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## From Spiritualists to Neopagans: Complicating American Religious Pluralism

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the relationship between minority religions and American religious pluralism, an ideology which supports religious equality and functions through social norms and legal mechanisms. Examining American religious pluralism's responses to efforts by nineteenth-century Spiritualists and contemporary Pagans to gain social recognition and political rights produces new insights into the nature of American religious pluralism. I argue that conceiving of American religious pluralism as a project with inherently Protestant Christian investments challenges its ability to support religious equality and exposes the ways in which it actively works to marginalize minority religions due to their inconsistency with the beliefs and practices of Protestant Christianity. The first chapter of this thesis examines how Spiritualism and Neopaganism challenge American religious pluralism's understanding of what qualifies as a legitimate form of American religion. Chapter two investigates the ways in which Spiritualism and Neopaganism's privileging of women contributes to their inability to become established modes of American religiosity. The third chapter explores the limitations American religious pluralism places on minority religions' responses to death. I argue that although in some ways American religious pluralism's treatment of minority religions has changed, a Protestant logic continues to influence American religious pluralism's strategies for religious management.

**From Spiritualists to Neopagans: Complicating American Religious Pluralism**

Clara Schoonmaker

B.A., Michigan State University, 2012

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Religion

Syracuse University

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: The Table of American Religious Pluralism.....	18
Chapter 2: Women Strive for a Seat at the Table.....	32
Chapter 3: Death Rituals in Plural America.....	56
Conclusion.....	70
Works Cited.....	72
Vita.....	78

## Introduction

This thesis explores American religious pluralism's ability, as a political ideology and social project, to accommodate, preserve, and defend religious difference through an examination of the resistance minority religions encounter when attempting to negotiate their positions in plural America. My project takes the form of a critical comparison of two minority religious groups, one historical and one contemporary, to determine how the nature of American religious pluralism has changed in regard to its treatment of minority religions. Each chapter works thematically to investigate specific conflicts concerning nineteenth-century Spiritualism and contemporary Paganism at the intersection of religion and politics.<sup>1</sup> I will first examine the ways in which Spiritualism and Neopaganism challenge American religious pluralism's definition of religion. Next, I will evaluate to what extent Spiritualism and Neopaganism's privileging of women as social and religious authorities contributes to their unfavorable reception in plural America. Last, I will investigate the limitations American religious pluralism places on minority religions' death memorializations and rituals.

My thesis makes an intervention in conversations about the position of minority religious groups in America and the nature of American religious pluralism by making a political theological analysis of minority religions' interactions with American religious pluralism.<sup>2</sup> In *Political Theology*, Schmitt argues that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt 36). While

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars choose to use the term "Neopagan" and others "contemporary Pagan." Both of these terms refer to the same group, but scholars use the terms interchangeably depending on preference.

<sup>2</sup> Political theology is a theoretical project initiated by 20<sup>th</sup> century political theorist Carl Schmitt to uncover the latent yet important institutional and rhetorical connections between historically dominant religious traditions such as Christianity and political structures. See Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*.

Schmitt develops this argument through an examination of sovereignty, I will explore the ways in which American religious pluralism functions as a secularized theological concept. I argue that because American religious pluralism began as a Protestant Christian project it continues to operate within a secularized Protestant framework which prevents minority religions with little resemblance to Protestant Christianity from becoming established and enduring modes of American religiosity. I demonstrate that although American religious pluralism has changed as a social project, its political ideology remains grounded in secularized Protestant interests. While contemporary minority religious groups are finding new opportunities and spaces to integrate themselves in America's religious landscape, American religious pluralism continues to work to preserve the social and political hegemony of majority religions like Protestant Christianity.

### **Overview of Spiritualism and Neopaganism**

The Spiritualist movement began in 1848 in Hydesville, New York when Margaret and Kate Fox “professed to having discovered an intelligent force behind the unexplained rappings that had disturbed their family” home (Moore, *In Search* 7-8). The Fox sisters soon declared themselves to be spirit mediums capable of communicating with deceased spirits, and they gained national notoriety by traveling around the country to hold séances and speak in front of large audiences.

Spiritualism appealed to nineteenth-century Americans' fascination with technology by praising technological and scientific advancement. Séances frequently included such seemingly unexplainable phenomenon as levitating objects, mysterious sounds, and entranced mediums conveying messages from beyond. Spiritualists believed

human scientific and spiritual progression were linked, and that theological questions could be answered through an engagement with scientific discovery. Moore notes, “People attended séances for consolation, for entertainment, and for assurance of a purpose beyond life. All these satisfactions blended with the unusually expressed scientific aim of penetrating nature’s mysteries” (43).

As a religious movement which combined aspects of scientific advancement and social reform, Spiritualism stood on the cutting edge of nineteenth-century American religiosity. Spiritualist publications simultaneously speculated about theological questions, advocated for the women’s suffrage movement, and lauded the recent discovery of electricity and the building of railroads. With such diverse and innovative interests, Spiritualism captivated the imagination of thousands of nineteenth-century Americans, but it also incurred disfavor from the Protestant church and from political elites holding Protestant values.

Spiritualism’s combination of spiritual belief and social reform paved the way for the emergence of other contemporary religious movements which stand outside of mainstream American religious culture. In her ethnographic study of American Neopagan festivals *Earthly Bodies, Magic Selves*, Sarah Pike argues “Neopagan festivals are akin to the gatherings of nineteenth-century Spiritualists in their eclecticism and the challenge they represent to more orthodox and established religious practices” (Pike, *Earthly* 14). Pike locates the development of contemporary American Paganism in the 1960s “countercultural” era during which “cultural and religious expressions emerged as protests against dominant American social institutions” (xiv). Pike notes that “aspects of the ‘counterculture’ that contributed to American Neopaganism include: experimentation



with psychedelic drugs, the feminist movement, growing ecological awareness, science fiction and fantasy novels, and fascination with Asian religions” (xiv).<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary American Pagans combine a variety of Eastern, Western, ancient, and contemporary religious traditions to create a unique constellation of spiritual beliefs and practices which vary between groups and individuals. Neopagans are loosely organized into numerous group affiliations including Wiccans, Druids, Neoshamans and Heathens. While Neopagan beliefs and practices vary, many worship both Gods and Goddesses, believe in the “centrality of the relationship between humans and nature,” and have a “desire to revive ancient pre-Christian nature religions” (Pike, *Neopagan* 18-19).<sup>4</sup> Neopagans use their reverence for the sacred feminine and nature as platforms to advocate for women’s rights and environmental conservation.

Pike identifies the Spiritualist movement as an historical antecedent to contemporary American Paganism due to the groups’ shared belief in anti-institutionalism, nonconformity, and their use of gatherings outside of the conventional spaces of society to share spiritual knowledge and participate in collective ritual. Like Spiritualists, Neopagans are invested in advocating for gender equality and use festivals as places to organize “female leadership and social activism” (Pike, *Earthly* 15).

While Pike focuses her comparison of Spiritualists and Neopagans on identity formation in festival space, my analysis looks into the ways in which both Spiritualists and Neopagans encountered social, political, and religious resistance when they left these spaces and aimed to negotiate a place for themselves in the context of plural America.

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<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive study of American religion in the 1960s see Robert Ellwood’s *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern*.

<sup>4</sup> I follow Neopagans’ capitalization of God and Goddess.

Pike claims “Neopagans and Spiritualists are located by themselves and others on the margins of American religious culture, and indeed, define themselves in rejection of it” (16). While I do agree that both of these groups are located on the margins of American religious culture, I wish to qualify Pike’s statement to argue that Neopagans and Spiritualists recognize the disadvantages of their marginalized positions, but instead of merely rejecting American religious culture, oftentimes actively work to gain social acceptance and political rights in plural America.

The examples I consider in the following chapters will show certain instances of both Spiritualists and Neopagans attempting to move away from the margins and insert themselves into the center of American religious culture. These moves happen not out of a desire to blend into mainstream American religious culture, but rather they are necessary steps to gain the same rights which religions situated comfortably within the religious mainstream enjoy. In order to gain equal footing Spiritualists and Neopagans must engage with the religious and political actors at the center, using the political and social resources available to them. However, their attempts to engage and be heard are often either ignored or actively resisted. My comparison of Spiritualist and Neopagan experiences will shed light on the ways in which American religious pluralism’s strategies for religious management, inclusion, and exclusion have changed between the mid-nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

### **Definition of Terms**

In the following section I will define three terms that I use frequently throughout this thesis, namely secularism, Protestantism, and pluralism. I will discuss contemporary scholarly literature concerning both Spiritualism and Neopaganism, as well as

scholarship on the nature of both nineteenth and twenty-first century American religious pluralism, paying particular attention to the ways in which scholars use the terms Protestantism, secularism, and pluralism. My aim is to locate my discussion of these terms within contemporary academic discourse, and to demonstrate how I will put scholars from various disciplines (religious studies, history, and anthropology) into conversation in order to uncover new insights into the nature of American religious pluralism in regard to its treatment of minority religions.

The aim of this introduction is to describe the ideologies which give form to the ways in which scholars understand religious communities and how religious subjects understand themselves. By doing this I introduce a critical edge to secondary scholarship on Spiritualism and Neopaganism which often lacks a discussion of the relationship between these groups and the ideological and social functions of religious pluralism. The chapters that follow will ground this ideological discussion in a concrete examination of religious experience in order to generate new understandings of minority religions' positions in plural America.

### *Secularism*

Secularism is an ideology which upholds the necessity of the separation of church and state. William Connolly explains that secularism demands that matters of faith are relegated to “the private realm so that a matrix of public reason free of any particular faith can operate in the public realm” (Connolly 28). Secularization is an historical process in which religion begins to lose its influence in society due to scientific development and growing market economies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See David Martin's *A General Theory of Secularization*.

There are a variety of opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of secularism and secularization in contemporary America. The evangelical Christian group Focus on the Family defines secularism as “believing in a self-directed life,” or a life not lived in accordance with biblical mandates.<sup>6</sup> Focus on the Family condemns secularism as an ideology which promotes dangerous social values and leads to the degradation of America’s youth.<sup>7</sup> Focus on the Family is devoted to helping families live “according to morals and values grounded in biblical principles” and views secularism as a direct threat to the vitality of evangelical Christianity in America.<sup>8</sup>

While Focus on the Family considers secularism to have a deleterious effect on American society, others believe secularism is essential to the proper functioning of a democratic nation. Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (AU) assert “A secular state is one that is neutral on matters of theology. Because the government has no official theology, all faiths are free to spread their doctrines and seek adherents among the population.”<sup>9</sup> AU believes the doctrine of secularism benefits all religions in America because it demands government neutrality towards matters of faith and ensures religious equality and freedom.

Both of the groups described above operate in political and social spheres of American life to forward their own opinions on the nature of secularism and its perceived advantages or disadvantages. Both seem to operate under the assumption that secularism successfully removes any religious proclivities from American politics and supports the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/protecting-your-family/under-siege>

<sup>7</sup> See this link for an article which links secularism with the apparent dangers of body piercings and tattoos: <http://www.crosswalk.com/family/parenting/body-piercing-and-tattoos-a-slip-into-secularism-1266329.html>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.au.org/church-state/february-2015-church-state/featured/myths-debunked>

equality of a variety of oftentimes divergent belief systems. However, academics across various disciplines and fields have questioned secularism's ability to keep religion and politics as separate, discrete categories.<sup>10</sup>

My thesis agrees and builds on Mark C. Taylor's assertion that "Secularity is a *religious* phenomenon, which grows directly out of the Judeo-Christian tradition as it develops in Protestantism" (Taylor 2-3). Taylor goes on to assert that modernization began with the Protestant Reformation and that "the distinctive institutions of the modern world –democracy, the nation-state, and the free market– are inseparable from Protestantism and its history" (3, 43). My thesis examines the implications of Schmitt and Taylor's work for minority religions existing in America. Chapter one develops my argument that American religious pluralism began and continues to operate as an implicitly Protestant project invested in maintaining Protestant hegemony in the American religious landscape.

I use the term secularism to denote a modern ideology which aims, yet fails, to reduce religion to the private sphere due to its foundation as a religious, rather than a political, project. If secularism was successful in ensuring political neutrality and pluralism was successful in upholding religious equality, then minority religions like Spiritualism and Neopaganism should not have encountered resistance in attempting to establish themselves in plural America. Spiritualists and Neopagans' struggles point to certain limitations in the successful functioning of American religious pluralism. I argue that because American secularism and pluralism began as Protestant projects and

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<sup>10</sup> For other academic treatments of the question of secularism see Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular*, Gil Anidjar's "Secularism," Saba Mahmood's "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," and Nancy Ammerman's "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions" in *Handbook for the Sociology of Religion*.

continue to exist in a Protestant framework, the legitimacy of minority religions is evaluated based on their similarity to Protestantism. I will demonstrate that while American religious pluralism as a social project has, in recent years, taken steps to promote the equality of minority religions on the surface, the same nineteenth-century logic by which minority religions are evaluated for inclusion based on their similarity to Protestantism looms behind pluralism's twenty-first century strategies for religious management.

In his 2011 work *Secularism in Antebellum America* John Modern describes the project of secularization as promoting the ability of the individual to choose what, or whether or not, to believe, as well as the emergence of a multitude of religious options, many falling outside of institutional lines. I use his analysis as a jumping off point to argue against American religious pluralism's ability to ensure the equality of those options. I argue that American pluralism theoretically allows any movement which captivates the imagination of the American public a chance to emerge, but its survival is contingent upon its ability to fit into a specific framework. Secularization may have created an abundance of religious options, but I will demonstrate that some of those options have a much better chance of success than others depending upon their proximity and likeness to the Protestant Christian framework. Minority religions' ability to gain social acceptance and legal recognition is dependent on the extent to which they are structurally and theologically similar to Protestant Christianity.

My political theological intervention looks at Modern's work through a Schmittian lens in order to expose the ways in which American religious pluralism is inherently a Protestant Christian project which serves to reify Protestant hegemony and

marginalize religious Others. While nineteenth-century American religious pluralism acted primarily from religious and secular institutions to combat the growing strength of the Spiritualists movement, I will demonstrate the ways in which the liberalized social and political climate of twenty-first century America prevents pluralism from explicitly resisting or marginalizing what it considers to be threatening minority religions.

### ***Protestantism***

In her 2007 book, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*, Tracy Fessenden forwards the idea of a “nonspecific Protestantism.”

Fessenden argues:

In the United States, whose founding documents aimed to unite a presumptively (if diversely) Christian population under the mantle of religious tolerance, the rule of noninterference between religion and government, far from consigning all religion equally to the silent margins of the political, instead created the conditions for the dominance of an increasingly nonspecific Protestantism over nearly all aspects of American life, a dominance as pervasive as it is invisible for *exceeding the domains we conventionally figure as religious.* (61)

I follow Fessenden’s idea of a “nonspecific” Protestantism to denote a hegemonic yet subtle force which saturates the social and political functioning of American life. In the above quotation Fessenden suggests that the United States’ democratic political formation began as a way to preserve equality across a variety of Protestant Christian denominations. American politics’ attempt to implement ideologies of inclusion and tolerance such as religious pluralism was generated by a desire to attend to specifically Protestant Christian needs. Thus Protestantism spilled over the categorical walls of

religion into the domain of politics, manifesting itself in political ideologies and social projects like American religious pluralism.

In the following chapters I will refer to “nonspecific” Protestantism as a secularized social and political force and to Protestantism as an institution. For example, I will describe instances in which Protestant clergymen, operating from Protestant churches as institutions, made statements denouncing the authenticity of Spiritualist mediums’ messages. I will also refer to a “nonspecific” secularized Protestantism which signifies the diffusion of Protestant Christian values throughout American society.

Modern charts Protestantism’s role in the project of secularism through an examination of John Maltby, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Congregationalist minister who “argued that ‘Christianity’ was not simply amenable to ‘secular progress’ but that it was an essential component of it” (Modern 68). As a member of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Maltby also equated the Christianization of the world with secular human progress and advocated for Christianity’s control over the “philosophical, scientific, political, economic, medical, and technological” components of human progression (70). I take “secular” institutions such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions as representations of the different masks this invisible, “nonspecific” Protestant mechanism continues to use to respond to and marginalize certain minority religions like Spiritualism and Neopaganism which threaten the Protestant status quo. By operating in and controlling these different realms of social life, Protestant Christianity has hidden but abiding influences.

Modern puts Gil Anidjar in conversation with Charles Taylor when he describes Protestantism’s response to the explosion of religious choices created by the Nova Effect.



First forwarded by Charles Taylor in his 2007 work *A Secular Age*, the Nova Effect is a term which represents the nineteenth-century proliferation of diverse religious beliefs and practices, as well as the creation of the freedom to choose what, and whether or not, to believe. Moore writes, “Confronted by the anxious prospect of somehow losing reality, evangelicals made reality, itself, in addition to God, an object of their belief. In doing so, evangelicals ‘reincarnated’ themselves as secular” (71). Because Protestant Christianity invented and implemented secularism by way of these various avenues (philosophical, scientific, etc.), it simultaneously made itself synonymous with secularism and created the rules by which secularism operates. Hence alternative religions which do not conform to the Protestant Christian framework do not qualify for acceptance into the secular, plural landscape. Chapter one explores this Protestant Christian framework more thoroughly, especially in regard to the ways in which it informs American political institutions’ definitions of religion.

Moore describes the ways in which Protestant clergymen and laymen resisted the Spiritualist movement’s success, making condemnations as mild as naming it superstitious or as severe as equating it with devil worship. Moore notes that “these religious groups resented spiritualism as they would have resented any other set of beliefs that challenged their own teachings about who could communicate with the dead and how” (Moore, *In Search* 43). Pike describes the continuation of Protestant resistance to minority religions which resist biblical authority, noting “Protestants may still feel challenged by Catholics and even by other Protestants, but antagonism toward Neopagans results from the fear that Americans will continue to seek meaning outside of biblical religion entirely” (Pike, *Earthly* 96). While Moore and Pike discuss the Protestant

church's resistance to both Spiritualism and Neopaganism, neither give adequate attention to the groups' positions in the context of American religious pluralism. My analysis will focus on Spiritualism and Neopaganism's relationship with American pluralism in regard to their failure to become established modes of American religiosity despite these movements' ability to draw large numbers of adherents.

### *Pluralism*

Secularism serves as the ground from which many other strategies for coping with social difference arise, such as the rhetorics of tolerance and diversity which are bound up with the project of pluralism. Pluralism is one example of a concept which grows out of the ideological ground of secularism.<sup>11</sup> Pluralism begins as a political ideology and is implemented in American society through a variety of social projects which promote religious tolerance and inclusion. I argue that while pluralism's social projects have changed over time to be more publically and institutionally inclusive of minority religions, the political ideology which grounds the ways in which pluralism functions in American society remains grounded in secularized Protestant interests. The following chapters will demonstrate how the location of American religious pluralism's resistance of minority religions is shifting from religious and secular institutions to become more prevalent in majority religions members' social perceptions of and interactions with members of minority religions.

The nineteenth century was an era characterized by "fragmentation [and] creativity" in which people were free to believe or not to believe (Modern 4). Modern concedes that since the nineteenth-century Nova Effect, "There have indeed been

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<sup>11</sup> See Bender and Klassen pgs. 17-18.

remarkable improvements, expansion of choices, extensions of freedom. Yet there are other stories to tell when examining the dense measures of antebellum experience, other truths to consider that unsettle the congealed mythos of religious freedom and pluralistic evolution” (5-4). Modern wants to complicate the idea of freedom of choice and human agency, arguing that although the Nova Effect produced a multitude of options, those options were determined by “organized forces and systemic structures” (6) beyond any individual’s control. Like Modern, I seek to put a finger on that invisible mechanism that regulates the American religious landscape, delimiting choices and determining what stays and what goes. There are many faces and forms to this pluralistic gatekeeper which acts as an adaptable, hegemonic mechanism, and therein lies its strength.

Modern analyzes American pluralism as it operates within Protestantism, claiming, “I am interested in the compatibility of different formations of mid-century Protestantism” (14). Modern considers Spiritualism on the basis of its use of and response to Protestantism, arguing that Spiritualism represented “the liberal extension of liberal Protestantism” (40). Rather than distinguishing Spiritualism as a separate movement, Modern makes a direct connection between Protestant and Spiritualist ideology. To Modern, Spiritualists simply represented another manifestation of liberal Protestantism. However, I argue against Modern’s claim that Spiritualism is a mere extension of liberal Protestantism.

My analysis shows Spiritualism to be a religious entity independent of and in fact seeking to contest nineteenth-century Protestant norms. Although Spiritualism did grow out of, and responded to, a religious environment dominated by Protestantism, I argue that Spiritualists had much more subversive intentions than merely trying to stretch the

limits of liberal Protestantism. Chapter two argues that Spiritualists made a conscious decision to operate within some nineteenth-century social and religious norms in order to challenge specific patriarchal attitudes toward the social, political, and religious position of women.

Pike notes, “While many Americans assume that late twentieth-century American society is tolerant of difference, the experiences of Neopagans and members of other new (or new to North America) religions suggest otherwise” (Pike, *Earthly* 94). Here Pike gestures to the ways in which an examination of Neopagan experience might suggest flaws in the logic of American religious pluralism which supports equality and tolerance. She devotes a portion of her third chapter to a discussion of the oftentimes tense relationship between Neopagan festival participants and their Christian neighbors. She includes a section in which she reflects on how Neopagans’ denunciation of Christians as uneducated and antagonistic contributes to the same cycle of misunderstanding and discrimination that results from Christian accusations of Neopagan participation in satanic rituals (107-113). I expand upon Pike’s analysis by examining the resistance Neopagans encounter in plural America in closer detail and demonstrating the ways in which their experiences complicate the rhetorics of tolerance and inclusion which bolster American religious pluralism.

In their edited volume *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen define pluralism as “a commitment to recognize and understand others across perceived or claimed lines of religious difference” (Bender and Klassen 2). Like Fessenden and Mark C. Taylor, Bender and Klassen point to the Protestant premises of pluralism, noting, “Pluralism was guided by historically realized

secular and religious impulses, including those of a Protestant elite, and became naturalized in courts, public schools, and a variety of other civic and political institutions” (16). Pluralism, which grew out of the secularization project of a group of Protestant elites, becomes infused with the “nonspecific Protestantism” Fessenden describes as it functions in American society.

In contemporary America, the ideology of pluralism guides social engagement “in which a multiplicity of individuals and communities recognize each other as parallel forms of the phenomenon called religion” (1). I argue along with Bender and Klassen that it is this search for equality that turns pluralism into an inherently comparative project in which similarities are sought rather than differences respected. This comparative project results in those religions that are adequately comparable to Protestant Christianity being accepted as equals while those with irreconcilable differences are cast to the margins. As Bender and Klassen argue, “The mutually constitutive relations between plurality and unity –between celebrating the plurality of religious diversity and organizing under the unity of the category of religion– produce complicated political effects in a range of arenas” (5).

The American political and judicial systems have implicitly forwarded both secularism and pluralism to cope with religious difference which produces conflict in our society.<sup>12</sup> While American religious pluralism claims to respect difference, the examples I consider in the following chapters demonstrate the ways in which pluralism actually seeks areas of commonality between diverse belief systems. Although secularism

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<sup>12</sup> See William Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence* for an argument against the idea that religious difference produces violence in society. Cavanaugh deconstructs the category of religion, claiming that due to its connection with such secular ideologies as capitalism and nationalism that religion is not inherently capable of producing or encouraging violence.

demands neutrality and pluralism claims tolerance, I argue that both of these concepts rest within and operate from the particular framework that birthed them as political projects, Protestant Christianity. Pluralism's quest for commonality is driven by its relationship to Protestant Christianity, and results in the pluralistic project's attempt to smooth out, gloss over, or exclude minority religions' differences instead of respecting them. In the following chapters I will investigate the implications of American religious pluralism's Protestant investments for minority religions, and I will evaluate how religious pluralism's treatment of minority religions has changed between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

As a social project, American religious pluralism's means of religious management have clearly changed over the centuries to be more inclusive towards non-Christian religions. However, I argue that American pluralism remains grounded in a secularized Protestant ideology in which minority religions are evaluated based on their degree of similarity to Protestant Christianity. While pluralism has adapted to political and social pressure and to accusations of prejudice against non-Christian religions like Islam, minority religions like Neopaganism continue to encounter staunch resistance in plural America.

## Chapter 1: The Table of American Religious Pluralism

In his 1979 article, “A Sort of Republican Banquet,” influential historian of religion Martin Marty traces early American leaders’ debates over the nature of American pluralism and the necessity of public religion. He describes United States founders’ deliberation over whether the young nation would thrive by a religious consensus or by mutually respected difference. Using the eloquent metaphor of the Republican Banquet first set forth by William James in *The Will to Believe*, Marty sets up a conflict between advocates of public religion, happy to sit at a table of distinct-yet-equal belief systems, and sectarians vehemently fighting for unilateral control.<sup>13</sup> Marty details how leaders of the young nation debated the characteristics of that controversial public religion, but eventually concluded that “public faith is one big agreed-upon thing over against schismatic church religion[s]” which were unconcerned with overarching “social morale” (Marty 394). United States founders such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin deemed public religion plural. In theory, a variety of denominations would enjoy equal social respect and political rights but no one religion would be allowed more power than another.

The Republican Banquet serves as an excellent metaphor for American religious pluralism. A seat at the table comes with great privileges, but in order to earn a seat one must meet certain criteria. Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, written between 1771 and 1790, the foundational years of American democracy, “defined the substance of public religion when he spelled out ‘the essentials of every religion’” worthy of a seat at

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<sup>13</sup> The original question posed by James reads, “Why may not the world be a sort of republican banquet...where all the qualities of being respect one another’s personal sacredness, yet sit at the common table of space and time?” (270).

the banquet of American pluralism (390). The list of stipulations includes “the existence of the Deity, that he made the world, and govern’d it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to men; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter” (390).

In this chapter I compare Spiritualism and Neopaganism’s inability or unwillingness to meet the criteria of the Republican Banquet in order to argue that the criteria set forth by Franklin are situated within a narrow Protestant Christian framework. Due to American religious pluralism’s reliance on a Protestant definition of religion, it is incapable of accommodating minority religion’s ideological and organization structures which do not directly map onto Protestant ones. I argue that the emergence of movements like Spiritualism and Neopaganism threaten to upset the carefully balanced table of American pluralism. Spiritualism and Neopaganism resist Franklin’s definition of religion through the combination of diverse religious beliefs, the advancement of progressive political agendas, and the refusal to comply with Protestant norms.

I argue that Spiritualism and Neopaganism’s illegibility within American religious pluralism’s definition of religion contributes to their inability to gain respect and recognition in plural America. Through an analysis of the ways in which Spiritualism and Neopaganism challenge Franklin’s definition of American religion, I explore how Franklin’s definition of the “essential” qualities of religion still determines the ways in which American religious pluralism manages the inclusion and exclusion of minority religions. The following sections will detail the ways in which Spiritualism and Neopaganism challenge the four components of Franklin’s definition of religion: the existence of a deity, the appropriate form of service to God, the immortality of the soul,



and the necessity of punishment for sin. This chapter will provide an analysis of Neopaganism and Spiritualism's challenge to Franklin's definition of religion while Chapters two and three will investigate the social and political conflicts which arise from their illegibility within the context of American religious pluralism.

### *The Deity*

While they did not deny the existence of a deity, Spiritualists contested the Protestant Christian assertion that God is a transcendent being.<sup>14</sup> A July 1860 excerpt from the popular Spiritualist journal *Banner of Light* reads, "A belief in a personal God, as above Nature, is the cause of all error." Spiritualists' belief in the immanence of God went hand in hand with their assertion that the divine could be understood through human scientific investigation. If God was a transcendent and unknowable being, humans had no hope for answering their theological questions. For Spiritualists, solving theological mysteries with science meant focusing on direct communication with deceased spirits through trance and séances. Opponents in the Protestant church argued that Spiritualists' focus on communication with non-divine spirits distracted their adherents from the proper worship of God. Although Spiritualists did not worship the spirits they communicated with nor attributed to them any divine authority, "To hostile observers the inordinate attention given to human spirits trivialized the true point of religious service, which was to worship God" (Moore, *In Search* 46).

Spiritualism placed religious authority in the hands of the practitioner rather than in the church. Spiritualists claimed that the spirits they communicated with did have a privileged view into what lay beyond, but their messages were imperfect and therefore

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<sup>14</sup> See Isaiah 55:8-9 and Acts 17:24.

needed to be interpreted by each individual listener. Moore notes that most Spiritualist gatherings lacked coherence and championed individual interpretation and personal exploration making “diversity a virtue.” He adds, “The leaders identified most closely with the new movement emphasized unrestricted investigation rather than institutional loyalty or public commitment” (14). Spiritualists made God directly available to each individual practitioner, rendering clerical intervention unnecessary.

Mediums’ spirit messages weakened the church’s argument for reliance on Scripture and ecclesiastical authority, and Protestant ministers feared Spiritualism’s success in promoting spirit communication would “render church authority a less effective agent of social control” (45). They argued that “investigation into important theological questions without the guidance of the Scriptures or of any church was diminishing established church authority” (45). Protestant clergymen made efforts to avoid the anarchy that would ensue if their parishioners responded to the liberation and personal authority that Spiritualism promised. Some clergymen went as far as to equate mediumship with devil worship, arguing that “Satan was behind the strange happenings and the men and women who attended these séances were debasing their spiritual natures beyond all hope of salvation” (43).

Like Spiritualists, Neopagans affirm the immanence of God, and their conception of the deity is radically different from the God of Protestant Christianity which is both transcendent and male.<sup>15</sup> Franklin’s list of the “essential qualities” of religion, in which he refers to God as “he,” clearly follows Protestantism’s traditional conception of God as male. In *The Spiral Dance*, Starhawk’s classic, comprehensive account of Neopagan

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<sup>15</sup> See Genesis 1:27.

invocations, chants, blessings, spells, and myths, the famed Wiccan priestess explains that the Neopagan deity is neither transcendent nor male. Rather, Neopagans worship a Goddess who is female and immanent, synonymous with the natural world. Starhawk affirms that the Goddess, “*is* reality, the manifest deity, omnipresent and in all of life, in each of us. The Goddess is not separate from the world –She *is* the world, and all things in it” (Starhawk, *Spiral* 8). Starhawk goes on to explain that prevalent Western religious traditions’ emphasis on the male nature of the deity teaches women “to submit to male authority, to identify masculine perceptions as their spiritual ideals, to deny their bodies and sexuality, [and] to fit their insights into a male mold” (8). In an attempt to elevate female religiosity, Neopagan worship is primarily focused on the Goddess while the male God, the Hunter or Lord of the Dance of Life, is considered to be the Goddess’s consort (2). This configuration of the divine resists both Protestant Christian monotheism and patriarchy.

Starhawk traces contemporary Christian attitudes toward Witchcraft to the thirteenth century, when “Witchcraft was declared heretical” (5) and “misogyny, the hatred of women, became a strong element in medieval Christianity” (6). Pagan priestesses, referred to as Witches for their ability to harness the magical powers of the Goddess, were condemned and persecuted throughout Europe. Starhawk argues that this period of persecution contributes to contemporary negative connotations surrounding the word “witch.” Starhawk urges Neopagans to challenge these connotations, and to “reclaim the word ‘Witch’” as the “right, as women, to be powerful” (7).

### *Service to God*

Franklin declares that one “essential quality” of religion entails service to God in the form of doing good for other people. While Spiritualists were invested in doing “good,” their idea of doing good was often manifested in campaigns for social reform which contested Protestant values. Spiritualists were deeply involved with the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement because, for Spiritualists, the transmission of spiritual knowledge depended upon female agency and autonomy. Spiritualist mediums were frequently invited to speak at women’s rights conventions on the subject of gender equality. At a convention in 1857, medium Elizabeth Kingsbury declared that “Woman has been so long subject to customs degrading to herself that neither she nor the men are sensible where, and to what extent, equal rights exist.”<sup>16</sup> Spiritualists’ ability to captivate wide audiences with their supernatural spectacles and radical political messages which aimed to inspire historically subjugated groups like women threatened those seated at the table whose social power depended on the illusion of equality forwarded by the pluralistic project. Modern explains, “Spiritualism and other aspirant religions attracted crowds and individuals who considered themselves progressive reformers. Such events unsettled traditional hierarchies of religious authority, not to mention those of gender, race, and class, conditioning possibilities for the emancipations that were to follow” (Modern 4).

Through their involvement with the women’s rights movement, Spiritualists suggested “the need to transcend the social attitudes accepted by the average American citizen” (Moore, “Insiders” 394). Women publically addressing the position of women in

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<sup>16</sup> This excerpt is taken from an 1857 issue of the Spiritualist journal *Vanguard* published in Dayton, Ohio.

society challenged prevailing nineteenth-century gender norms which supported patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> Moore argues that as certain dissenting groups like Spiritualists gather “strength in any particular period, it disrupt[s] the comity necessary to the stability of American pluralism” (394). Spiritualism threatened the stability of the Republican Banquet through its disruption of gender norms and its disavowal of patriarchy. The Protestant denominations seated at the Republican Banquet relied on patriarchy to assert their social and religious authority. If a group like Spiritualists, which claimed the social and religious authority of women, was offered a seat it would compromise the authority of the male leaders seated at the table who asserted women’s inherent inferiority.

The Republican Banquet operated under rhetorics of equality, inclusion, and tolerance, but only to the extent that a group wishing to join their club conformed to the demands set forth by Franklin: “the essentials of every religion.” Spiritualists seemed to have no interest in conforming to those provisions. Protestant elites feared Spiritualists would motivate the American citizen who was complicit with patriarchy to demand social change. Because many educated and prominent members of American society chose to forgo traditional religions and adopt Spiritualism the movement appeared threatening to both religious and secular institutional powers.

Neopagan theology is similarly oriented around doing good for human society. Starhawk asserts that “Witches are bound to honor and respect all living things, and to

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<sup>17</sup> Chapter two provides a much more thorough discussion of the ways in which Spiritualists and Neopagans challenge biblical patriarchy. This aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the ways in which Spiritualists and Neopagans resist Franklin’s definition of religion. The following chapters will provide deeper analysis of Spiritualism and Neopaganism’s difficulty in gaining social acceptance and political rights in America in order to demonstrate how Franklin’s definition guides American religious pluralism’s strategies for the religious management of minority religions differently in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries.

serve the life force” (Starhawk, *Spiral* 11). This commitment to honoring life informs two of the main goals of Neopagan social and political action: to advocate for gender equality and environmental preservation. These commitments directly challenge the Protestant values of patriarchy and environmental exploitation which find their shape and justification in the bible.

Starhawk explains that the Neopagan conception of the deity as female has important social implications for men as well as women. She argues that the patriarchy endorsed by the Christian bible creates the expectation that men rule over all life in the earthly realm. This expectation not only leads to environmental exploitation and female oppression, but forces men into impractical roles as “minirulers of narrow universes” (9). Neopagans believe that returning to a pre-Christian reverence for nature orients humanity toward the mutual respect of all life. Starhawk asserts that “In areas as deeply rooted as the relations between the sexes, true social change can only come about when the myths and symbols of our culture are themselves changed (10). The next chapter will discuss in greater detail the ways in which Neopagans’ belief in the Goddess and the divinity of nature informs both their feminist political action and their efforts to preserve the natural environment.

### ***Immortal Souls***

In the mid-1850s, Americans were fascinated by the wonders of electricity, still unsure of whether it was a natural, scientific phenomenon or a demonstration of divine power. Spiritualist séances in which ghostly rappings excited attendees, furniture mysteriously flew around the room, and female mediums channeled the spirits of deceased friends and relatives drew huge audiences who sat in child-like awe of this

strange juxtaposition of scientific wonder and religious miracle. Moore notes Spiritualism “appealed not to the inward illumination of mystic experience, but to the observable and verifiable objects of empirical science” by incorporating elements of parapsychology and the frontiers of scientific experimentation (Moore, *In Search* 7).<sup>18</sup> Groundbreaking spiritualists aimed to develop a rational theology which would expose the God in science and the science in God.

Spiritualists appealed to communication with human spirits to uncover truths about the afterlife. Rather than emphasizing the importance of blind faith, Spiritualists confirmed that “spirit communication was a scientific fact” (41). Spiritualism’s integration of pseudoscientific techniques such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and mesmerism stretched the limits of what was considered religious in the mid-nineteenth century and evoked various levels of protest both from members of the Protestant church and the secular press. An article appearing in an 1856 issue of *The New York Times* cautioned its readers not to “yield to the presumptuous curiosity that tries to peer across the gulf dividing us from God’s undiscovered world.”<sup>19</sup>

There are strong resonances between the theological underpinnings of Spiritualist séances and the Neopagan ritual of Samhain. Both Spiritualists and Neopagans support the idea that the dead can have a direct impact on the lives of people on earth. Scott Cunningham’s *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* is an instructional book which details essential Wiccan theory and practices. While not considered a sacred book, Cunningham’s work is widely used among both experienced and beginner Neopagan

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<sup>18</sup> Parapsychology investigates pseudoscientific or paranormal events and abilities such as extra sensory perception (ESP), telekinesis, clairvoyance, and hypnosis.

<sup>19</sup> *The New York Times* December 1, 1856, p. 3.

practitioners. The book includes ritual incantations for Samhain, one of the eight Wiccan sabbats or “days of power” (Cunningham 63).

Cunningham explains that four of the Wiccan sabbats coincide with the winter and summer solstices and the fall and spring equinoxes, marking the beginning of each season. The four other sabbats, Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Samhain, are “associated with agriculture and the bearing cycles of animals” among ancient Celtic pagans (63). Cunningham explains that Samhain, which occurs in late October of each year, has been “heavily Christianized” and has developed into what is known in secular culture today as Halloween (64). For practicing Pagans, Samhain represents the time of the year when the veil between earthly life and the afterlife is at its thinnest.

Samhain, like the majority of Pagan sabbats and the Spiritualist séance, is led by a woman. Starhawk provides suggestions for the incantation which should be given by the priestess conducting the ritual. A portion of the incantation which has particularly strong resonances with Spiritualist séance reads:

The gates of life and death are opened; the Sun Child is conceived; the dead walk, and to the living is revealed the mystery; that every ending is but a new beginning. We meet in time out of time, everywhere and nowhere, here and there, to greet the Lord of Death who is Lord of Life, and the Triple Goddess who is the circle of rebirth. (Starhawk, *Spiral* 181)

Like the Spiritualist séance, the goal of Samhain is for practitioners to convene with the souls of their deceased loved ones. Each practitioner is empowered by the female leader to experience a direct connection with the spirits invoked, and to take comfort in the



spiritual knowledge being transmitted. Spirits are given new life through these rituals, embodied and autonomous.

In describing her experiences at a Spiral Dance led by Starhawk, anthropologist Sabina Magliocco explains that the ritual involves “a group trance experience in which participants journey to the Isle of the Dead, the Witchen otherworld, to commune with their beloved dead” (Magliocco 83). In Spiritualist séance only the medium enters a trance state while in the context of the Samhain ritual everyone present enters a collective trance. However, the rituals share a similar emphasis on the individual’s ability to achieve contact with those that have passed from this life. While Protestant Christians believe in salvation and the immortality of the soul, the Spiritualist and Neopagan belief that the spirits of deceased relatives can have an impact on the earthly realm defies Protestantism’s assertion that the sacred and the profane are distinct realms.

### ***Crime and Punishment***

While Spiritualists shared Protestant Christianity’s belief in the immortality of the soul, they neither assumed that humanity was inherently sinful nor fixated on the punishment of said sins. In fact, they rejected a number of Protestant Christian beliefs including “the Trinity, human depravity, predestination, vicarious atonement, [and] a final judgment” (Moore, *In Search* 50). Spiritualist leader Asaph Bemis Child asserts in his book, *Whatever Is, Is Right*, that “Every law of Nature is a law of God. God being infinite, there can be no nature or law outside of infinitude. God being good, all that is in God is good. So every deed of human life is good –not one is evil” (Child 2). Chapter three will provide more detail regarding Spiritualists’ perspectives on death, salvation, and spiritual fulfillment.

Like Spiritualists, Neopagans find the Protestant Christian emphasis on sin and punishment equally unhelpful in ensuring morality. Starhawk asserts that “Witches do not see justice as administered by some external authority, based on a written code or set of rules imposed from without. Instead, justice is an inner sense that each act brings about consequences that must be faced responsibly” (Starhawk, *Spiral* 12). Neopagans’ belief in the immanence of the divine in the natural world grounds their view that morality is the responsibility of the individual. Each individual must take ownership of the ways in which they interact with and treat the world around them. There is no conception of evil or temptation, just individual decisions to commit right or wrong.

### **Conclusion**

The Republican Banquet of public religion is a perfect example of American pluralism at work, and Marty clearly describes how that table was built upon inherently Protestant legs. During the early years of the nineteenth century, various Protestant Christian denominations fought each other for power. The concept of pluralism was created as a means of ensuring equality across different Protestant denominations, while secularism was developed as a strategy for maintaining Protestant hegemony in an age experiencing the creation of a multitude of religious options. In the twenty-first century, pluralism claims to advance inclusion and tolerance, rhetorically allowing space for alternative beliefs, but in reality the pluralistic mechanism continues to exclude minority religions in an attempt to maintain Protestant hegemony.

Since the nineteenth century, sectarians who were initially opponents of public religion have found their way to the table because they have recognized its political and social power. Although Spiritualists and Neopagans desired a seat at the table in order to

gain access to the same social acceptance and political rights, there were certain aspects of their ideologies that they were unwilling to change in order to secure a seat. Rather than manipulate their ideology to comply with American pluralism's definition of religion, Spiritualists and Neopagans aim to change the nature of that definition, broadening and loosening the criteria so that American religious pluralism might be truly inclusive. However, to the powers seated at the table, changing the criteria means giving up the Protestant Christian hegemony which assures their social and political power.

Neopaganism's presence in America since the early 1960s indicates that the pluralistic mechanism has not succeeded in removing it from the American religious landscape in the same way it did Spiritualism. Since the nineteenth century, diverse forms of religious belief and practice have continued to multiply, making it increasingly difficult for Protestantism to maintain its hegemony. Today, thousands of groups exist in America which do not conform to Franklin's definition of religion. However, as I will show in the chapters to follow, it is those religions which do comply with Franklin's criteria that hold the most social, political, and economic power in contemporary America.

This chapter has demonstrated how American religious pluralism's strategies for religious management operate in accordance with Franklin's definition of religion. I have argued that that definition rests within a Protestant Christian framework, and therefore is unwilling to recognize minority religions such as Spiritualism and Neopaganism which resist Protestant conceptions of a transcendent, male God figure, have different ideas regarding the immortality of souls, and do not place an emphasis on the reparation of human sin. While Franklin's list of criteria, to which American pluralism appeals each

time a new group approaches the table, has been tempered over the centuries, the basic Protestant Christian framework remains. Although the conditions set forth by Franklin have relaxed to a certain extent, minority religious groups today encounter similar struggles as Spiritualism did in attempting to gain a seat at the Republican Banquet.

The following chapters will explore in further detail the ways in which Spiritualism and Neopaganism's approaches to gender and death contribute to their inability to become accepted modes of American religiosity. I will investigate specific moments of conflict which occurred when Spiritualists and Neopagans attempted to gain a seat at the table of American pluralism. The investigations made in chapters two and three will ground the claims made in this chapter in an examination of concrete experience. I will demonstrate how Spiritualism and Neopaganism's struggles for acceptance expose the limitations of American religious pluralism, and continue to investigate how American religious pluralism's treatment of minority religions has changed since the mid-nineteenth century.

## Chapter 2: Women Strive for a Seat at the Table

One compelling parallel between nineteenth-century Spiritualism and contemporary Paganism is their assertion of female social, religious, and political authority. In both of these groups women are the arbiters of religious knowledge, and both groups publically advocate for female equality. Many Spiritualist and Neopagan women also share similar conversion narratives: choosing to leave the patriarchal religious traditions of their families, usually Judaism or Christianity, for the promise of empowerment afforded by these alternative religious movements.

In 1854 Spiritualist leader Mary Fenn Love Davis left her home, her family, and her Calvinist upbringing in western New York. Her involvement with the women's rights and Spiritualist movements had given her the confidence to leave her unhappy marriage. Love Davis traveled to Indiana where more liberal laws allowed her to obtain a divorce from her husband Samuel (Braude 117). After the divorce Love Davis continued her frequent speaking engagements at Spiritualist gatherings and women's rights conventions. She focused her public addresses on the institution of marriage, contending that marriage was the foundation of women's oppression and represented a substantial barrier to female empowerment and sovereignty.

Love Davis promoted the Spiritualist doctrine of free love (discussed further below) as a solution to what she and many other Spiritualist and women's rights leaders considered the most significant problem with the institution of marriage: the patriarchal assumption that the wife becomes her husband's domestic servant in exchange for economic support. Love Davis and other Spiritualist leaders located the root of patriarchy

in the Christian bible. Love Davis argued that marriage was the religiously justified social vehicle through which patriarchal oppression was perpetuated.

Famed Neopagan Starhawk, author of the seminal work *The Spiral Dance* and founder of numerous Pagan worship circles, underwent a similar conversion experience from the Judaism of her childhood to the feminist witchcraft for which she is well-known today. Jone Salomonsen's ethnography *Enchanted Feminism* examines Reclaiming, the politically active contemporary Pagan Witchcraft movement in San Francisco that Starhawk founded in 1979. Working at the intersection of theology and social anthropology, Salomonsen argues that "the notion of having left the Father's House (Jewish and Christian religions) and return[ing] 'home' to the Self (Goddess religion) is a basic theme" in many Neopagan accounts of conversion (Salomonsen 3).

Starhawk and other Reclaiming witches draw a direct connection between the patriarchal religious traditions which have historically dominated the American religious landscape, the oppression of women, and environmental exploitation. While Spiritualists did not share Neopagans' environmental concerns, they held similar views on the ways in which patriarchal religious traditions have contributed to female oppression. Salomonsen describes Starhawk as "a modern magician whose work is to liberate patriarchal culture and heal its wounds, at both a social and an individual level" (3). Spiritualists and Neopagans alike affirm that patriarchal religious traditions, whether they result in repressive social practices like marriage or an insistence on male religious authority, are detrimental to the social, religious, and political well-being of women.

This chapter examines how both of these groups' theological stances on the divinity of women guide their social reform efforts to abolish female oppression. I will

evaluate to what extent Spiritualism and Neopaganism's privileging of women as religious authorities and political actors contributed to the groups' unfavorable reception in religiously plural America. I will analyze the ways in which Spiritualism and Neopaganism's feminist social reform and assertions of female religious authority contributed to the movements' struggles to become established and enduring modes of American religiosity. My analysis focuses closely on Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* and Jone Salomonsen's *Enchanted Feminism*. The work of Braude, a religion scholar and historian of American religion, and Salomonsen, a theologian and anthropologist, operate under specific disciplinary perspectives and methodologies. While both books describe specific instances in which Spiritualist and Neopagan women encountered resistance in both the religious and secular spheres, neither work focuses on the nature of American religious pluralism.

I hope that by reading these books together, delving deeper into these moments of resistance, I will be able to draw out new insights into the nature of American religious pluralism in regard to its treatment of minority religions. Examining Spiritualism and Neopaganism's positions in the context of American religious pluralism goes beyond Braude and Salomonsen's analyses to generate new understandings of these movements' position in the American religious landscape. I demonstrate the ways in which American religious pluralism operates under patriarchal imperatives which rest within a majoritarian, Protestant framework. I further demonstrate and how these patriarchal imperatives dictate the ways in which American religious pluralism excludes religious movements which fail to comply with Protestant gender norms.

Both Spiritualism and Neopaganism represent significant threats to American religious pluralism due to their active social, political, and theological defiance of traditional gender roles. Through their elevation of the divine feminine these religions not only complicate the basis of patriarchy but also deconstruct the ways in which institutional religions, and by extension society itself, legitimate gendered inequalities as divinely ordained.<sup>20</sup> I argue that the pluralistic mechanism acts as a gatekeeper, preventing minority religious groups like Spiritualism and Neopaganism which contest patriarchal norms, from becoming established modes of American religiosity. Through an analysis of the efforts of Spiritualists and Neopagans to earn a seat at the table of American pluralism, I will evaluate the ways in which American pluralism's strategies for religious management have changed in regard to minority religious groups which privilege women.

In her 1989 work on Spiritualism and the nineteenth-century women's rights movement, *Radical Spirits*, Braude notes, "Spirit mediums formed the first large group of American women to speak in public or to exercise religious leadership" (Braude xix). According to the dominant nineteenth-century perspective on the nature of femininity, the cult of true womanhood, women were considered to exemplify purity, piety, passivity, and domesticity.<sup>21</sup> Capitalizing on several of these qualities, Spiritualist mediums were purported to be passive vehicles through which spiritual knowledge was transmitted.

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<sup>20</sup> In her classic ethnography on contemporary Paganism in America *Drawing Down the Moon*, Margot Adler writes that Neopagans "consider themselves priests and priestesses of an ancient European shamanistic nature religion that worships a goddess who is related to the ancient Mother Goddess in her three aspects of Maiden, Mother, and Crone" (10). She also notes that Neopagans configure their theology over and against "the major religions today" which "function to legitimate patriarchy" through their insistence on a deity which is both transcendent and male (204).

<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth analysis see Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" published in *American Quarterly*, Volume 18, Issue 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1966), 151-174.



Spiritualists argued that women's passive and inherently pious nature made them ideal candidates for connection with the afterlife through trance. Many mediums were young girls whose presence on convention platforms radiated the innocence and purity of youth.

A career as a spirit medium allowed many women to abandon their domestic responsibilities and travel the country earning public respect and financial independence. Spiritualists utilized nineteenth-century gender norms as justification for women to abandon domesticity and travel the nation disseminating spiritual knowledge to wide audiences. Instead of allowing the cult of true womanhood to continue to silence women and confine them to the home, Spiritualists actively reconfigured gender norms in order to empower women. This slowly and subtly began to shift widespread patriarchal assumptions about female gender norms in the American cultural imaginary.

Female mediums evaded the necessity of appealing to a church or a male religious authority for connection to the divine, and allowed their audiences direct access to spiritual truth through their public lectures in trance states. As a result, in the eyes of many followers, male religious education became inferior to female mediums' "knowledge of the world beyond inaccessible to conscious human beings" (87). Audiences convinced of the spiritual validity of these performances began to defer to mediums as spiritual authorities. Braude explains, "Mediumship circumvented the structural barriers that excluded women from religious leadership. By communicating directly with spirits, mediums bypassed the need for education, ordination, or organizational recognition, which secured the monopoly of male religious leaders" (84). Mediums' newly found roles as religious authorities, and the thousands of American

imaginations they captured, was threatening to Protestant churches which relied on the patriarchal assumption of male religious authority.

Spiritualist conventions, large gatherings where ideas on women's rights, abolition, and new forms of religious expression came together in the name of social reform and theological understanding, "provided an outlet for anyone who could attract an audience, with or without church sanction. As trance speakers, women who could not speak in church took advantage of a secular format to deliver a religious message" (93). However, the "secular format" of Spiritualist conventions was criticized by religious conservatives who opposed both the right of women to speak publically and the content of their messages.

Although some Spiritualist converts refrained from severing all ties with Christianity, many Spiritualists positioned themselves in staunch opposition to their Protestant Christian counterparts. Spiritualists' investment in anti-institutionalism led them to operate outside the church in such ostensibly secular spaces as women's rights conventions. Despite Spiritualists' efforts to distance themselves from the church, Protestant clergy criticized the movement in churches and through ostensibly secular mediums like newspapers. As Braude notes, "Clerical opponents cited Paul's injunction to the Corinthians that women should keep silent in church to argue both against women preaching and against women speaking in public in general" (90-91).

Clerical leaders' use of the bible as the basis for the argument against the right to female public expression clearly demonstrates the bleeding of religious patriarchal imperatives into the secular sphere, or the transformation of biblical patriarchy into social patriarchy. "Patriarchy" comes from the Greek word "*patriarkhēs*" which means "ruling

father” or the father’s authority over the women and children in his household.<sup>22</sup> While this relationship dynamic is lived out in the secular sphere, the idea of patriarchy finds its shape and justification in the bible. For example, a passage from Corinthians reads, “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ (I Cor. 11:3).<sup>23</sup> In this way patriarchy, and the hierarchical family structure in which women are subordinate to men, is considered to be the natural and divinely designed order of society.

Gender roles in which women’s sole purpose is to support men also originates in the bible as exemplified by a verse which reads, “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’” (Gen. 2:18). This verse presents a biblical mandate that a woman should be subservient to a man; to literally be his “helper” or servant. This biblical imperative carries over into the secular order and manifests in such ideologies as the cult of true womanhood, forwarding the idea that men should engage in affairs in the public sphere while women belong in the home, tending to domestic tasks in order to absolve the man of any domestic responsibilities such as child-rearing.

Prior to the nineteenth century Protestant Christianity reigned in America. As the dominant religion in America Protestantism served to organize and regulate Americans’ social, religious, and political lives. Spiritualism threatened Protestant patriarchal ideology by demonstrating women’s spiritual authority in highly public settings. This threat was compounded by Spiritualism’s progressive political claims which asserted that female oppression resulted directly from the Protestant Christian institution of marriage.

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<sup>22</sup> Taken from *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*.

<sup>23</sup> All bible passages in this thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Some Protestant clergymen responded by denouncing the validity of spirit mediums' messages, contending that female mediums must be communicating with the devil.

Moore notes that abolitionist, writer, and Congregationalist minister Reverend Charles Beecher contended that God authorized only certain channels of communication and "had strictly prohibited communication with spirits, who, it was believed, wandered through space furthering the Devil's mission of deception and destruction" (Moore, *In Search* 28).

Spiritualists encountered opposition from the ostensibly secular sphere as well. A *New York Times* editorial from June 12, 1852 criticized Spiritualism for its "subversion of all respect and devotion to the only true faith." A team of Harvard scientists who conducted a study on the validity of spirit communication by observing a variety of séances conducted by the Fox sisters concluded in their final report, "Any connection with spiritualistic circles, so called, corrupts the moral and degrades the intellect. [The scientists] therefore deem it their solemn duty to warn the community against this contaminating influence, which surely tends to lessen the truth of man and the purity of women."<sup>24</sup>

These statements, issued by a major newspaper and scientists from a highly respected institution, demonstrate how even supposedly secularized institutions retained an investment in Protestant norms and values. The report from Harvard is even more alarming in its obvious reification of biblical gender norms in its reference to "the truth of man" and "the purity of women." The statement clearly exposes how men in an influential academic institution supported male religious authority and female subordination. Newspapers and universities who openly denounced Spiritualism to the

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<sup>24</sup> This excerpt is taken from Emma Hardinge's *Modern American Spiritualism* (187).

public were components of the pluralistic mechanism which would not accept or support religious movements which defied Protestant gender norms.

Braude argues, “Because speaking in public contradicted biblical mandate, it was viewed as a subversion of God’s intended ordering of the relations of men and women on earth” (Braude 91). These examples of clerical and secular opposition expose the ways in which biblical order continued to dictate the social order of the nineteenth century despite efforts by radicals to break from patriarchal tradition. Spiritualist leaders responded to their opponents by vehemently defending the ways in which their own interpretation of scripture supported women’s rights, arguing, “In every work and reform whose united object it is to correct the evils existing in society should women be allowed to labor by the side of man. God created her on an equality with him, and endowed her with the same glorious rights and privileges, the same capacities and power, to advance His kingdom.”<sup>25</sup> Spiritualists advanced their own interpretations of scripture in order to assert the social equality of women and to argue for their role in fulfilling God’s purpose for humankind. In this way Spiritualist mediums challenged social norms embedded in Protestant Christian ones by asserting female religious authority in the public domain and defying biblical order which consigned them to the service of men. They constantly confronted opponents in the Protestant church seeking to bolster religious conservatism and disparage Spiritualists for their defiant messages.

For a short time in the mid-nineteenth century, Spiritualists succeeded in overcoming hostile attacks from the church, the media, and the scientific community. Mediums used their spiritual authority to gain the attention of the American public and

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<sup>25</sup> This passage was taken from *Twelve Messages from the Spirit of John Quincy Adams Through Joseph D. Stiles, Medium to Josiah Brigham* (348-349).

disseminate their radical social, religious, and political views. Braude explains, “Spiritualism held a special attraction for activists who felt oppressed by the traditional roles assigned to men and women, found the entire social order in need of revision, and condemned the churches as perpetuators of repressive conventions” (2). Spiritualism, a radical new form of religious belief and practice, found a happy home in the hearts of many social reformers who agreed that women’s position in society should be equal to men’s. Spiritualists were not reluctant to assign blame to the Protestant church for what they perceived as Protestant norms which had grown into problematic social ones. They exposed the ways in which biblical patriarchy, which supported the Protestant Christian clergy’s authority, was reorganized into social patriarchy which maintained men’s dominance over women in the home and in public.

One of the main targets of Spiritualist dissent was the institution of marriage. Male and female Spiritualists alike considered marriage to be an oppressive arrangement antithetical to human nature. Braude notes, “During a period that placed marriage on a pedestal and banned the discussion of sexuality in public and often in private as well, Spiritualists insisted on a frank and open analysis of the personal, political, and economic implications of all personal and sexual relations” (118). Spiritualists identified marriage as an institution which had “the weight of the state behind slavery to oppressive customs” (118) and noted that “both the state and church granted husbands unlimited sexual access to their wives” (119).

Spiritualist leaders denounced the institution of marriage as a commoditized relationship in which women’s bodies were sold in exchange for economic support. They pointed to the ways in which marriage had become an integrated and assumed part of

American social life through political and religious justifications which espoused both its legal and spiritual value. Spiritualists asserted the importance of women's financial independence prior to entering into a union, and spirit mediums served as viable examples of female financial independence. Besides their vehement critique of the institution of marriage, female mediums and reformers associated with the Spiritualist movement also constituted a threat to social norms because they inspired women to take a stand against domestic and social abuse. Braude argues "spirit mediumship emboldened women to overcome internal fears about their capabilities as well as external social strictures" (96).

A rallying point for conservative opponents was the Spiritualist doctrine of free love. Mary Fenn Love Davis, along with many other nineteenth-century Spiritualist leaders, promoted free love as an alternative to the institution of marriage. For Spiritualists, free love "referred to the belief that the morality of sexual intercourse depended on freely experienced, compelling mutual desire—that is, love—not on whether the parties were married" (128). Religious and political conservatives presented the term "free love" as evidence of the Spiritualist reformers' moral ambiguity. While for Spiritualists, free love constituted a solution to what they argued was the inherently abusive nature of marriage, for their conservative counterparts, free love stood for the deconstruction of biblical and social gender norms, and thus society's total moral breakdown.

While religious conservatives who "feared free love believed that it threatened the family and the structure of society" (128), for Spiritualist reformers "free love meant the freedom of women to refuse their husband's sexual advances, a potentially powerful

source of autonomy in an age without contraception and with little notion of sexual satisfaction for women” (128). Instead of refuting the Christian idea of the procreative function of sexual intercourse, Spiritualist free love just altered it slightly. They believed sexual intercourse was purely for reproduction but only with the woman’s consent, asserting that free love would lead to better physical and mental health for the woman whose body would no longer be ravaged by multiple pregnancies in a small number of years.

Spiritualists sought to reform marriage in a way that resisted patriarchy and affirmed the mutual equality of both men and women. Rather than representing an economic or legal agreement in which a wife was given to her husband as a piece of property, or a social contract in which the wife was placed under the husband’s control, Spiritualists’ idea of marriage was one in which both parties entered willingly into an equal and mutually beneficial partnership. One Spiritualist, Mrs. H.M.F. Brown, performed marriage ceremonies for the Religio-Philosophical Society with a Spiritualist edge. According to Braude, Brown turned “the meaning of the marriage ceremony on its head by making it an occasion for the declaration of woman’s freedom rather than her subjugation” (132). Not only did this practice challenge traditional views on the purpose of marriage as a contract in which the woman was placed in the service and care of the man, it placed a woman in the role of a religious authority with the power to conduct a marriage ceremony, a power usually held by males.

Despite finding audiences sympathetic to their ideas on social reform throughout the United States, Spiritualist leaders encountered resistance from the police and legal system as well as the aforementioned opposition from religious conservatives and



members of the press and academic community. One particular Spiritualist leader, Lois Waisbrooker, was eventually arrested for publishing her radical views on sexuality and marriage.<sup>26</sup> Braude describes Waisbrooker as a woman wholeheartedly “devoted to the intertwined reforms of women’s rights, free love, and Spiritualism” (137). Waisbrooker challenged the Protestant idea that women’s “sexual desire reflected a lack of virtue” (138). She believed that because desire was a naturally occurring human impulse, it must be a part of God’s intention for the natural world and human life. She used Spiritualism’s claim to provide direct access to spiritual truth to support her argument that God meant for human sexuality to be celebrated.

Braude writes that “Waisbrooker’s insistence that human sexuality must be accepted in order to allow for self-respect shows the distance Spiritualism had traveled from the religious worldviews that preceded and surrounded it. Protestant orthodoxy asserted that salvation required a consciousness of oneself as inherently sinful by virtue of one’s descent from Adam through the tainted process of sexual reproduction” (138). In her book *My Century Plant*, Waisbrooker draws a direct connection between the divine forces behind spirit communication, the human sex drive, and religious enthusiasm. She considered her purpose in life to be the simultaneous liberation of men and women from unhealthy marriages and the conversion of people from “the dogma of conventional religion” (Waisbrooker 10).

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<sup>26</sup> Leigh Schmidt’s *Heavenly Bride* examines another groundbreaking yet nearly forgotten social reformer, Ida C. Craddock. Schmidt describes Craddock as a “secular freethinker, a bookish folklorist, a spiritual eclectic, and a civil liberties advocate” (x). Craddock was also one of America’s first sex therapists who penned six pamphlets containing advice for married couples seeking to strengthen their sexual relationship. Schmidt notes that these pamphlets “were suppressed as obscene literature” by “America’s moral guardsmen” who “made it very difficult for her to print and circulate her views” (x).

A Kansan man wrote to Waisbrooker's newspaper, *Foundation Principles*, in 1892 seeking advice on his extramarital affair. Waisbrooker published a response in which she encouraged him to find the courage to leave his loveless marriage. Waisbrooker sympathized with the woman with whom he was having the affair, knowing that social custom would dictate that the woman suffer great social and economic hardship should their affair be revealed. Waisbrooker writes, "Should exposure follow, you, a man, can stand it, but where would she be in the eyes of the community? Do you love her and yet would subject her, through her love for you, to such a risk?" (240). As a result of this published correspondence, Waisbrooker was arrested under the Comstock Antiobscenity Act. Authorities took her published words as evidence of her unorthodox, and indeed dangerous, opinions on human sexuality which challenged the institution of marriage (Braude 139).

Authorities from all manner of institutions made efforts to silence Spiritualists' messages on women's rights. Spiritualists refused to conform to nineteenth-century Protestant gender norms, and as a result, suffered public denunciations and even legal sanctions. These examples make it clear that the Spiritualist movement's unconventional views on gender were a main factor in its failure to gain a seat at the table of American pluralism. American pluralism, steeped in Protestant assumptions on what an acceptable religion looks and sounds like, fought Spiritualism from multiple angles until it disintegrated into a memory of nineteenth-century American religiosity. American pluralism was not ready to give up its patriarchal framework in order to allow a movement so at odds with its ideology to become established.

Spiritualism failed to become a permanent fixture of the American religious landscape: it declined rapidly in the late nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> It could be argued that Spiritualism was simply a passing fancy of the nineteenth-century American imagination, captivated by scientific anomalies and political activism. However, I follow Braude and Pike by arguing that Spiritualism did in fact leave a lasting mark on the United States cultural imaginary due to its intrepid efforts to combine scientific experimentation, progressive politics, and unconventional pursuits of sacred knowledge. It worked to transform patriarchal assumptions which contributed to the oppression of women and paved the way for future religious movements with alternative and innovative beliefs. Unfortunately it was precisely those daring endeavors which threatened the powers behind the American pluralistic mechanism and caused it to strike a quick and deadly blow to the Spiritualist movement.

There are strong resonances between the ways in which Spiritualists' and Neopagans' belief in the spiritual authority of women informs their political strategies for female empowerment. Similar to the spiritual authority of female mediums, contemporary manifestations of Pagan practice such as the Reclaiming community hold female priestesses superior to male priests (Salomonsen 6). Salomonsen explains that Neopagan priestesses' spiritual knowledge stems from "personal revelations, everyday experiences, common sense, or a good library" (7) rather than an authoritative text. Reclaiming bases its spiritual and political beliefs on Starhawk's definition of contemporary Witchcraft, or "the claiming back of an ancient Goddess religion reinterpreted through the lenses of feminism" (40). Reclaiming combines Pagan theology,

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<sup>27</sup> The reasons for Spiritualism's decline will be discussed in greater detail in the third chapter.

feminism, and political activism to advance their ideas on how contemporary society has strayed from its original purpose, and to advance their vision for a world guided by the sacred feminine.<sup>28</sup>

In her 1987 work *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* Starhawk explains her belief that patriarchal religious traditions justify the exploitation of nature and women's bodies through scripture. For example, a passage from Genesis reads, "God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28). Starhawk explains that Christian creation stories portray human reproduction and domination over nature as divine imperatives. When those divine imperatives manifest in secular society they result in environmental ruin and female subjugation.<sup>29</sup> The Reclaiming community contests the biblically justified argument for the exploitation of women's bodies and natural resources for human progress. Instead they seek to realign contemporary religiosity with a feminine conception of God/Goddess which respects nature as something to be worshipped rather than exploited. Their emphasis on the Goddess inverts traditional religions' conception of

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<sup>28</sup> Chapter 8 of Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon* provides a thorough analysis of Neopaganism's relationship to second wave feminism (178-239).

<sup>29</sup> Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* is a foundational text for studies which explore the relationship between Judeo-Christian patriarchy and the social oppression of women. Daly argues that conceiving of God as a verb, rather than as a transcendent *thing*, can provide women the means to move beyond objectification and thus patriarchy. Neopagans follow Daly's argument that "Various theologies that hypostatize transcendence, that is, those which in one way or another objectify 'God' as *being*, thereby attempt in a self-contradictory way to envisage transcendent reality as infinite. 'God' then functions to legitimate the existing social, economic, and political status quo, in which women and other victimized groups are subordinate" (19).

God as male and challenges biblical gender norms which conceive of women as tools for reproduction.<sup>30</sup>

Starhawk, whose writings continue to serve as cornerstones of contemporary Pagan practice, points to the degradation of the natural environment and the subjugation of women as symptoms of a society grounded in patriarchy. In *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, Politics* Starhawk characterizes Judeo-Christian patriarchy as a “consciousness of estrangement” which emphasizes fragmentation, alienation, and the separation of the sacred and the profane into distinct realms (Starhawk, *Dreaming* 5). This separation creates the idea that God the father rules over human life and that humans should rule over the earth. The emphasis on God as a male figure provides further justification for the patriarchal assumptions that men are superior to women. Starhawk locates the beginning of society’s downfall at the institutionalization of monotheistic, patriarchal religions which conceive of God as a transcendent, male figure. Starhawk and the Reclaiming community draw from a simultaneous critique of patriarchy and majority religions like Protestant Christianity to argue that only by forging a connection with nature and realizing the importance of the sacred feminine will the world begin to heal.

Starhawk and the Reclaiming community contend that “to become de-possessed from patriarchy is the struggle of feminism” (Salomonsen 80). Salomonsen makes a critical intervention in Starhawk’s theological argument, explaining that “The concept of god that she criticizes is a certain interpretation of the Jewish divinity, Yahweh.”

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<sup>30</sup> Wendy Griffin has explored the ways in which Neopagan women reconfigure gender roles through collective ritual. Her article “Crafting the Boundaries,” which appears in her edited volume *Daughters of the Goddess*, analyzes the ways in which Neopagan women “transform gender identity by subverting traditional meaning and representation of what it means to be female, simultaneously creating new definitions of appropriate gendered behavior for women. This process redefines the boundaries of what is acceptable” (85).

Salomonsen argues that Starhawk “takes it for granted that this theistic, transcendental figure also represents Christian versions of the godhead” (80). Salomonsen explains that the patriarchal God figure that Starhawk works to combat stems from the Judaism of her childhood, but the type of patriarchal God she points to can easily be understood as the Christian God as well. A group like Reclaiming, which dabbles in the occult, vehemently endorses a reorganization of contemporary religiosity around the sacred feminine, and inserts itself into the political sphere threatens both secular and religious institutions whose power relies on patriarchy.

Reclaiming began as a way to strengthen and spread Neopagan knowledge and feminist ideology throughout the San Francisco Bay area. The community’s commitment to feminist witchcraft soon inspired many of its members to begin participating in local groups engaged in political activism. The main political concerns of Reclaiming members include female social and political equality and environmental preservation. Magliocco explains how Reclaiming’s theological investment in feminist witchcraft informs and inspires their political action: “The visceral feeling of connection between all things and their inseparability is an important factor which motivates many Pagans to undertake political action in a personal way. It is at the root of Reclaiming’s theology of political commitment. If everything is connected, then, according to Pagan theology/theology, we all bear a responsibility for making the world a better place” (Magliocco 159).<sup>31</sup>

Neopagans’ belief in the interconnection of all life prompts them to advocate for mutual respect between the sexes and between humans and the natural world.

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<sup>31</sup> Magliocco explains that Reclaiming prefers the term “thealogy” as a feminist alternative to the male-centered “theology” (82).

Reclaiming's political involvement began in 1981 during a protest in California's Diablo Canyon to prevent the opening of a nuclear power plant (Salomonsen 41). This shift from being a series of loosely affiliated circles of Pagan worship to the integration of organized politics represented the advent of a "new coalition between paganism and political activism" (42). Reclaiming asserted an active politics of resisting patriarchy, "combining an 'anarchist political agenda' of equality, diversity and local autonomy with a 'feminist liberation agenda' of empowering women, both in public and domestic spheres" (35). Reclaiming's projects in the San Francisco Bay area include running food pantries and drug rehabilitation centers, conservation projects aimed at preserving the California redwoods, and "demonstrating against the spread of global capitalism" (Magliocco 82). Members like Starhawk travel the country giving lectures on the importance of female social equality and sustainable environmental practice.

Neopagan festivals are important spaces for Neopagans to hone their ideas on feminist theology and politics and to formulate their unique religious identities. The week-long festivals described by Pike in *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves* are usually held on private campgrounds or at state parks. Festivals allow Neopagans to create spaces which are distinctly different from the spaces of their daily lives; spaces which Neopagans believe to be ridden with social and political problems stemming from dominant religions like Protestant Christianity. Pike notes, "Neopagans carve out a place for themselves on the American religious landscape by creating boundaries to distinguish the festival world from the mundane world and Neopagan communities from their Christian neighbors" (Pike, *Earthly* 122).

While it might seem like festivals are merely reclusive spaces in which to escape the pressures of the outside world, I argue that festivals serve as spaces in which Neopagans come together to strengthen both their individual and collective perspectives on how they can combat social patriarchy and environmental degradation. Even though Neopagan festivals do not aim to disseminate ideas on social reform like Spiritualist conventions, Neopagan festivals are open to anyone who would like to participate and function as antinomian spaces in which social and political activism can take root.

Unfortunately, festivals are usually met with suspicion and persecution from neighboring communities who misunderstand and fear Neopagan practice. Despite Neopagans' attempts to create an air of transparency and inclusion, festivals are often "vandalized by teenagers and searched late at night by local police" (87). Pike describes one incident in which undercover police officers investigated a festival held at Yellowwood State Forest in southern Indiana (88-9). The police officers told local newspapers that they feared festival participants were conducting satanic rituals, engaging in cannibalism, and abusing children.<sup>32</sup>

Pike traces these wild accusations to social stigmas against Neopagans generated by the media and pop culture which tend to conflate Neopagans with Satanists. The most recent resurgence of the condemnation of Pagans as Satanists in American society occurred in the 1980s. The phenomenon now referred to as the Satanic Panic began in conservative Christian communities following the publication of a number of books

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<sup>32</sup> S. Zoreh Kermani's *Pagan Family Values*, an ethnographic study of the ways in which Pagan families transmit their beliefs to their children, devotes several pages to a discussion of "custody cases that pit a Pagan parent against a parent of a more common religion." Kermani argues, "Most people will tolerate other Judeo-Christian traditions and those very similar, but Paganism is not so well accepted and is often confused with Satan worship" (142). Chapter 5 of Carol Barner-Barry's *Contemporary Paganism: Minority Religions in a Majoritarian America* examines several Neopagan child custody disputes in detail.



documenting ritual Satanic abuse.<sup>33</sup> In his 1993 work *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend*, sociologist Jeffery S. Victor describes how sensationalist media accounts fueled many Americans' paranoia that Satanists' and other occult groups had pervasive control over political and educational systems and were attempting to persuade unwitting individuals to aid them in the systematic degradation of society through such practices as the ritual abuse of children.

The outcry from conservative Christians spread through the media and began to influence the ways in which mainstream Americans viewed practitioners of occult religions. Victor notes, “[Neopagans] are common secondary targets of the moral crusaders, who sometimes make no distinction between these occult enthusiasts and imaginary criminal Satanists” (Victor 250). The statements made by the police officers investigating the Neopagan festival at Yellowwood State Park demonstrates that the paranoia which associates Neopagans with Satanism has pervaded not only ordinary Americans' perception of Neopagans, but influences institutional responses to Neopagans as well.

Pike writes, “Films and T.V. shows which portray Neopagans, especially Witches, as satanic, encourage fear of difference” (Pike, *Earthly* 91-2). Stories of evil witches are prevalent in the American cultural imaginary, appearing frequently in horror movies and ghost stories. Children dressed up like witches on Halloween is one example of the ways in which American culture appropriates Neopagan ideology and ritual, and manipulates their religiosity into a social stigma which promotes unknowability and fear. Some Neopagan communities attempt to alleviate these social stigmas by referring to

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<sup>33</sup> See Mike Warnke's *The Satan Seller* and Michelle Smith's *Michelle Remembers*.

themselves as, for example, folklorists, rather than the more “culturally charged identity” of Witches or Pagans (116). Due to cultural stigmas and social marginalization female witches, highly respected members of the Neopagan community, become feared and condemned as devilish consorts. Neopaganism, which names its religious authorities “Witches,” has little hope of gaining respect in American pluralism due to unjust and inaccurate yet pervasive historical and social stigmas.<sup>34</sup>

I believe that nineteenth-century Spiritualist activists like Mary Fenn Love Davis would agree with Starhawk’s argument that “A model where a male deity governs the cosmos from outside serves to legitimize men’s control of social institutions and the subordination of women” (Salomonsen 81). In America’s majoritarian religions like Judaism and Protestant Christianity, traditions which Spiritualist and Neopagan women chose to forgo and directly challenge, “people are taught that truth is revealed to certain chosen, great Men and confined to their Word. This Word—which mediates between the godhead and the humans— becomes ultimate authority” (81). Instead, both Spiritualists and Neopagans affirm the feminine’s unique capacity for religious truth and the immanence of the sacred: Spiritualists believe in the ability for spirits to communicate through human mediums and Neopagans believe in the immanence of God in nature.

This chapter has argued that minority religions’ theological, social, and political positions on gender are an important factor in their failure to become established in the context of American religious pluralism. Due to American religious pluralism’s investment in Protestant patriarchal gender norms, groups like Spiritualism and

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<sup>34</sup> Loretta Orion’s *Never Again the Burning Times* explores the ways in which American Neopagans understand themselves as descendants of those persecuted and killed during the European witch hunts between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Neopaganism which privilege women are met with staunch resistance. Spiritualist and Neopagan women's struggles to gain social acceptance and political respect share important similarities, but are ultimately different. Opponents of the Spiritualist movement acted from religious institutions in the form of Protestant churches and from purportedly secular institutions such as national newspapers and prestigious universities, while the resistance to Neopaganism I have discussed in this chapter stems from both local actors and organizations like local police. The next chapter will detail a specific conflict between Neopaganism and a United States political institution.

As the ideologies of secularism and pluralism developed in American culture, it became more controversial for secular institutions to directly contest minority religious groups. Mounting pressure to become more tolerant and inclusive have forced American religious pluralism's strategies for religious management to adapt to more a liberalized political climate. While during the nineteenth century Protestantism thrived in the church and secularized Protestantism influenced secular institutions, twenty-first century American religious pluralism is more careful to disguise its latent Protestantism.

However, the social stigmas which regard Neopagans as Satanists are evidence that Protestant assumptions remain strong and well-dispersed throughout American society. Without direct institutional opposition, minority religious groups like Neopaganism have more freedom, but are still not fully accepted in plural America. Even though Spiritualism's radical beliefs prevented it from becoming a sustained form of American religion, its courage to contest the patriarchal framework of American culture made it possible for future manifestations of feminine religiosity like Neopaganism to continue its mission. Due to the ever-changing nature of American religious pluralism,

Neopagans have further opportunities to demonstrate their religious and political ideals to wider and more willing audiences.

### Chapter 3: Death Rituals in Plural America

This chapter will examine the limitations American religious pluralism places on minority religions, specifically in relation to views on death and death rituals. I argue that in addition to requiring certain theological structures and gender values, minority religions must also have certain beliefs and practices concerning death in order to be accepted in the American religious landscape. Death is an inevitable and particularly difficult topic to contend with in secular America. This difficulty stems from the fact that many religions choose to commemorate death materially, symbolically, and publically in a country invested in maintaining secular and plural religious order. Funeral processions line streets and stop traffic. Flowers appear alongside highways where fatal accidents occurred. Memorial walks for victims of disease are held annually in American cities and parks. However, in a plural society which demands religious equality death rituals must occupy certain bounded spaces and take on a more subdued character in order to avoid accusations of religious privilege.

In her 2005 book, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan evaluates the meaning of religious freedom in America through a close examination of a court case in which she provided expert testimony as a scholar of religion and law.<sup>35</sup> The 1999 case of *Warner vs. Boca Raton* involved a group of Florida citizens of various religious denominations who had erected vertical memorials to their deceased loved ones, defying the regulations of the Boca Raton cemetery. The cemetery's rules specified that any plaques or memorials needed to be horizontal and flat in order to

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<sup>35</sup> For other studies of religious freedom see *After Secular Law* edited by Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert A. Yelle and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo; Sarah Barringer Gordon's *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America*; and David Sehat's *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*.

convey a sense of uniformity and to make it easier to care for the cemetery's grounds. The plaintiffs' memorials consisted of elaborate configurations of statues, ornaments, flowers, and trinkets, all of which, according to cemetery and city officials, cluttered the area and directly defied cemetery regulations. After being issued several notices to remove the memorials, the citizens brought the case to court, arguing that the cemetery's rules violated their religious freedom.

Sullivan and the other religious experts in the Warner case were asked to determine whether "the plaintiffs' practices were what they claimed to be –that is, whether they were authentic Christian and Jewish religious practices" (Sullivan, *Impossibility* 102). Experts were "also asked how courts should generally distinguish which practices are sufficiently important to count in a scheme for the legal protection of the free exercise of religion" (102). The fact that whether a particular form of religious expression is deemed acceptable in a court of law is dependent upon the evaluation of a few experts demonstrates the problematic way American religious pluralism functions in the legal system. Sullivan and other religious "experts," including a rabbi and a priest, were brought in by the plaintiffs' lawyer and asked to assess whether the plaintiff's memorials conformed to traditional Jewish and Christian memorial rituals (5, 11-12). The language of "sufficiently important" implies that these outside parties were inappropriately tasked with making value judgments in order to determine whether these memorials mattered enough to be protected under the First Amendment.

The testimony of a few experts cannot adequately address the complexities of death memorialization. In attempting to evaluate the relative validity of the religious expressions in question, American religious pluralism, as it acts in the legal system, seeks

over-simplified answers to immensely complex questions. While Sullivan admits how difficult this type of reductionist assessment is to make for a religion scholar, she admits that she became captivated by the case itself and believes it illuminates various controversial aspects of the intersection of religion and politics both in America and beyond.

Many of the plaintiffs testified that they were initially attracted to the cemetery because it was not associated exclusively with a particular religious community” (37). While the cemetery was officially plural and nonsectarian, the religions present in the cemetery were not representative of the diversity of belief which characterizes the American religious landscape. On the contrary, the memorials erected were exclusively Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish emblems; statues of Jesus and Mary, the Star of David, and the like. Unfortunately for the plaintiffs in the Warner case, their particular form of expression was found not to be protected under the First Amendment. Given the federal court’s ruling in favor of the city of Boca Raton, Sullivan ultimately argues that “legally encompassing the religious ways of people in an intensely pluralist society is most likely impossible” (138). This chapter uses Sullivan’s conclusion as a jumping off point to examine the possibility of religious freedom for members of minority religions whose material and symbolic approaches to death fall far outside of the mainstream.

The Warner case points to an interesting theme of American pluralism I have been tracing: uniformity. American pluralism operates under certain understandings of what religion is, what it looks like, and how it must be enacted and represented. I argue that American religious pluralism’s insistence on uniformity is situated within a framework which privileges majority religions and discriminates against religious

minorities whose responses to death do not conform to American pluralistic norms. The Boca Raton cemetery is a tangible example of the conception of American religious pluralism this thesis argues for, one that on the surface demonstrates equality and inclusion, but actually works to maintain the hegemony of certain majority religions.

Sullivan's work engages with the complex and problematic nature of American religious freedom and encourages her reader to think about the ways in which religious freedom can inflict violence on Americans' religious expressions. I want to use Sullivan's work to think about the ways in which American religious pluralism, despite claims to support equality and inclusion, manages and restricts minority religions' responses to death. I argue that what American religious pluralism considers to be appropriate material, symbolic, and public memorializations are heavily influenced by Protestant Christian norms. The Protestant assumptions which underlie American religious pluralism's management of death ritual results in violence committed against members of minority religions who choose to commemorate their deceased loved ones in ways inconsistent with Protestantism.

First, I will unpack Spiritualism séance practices in which spirit mediums act as channels through which deceased spirits might communicate with their loved ones. I will consider the ways in which Spiritualists' views on death and the afterlife challenge those of Protestant Christianity. Next, I turn to a contemporary conflict concerning minority religions' rights in which a deceased veteran's widow's request for the Pagan pentacle to appear on his grave marker in a veterans' cemetery was denied. I analyze Roberta Stewart's fight for religious freedom in terms of the institutional resistance she encountered as a result of cultural stigmas against Neopaganism. A critical comparison of



the problems Spiritualists and Neopagans experienced in their efforts to conduct death rituals will point to some ways in which American religious pluralism's treatment of minority religions has changed.

During ritual séances, entranced Spiritualist mediums transmitted messages to audiences from their departed loved ones. Spirit messages were not believed to contain divine truths or theological revelations; they spoke to ordinary human preoccupations with death and the afterlife. Spirits would often detail their journey to the "other side" and describe in detail the material conditions of the afterlife. The opportunities séances presented for direct communication with someone who had passed into the unknown was very appealing to many nineteenth-century religious seekers. The fact that spiritualist leaders appeared to demonstrate empirical proof of these spiritual encounters provided the movement with a great sense of legitimacy.<sup>36</sup>

Spiritualists asserted the "empirical proof of an afterlife" over and against the Protestant emphasis on blind faith (Moore, *In Search* 32). Defying traditional Christian calls to *belief* in heaven, Spiritualists used séances as scientific evidence of a celestial afterlife. The spirits they communicated with were strictly ones "who had once lived on this earth" (37), and therefore were thought to have authoritative knowledge of the transition from this life to the next. The certainty afforded by these spirit encounters was comforting to converts from traditional religions like Protestantism which traditionally relied on "believing-without-seeing." Spiritualists embraced the social and cultural changes precipitated by secularization, combining emerging interests in science and technology with sustained commitments to theological questions. Many converts were

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<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed treatment of Spiritualists' scientific/empirical approach to religion see *In Search of White Crows* p. 19, 31-5, 62, and 141 and *Radical Spirits* p. 4-5.

dissatisfied “with traditional Christian accounts of life after death” (51) and found Spiritualism’s promise to convey clear and concise information about the afterlife reassuring to nineteenth-century desires for rational, scientific evidence of divine truths.

In contrast to Protestantism’s focus on salvation, Spiritualism brought attention back down to the earthly realm, imbuing ordinary experiences with spiritual enchantment. They sought empirical evidence of the divine at work in the natural world and promoted the idea of an imminent rather than a transcendent God. Moore explains, “In emphasizing divine immanence, spiritualists wished to prove that the world was in its entirety open to scientific investigation. To talk about a God that existed before all other life and was radically separate from all other substance was to demand some category over and above Nature” (53). Moore goes on to explain:

Transforming a concern for man’s spiritual nature into an empirical inquiry into the nature of spirits, they built a belief in the afterlife upon such physical signs as spirits from another realm could muster. Spiritualists, in their effort to make spirit communication credible, never wavered from four principles: a rejection of supernaturalism, a firm belief in the inviolability of natural law, a reliance on external facts rather than on an inward state of mind, and a faith in the progressive development of knowledge. In upholding such principles, they struck a responsive chord among many Americans who had earlier rejected orthodox Christian theology partially because they wanted to believe that life posed a limited set of questions with rational, discoverable answers. (19)

Rather than simply put a scientific spin on Protestant Christian theology, Spiritualists developed their own unique and detailed conception of life after death.

Spiritualists believed in a pseudo-shamanic, layered afterlife, with various realms representing different stages of one's spiritual progression. Spiritualists claimed that the "astral bodies of the departed looked in these places very much like their earth bodies had looked except that physical disabilities had disappeared" (54). In opposition to Protestant orthodoxy, there was no hell or punishment for sin in Spiritualist theology. Moore notes, "Most spiritualist writers did not believe that people chose to sin and were for that reason accountable before God," nor did they "recognize Christ's role in human salvation" (56). Instead, "responsibility for self-improvement rested squarely on the individual" (56-7). Rather than death dissolving the individual's particularity, the quest for self-actualization which began on earth could be continued in the afterlife, and the spirits who communicated during séances confirmed that fact.

This popular new movement's direct contestation of Protestant Christian belief in sin and the redemptive power of Jesus Christ incited a great deal of hostility both in the church and in various areas of American public culture in which secularized Protestantism thrived. Prominent Protestant ministers and advocates of Protestant orthodoxy began to publish scathing accusations of Spiritualism in national newspapers. Gerrit Smith, an influential abolitionist and Liberty Party leader who campaigned three times for the United States presidency warned "that spiritualism is fraught with a great evil to those who are foolish enough to welcome it as a new religion, and a substitute for Christianity" (50).

Spiritualists' disregard for evil, their denial of the existence of hell, and their lack of concern for the punishment of sin posed a serious threat to Protestant Christian authority since the Protestant church's authority rested on the belief that clerical

mediation and repentance for sin was needed in order for souls to reach heaven. The clergy attacked spiritualist mediums as frauds and claimed that Spiritualism represented total moral depravity (45). Finally, in the late nineteenth century, plagued by numerous fraud scandals, plummeting numbers of séance attendees, and lacking the scientific credentials it desired, the Spiritualist movement was close to complete dissolution.

Swedenborgians, a religious group with similar beliefs to Spiritualism regarding spirit communication, has succeeded in carving out a space in contemporary plural America.<sup>37</sup> I argue that Swedenborgians' acceptance in the context of American religious pluralism is most likely due to the fact that Swedenborgian theology was more closely aligned than Spiritualism with nineteenth-century Protestantism. Swedenborgians, or members of The New Church, believed that God had spoken to the Swedish mystic Swedenborg in order to confirm the second coming of Christ and to declare that God was to be worshiped in the form of one person: Jesus Christ. Although Swedenborgians denied the Trinity, they did believe in sin and the existence of hell (Carroll 78). The New Church believed that Swedenborg was the only person capable of direct communication with the spiritual world and therefore considered him to be the church's religious authority.

Spiritualists rejected the idea that spirits communicated with only one person, affirming instead that many spirit mediums were capable of such communication. Spiritualists believed that the existence of many spirit mediums prevented one person

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<sup>37</sup> The Swedenborgian Church has an international presence with a number of churches dispersed across the United States. For a comprehensive list of Swedenborgian ministries see the following link: <http://www.swedenborg.org/Ministries/RegionalAssociations.aspx>

from becoming the sole religious authority.<sup>38</sup> Carroll explains that “New Church leaders opposed widespread, open, and intentionally sought communication with spirits and denounced the Spiritualist movement as a threat to the order” (30). It is most likely due to the New Church’s theological proximity to Protestantism and their strong institutional structure which allowed it to become an integrated part of plural America as evidenced by its continued existence in the United States today.

Spiritualism’s failure to become an integrated part of plural America was partly due to its unconventional views on death and the afterlife. Spiritualists’ belief that the spirits of deceased loved ones were accessible and could provide theological guidance threatened to put too much authority in the hands of individual practitioners. Séances during which attendees were confronted with material proof of deceased spirits’ agency through strange noises and levitating objects was too far removed from the Protestant mainstream to gain lasting influence.

Today, American religious pluralism continues to operate under Protestant assumptions of what are considered appropriate responses to death. Rather than operating directly from the Protestant church, Neopagans encounter resistance from ostensibly secularized institutions like the United States military. The following example will demonstrate the ways in which American religious pluralism’s Protestant investments dictate the ways in which in secular institutions manage the religious expression of minority religions like Neopaganism.

After Sergeant Patrick Stewart was killed in Afghanistan in September of 2005, his widow Roberta wanted the symbol of his chosen religion to appear on his grave

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<sup>38</sup> For a thorough treatment of the relationship between Swedenborgians and Spiritualists see chapter 2 of Bret E. Carroll’s *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*.

marker at Fernley, Nevada's Veterans Memorial Cemetery. The Department of Veteran Affairs (V.A.), however, denied Roberta's request because the symbol she wanted was not an emblem of belief approved by the United States military. Although another soldier killed in the same helicopter as Stewart was promptly given a Christian cross for his grave marker, Roberta was told her husband's grave would have to be left bare.

The symbol Roberta wanted, the symbol which represented her and her deceased husband's religion, was the Wiccan pentacle. The pentacle is a five pointed star, the four lower points representing the four elements (earth, air, water, and fire) and the top point representing God or Spirit. The star is placed inside of a circle to represent the unity of all of the star's constituent elements.<sup>39</sup> At the time of Stewart's death prominent Wiccan priestesses like Selena Fox had been petitioning the V.A. for nine years to include the pentacle among the thirty eight other military-approved religious symbols, roughly half of which were variations of the Christian cross.<sup>40</sup> The only explanation offered by the V.A. was, "A decision on Wicca is simply being delayed until the department completes its efforts to develop a uniform set of rules."<sup>41</sup>

Members of the broader Neopagan community, of which Wicca is a part, believed that the V.A. was delaying incorporation of the Wiccan religion because of a pervasive

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<sup>39</sup> Salomonsen explains that the five points of the pentacle can also represent "the five stages of life: birth, initiation, mature love, repose, death, as well as the human body with four limbs and head, five senses, etc." She also notes that the symbol appearing without the circle is called a pentagram (179). For more information on the history and ritual use of the pentacle in Neopaganism see Scott Cunningham's *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* p. 33, 57, 61, 162 and Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* p. 50-51, 66-67.

<sup>40</sup> Selena Fox is the founder of Circle Sanctuary, a Wiccan church located in Barneveld, Wisconsin. She is also the founder of the Pagan Spirit Gathering, one of the oldest Neopagan festivals. For more information on Pagan Spirit Gathering see Sarah Pike's *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*.

<sup>41</sup> The following link provides a transcription of CNN coverage:

<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0607/10/lm.03.html>.

A more detailed journalistic account of the Patrick Stewart case can be found here:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/03/AR2006070300968.html>.

social stigma in the United States which associates Paganism with Satan worship (as discussed in chapter two). Although contemporary Pagans worship nature Gods and Goddesses through ritual, the United States' historically dominant religion of Protestant Christianity theologically and rhetorically equates Paganism with devil worship. Fox explained in a CNN interview, "Witchcraft is not Satanism. It is not harming others. It's not power over others."<sup>42</sup> Through the influence of both the Protestant church and secularized threads of Protestantism present in the media, the perception of Pagans as devil worshippers has been ingrained in the American social imaginary and influences the actions of American political institutions like the U.S. military.<sup>43</sup>

In a widely publicized demand for minority religion rights Roberta Stewart, along with Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU), chose to pursue legal action against the V.A. for refusing to provide a pentacle for Stewart's grave marker in the Veterans Cemetery. On April 23, 2007, the case was settled out of court and the pentacle was incorporated into the list of emblems available in United States military cemeteries.<sup>44</sup>

The Patrick Stewart case begs the question of why certain religions are accorded more legitimacy and respect by American social and political institutions than others. In twenty-first century America, a country which promotes religious pluralism, tolerance, and inclusion, why was the Christian cross already incorporated as a valid religious symbol by the United States military while the Wiccan pentacle was not? Religious

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<sup>42</sup> <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0607/10/ltn.03.html>

<sup>43</sup> The following link provides an article about a Christian women who was outraged when she saw a symbol which looked like the pentacle on the tail light of a school bus:  
<http://xtribune.com/2015/01/christian-mother-outraged-spotting-satanic-symbol-back-school-bus/#>.

<sup>44</sup> Announcement on the AU website: <https://www.au.org/church-state/june-2007-church-state/featured/pentacle-quest-success>

freedom and pluralism claim to support equality, each religion existing on an even playing field, but the Patrick Stewart case exposes the ways in which majority religions like Protestant Christianity already hold a privileged position in America while minority religions such as Neopaganism must struggle to attain the same respect and legitimacy. Due to pluralism's origin as a Protestant Christian project, the U.S. government continues to regulate religious affairs along Protestant lines. These strategies for religious management which are invested in a secularized Protestantism operate by, for example, passing judgment on what qualifies as a legitimate religious symbol for a military grave marker.

Prior to the Stewart case, religions seeking military recognition needed to justify themselves by providing proof of a central institutional organization.<sup>45</sup> Although various Christian denominations can demonstrate the existence of an institutional authority to represent them, because Wicca is not institutionally organized it was unable to meet the requirements of the V.A. until the rule was absolved as a result of Roberta Stewart's legal battle. The Protestant Christian framework in which governmental definitions of religion are grounded persists regardless of the efforts of modern secularization to compartmentalize and privatize religious belief and practice, and is particularly problematic for minority religions whose structures of belief and practice do not directly compare to Christian ones.

However, the incorporation of the Wiccan pentacle into the list of military-recognized religious symbols indicates a shift in American religious pluralism's function as a social project. Roberta Stewart, as a member of a minority religion, was able to

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<sup>45</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/03/AR2006070300968\\_2.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/03/AR2006070300968_2.html)



speak out about the injustice of the V.A.'s initial dismissal of her request, and was able to procure a change in American religious pluralism's treatment of Neopaganism. The support she garnered from members of the Neopagan community brought attention to the ways in which an ostensibly secular United States institution had attempted to deny a minority religion's rights.

Since the initial boom of secularization in the nineteenth century, with the accompanying proliferation of different religions, religious belief and practice in America has continued to diversify. While many people still practice traditional religions like Protestantism, there are many other belief systems which demand equal recognition. This demand causes the Protestant hegemony looming behind America religious pluralism to respond to emerging threats in new ways, often needing to grant certain demands in order to maintain the illusion of religious equality. In this way strategies for religious management have become smarter and subtler.

Today, American religious pluralism's means of religious management have adapted to respond to new threats, finding more nuanced and diplomatic responses. The small concession of a pagan pentacle, while a victory on one level, does not mean that Pagans have achieved equal footing in the context of American pluralism. Neopagans continue to encounter social and political resistance, as evidenced by chapter two's discussion of unwarranted police intervention in Neopagan festivals.

Much religious expression is concerned with life after death, and many religious conflicts revolve around public displays of religious death memorials. Plural, secular America holds a very specific idea of what is an acceptable mode of public, religious death memorialization. While Spiritualist séances did not conform to Protestant norms

concerning death rituals, Neopagans have won a small battle for minority religions rights by convincing the V.A. to allow the Pagan pentacle to appear in a military cemetery. However, this victory did not come easily and it was won only after years of discrimination. Minority religions like Neopaganism are beginning to find spaces to assert themselves in the American pluralistic landscape. However, I argue that the Patrick Stewart case demonstrates that American political institutions, despite claims to support religious equality, continue to operate within a Protestant Christian framework of what constitutes legitimate religious expression. It is not until members of minority religions take action to demonstrate injustice and to engage those with political and social power that these Protestant investments are challenged and begin to break down.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that American religious pluralism's responses to minority religions' efforts to integrate into the American religious landscape have changed. Yet despite the changes in American religious pluralism's social function, the logic behind American religious pluralism's strategies for religious management continues to support Protestant hegemony. Protestant investments influence American religious pluralism's exclusion of certain minority religions, both within religious and secular institutions and in ordinary American citizens' interactions with members of minority religious groups. The secularized Protestant logic of American religious pluralism has found new ways to alleviate threats and maintain control of the religious, political, and social landscapes of American society.

Just as in nineteenth-century America, contemporary minority religious groups must justify their right to a seat at the table of American pluralism by demonstrating that their theology, their gender values, and their approaches to death comply with Protestant Christian norms. My thesis focuses on these three factors but further work could be done to explore how other factors such as class and race contribute to minority religions' inability to gain a seat at the table of American pluralism.

Although I have argued that American religious pluralism's primary aim is to maintain the social and political hegemony of majority religions like Protestant Christianity, I do think that the Protestant framework of American religious pluralism is beginning to break down so that minority religions which do not conform to Protestant norms can find new spaces to assert themselves. Roberta Stewart's success in persuading the United States military to include the Pagan pentacle in the list of religious emblems available in America's veterans' cemeteries demonstrates that minority religions like

Neopaganism are beginning to gain the respect and recognition they need in order to become established and enduring components of America's religious landscape.

Although Neopagans continue to suffer from prejudice and misunderstanding, the Patrick Stewart case suggests that the strong, Protestant threads binding American religious pluralism may be loosening.

The experiences of members of minority religions like Spiritualism and Neopaganism are important to consider because they shed light on the ways in which American religious pluralism manages and excludes certain religious actors. The struggles of Spiritualists and Neopagans demonstrate the limitations and flaws of a pluralistic project which claims to promote tolerance and respect difference, but in reality casts difference to the margins of society. Spiritualists and Neopagans both recognized that a seat at the table of American religious pluralism offers great social and political benefits, but that those seats come at a cost. Members of these minority religions were not willing to manipulate their beliefs in order to earn a seat, but rather sought to change and broaden the criteria by which religions are evaluated and deemed worthy of a place at the table.

I believe that this project will serve as a solid stepping stone to future research on the position of minority religious groups in America. I intend for my doctoral work to bring together ethnographic research on a Neopagan community in southwestern New York and theoretical questions which inquire further into the nature of secularism and pluralism in America. I aim to apply a political theological lens to original ethnographic research in order to contribute innovative scholarship to discourses on the position of minority religious groups in plural America.

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**Vita**

NAME OF AUTHOR: Clara Schoonmaker

PLACE OF BIRTH: Arlington Heights, Illinois

DATE OF BIRTH: September 1, 1991

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, United States

DEGREES AWARDED:

Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Humanities, 2012, Michigan State University