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Fastest-Growing Religion? Reflections on Contemporary Paganism's Rapid Growth and How Scholars Describe That Which They Study

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Abstract

Starting around the early 2000s, many scholars declared that contemporary Paganism was the "fastest-growing religion" either worldwide, or in specific locales. This claim was most often based on data from the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, which found a dramatic rise in Pagans compared to a similar study conducted ten years earlier. Although Paganism most certainly witnessed explosive growth around this time, there are many reasons to question Paganism's status as the fastest-growing religion, including social factors that shape data collection and the interpretations that scholars applied to the data. This article analyzes the data that Pagan studies scholars used to proclaim Paganism's growth, and suggests that the claim represents a legitimation tactic. By suggesting that a group is growing quickly, a fairly meagre population is given increased importance. This enhances the perceived significance of both the community in question and any scholars who specialize in studying that community. Although Paganism is not the only religion to assert this claim, and this statement is no longer as prominent as it once was, publications from Pagan studies that make this proclamation offer case studies which demonstrate how scholars manipulate data to legitimize the topics about which they write.

Keywords: Contemporary Paganism; religious studies; new religious movements, terminology; sociology of knowledge

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Beginning in the late 1990s, and continuing through the early 2000s, a trend emerged, of scholars calling Paganism the "fastest-growing religion." Paganism was sometimes labelled the fastest-growing religion in specific contexts, like the United States or United Kingdom.[2] In other cases, Paganism was declared the fastest-growing religion in places as broad as the West or even the entire world.[3] Although Paganism's size at this time was fairly meagre, several surveys indicated a sharp uptick in size. Scholars cited this growth and announced that Paganism was taking major steps on the world scene.[4]

2. Tracy Leigh Little, "An Ethnographic Study of Neo-Pagan Folklife: Festivals and the Creation of Neo-Pagan Identities and Cultures in the United States" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1995); Richard Smoley, "The Old Religion," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 6 (1998): 29–34 https://journals.equinoxpub.com/POM/article/view/14458; Michael F. Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2005), 1–53; Gary F. Jensen and Ashley Thompson, "'Out of the Broom Closet': The Social Ecology of American Wicca," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 4 (2008): 753–66 https://www.jstor.org/stable/20486967; Regina Smith Oboler, "Negotiating Gender Essentialism in Contemporary Paganism," *The Pomegranate* 12, no. 2 (2010): 159–84 https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/POM/article/view/9349; Lil Abdo, "The Bahá'í Faith and Wicca: A Comparison of Relevance in Two Emerging Religions," *The Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 124-48 https://dx.doi.org/10.1558/pome.v11i1.124.

3. Dale Wallace, "Pagans at the Parliament," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 18, no. 61 (2004): 80-84 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10130950.2004.9676047; Deirdre Sommerlad-Rogers, "Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors Among Pagans," *The Pomegranate* 15, nos. 1-2 (2013): 223–49 https://dx.doi.org/10.1558/pome.v15i1-2.223; Manuel J Tejeda, "Skeletons in the Broom Closet: Exploring the Discrimination of Pagans in the Workplace," *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 12, no. 2 (2015): 88-110 https://doi.org/10.1080/14766086.2014.933710; David Waldron and Sharn Waldron, "Jung and the Neo-Pagan Movement," *Quadrant* 34, no. 2 (2004): 29-46. https://works.bepress.com/quadrant/66/; David Waldron, "Witchcraft for Sale! Commodity vs. Community in the Neopagan Movement," *Nova Religio* 9, no. 1 (2005): 32-48 https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2005.9.1.032.

4. Other examples of scholars calling Paganism the fastest growing religion (without specifying a locale) include Britta Rensing, "Individual Belief and Practice in Neopagan Spirituality," *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 21, no. 1 (2009) https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67350: 182-195; Rozália Klára Bakó and László-Attila Hubbes, "Religious Minorities' Web Rhetoric: Romanian and Hungarian Ethno-Pagan Organizations," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 10, no. 30 (2011): 127-158 http://www.jsri.ro/ojs/index.php/jsri/article/view/550/516; Scott Duncan Gilliam, "From Christian to Pagan Soul: An Archetypal

This article interrogates the data on which such claims were based, and highlights factors that cast doubt on the suggestions of Paganism's unparalleled growth. By pointing out the inaccuracy of this claim, I am not trying to criticise any particular scholars. Rather, this one example can prompt deeper reflection on how scholars of Paganism, or scholars of religion more broadly, interpret and describe data. Save for a select few, most publications making this claim were largely unconcerned with discussing Paganism's size. Rather, this was often a throwaway statement when introducing Paganism. The wide proliferation of this claim (contrasted against what the data reveals) suggests several possibilities behind this inaccurate or misleading reporting. On the one hand, scholars may have purposely misrepresented the data in an effort to inflate Paganism's significance. On the other hand, it is possible that this inaccurate reporting simply spread incidentally. This could result from uncritically repeating a claim that one heard elsewhere, or by not explicitly outlining the particular parameters under which Paganism could actually be considered the fastest-growing religion. Since it is impossible to know the reasons why any one scholar made this claim, this article instead highlights how discourse spreads in academic fields and how descriptions shape perceptions.

The Power of Labels

How people label objects is a seemingly banal task with significant implications. Erich Goode writes, "By devising a linguistic category with specific connotations one is designing armaments for a battle; by having it accepted and used, one has scored a major victory."[5] Although discussing marijuana's classification on the eve of the US war on drugs, Goode's quote also applies to how scholars describe their object(s) of study. Labels applied to religions, for instance, announce how scholars want that community to be seen. Descriptions also have enduring consequences. Contingent

Journey" (PhD diss., Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2012); Gus DiZerega, "Paganism and Neopaganism: Adherent Essay," in *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices*, ed. Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland, and Gerald R. McDermott (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 543-546; Bruce Douglas Konold, "Defining Twin Cities Wicca: the Emergence of Wicca as a Polyaffiliated Pagan Movement" (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020).

5. Erich Goode, "Marijuana and the Politics of Reality," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 10, no. 2 (1969): 89. https://doi.org/10.2307/2948355.

rhetorical constructions (why *this* name, and not *that* one) acquire a sense of inevitability. Regarding the politics of naming, Chaiwat Satha-Anand writes "through the popular use of words, a new normality can emerge with little or no possibility of questioning."[6] Over time, descriptions become taken for granted, or rather, taken as fact.

Although we constantly make rhetorical choices in everyday conversation, scholarly discourse plays a role in cementing classifications, carrying a sense of prestige or authority.[7] However, while scholarship often seeks to connote objectivity, scholarly classifications also often mask deeper ideological work.[8] For instance, the world religions discourse, which undergirds religious studies, was rooted in legitimizing European liberal Protestantism as the enlightened worldview towards which all societies were progressing.[9] Defining religion in a certain manner, and contrasting different ideal types, served to reinforce particular worldviews.

Classification also lets scholars shape how their fields are seen. For instance, by positioning the emergent field of *religionswissenschaft* as a "science" of comparative religion, scholars masked this ideological project as an objective discipline. The process of classification, and the attendant motivations behind each descriptor, is most easily observed in emergent fields. The field of Black studies, for example, is marked by departments with such titles as Africana, Diaspora, or African American Studies. Each of these labels change the field's scope, and the importance of different groups therein.[10] Asian

6. Chaiwat Satha-Anand, "Celestial Axe: On the Politics of Naming," *CSEAS Newsletter* 76 (2018): 16.

7. James R. Lewis, "Excavating Tradition: Alternative Archaeologies as Legitimation Strategies," *Numen* 59, nos. 2/3 (2012): 202–21, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852712X630789.

8. Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Theodore M. Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, "Locating Religion in South Asia: Islamicate Definitions and Categories," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 217–41, https://doi.org/10.1558/cis.30937.

9. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 19.

10. Noliwe M. Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 167.

American studies faces similar debates over how Pacific Islanders or Filipinos, among others, are excluded from a field that foregrounds Americans of East Asian descent.[11] Beginning as women's studies in the 1960s, the field has more recently shifted towards gender studies.[12] Despite concerns over how this new title marginalizes women's experiences, Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson note that it represents the more "'scientific' sounding term," which can help courses navigate the university structure.[13] However, this strategic choice also raises certain questions. For a field rooted in feminist critique of patriarchal structures, what is the position of men and their experiences?[14] For fields seeking to establish relevance, broad terms can help widen the scope of who fits inside, or who might be interested. However, terms also have consequences that impact the communities being studied.

Contemporary Pagan studies is another field marked by shifting signifiers, especially since Paganism itself describes a broad umbrella of traditions, each with fluid borders.[15] Scholars might study such diverse topics as Western esotericism, eco-feminist activism, far-right Heathens, or ancient megaliths, yet are often collapsed into common spaces that bear the title Pagan studies. Despite this field's breadth, there have been few reflections on how scholars should describe Paganism, or even what Pagan studies should be called. One exception is Ethan Doyle White's 2016 essay, which surveys various descriptors and evaluates their strengths and

11. J. Kehaulani Kauanui, "Asian American Studies and the 'Pacific Question,'" in *Asian American Studies After Critical Mass*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 123–43; Helen C. Toribio, "The Problematics of History and Location of Filipino American Studies within Asian American Studies," in *Asian American Studies After Critical Mass*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 166–76.

12. Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur, "Thinking Outside the Master's House: New Knowledge Movements and the Emergence of Academic Disciplines," *Social Movement Studies* 8, no. 1 (2009): 73–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742830802591176.

13. Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson, "Theorizing Women's Studies, Gender Studies and Masculinity: The Politics of Naming," *The European Journal of Women's Studies* 1, no. 1 (1994): 16, https://doi.org/10.1177/135050689400100102.

14. Mark J. Justad, "Women's Studies and Men's Studies: Friends or Foes?" *The Journal of Men's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2000): 401–06, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F106082650000800302.

15. Following others, I use contemporary Paganism to describe a range of religious traditions, including Wicca, Druidry, and Heathenry, which have roots in the mid-twentieth century. However, for brevity, I refer to these communities as Pagan and to the corresponding academic field as Pagan studies.

drawbacks.[16] He pleas "for a rebranding of our field . . . the explicit reformulation of its area of focus, a concomitant name change, and a thorough reconsideration of its relationship with the Pagan community itself."[17] What this field chooses to call itself determines which communities and scholars fit within this area, and also which colleagues, departments, and publishers might be interested in Pagan studies research. Building on Doyle White's reflections, I shift attention from what the field calls itself to how the field describes that which it studies. These choices similarly shape who counts as Pagan, to which other groups Pagans might be compared, and why it might be considered relevant to study Pagans.

The Role of Scholars

Labels relate to broader issues or ideas, and represent "socially constructed discourses."[18] With regards to labelling food for example, Jason W. M. Ellsworth notes that calling something 'fair trade' elevates that product's perception—as being healthier, higher quality, and more ethical—regardless of its actual production process. As socially constructed discourses, meanings can shift based on who is classifying the data. Christianity, for example, was redefined by white liberal Protestant, Catholic, and Black scholars respectively, in an effort to legitimize different social outlooks as being fundamentally 'Christian.'[19] Descriptors attributed to Paganism can similarly establish identities or explain why this group is important. Scholars

16. Ethan Doyle White, "Theoretical, Terminological, and Taxonomic Trouble in the Academic Study of Contemporary Paganism: A Case for Reform," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 18, no. 1 (2016): 31–59, https://journals.equinoxpub.com/index.php/POM/article/view/28457. Another reflection which bears mention is Pavel Horák, "Who Is, and Who Is Not a Pagan? Struggles in Defining Contemporary Paganism: A Response to Ethan Doyle White," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 22, no. 2 (2020): 125–45. https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.39673. Horák discusses issues of formulating clear definitions in this field, but ultimately fails to construct a suitable definition equipped for wide use.

17. Doyle White, "Theoretical, Terminological, and Taxonomic Trouble," 32.

18. Jason W.M. Ellsworth, "Caffeinated and Half-baked Realities: Religion as the Opium of the Scholar," in *Constructing 'Data' in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie Dorrough Smith (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 192–201.

19. Matthew Bowman, *Christian: The Politics of a Word in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 44, 104, 61.

have positioned Paganism as a religion which reveres nature, embodies a feminist outlook, or aligns with countercultural ideals. These descriptions shape who might be considered authentically Pagan, or to which broader issues Paganism might be related. This article explores one particular signifier in depth—the suggestion that Paganism is the fastest-growing religion.

Exploring how scholars describe Paganism is important because scholars (consciously or unconsciously) play a role in legitimizing their objects of study. In the context of religion, legitimacy often refers to how leaders exercise influence over their followers.[20] Religions also often seek to develop "societal legitimacy" and be taken seriously as a "genuine religion" with a right to exist in society.[21] I use the term legitimize to describe how religions try to shape their public image and/or be taken seriously. Religions employ many different legitimation strategies, such as emphasizing an ancient lineage, making appeals to scientific rationality, or highlighting similarities to dominant religions.[22] Stressing a large or growing population is another legitimation strategy that helps justify the importance of a given group.

Most legitimation occurs through everyday conversations, such as between practitioners and their friends, family, and neighbours.[23] Many religions also have advocacy organizations, and the media further shapes perceptions of groups. However, scholars are another party who play a role in this larger process. Scholars act as knowledge producers, by articulating their interpretation of how Pagans should be understood to wider audiences. Scholars' role in this process is enhanced due to the prestige of science and academia that these claims entail.[24] By using particular labels in publications or classrooms, scholars help construct "what passes for knowledge"[25] about Paganism, and ultimately, how this community is understood.

The brief trend of calling Paganism "the fastest-growing religion" offers one example of how scholars can manufacture legitimacy. By

20. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al., (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

21. James R. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 15.

22. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions*.

23. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 152.

24. Lewis, "Excavating Tradition."

25. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 3.

analyzing the data on which this claim is based and how scholars manipulated this data to articulate Paganism's significance, this article demonstrates how scholars (consciously or otherwise) can legitimize Pagans. I therefore advise a more careful articulation of Paganism's place in the global religious marketplace. Further, since instances of scholars making this specific claim have largely subsided, I argue more broadly for critical reflection on how data comes up against the claims that scholars make.

Religion by the Numbers

The world religions paradigm, which constrains how many scholars write, teach, and think about religion, places the most attention on Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While historical context partly justifies the attention given to these traditions, this list also includes the most populous religions. Scholars can defend this emphasis by noting that they study religion's most common manifestations. Since estimates suggest roughly one million US Pagans, this can pose a challenge in justifying the importance of studying Pagans.[26] Why focus on such a minor religion when there are larger (and seemingly more significant) communities to study?

One way to overcome a numeric deficit is emphasizing importance from a historical perspective. Judaism, for instance, represents an ancestor of two much larger religions, and has occupied an important role in global historical events. Claims of Judaism's historical importance or cultural relevance therefore bolster the significance of Jewish studies.[27] Scholars can also stress importance in specific contexts. An American Jewish studies scholar, for example, might note that while there are fewer Jews than Hindus globally, Jews are more numerous in America.[28] This rationale partly applies to Pagan studies. While the number of Pagans worldwide pales in comparison to other religions, their greater representation in the US population makes this a community that Americanists should study. Since Pagans mostly live in Canada, America, Britain, Scandinavia,

26. "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/.

27. Aaron W. Hughes, *The Study of Judaism: Authenticity, Identity, Scholarship*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

28. Pew, "America's Changing Religious Landscape."

and Australia, scholars in these contexts can justify studying this community (despite its smaller global population).

When lacking a large population, another way to justify importance is emphasizing an upward trend. For groups that are currently marginal, rapid growth may indicate movement towards the mainstream. This claim is common among New Religious Movements. For instance, despite census data revealing that it is neither large, nor growing quickly, Scientology often calls itself "the world's fastest-growing religion."[29] Baha'i similarly claims to be the fastest-growing.[30] Indeed, even the parodic Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster makes this declaration.[31] This claim represents a legitimation tactic. As James R. Lewis notes, "impressive growth appears to *validate the truth* of one's religion."[32] In other words, if many people are joining a religion, its members must be on to something.

In religious studies scholarship, one famous example of a "fastest-growing religion" is Mormonism. In 1984, sociologist Rodney Stark suggested that due to rapid growth in its first one hundred fifty years, Mormonism "stand[s] on the threshold of becoming the first major faith to appear on earth since the Prophet Mohammed rode out of the desert."[33] While there were only around 4.5 million Mormons at the time, Stark suggested that its growth rate would soon make Mormonism significant.

As evidenced by this claim from Stark, scholars often speak to multiple audiences. This claim did not only reach other scholars, but was also repeated, for example, by the LDS Church itself, and by news outlets reporting on religion.[34] For practitioners, growth

29. "Scientology Today: The Fastest-Growing Religion in the 21st Century," Scientology Canada, https://www.scientology.ca/scientology-today/.

30. James R. Lewis, "The Growth of Scientology and the Stark Model of Religious 'Success,'" in *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 118.

31. Kevin Polowy, "How the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster Became 'World's Fastest Growing Religion,'" *Yahoo! Entertainment*, July 7, 2020, https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/i-pastafari-movie-documentary-church-of-the-flying-spaghetti-monster-150041804.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=ma.

32. Lewis, "The Growth of Scientology," 120.

33. Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (1984): 19.

34. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "LDS Church is United States' Fastest Growing Denomination," *Ensign* 32, no. 11 (2002); David Van Biema,

reinforces one's worldview, providing reality maintenance.[35] Reid L. Nelson writes, "many Latter-day Saints view Stark's projections as long awaited, outside corroboration of their own beliefs regarding the destiny and growth of their own church."[36] Since scholars also direct their work at other scholars, growth can enhance the legitimacy of an academic field. Encouraging others to pursue this topic, Stark argues, "the 'miracle' of Mormon success makes them the single most important case on the agenda of the social scientific study of religion."[37] Based on his projections of growth, Stark heralds the study of this religion as significant.

Situating Paganism's Growth

Around the early 2000s, many scholars began labelling Paganism the fastest-growing religion. While Paganism's numbers at this time sat in the hundreds of thousands, scholars pointed to recent growth, suggesting that Paganism was getting larger and would soon become more significant. A quote from the last edition of Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* illustrates both how scholars can influence the Pagan community, and how numbers are used to signal significance. Adler writes:

> Why do numbers matter? Because it gives a partial answer to the question whether or not the Neo-Pagan religious movement should be taken seriously by the world. In my own view, Paganism is important because of its ideas, but if we are talking about a religion that has more members in the United States than Unitarian Universalists, Quakers, or Baha'is, that's something worth noting and studying.[38]

This book is widely read among Pagans, and this quote comes after a section in which Adler summarizes estimates of Paganism's size offered by Helen A. Berger, Sarah M. Pike, James R. Lewis, and other scholars. In this way, Adler offers a conduit between academia and Pagan communities. More importantly, this quote reveals why, in

"Kingdom Come: Salt Lake City was Just for Starters," *Time*, August 4, 1997, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,986794,00.html.

35. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*.

36. Reid L. Nelson, "Introduction," in *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Rodney Stark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 8.

37. Stark, "Rise of a New World Faith," 16.

38. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin, 2006 [1979]), 412.

the eyes of many, numbers are important. Paganism's size, relative to other religions, merits attention and respect.

Claims of being the fastest-growing religion thereby provide legitimacy from several angles. For Pagans, this claim offers internal validation; one belongs to a growing movement. Further, since chaplaincy in public institutions is often based on "demonstrated need," projected growth can support advocacy for greater representation.[39] There might not be enough Pagans to merit a Pagan military chaplain right now, but projections offer a potentially powerful negotiation tactic. Growth can help bolster similar attempts when Pagans advocate for greater representation, acknowledgment, and respect.

Beyond these benefits for Pagans themselves, this claim also helps legitimize the field of Pagan studies. In the early 2000s, despite many graduate students conducting research, there were only a handful of professional scholars in this area. The field also lacked a dedicated journal or clear presence in academic conferences. Indeed, when scholars applied for a unit to represent the study of Pagans in the American Academy of Religion in 1998, they were rejected. The AAR suggested that this field did not merit its own space outside the study of New Religious Movements or Women and Religion.[40]

There is no direct link between publications making this claim and the eventual creation of a Pagan studies unit in 2005 (or any other outlet for Pagan studies research for that matter). However, the early 2000s marked an era in which scholars had to defend the study of this community. It was not taken for granted that this new topic was worthy of investigation. Indeed, Helen Berger notes that early scholars were often forced to "defend their topic more than their findings."[41] With Paganism representing a small, and generally overlooked community, pointing to rapid increase in size can help articulate why it is important to start observing this religion and taking it seriously. Being deemed the fastest-growing religion

39. Joanne Benham Rennick, *Religion in the Ranks: Belief and Religious Experience in the Canadian Forces* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 56.

40. Chas S. Clifton, "A Double Issue of *The Pomegranate*: The First Decades of Contemporary Pagan Studies," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 17, nos. 1-2 (2015): 6, https://journals.equinoxpub.com/POM/article/view/29701.

41. Helen A. Berger, "An Outsider Inside: Becoming a Scholar of Contemporary Paganism," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 17, nos. 1-2 (2015): 132, https://dx.doi.org/10.1558/pome.v17i1-2.27798.

represents one factor, among others, that helped position Pagan studies as a legitimate field of inquiry.

The American Religious Identification Survey

Given the many benefits of making this claim, the underlying data that supports this statement bears greater scrutiny. Most scholars making this declaration about Paganism cited the American Religious Identification Survey, or ARIS for short.[42] Due to this study's influential role in Pagan studies, I wish to briefly outline how this study was conducted, and what it reported. In 1990, sociologists at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York phoned 113,723 households in the lower 48 US states, asking people their religious affiliation.[43] From this sample, researchers estimated the size of various religions in America. In 1990, researchers estimated that there were 8,000 US Wiccans.[44] In 2001, researchers conducted a follow-up study, this time phoning 50,281 households, and reporting estimates of 140,000 Pagans, 134,000 Wiccans, and 33,000 Druids.[45]

In the sections that follow, I explore how Pagan studies scholars interpreted and described this data. However, several factors that are often ignored when scholars cite this data bear mentioning. First is the issue of how many Pagans there truly were in 1990. The estimated 8,000 Wiccans in 1990 represented the second-smallest of all reported groups. There were however, 889,000 estimated people belonging to a grouping titled "Other unclassified." It seems

42. Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures," 1; Jensen and Thompson, "Social Ecology of American Wicca," 753; Oboler, "Negotiating Gender Essentialism," 161; Sommerlad-Rogers, "Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors," 229.

43. The initial study conducted in 1991 was called the National Survey of Religious Identity or NSRI (Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, "Research Report: The National Survey of Religious Identification 1989-1990" (New York: CUNY Graduate School and University Center, 1991). A follow-up study, titled the American Religious Identification Survey was conducted in 2001 (Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey" (New York: The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 2001); and another in 2008 (Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008): Summary Report" (Hartford, Conn.: Trinity College, 2009). Since Kosmin was the primary investigator for all studies, and to avoid confusion, I refer to each of these as "the ARIS data" and their corresponding year.

44. Kosmin and Lachman, "National Survey of Religious Identity," 5.

45. Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey," 12.

plausible that inside of this number were Pagans, Druids, and other groups with low numbers, some of whom would appear in the 2001 estimates. How Kosmin and colleagues coded the data, and the established thresholds for creating categories contributed to the apparent explosion between time periods. Another issue concerns sampling errors which may have occurred. Comparing ARIS estimates to the US populations at the time, surveyors contacted roughly five self-identified Wiccans in 1990, and roughly 32 Wiccans in 2001. However, since the sample in 2001 was half the size compared to 1990, sampling errors may have contributed to the dramatic increase from 8,000 to 134,000 estimated Wiccans. Granted, these are issues common with any survey. However, the ways in which scholars describe these findings reveal a fundamental misreading of the data, resulting in misleading claims of Paganism's growth.

Having established what the data revealed, this section explores how scholars described Paganism's growth. In the opening of his book, Michael F. Strmiska writes, "An estimated 307,000 Americans identify their religious affiliation as 'Wicca, Pagan, or Druid,' making this one of the twenty largest religious categories in the United States."[46] This statement, though accurate, fails to acknowledge that this survey only reported twenty-one religions (counting both 'Other' and 'No Religion' categories). It makes as much sense to say "Paganism is a religion in America" as it does to call it "one of the twenty largest." However, the latter claim denotes more significance.

Since this total of 307,000 still placed Paganism well below several other groups (and seventh largest out of twenty-one total religions), scholars often emphasized the upward trend between 1990 to 2001 to connote significance. Strmiska writes, "A similar survey carried out in 1990 did not even mention Wiccans, Pagans, or Druids, which underlines how fast modern Paganism . . . has been growing."[47] Assuming that Strmiska is referring to the NSRI survey, Wicca *was* listed in 1990, making his statement inaccurate. Alternatively, if Strmiska is referencing a different survey, he does not specify this other data. By ignoring (or at least omitting) what the data actually reported, Strmiska accentuates Paganism's growth.

Another interpretation of these statistics comes through James R. Lewis, who writes about "The Pagan Explosion." Lewis calls the

46. Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures," 1.
47. Ibid..

growth from 8,000 Wiccans in 1990 to the combined total of 307,000 in 2001 a thirty-eight-fold increase.[48] However, it is slightly misleading to proclaim this high of a percentage increase, considering (as Lewis indeed acknowledges) the lack of estimates for Druids or Pagans in 1990. Lewis adds that even looking at just Wiccans, the jump between time periods represents a seventeen-fold increase. However, even this percentage increase is misleading, as the US population itself increased by over 30 million people.[49] Statements that go beyond the inferences that one could responsibly make from the ARIS data allow scholars to enhance claims of explosive growth.

Discussing Pagan workplace discrimination, Manuel J. Tejeda offers another example of misleading reporting. Tejeda writes, "Mayer *et al*. [the researchers behind the ARIS survey] noted that Wiccans or Pagans were the fastest-growing religious group . . . between 1990 and 2000."[50] However, besides presenting estimates of the Pagan categories in a table, the ARIS report does not actually "note" anything about Paganism. In fact, Mayer and colleagues declare three other groups to be the biggest gainers.[51] Describing how citations impact the construction of knowledge, Ken Hyland writes, "the way information is presented is crucial in gaining acceptance for a claim," adding, "this means employing the cited text in a way that most effectively supports their own argument."[52] Through careful phrasing, Tejeda attributes his interpretation (Pagans are the fastest-growing religion) to the original researchers, thereby elevating the perceived importance of Pagan workplace discrimination.

48. James R. Lewis, "The Pagan Explosion: An Overview of Select Census and Survey Data," in *The New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloi (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007), 16.

49. Factoring US population growth alongside the growth of Wiccans reveals a fourteen-fold increase.

50. Tejeda, "Skeletons in the Broom Closet," 91.

51. The ARIS summary states, "the greatest increase in absolute as well as in percentage terms has been among those adults who do not subscribe to any religious identification" (Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey," 10). Elsewhere, the summary states, "the top three 'gainers' . . . appear to be Evangelical Christians, those describing themselves as non-denominational Christians and those who profess no religion" (25).

52. Ken Hyland, "Academic Attribution: Citation and the Construction of Disciplinary Knowledge," *Applied Linguistics* 20, no. 3 (1999): 348.

Strmiska, Lewis, and Tejeda were not the only scholars to cite this data and proclaim Paganism's growth. I single them out only as examples of how scholars apply interpretations and thereby distort or misrepresent data. Claims about Paganism's growth eventually become what Joel Best calls "mutant statistics," or numbers that get divorced from their original data.[53] Pagan studies scholars became more likely to rely on other scholars in the field rather than track down the original ARIS data. This meant that it became increasingly less common to write that there were an estimated 307,000 Pagans in 2001 (up from 8,000 in 1990), and more common to simply declare Paganism's unrivalled growth. It eventually became unnecessary to even verify this 'fact,' instead relying on other scholars who had said as much.

In their treatise on the sociology of knowledge, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggest that they are concerned with "whatever passes for 'knowledge' in society regardless of the ultimate validity . . . of such knowledge."[54] Scholars play an important role constructing what passes for knowledge, and indeed, are not always concerned with the ultimate validity of that knowledge. Academic knowledge is constructed through social processes negotiated by various parties, including researchers, reviewers, and readers.[55] Through citational practices, or attributing one's knowledge to predecessors that guide one's thinking, the "cachet of acceptance" is bestowed on claims. However, continued repetition of certain statements eventually results in "the disappearance of all acknowledgement," as claims are "incorporated into the literature of the discipline."[56] For example, when describing Paganism's size, Julie Fennell and Laura A. Wildman-Hanlon do not cite the original ARIS data, but rather cite another article that did.[57] Indeed, some scholars who call Paganism the fastest-growing religion, do not even

53. Joel Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 4.

54. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 15.

55. Hyland, "Academic Attribution," 342.

56. Hyland, "Academic Attribution," 342.

57. Julie Fennell and Laura A. Wildman-Hanlon, "The Children of Converts: Beyond the First Generation of Contemporary Pagans," *Social Compass* 64, no. 2 (2017): 289, https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617704165.

support this claim with a citation.[58] As a result of citational practices, Paganism stretches beyond the estimates reported by Kosmin and colleagues. Instead, as this claim echoes throughout the field, Paganism being the fastest-growing religion became "what everybody knows."[59] Statistics—and more importantly, claims—are repeated, taken for granted, and further divorced from their original contexts. The suggestion of Paganism's growing size (and therefore, its presumed importance) becomes more significant than the actual data.

Although seemingly trivial, it is significant when scholars move away from the numbers themselves to interpretations based on those numbers. Rather than just stating Paganism's size, being the "fastest-growing" invites implicit comparison to other religions. This statement suggests that Paganism is not just growing, and not just growing quickly, but growing more quickly than Christianity, Islam, or any other religion. However, offering the example of a new religion growing from 20 members to 200, Best argues that such claims compare apples and oranges. While this 1,000 percent increase is a higher growth rate than other religions, Catholicism adding 200 more members "would not be a tremendous feat."[60] Mutant statistics hide, therefore, that the data may not even support Paganism being the fastest-growing religion.

Returning to the ARIS data, although no religion grew by a similar percentage, there are other metrics of growth. For example, between 1990 and 2001, the estimated number of Muslims grew by 577,000, Hindus grew by 539,000, and Pentecostalism grew by over one million members.[61] While these groups all added more members than there are Pagans, interpreting growth by percentage can support a different claim. Granted, there are many different (equally valid) ways to measure growth. However, when claims are divorced from data, scholars often fail to specify or justify their interpretations. In other words, by what metric is Paganism the fastest-growing religion? According to what study? While scholars play a role constructing knowledge about Paganism (and in this

58. See for example Waldron, "Witchcraft for Sale!" 32; DiZerega, "Paganism and Neopaganism," 543; Bakó and Hubbes, "Religious Minorities' Web Rhetoric," 128.

59. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 83.

60. Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics*, 114.

61. Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey," 11-12.

instance, its size and growth), it is significant that the 'fact' which scholars established often came without qualifications or caveats.

Citational practices further distort the knowledge that scholars construct. Gary F. Jensen and Ashley Thompson write, "the *number* of people identifying themselves as Wiccan or Pagan grew faster than any other" category in the ARIS survey.[62] Simply put, this is untrue. However, as other scholars cite Jensen and Thompson rather than the ARIS data, such statements go unchallenged.[63] Through second-order interpretations, mutant statistics can legitimize claims about a community which are simply not true.

To step away from the ARIS data momentarily, other scholars have recently cited estimates of as many as three million Pagans worldwide.[64] Unfortunately however, and revealing the effects of citational practices, these sources are all connected, yet unsupported by data. Kim Wilkins and Katie McClymont, for example, each cite Robert Saunders.[65] He cites a podcast in which Krista Tippett offhandedly (and without any supporting data) mentions an estimate of 1-3 million Pagans.[66] This chain again highlights how figures become established as fact. Reflecting "manifest intertextuality," each scholar provides a citation to back up their claim.[67] Put differently, each text makes "overt reference to specific other texts," allowing scholars to "construct facts through their communicative

62. Jensen and Thompson, "Social Ecology of American Wicca," 753, emphasis added.

63. See for example Fennell and Wildman-Hanlon, "The Children of Converts," 289.

64. Robert A. Saunders, "Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism," *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 6 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512473868: 786-810; Kim Wilkins, "Pagan Places: Contemporary Paganism, British Fantasy Fiction, and the Case of Ryhope Wood," in *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reding Genre Settings*, ed. Lisa Fletcher (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 109-123; Katie McClymont, "Neo-paganisms, 'Dark Green Religion' and What the Divine Feminine Might Mean for Planning," in *Gender and Religion in the City: Women, Urban Planning and Spirituality*, ed. Clara Greed (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 161-174.

65. Wilkins, "Pagan Places," 110; McClymont, "What the Divine Feminine Might Mean for Planning," 162.

66. Krista Tippett, host, 2008. "Pagans, Ancient and Modern," *On Being* (podcast), March 30, 2006, last accessed February 18, 2022, https://onbeing.org/programs/adrian-ivakhiv-pagans-ancient-and-modern/#audio.

67. Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1992), 104.

practices."[68] However, from the very start of this chain, no one actually offers any statistical evidence to verify an estimate of 3 million Pagans. Best calls this process "number laundering."[69] Whether discussing Paganism's size or its level of growth, scholars construct what counts as knowledge. However, it is troubling when there is insufficient evidence to back up the facts that scholars assert.

The Social Construction of Statistics

Calling Paganism the fastest-growing religion is also misleading because certain factors that likely influenced the apparent spike in the ARIS data are largely ignored when scholars announced Paganism's growth. As mentioned, issues related to coding inflated the appearance of growth. Presuming that the numbers of US Pagans and Druids jumped from zero in 1990 to 140,000 and 33,000 respectively helps amplify the percentage of growth. Further, since the sample size in 2001 was half that of 1990, there was a greater possibility of sampling error.

Best offers the reminder that social and organizational practices shape both statistical measuring tools and responses.[70] Stigmatization, for example, has historically contributed to Pagans being undercounted.[71] Assessing the reliability of census data, Lewis adds, "many minor pagans with Christian parents are incorrectly recorded as belonging to their parents' faith."[72] However, historical underrepresentation can also cause abrupt increases. Douglas E. Cowan suggests that in 2001, many did not recently become Pagans, but rather recently had the opportunity or confidence to self-identify.[73] For instance, as teen Pagans leave their parents' homes, answer surveys themselves, and are no longer miscategorized, they appear as new growth for the religion.

68. Hyland, "Academic Attribution," 343.

69. Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics*, 63.

70. . Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics*, 25.

71. Vivianne Crowley, "Standing Up To Be Counted: Understanding Pagan Responses to the 2011 British Censuses," *Religion* 44, no. 3 (2014): 491–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2014.903640.

72. Lewis, "The Pagan Explosion," 21.

73. Douglas E. Cowan, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 195.

Relatedly, just as censuses have consistently added more categories over the years,[74] Pagan affiliation has gradually become more acceptable to disclose. Increased numbers may therefore indicate *some* new Pagans, but also more Pagans who feel *comfortable* disclosing identity. In addition to the "teen Witch craze" giving Paganism greater exposure in popular media,[75] the years between 1990 and 2001 were also marked by more scholarship about and by Pagans. At the time of the 1990 ARIS survey, Tanya Luhrmann's book was the lone scholarly monograph about Paganism.[76] If one takes seriously the feelings of betrayal that this book created among Pagans,[77] then it may have also caused hesitance to publicly self-identify, especially over the phone with a sociologist. By 2001, considerably more research about and by Pagans had been published.[78] Additionally, the survey for the Pagan Census—with over 2,000 respondents—was conducted between 1993 and 1995.[79] More interactions between scholars and practitioners may have helped Pagans feel more confident self-identifying to the researchers conducting the ARIS poll.

By emphasizing a jump indicated in one study, scholars also ignored other potentially useful data for contextualizing Pagan growth. Not only does the unknown commodity of Druids or Pagans

74. Peter Beyer, "From Far and Wide: Canadian Religious and Cultural Diversity in Global/Local Context," in *Religion and Diversity in Canada*, ed. Lori G. Beaman and Peter Beyer (Boston: Brill, 2008), 15-16.

75. Denise Cush, "Consumer Witchcraft: Are Teenage Witches a Creation of Commercial Interests?" *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28, no. 1 (2007): 43–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/13617670701251439.

76. Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

77. Jo Pearson, "'Going Native in Reverse': The Insider as Researcher in British Wicca," *Nova Religio* 5, no. 1 (2001): 52–63, https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2001.5.1.52.

78. See for example Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-pagan Movements* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); James R. Lewis, ed., *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999). Further, while some books may not have been released until after 2001, many scholars conducted fieldwork during this period.

79. Helen A. Berger, Evan A. Leach, and Leigh S. Shaffer, *Voices From the Pagan Census: A National Survey of Witches and Neo-Pagans in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003).

in 1990 help produce a "thirty-eight-fold increase,"[80] but the low estimate of only 8,000 Wiccans further accentuates growth. However, several scholars had already attempted to estimate Paganism's size and found much higher numbers. In 1972 for example, Marcello Truzzi estimated that there were possibly 3,000 Pagans in the US.[81] In 1985, Margot Adler estimated 50,000–100,000 Pagans.[82] In 1992, Aidan Kelly estimated as many as 300,000.[83] Danny L. Jorgensen and Scott E. Russell provide a range of estimates for Paganism's size from 1970 to 2000. In the 1970s, they suggested between 3,000–20,000 Pagans. By the mid-1980s, this rises to 40,000–100,000. In 1999, they estimated at least 200,000 Pagans, adding that 400,000 was not implausible.[84] Obviously these estimates each have their own limitations, and it is unwise to guess at Paganism's size based on different surveys. However, were scholars to better contextualize the absurdly low starting point of 8,000 Pagans in 1990, the growth to 300,000 by 2001 (as indicated in the ARIS data) becomes less striking. Additional data points show a more gradual increase, eliminating the likelihood that Paganism was indeed the fastest-growing religion.

While scholars construct knowledge about Paganism, it is important to remember that scholars also make choices that shape their work. To describe Paganism as the fastest-growing religion is predicated on numerous choices. By what metric is Pagans growing the fastest? Which survey reveals that level of growth? Would other surveys contradict this claim? Are any factors, beyond just new

80. Lewis, "The Pagan Explosion," 16.

81. Marcello Truzzi, "The Occult Revival as Popular Culture: Some Random Observations on the Old and Nouveau Witch," *The Sociological Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1972): 26.

82. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 103.

83. Aidan A. Kelly, "An Update on Neopagan Witchcraft in America," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 141. As Helen A. Berger suggests, Kelly's estimate extrapolates from festival attendance, journal subscriptions, and the number of San Francisco covens, and should rightly be scrutinized (Helen A. Berger, "Contemporary Paganism by the Numbers," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 153). However, Kelly's estimate (though flawed) hints that there were likely many more than just eight thousand Pagans in 1990.

84. Danny L. Jorgensen and Scott E. Russell, "American Neopaganism: The Participants' Social Identities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 3 (1999): 326, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1387755.pdf.

people becoming Pagan, related to this apparent growth? Finally, when writing that Paganism is the fastest-growing religion in a publication, what caveats does a scholar include (or more often, which caveats do they not include)? These choices—sometimes stated, but more often, left unspoken—shape what passes for knowledge about Paganism.

The Trouble With Composite Categories

Concerning the contingent choices that shape scholarship, it is finally worth noting that when most scholars cite the ARIS data, only certain groups get lumped together. The estimate of 307,000 Pagans represents a second-order interpretation, since the ARIS data lists Pagans, Wiccans, and Druids separately. It is worth remembering that Druids chose to call themselves Druids and not Pagan in this self-identification survey. There is certainly ample justification for grouping these three traditions together. However, doing so reveals how scholarly classifications bump up against on-the-ground realities. Members of different sub-groups do not always embrace the broader label of Paganism. Regardless, scholars routinely classify their data in particular ways. How scholars describe Paganism's size therefore shines a light on broader taxonomical debates.

While there is insufficient space to properly discuss the issue here, I wish to briefly allude to ongoing disputes regarding which traditions belong inside the Pagan category. It was once common to categorize New Age and Pagan groups together.[85] However, some scholars critique this categorization, and it has become more rare.[86] Similarly, despite stark differences between modern Western Paganism and Indigenous or African diasporic religions,[87] some scholars assert wider definitions of Paganism which incorporate

85. See for example Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); York, *The Emerging Network*.

86. Melissa Harrington, "Paganism and the New Age," in *Handbook of New Age,* ed. Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 445.

87. Doyle White, "Theoretical, Terminological, and Taxonomic Trouble"; Lee Gilmore, "Pagan and Indigenous Communities in Interreligious Contexts: Interrogating Identity, Power, and Authenticity," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 20, no. 2 (2018): 179–207, https://journals.equinoxpub.com/POM/article/view/32588.

these groups.[88] Practitioners themselves also debate Paganism's boundaries, and whether Paganism incorporates traditions such as Haitian voodoo or shamanism.[89] Other "Pagan-adjacent" groups listed in the ARIS data include, for example, New Age (an estimated 68,000 Americans), Santeria (22,000), and even Native American (103,000). Statistics represent more than simply objective reports of numbers. By citing roughly 300,000 US Pagans—as opposed to 274,000 (if Druids were *subtracted*) or 397,000 (if New Age and Santeria estimates were *included*)—scholars interpret numbers, and in doing so, legitimize particular constructions of who belongs to Paganism itself.

What's in a Name? What's in a Number?

Tomoko Masuzawa argues that scholars should always attend to analyzing discourse itself.[90] Similarly, and recalling Ellsworth's analogy of fair-trade goods, he argues that "rather than taking fair trade as a given," scholars should "unveil the contradictory aspects of food production" that lie hidden beneath "labels and marketing tactics."[91] When describing the size of a religion, scholars may not even recognize the constructs which they uphold. Citational practices transcend mere quotation, and extend to how claims align with broader ideas.[92] Calling Paganism the fastest-growing religion is not just a commentary on this one religion's growth, but a comparative statement against the size and growth of all other religions. Following this implicit comparison, growing faster than Christianity, Islam, or any other religion also suggests that Paganism merits a similar degree of respect and acknowledgement. While Lewis acknowledges that Paganism's rapid expansion will eventually slow down, he also raises the possibility of Paganism becoming "a large, mainstream religion within the next decade."[93] Paganism's proclaimed growth

88. Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (Toronto: AltaMira Press, 2007).

89. Horák, "Who Is and Who Is Not a Pagan," 126.

90. Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*, 328.

91. Ellsworth, "Caffeinated and Half-baked Realities," 199.

92. Jane E. Goodman, Matt Tomlinson, and Justin B. Richland, "Citational Practices: Knowledge, Personhood, and Subjectivity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 449–63. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-025828.

93. Lewis, "The Pagan Explosion," 22.

puts it on track to secure mainstream recognition. Further demonstrating how size begets legitimacy, Barbara Jane Davy writes, "With the inclusion of indigenous religions, between 5 and 6 percent of the world's population is small-*p* pagan."[94] Noting that Jews, Sikhs, Jains, and Baha'i combined only amount to less than one percent, Davy calls her conglomerate Pagan category "a statistically significant portion of the world's population."[95] Although this twists the typical meaning of statistical significance, Davy makes similar claims about Paganism's size relative to its mainstream status: "After sixty years, contemporary Paganism is no longer a new religious movement but a world religion."[96] Referencing other religions, ranging from Jews to NRMs, Davy reinforces that Paganism is larger, and therefore in need of greater attention and respect. Scholars who emphasize Paganism's growth thereby reinforce the idea that big equals legitimate. In their attempts to articulate Paganism's importance, these scholars subtly reinforce that religions must reach a certain size before being considered worthy of study.

I wish to note that I do think that studying Pagans is important, and indeed, such projects merit wider attention. However, rather than emphasizing Paganism's growth, scholars can simply acknowledge that this religion is legitimate as an outlook that offers meaning to some people, then focus on the insights that these communities reveal for the study of religion. I have undertaken this rather painstakingly detailed scrutinization of Pagan growth because of the responsibility to data that I believe scholars have, urging that scholars also foreground how they are choosing to interpret data. Distorting, or simply misrepresenting data to enhance Paganism's importance invites suspicions of other ways in which scholars might tailor data to suit their needs.

Proclamations of Paganism's growth were largely based on how scholars interpreted the 2001 ARIS data. Using this one data set, without sufficient contextualization, scholars called Paganism the fastest-growing religion. While the ARIS data offered hard numbers to support this claim, this overlooks what the data actually revealed,

94. Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, 3. Although there is seemingly little justification for this move to align Paganism with indigenous religions, it undoubtedly increases Paganism's size.

95. Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, 3

96. Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, 217.

how social factors shaped the data, how scholars grouped the data, and what other data might be relevant.

Accepting that this proclamation was based on either inaccurate or misleading reporting, there are two possibilities for why this occurred. The first possibility is that, in some cases, this claim was made to legitimize the significance of either Paganism or Pagan studies. Recalling the positive reaction among Mormons to Stark's proclamations from the 1980s, this claim legitimizes Pagans by suggesting that more people are recognizing the benefits of this religion. Although Pagans eschew visions of global missionizing, growth can offer internal validation that one's beliefs are becoming more widely adopted. For members of this often-stigmatized religion, growth can also offer reassurance that one's identity is steadily becoming more mainstream. This claim can also fulfill self-serving purposes. Ed Hubbard, founder of the Witch School, offers training for future Pagan leaders. Referencing Paganism's rapid growth, Hubbard predicts "the need for thousands of Wiccan teachers" over the coming years – a service that he coincidentally provides.[97] Finally, growth can support more formal advocacy campaigns. Backed up by the hard data of statistics, Pagans can pressure local or national institutions to start acknowledging this growing movement, in the form of chaplains or other accommodations. Due to the close relationships between scholars and practitioners, or the fact that many in this field are Pagans themselves, some may have been motivated to interpret the data in a way such that it legitimized Paganism.

Beyond scholars just wanting to support this community, claims of growth also help legitimize the study of that thing. Often functioning as a hook in the opening paragraphs of a publication, this claim helps scholars announce that what is admittedly a relatively small community is rapidly becoming more significant. For an emergent field that occasionally struggles to attract interest outside of a core group of specialists, it can be useful to position one's observations as reflecting a rising trend. Beyond just attracting the interest of colleagues, claims of growth also help justify the importance of a dedicated journal, volume, or course about this religion. Granted, scholars who study all manner of phenomena always try to convince

97. "Teachers of Witchcraft and Wicca Needed to Supply Global Shortage," *PRWeb*, October 15, 2011, https://www.prweb.com/releases/2011/10/prweb8879161.htm.

others that their topic is most important. Claims of rapid growth stand apart in that they have the backing of statistics.

As noted at the outset, it is impossible to determine a scholar's motivations in making this claim. Rather than consciously trying to distort the data, another far more likely possibility is that this misleading claim was spread incidentally. Claims of unparalleled growth often failed to explicitly outline that this was only the case according to one study, and according to one interpretation of that study. Relatedly, claims of growth also spread as scholars would uncritically repeat what they had read elsewhere. These two patterns of transmission are mutually-reinforcing. Statements which are repeated become divorced from their source data and are also taken for granted as being true.

Regardless of the precise impulses behind making this claim (i.e., conscious or unconscious), the result was the same. Being the fastest-growing religion connotes a certain degree of legitimacy, and the more this claim is made, the more it is taken as fact. Comparing fair trade goods in supermarkets and religion as a concept in scholarship, Ellsworth notes that people often apply labels in cases that may not necessarily satisfy that term's meaning.[98] Regardless of whether the growing, harvesting, or manufacturing processes differ from any other product, corporations can label products fair trade to tap into niche marketplaces and make their products seem ethical, trendy, or higher quality.[99] Similarly, descriptions can help a community be perceived in certain ways. Despite the fact that (at best) its ten-year growth was unsustainable, and (at worst) Paganism could never rightfully claim this title, being the fastest-growing religion legitimized Paganism.

Conclusion and Future Directions

I acknowledge that the trend of calling Paganism the fastest-growing religion was especially pronounced in the mid-2000s, appearing in only a handful of publications by the late-2010s. Recent descriptions of size and growth are more nuanced. For example, Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson write, "At the turn of the millennium, the number of self-declared Pagans and Witches was growing rapidly in virtually all areas with a population of European

98. Ellsworth, "Caffeinated and Half-baked Realities."
99. Ellsworth, "Caffeinated and Half-baked Realities,"195.

origin."[100] Similarly, Helen Cornish writes that Pagan religions "have been growing in Britain since the 1950s."[101] Paganism is no longer fastest-growing, but simply growing or growing rapidly. Growth is also limited to specific contexts. This shift suggests that tactics of legitimacy rise and fall in popularity. At one time, emphasizing growth helped articulate the importance of studying Paganism. It is perhaps worth noting that publications making this proclamation were prominent around the mid-2000s, right as Pagan studies was establishing its first peer-reviewed journal, dedicated academic book series, and sub-group within the AAR. After Pagan studies had grown as a field, and once studying Pagans was more widely acknowledged as something worth doing, perhaps it becomes easier to abandon this particular claim.

While this article explores what is perhaps a bygone trend, it illuminates several broader themes relevant to both Pagan and religious studies. While it has become rare for scholars to assert this claim, it is still common to see news articles or blogs about Paganism describe this community's astronomical rise, thereby still representing what passes for knowledge about Paganism.[102] More broadly, the trend of calling any group the "fastest-growing" still applies to scholars who describe other religious communities.[103] As with Paganism, claims of, say, Pentecostalism's growth are sometimes confined to specific locales, while in other cases, it is called the fastest-growing religion

100. Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson, eds., *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 488.

101. Helen Cornish, "In Search of the Uncanny: Inspirited Landscapes and Modern Witchcraft," *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 16, no. 4 (2020): 414, https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2020.1794578.

102. See, for example, "It's a Moot Point, but Paganism May be the Fastest Growing Religion in Britain," *The Yorkshire Post*, October 31, 2013, https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/its-moot-point-paganism-may-be-fastest-growing-religion-britain-1853590; Dave Roos, "Paganism is the Oldest, Newest Religion," *How Stuff Works*, November 16, 2020, https://people.howstuffworks.com/paganism.htm; Antonio Pagliarulo, "Historic Parliament of World's Religions," *The Wild Hunt*, November 4, 2021, https://wildhunt.org/2021/11/historic-parliament-of-worlds-religions.html.

103. See, for example, Jan Willis, "'Yes, We're Buddhists Too!'" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 32, no. 1 (2012): 39-43, https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2012.0004; Marika Laudere, "Women Contribution to the Development of Buddhism in Latvia," *SHS Web of Conferences* 85, no. 1 (2020): 1-8, https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20208501004, who call Buddhism the fastest growing religion in the US and the West respectively.

in the world.[104] Such is also the case of Islam, which scholars describe as the fastest-growing religion in America, in American prisons, or again, the entire world.[105] Indeed, this trend is not even confined to religion, as various ethnic communities are also marked as the fastest-growing.[106] In most cases, rapid growth is not the subject of a particular study. Rather, the claim helps to elevate the importance of what is being studied. Since this claim will likely continue to endure, scholars should pay close attention to what data is being cited, how that data is being interpreted, and what legitimizing work is performed through these claims.

Closer scrutiny of how growth is described is also important because claims are used for many purposes. The main goal of proclaiming Paganism's rapid growth was seemingly to reinforce the importance of this community and field. In other cases however, rapid growth is used to demonize a community. For instance, David

104. See, for example, Carlos Navarro and Miguel Leatham, "Pentecostal Adaptations in Rural and Urban Mexico: An Anthropological Assessment," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 20, no. 1 (2004): 145–66, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/msem.2004.20.1.145; and Gladys Ganiel, "Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in South Africa and Zimbabwe: A Review," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 3 (2010): 130–43, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2009.00203.x, who call Pentecostalism the fastest growing religion in Mexico and southern Africa respectively, while Isabelle V. Barker, "Charismatic Economies: Pentecostalism, Economic Restructuring, and Social Reproduction," *New Political Science* 29, no. 4 (2007): 407–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393140701688305, calls it the fastest-growing religion in the world.

105. Sadia R. Chaudhury and Lisa Miller, "Religious Identity Formation Among Bangladeshi American Muslim Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23, no. 4 (2008): 383-410, https://doi.org/10.1177 percent2F0743558407309277; Eric M. Trinka, "The End of Islands: Drawing Insight from Revelation to Respond to Prisoner Radicalization and Apocalyptically-Oriented Terrorism," *Religions* 10, no. 2 (2019): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020073; Engy Farrag, "Architecture of Mosques and Islamic Centers in Non-Muslim Context," *Alexandria Engineering Journal* 56, no. 4 (2017): 613–20, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aej.2017.08.001.

106. See, for example, Amy L. Non, Gabriela Leòn-Pérez, Holly Glass, Emma Kelly, and Nanibaa' A. Garrison, "Stress Across Generations: A Qualitative Study of Stress, Coping, and Caregiving Among Mexican Immigrant Mothers," *Ethnicity & Health* 24, no. 4 (2019): 378-394, https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1080/13557858.2017.1346184, who call Hispanic immigrants the fastest-growing ethnic minority in the US. In contrast, Kayee Zhou and Dennis Patterson, "Changing Patterns of Asian-American Partisanship: Accounting for the Politicization of the U.S.'s Fastest-Growing Minority," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 4 (2021): 1428–38, https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13050., call Asian-Americans the fastest growing minority.

G. Bromley notes that Santa Muerte—"one of the fastest-growing folk saint movements in Mexico"—risks being labelled a "dangerous religion" and subjected to legal measures.[107] The widespread growth of Islam, or rather, fears of this growth, are contributing factors to anti-Muslim sentiments in Western countries.[108] While Paganism's growth is usually a marker of success, Pagans also sometimes become the victim of this claim. Conservative Christian author Steve Wohlberg warns against the dangers of Witchcraft, using the ARIS data to suggest that Wicca could become America's third-largest religion.[109] In these cases, proclaimed growth represents a tactic of delegitimation.[110] Growth amplifies the perception of a threat, and legitimates taking sanctions against that threat.

Numbers can serve many different purposes, and even take on lives of their own. Of course, scholars cannot control what practitioners, reporters, or even other scholars choose to do with published research. However, the myriad possibilities behind numbers highlights the responsibility that scholars should have in their writing, suggesting a more careful, critical, and restrained approach, and less broad, sweeping proclamations.

I have also scrutinized this particular trend because emphasizing rapid growth is only one of many ways that scholars can legitimize Paganism. As an umbrella label that encompasses many traditions, Paganism has been positioned as emblematic of youth culture, environmentalism, or feminist spirituality.[111] In specific locales and contexts, such claims are generally accurate. However, as this exploration of Paganism's proclaimed growth demonstrates, descriptors take on lives of their own as they travel through scholarship. A closer look at the ARIS data offers a case study for how

107. David G. Bromley, "Santa Muerte as Emerging Dangerous Religion?" *Religions* 7, no. 65 (2016): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7060065,

108. Salima Koroma and Carlos H. Martinelli, "How Islam Became the Fastest-Growing Religion in Europe" *Time*, January 16, 2015, https://time.com/3671514/islam-europe/.

109. Steve Wohlberg, *Hour of the Witch: Harry Potter, Wicca Witchcraft, and the Bible* (Shippensburg, Pa.: Destiny Image Publishers, 2005).

110. Lewis, *Legitimating New Religions*.

111. Helen A. Berger and Douglas Ezzy, *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for the Self (*New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel, eds. *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity Among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

data comes up against interpretations. In a ten-year span, the ARIS data revealed an increase of about 300,000 Pagans, and also increases of about 500,000 Muslims and Hindus respectively. Which of these represent the fastest-growing religion in America? There are always many ways to describe data. Further, a statement that begins as true, given very specific caveats (according to one study, over a ten-year span, Paganism grew by a greater percentage than any other religion in the US), can gradually become misinterpreted, and even inaccurate.

Certain terms connect Paganism to certain allies, or relate it to various cultural concerns, regardless of whether the community actually merits such a label. Calling Paganism a "nature-based" or feminist religion, for example, ties these communities to different popular, generally positive, discourses. For Pagans, this may reinforce the perception that one belongs to a religion espousing certain ideals. This also helps connect Pagan studies to broader discourses, allowing scholars to situate their work in more journals, conferences, courses, or departments. How does data compare with other descriptions applied to Paganism? As examples for reflection, Berger finds that roughly 60 percent of Pagans that she surveyed self-identify as feminist, and 90 percent consider feminist issues when voting. However, percentages are much lower concerning those who participate in women's rights demonstrations, or in organizations that advocate for women's rights.[112] Similarly, while high percentages of Pagans self-identify as environmentalists, and an overwhelming percentage recycle, percentages are much lower when asked about participating in demonstrations for environmentalism, or belonging to environmental groups.[113] These statistics invite questions on what

112. According to Berger's survey, 57 percent of solitary practitioners, and 64.2 percent of respondents who practice in groups, self-define as feminist. Concerning whether one considers feminist issues when voting, affirmative responses were 86.5 percent and 90.8 percent respectively. In contrast, only 25.2 percent of solitaries, and 35.7 percent of group practitioners, participate in women's rights demonstrations, while 11.2 percent and 17.3 percent respectively participate in organizations that advocate for women's rights (Helen A. Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans and Others Who Practice Alone* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 136.

113. According to Berger's survey, 74.6 percent of solitaries and 81.7 percent of group practitioners self-define as environmentalists while 85.5 percent and 90.7 percent respectively recycle. In contrast, 27 percent of solitaries, and 34.6 percent of group practitioners participate in environmentalism demonstrations, while 18

scholars mean when they describe Paganism as a religion with a feminist or environmentalist outlook.

Again, this is not to say that such labels are never justified, just as the myriad other descriptors applied to Paganism are often justifiable. However, are the necessary qualifications always spelled out? Scholars should reflect carefully on whether, where, and under what caveats particular descriptors are truly justified. Further, scholars broadening their scope to other groups or discourses is hardly unique to Pagan studies. Regarding Black studies, for example, Patricia Reid-Merritt notes that programs with names like Africana, Afro-Caribbean, or African Diaspora "laid claim to offering broader curricula inclusive of global issues, concerns, and perspectives."[114] However, labels sometimes lack categorical integrity and ignore diversity within Paganism. When scholars label Paganism as one thing or another (inclusive, environmentalist, feminist, fastest-growing), what becomes of Pagans who exclude others or who do not hold feminist ideals? Describing Paganism as a religion that essentially embodies any of these categories may instead function merely to legitimize these communities and field of study.

Finally, scholars should recognize how trends shape the descriptors for which one reaches. For a brief period, "Paganism is the fastest-growing religion" was a statement found across many publications. Even when Paganism's size was irrelevant to the subject at hand, this sentence was used to frame the topic. Citational practices play a significant role in the socialization of people, students especially, into a new field of knowledge.[115] Through reading major texts in the field, scholars discover which sources should be cited, and more importantly, what sort of assertions can be made. Over time, as pieces of knowledge become taken for granted, the necessary stipulations or citations are dropped, and established facts become entirely divorced from their supporting data.

The claims, topics, or terms which saturate a field shape how other scholars will describe or position their work. Recalling Ellsworth's analogy of fair-trade food, does the plethora of packaging in an aisle

percent of solitaries, and 26.6 percent of group practitioners belong to environmental groups (Berger, *Solitary Pagans*, 133).

114. Patricia Reid-Merritt, "Defining Ourselves: Name Calling in Black Studies," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 80, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934709335136.

115. Menno H. Reijven and Rebecca M. Townsend, "Communicative Competence and Local Theories of Argumentation: The Case of Academic Citation Practices," in *Local Theories of Argument*, ed. Dale Hample (New York: Routledge, 2021), 497–503.

reflect that more companies are adopting ethical business practices, or that labelling food in a certain way has been found to increase sales? Scholars should be mindful of the deeper work being performed when applying a label, and reflect on whether a given claim, as it applies to a specific community and context, is necessary or justified. Munashe Furusa urges scholars to continually reflect on "the nature and direction of the discipline . . . with specific attention to how names relate to the nature, scope, goals, and expected outcomes of the field."[116] Although Furusa is speaking in the context of Black studies, such reflection is crucial regarding any emergent field, as these often experience more intense outside scrutiny, and are also still in the process of developing patterns of discourse. Especially given critiques concerning how Pagan studies occasionally uses scholarship to legitimize the community being studied,[117] self-reflection concerning the labels that scholars apply, and vigilance over trends, seems a useful step towards ensuring a more critical approach.

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116. Munashe Furusa, "Spelling Our Proper Name: Reconceptualizing the Order of Africana/Black Studies," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 25, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934709335133.

117. See for example Markus Altena Davidsen, "What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2012): 183–99,https://doi.org/10.1163/157006812X634881; Amy Hale, "Navigating Praxis: Pagan Studies vs. Esoteric Studies," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 15, nos. 1–2 (2013): 151–63, https://journals.equinoxpub.com/POM/article/view/19978.

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