaria: Grimorio di stregoneria rituale* (Brescia: Aradia Edizioni, 2008); *Striaria: Il Culto delle Streghe* (Brescia: Aradia Edizioni, 2010); *Striaria: I rituali del piccolo cerchio* (eBook, 2010); website of Dragon Rouge: <http://www.vecchiareligione.org/>.

³⁰ Here, and in what follows, I often talk generically about Christianity, but in his work the author is referring essentially to the Catholic Church.

The term *Witchcraft* has been referred to—and still is to this day—as, at best, an exclusive synonym for magic, as if the two words were easily interchangeable, while at worst and in the most widespread notion, as a synonym for *evil*, *black magic*, *a devilish cult* with an *orgiastic* or even *criminal* background. This way of thinking is as narrow-minded as it is wrong, and is the result of a clever campaign of slander carried out against “Old Religion” as well as other cults over the centuries, by the *Church* which has always seen any other Divinity which is different from Abraham’s God, as *evil*, the *devil*, *Satan* or whatever you want to call him.³¹

The outlook put forward by Dragon Rouge in this text is extremely clear: all the accusations that tend to paint the Old Religion as something criminal, if not even satanic, must be refused and considered completely false, as they are opinions propagated by the dominant religion, Christianity, in opposition to another form of religiosity that is culturally subordinated.

Apart from these observations in the introduction, the first chapter entitled “Cenni storici” (Historical outlines), most exhaustively expresses Dragon Rouge’s conflictual approach to the historical and cultural relationship between the Old Religion and Christianity. As the author himself admits, the sensitive issue of historical nature is tackled mainly by the theories that can be found in Murray’s work.³² Dragon Rouge writes that the slow and gradual decline of the Old Religion began when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire:

Like in the past, when two communities were in conflict, the Divinity adored by the community which was defeated then became an evil Divinity in the eyes of the winners, with the aim of downgrading it.³³

The arguments put forward by Dragon Rouge are also clear: the political-cultural victory of Christianity made it possible to well and truly demonize the rival cult and turn it into something completely negative to be fought against. Even more explicitly, Dragon Rouge says that the ascendancy of Christianity brought about a true overturn of the significance of the cult of

³¹ Dragon Rouge, *La Vecchia Religione*, 12. Emphasis in original.

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

the Old Religion; Christianity established the existence of only one God, and other Divinities became the devil or a diabolical entity subordinate to the devil.³⁴

This violence and intolerance were the reason for the victory of Christianity over the Old Religion, which nonetheless survived among the country dwellers and was partly transcribed in manuscripts, one of which eventually ended up in Leland's hands.³⁵

The thing that is of the greatest interest to us here is not the aspect regarding the alleged survival of witchcraft and the subsequent direct connection with modern witchcraft, but rather that of trying to understand the structure of the Old Religion-Christianity relationship. The violent and intolerant design of Christianity can only render witchcraft the complete opposite: a peaceful and tolerant cult, which as we will soon see is one of the author's main concerns. Before tackling the specific passage dealing with this problem, here is another excerpt, which only helps to emphasize further the completely antithetical conception of the two religions:

“Old Religion” is not a revealed religion, but is actually lacking in any artifice, unlike the numerous other religions that followed, and it is for this reason that I have always unintentionally disparagingly considered these as artificial religions, as many of them, as it very clearly transpires, did not appear naturally but were very carefully thought out.³⁶

These words include further aspects that contribute towards creating the elements of antithesis between the two cults as well. Let us now come to the passage I have just mentioned, in order to make the gap even more evident. Regarding the numerous passages of his work in which the author refers to the Catholic Church and various events connected to it, in the Clarification, the author states that:

In no way is this [the references to events concerning the Church] intended, on my part, to be an attack on the Church, but rather a simple account of a painful past, brought about by a certain

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

way of thinking that must never be forgotten, in order that it is not repeated today nor in the future.³⁷

This passage contributes to connoting further the antithetical characterizations of the Old Religion in contrast to what Christianity—and in particular, the Catholic Church—has represented historically. This declaration, which also states that there is no intent of attacking the Church, but rather a simple recollection of sad events, should be read together with the excerpt quoted previously, in order to schematize some of the Old Religion’s main ideological characteristics: it is peaceful, tolerant, and natural, not revealed. Its natural character, in particular, takes on some very interesting features, in that it is opposed to the alleged artificiality of other religions (with reference in particular to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), which don’t originate naturally from a specific exigency on the part of their authors, but rather from operations calculatedly thought out by people who had ulterior motives. To these, we must also add other characteristics, which are tackled in various chapters of the work, such as the essential joy of the “Old Religion”.³⁸

All these considerations cannot fail to call to mind Lanternari’s observations regarding the socio-political significance of some of the themes relative to neo-paganism. Even if Dragon Rouge’s work does not touch on socio-political issues, it is clear that the author intends to present the Old Religion, of yesterday *and* today, as something radically different from the Christianity.³⁹ Something distinct, which is structured antithetical when compared to the negative characteristics of its opposite, takes on an absolutely positive value by force of circumstances.

Before proceeding to the interview with the author, another aspect of the Old Religion/Church relationship must be briefly touched upon: the figure of the Horned God. The nature and interpretation conferred to this figure is essential for the understanding of the reversal of values carried out by the Church. The assimilation of Murray’s thesis on the Horned God is one of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86–91. The work also refers to the lack of a *priestly class*, which is another element which tends to differentiate the Old Religion from Catholicism in particular (121).

³⁹ The excerpt taken from the section “Clarification,” like the other statements relating to Christianity in the work, seems to want to avoid touching on present-day issues; on the contrary, the author does not want to enter the arena of the anti-Christian dispute as an end in itself, but rather to positively connote Old Religion, simply basing oneself on the persecutions endured in the past. However, in one of the answers in the course of the interview, there is a brief reference to the present as well.

the best examples for showing how an historical account can contribute to the construction of a modern religious ideology. Dragon Rouge states that:

The historical origin of all this confusion [between the god of the Old Religion and the devil of Christianity] is imputable to the *Church*, which in order to eradicate *Old Religion* more efficiently, did not waste the chance of finally giving a face to its obsession—the devil—describing him with the semblances of *Pan* and often calling him *Satan*, as well as *Lucifer*.⁴⁰

It is clear that the approach in this excerpt follows the one in Murray's work,⁴¹ but as the author had already unambiguously declared, the historical issues are based on the eminent Egyptologist's theories.

Conclusions

Having discussed the most pertinent aspects of the text, let us turn to an unpublished interview, carried out via email with Dragon Rouge, which continues to focus on the Old Religion/Church relationship and the ideological influence of the work of Murray and Leland on this modern religious vision.⁴²

In the following pages, I have inserted an interview with Dragon Rouge where we can immediately notice how the author's thoughts essentially converge with the excerpts quoted in his book. Furthermore, his is a voice which comes directly from within modern Italian witchcraft and can be juxtaposed with the criticism previously carried out on the texts. Therefore, taking into account both the texts examined and the interview in the next pages, we can come to a few conclusions. The influence the writings of authors such as Murray and Leland have had is clear; the concepts of the Old Religion and the Horned God, seen in relation to Christianity, are influenced by the theories presented in the above-mentioned authors' works, and Dragon Rouge himself admits to having used their works for historical reconstruction. However,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 68. Emphasis in original.

⁴¹ "It is impossible to understand the witch-cult without first understanding the position of the chief personage of that cult. He was known to the contemporary Christian judges and recorders as the Devil, and was called by them Satan, Lucifer, similar names appropriate to the Principle of Evil, the Devil of the Scriptures, with whom they identified him" (Murray, *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, 28).

⁴² Excepting the penultimate, all the answers to my questions date from an email of June 28, 2012. The penultimate answer dates back to an email of the July 22, 2012.

according to Dragon Rouge, Murray and Leland only had an auxiliary role, as witchcraft existed and continues to exist regardless of their work. Therefore, from a practising point of view, the influence of the two authors can be defined as being marginal, and certainly not pertaining to the doctrinal and ritual aspects. Dragon Rouge claims he was an adept of witchcraft, before he knew the work of Murray and Leland. These authors have helped Dragon Rouge only to reconstruct the history of his religion. As mentioned previously, from the point of view of those who try to analyze from the outside the phenomenon of what is in effect a new religion, one cannot but observe how the study and contemplation of history (whether correctly or not, as we noted at the beginning, but this is not important here) has had a considerable influence on the birth and development of present-day witchcraft, including in Italy. Regarding the socio-political aspects, however, Dragon Rouge's approach does not seem to be completely in concurrence with Lanternari's considerations, seeing as the author does not express any real political contemplations regarding this day and age. As mentioned, a criticism of the present-day actions of the Church emerges in the interview without, however, a proper deliberation regarding the current political, social, and cultural problems lying outside exclusively religious themes—just as Lanternari had observed in other contexts. Dragon Rouge's concern is for the most part focused on the past behaviour of Christianity, in order to issue an appeal that tragic incidents and cases of violence no longer occur. Dragon Rouge remembers the violence and he denounces the past religious politics of the Catholic Church, but now he wants peace and not other struggles. He does not want conflict, he wants only to practice his religion. This is the reason he does not want enter in the contemporary debates about the Catholic Church. Dragon Rouge is not interested in contemporary political debate, but I think he has a "metapolitical" interest identified in his search for a peaceful religious ideology.

As we have seen, even though no particular or explicit ideological vision or current which can be traced back to contemporary political movements arises directly from Dragon Rouge's statements, it is nonetheless possible to draw some consequences from them. The author does not seem to be basing his arguments on any *a priori* antipathy toward Christianity, but is simply pointing out the intolerance this religion has manifested in the course of its history. On the other hand, the substantial tolerance and pacifism of witchcraft are illustrated by its history, which developed in antithesis to that of Christianity. In this way, both the analysis of the writings and

the textual criticism (undertaken from an outside perspective) and the interview (which came from within) seem to agree regarding the role played by historiography—true or false—and the use to which this has been. It has not been employed merely for the sake of reconstruction, but in order to confirm his own theses as well. The latter are therefore not just the fruit of speculation and hypothesis, but become demonstrable by historical judgment.

Appendix: Interview with Dragon Rouge

Q. Margaret Murray's work has undoubtedly had a great influence on the rise of Wicca. Concerning Italian witchcraft, do you think there was a similar influence, or on the contrary, that this English scholar's work played a minor role, favouring other texts, such as Leland's *Aradia, or, the Gospel of the Witches*, for example?

A. Witchcraft does not need books in order to survive, but can nonetheless use them in order to circulate information which can then become common knowledge.

In Murray's case as in Leland's, we can affirm that their research served in interesting a lot of people in witchcraft and that the contents of their work are respected and widely shared, both by people who practice old witchcraft as well as the contemporary version. I have used them myself as a historical source more than once.

The concept I am talking about can be summarised as follows: witchcraft is not the cult of the devil, but quite the contrary; historically it has represented the last stronghold of the Cult of Ancient Spirits in medieval Europe, which was by now in large part Christianized.

This is the most important message contained in Murray's and Leland's works.

These authors have had the merit of having understood this and of wanting to divulge this important truth.

Q. What can you tell me about the term "Old Religion", in reference to the way it is used in Murray's and Leland's works? Do you feel that it is a term that has polemical overtones regarding new religion, that you are simply expressing a chronological date or that it is a term that is characterized by a sense of nostalgia for a better past that can longer return (therefore a pessimistic view)?

A. The term "Old Religion" quite simply refers to what existed before the advent of the new religion, in other words, of that exotic religion which

stemmed from a sect of dissidents in the heart of the Jewish religion, which after being Romanized and subjected to the power of the emperor and a select oligarchy, was then imposed as the official religion all over the Roman Empire.

- Q. In your opinion, what is the influence of the expression “Old Religion” in present-day Italian witchcraft? How is it used and with what motives?
- A. The term “Old Religion” is generally used as described previously, although in some cases it can indicate the Cult of Diana as well. In the memorial known as *I Canti di Aradia: il Vangelo delle streghe italiane (Aradia: Gospel of the Witches in Italy)*, Leland writes that among the initiated, witchcraft is known as the “Old Religion”; Diana represents the main divinity and her daughter Aradia (or Erodiade) is her highest earthly representative, a real female Messiah.
- Q. As regards the “Horned God,” do you think the arguments advanced by Murray have influenced modern witchcraft?
- A. If we are talking about modern witchcraft, then this is most likely. But, as I was telling you, Murray’s theories are generally widely respected and shared.
- Q. Do you consider the Horned God, as described by Murray, to be a sort of Eurasian, pre-Christian divinity (put concisely) and to have any true historical foundation? Do you think that this divinity, as it is conceived today, has any anti-Christian connotations?
- A. Many ancient divinities are portrayed as having horns—two, three or more—as horns represent Power; in fact the crowns worn by ruling monarchs as well as the Pope King derive from these.

These superhuman beings portrayed with horns have absolutely no anti-Christian connotations; if they do take them on, this happens in the interpretation that Christianity gives of these Divinities, as in their superstitions the imaginary being they call the devil is portrayed with a likeness borrowed from ancient Gods, in confirmation of the contempt this monotheist religion has always harboured against other cults.

- Q. Let us once again expand on the relationship between Old Religion and Christianity, and in particular on the type of opposition (on an ideological level) with which the former confronts the latter. Do you feel that Old Religion presents itself antithetically (implicitly or explicitly) in the face of Christianity?
- A. To not agree with or share others’ ideas does not mean to be against the ideas of others.

Old Religion teaches respect for others' beliefs and dialogue as a tool to overcome any incomprehension, and in this way to co-exist peacefully with anyone who holds different ideas from ours.

We do not want to convince or discredit anyone, but just to be respected and left to live our own lives in peace and freely express what we believe in.

Having said this, Old Religion is a cult of pleasure, which obviously can only be in antithesis—regarding its teachings and practices—with the cults of pain.

A cult of pleasure is a source of joy, strength, well-being and pleasure for its followers.

Whereas the cults of pain are all those religions which feed off the blood, the tears, the fear and the pain of human beings and thus they exalt suffering as if this were a virtue, a means with which to gratify their (hypothetical) God.

I use the term hypothetical, in that no Divinity (a supreme and perfect Ancient Spirit) worthy of this name could take pleasure from such abominations—to urge their own followers to commit evil deeds and ritual crimes—that can only come from human perversion.

It is perfectly pointless for me to tell you which religions I am referring to when I discuss the cults of pain, seeing as the bloodthirstiness of these wolves in sheep's clothing is easily recognizable, both today and in the course of history.

- Q. Regarding your own personal experience, do you feel that reading Margaret Murray's works has had any influence on your religious choices?
- A. Absolutely not, I practiced witchcraft before having read any books on esotericism or concerning witchcraft.