

## **Chapter 11: Conclusion**

" 'What has changed, now that this book has been written?' "  
(Milton, 2002: 147).

I began this thesis with a reference to how my 1995 paper made an initial foray into the territory of embodied knowing. That excursion opened new vistas, and further exploration has revealed rich potential. My initial aims and objectives, (see Appendix 1), have now been met: I have determined the primary roles of embodied knowing in Eco-Paganism, though further complexity remains; I identified appropriate theories of embodied knowledge and developed a hermeneutics of embodiment that enabled my fieldwork. To a great extent, then, I have answered the questions I implicitly asked in my 1995 paper, and have clarified the process of embodied knowing and its role in Eco-Paganism.

To conclude, I present and then discuss the argument that has emerged from my research. My argument notes several original contributions to research, which I discuss in detail. Before closing, I consider the relevance of my work to related debates and make suggestions for further research.

### **THE ARGUMENT**

In summary, I make the following claims:

- 1) Existing research shows that key aspects of cognition are situated and embodied (inter alia, Varela et al., 1991), such that we often think with cultural artifacts (Burkitt, 1999: 26) and place (inter alia, Preston, 2003).
- 2) This process involves such an intimate relationship between the skin enclosed body and the local environment that conventional notions of 'self' and 'other' are revealed as, at best, partial.
- 3) Because our cognitive processes are intimately bound up with our surroundings, place has a profound influence on our being-in-the-world. Place operates in the background all the time but we sometimes think with place more explicitly.
- 4) My fieldwork showed that many Eco-Pagans use an enhanced sensitivity to embodied knowing in their spiritual practice. This has been identified in other contexts as using somatic modes of attention to attend "to and with one's body" (Csordas 1993: 138) or as a sensitivity to felt sense (inter alia, Gendlin, 1981).
- 5) I identified six processes which create a sense of connection to the organic environment. Some of these processes are used intentionally, while others operate in the background. Although these process of connection had been identified, their significance to Eco-Paganism had not been fully recognized.
- 6) Eco-Pagans sometimes use these processes of connection to think with a place.

7) Living on a protest site can catalyses the emergence of a complex 'nature based' spirituality that many come to identify as Paganism. This results from a type of wilderness effect (Greenway, 1995:128) and can be explained by reference to points (1), (2) and (3).

8) Urban Eco-Pagans experience the same process less intensely through their intentional connection to a specific place - a "threshold brook" - that provides a "deepening sense of place" (Patterson, n.d.).

9) Training in spiritual practices enables urban Eco-Pagans to use the felt sense - a process of connection - to commune with flora, specific places and (less often) fauna. Similar experiences amongst untrained site Eco-Pagans is facilitated by the wilderness effect. These experiences were profound and spirituality significant.

I conclude that:

10) The processes of connection and thinking with place are fundamental to embodied knowing in Eco-Paganism, and help explain many of its distinctive aspects.

## **Discussion**

Claims 1, 2 and 3 are based on existing research discussed in my embodied cognition literature review (Chapter 3). In Chapter 4, I integrate this research into a model of embodied knowing I call the enactive process model, which I graphically illustrate with the cognitive iceberg diagram. Because our cognitive processes are intimately bound up with our surroundings, place has a profound influence on our being-in-the-world. This influence is apparent in research correlating childhood play in the organic environment with heightened adult environmental awareness (inter alia, Cobb, 1977) and extensive evidence of the wilderness effect (inter alia, Greenway, 1995).

Claim 4 is original and significant. Bado-Fralick opined that Wiccan training can be understood in terms of Csordas's somatic modes of attention (Bado-Fralick, 2005), but I develop her discussion by showing that Gendlin's theory is more useful (inter alia, Gendlin, 1981), and then illustrate how the felt sense is used in Eco-Paganism.

Claim 5 is original and significant. My fieldwork identified six processes which enhance a sense of connection to the organic environment: These are the wilderness effect and similar intimate experiences of the organic environment, the felt sense, ritual, trance, meditation and entheogens. All these processes have been widely discussed, but in most cases their significance in Eco-Paganism have not been recognized. Several researchers have noted the role of ritual in Eco-Paganism (inter alia, Letcher, 2002; Plows, 1998a; Taylor, 2001), while Plows and Shaw noted the significance of childhood play in the organic environment for environmental activists (Plows 1998b: 136; Shaw, 2004: 132). However, no previous study has noted all six processes of connection or analyzed how they function in Eco-Paganism. My application of the enactive process model to theorize these processes

is also original and significant.

While some of the processes of connection operate in the background, some can be applied intentionally, and my fieldwork showed that Eco-Pagan practice enhances the power of the wilderness effect and thinking with place (claims 8 and 9). As the wilderness effect and thinking with place contribute to Eco-Pagan motivation, this finding has significance for motivation research.

My fieldwork identified participants who developed a complex 'nature based' spirituality while living on protest sites, which some came to identify as Paganism. The evidence supports my claim (7), that such spiritual emergence is at least partly catalyzed by the wilderness effect (Greenway, 1995), and is best explained by reference to claims (1), (2) and (3). Although researchers agree that the wilderness effect can catalyze spiritual experiences, this had never been observed on a protest site or been explicitly associated with a specific spiritual identity.

Given the considerable power of the processes of connection and thinking with place within Eco-Paganism, I expect their influence to be apparent elsewhere. In as much as this is the case, my research findings will have widespread relevance for several disciplines, including religious studies, anthropology, sociology and ecopsychology.

## **ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION**

I have highlighted several original and significant contributions made by my research. My enactive process model, set out in chapter 4, is an original synthesis that develops existing research. The model has been a valuable tool for interpreting Eco-Paganism and it is capable of explicating all the processes of connection. Given that the enactive process model has explanatory power in both religious studies and ecopsychology, it is likely to prove valuable in other contexts.

Although all the processes of connection have been subjected to considerable research, discussion of their role in Eco-Paganism was minimal prior to this thesis, and my identification of the significance of place and the wilderness effect is original. My application of the enactive process model to provide a detailed analysis of how these processes interact is entirely original and has considerable significance beyond this thesis. The main concern of ecopsychology has been to find means to overcome what is perceived as a widespread alienation of western people from the organic environment (Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner: 1995). Thus, my identification of fundamental processes of connection, which can be further theorized using the enactive process model, makes a significant contribution to ecopsychology.

One of the most personally significant experiences of my fieldwork was observing the gradual emergence of a deep spiritual awareness in several participants (Chapter 9; *Spiritual Emergence*). This was the first fieldwork discussion of the emergence of a complex 'nature based' spirituality in participants in any location. My observation demonstrates that Eco-Paganism is a spirituality of place, which in turns means that place is more important to religious studies than usually presented.

My research explains many of the distinctive aspects of Eco-Paganism (claim 10) and moves beyond published work on the subject. Letcher claimed that "the language spoken and by the myths and narratives shared around the campfires, the hearths of the protest camps" (Letcher, 2001b) was the driving force behind Eco-paganism. Although my research illustrates that this kind of social bonding is significant, it functions in tight co-operation with the processes of connection, notably the wilderness effect (Chapter 9). Taylor emphasizes the role of formal ritual (Taylor, B., 2005b) in US Earth First! Eco-Paganism, and although my research is exclusively based in the UK, it seems unlikely that the US movement would be unaffected by the processes of connection I identify. My research shows how profound spiritual experiences can be catalyzed by processes of connection, and that those processes have helped create the entire spiritual sub-culture I call site Eco-Paganism.

While Campbell and McMahon discussed the role of Focusing in spiritual practice (Campbell and McMahon, 1985), they don't explore spiritual training or Paganism. My research is the first to identify the use of the felt sense by Pagans, and uniquely explores its role as a process of connection to commune with place, flora and fauna (claim 9). By identifying that many Eco-Pagans use the felt sense, I have provided a new and powerful approach to understanding similar practices. Given that at least some Eco-Pagan healers use the felt sense, it seems likely that healers in other religious movements will do, too. At the very least this insight will provide Eco-Pagans, and the wider Pagan community a better understanding of their own practice. By explicitly integrating Focusing into Pagan training we can learn to use the felt sense even better.

In addition to the original contribution of these descriptive and theoretical conclusions, my methodology develops existing work in original ways. My embodied hermeneutics builds on existing research to provide a powerful and flexible means of researching embodied knowing. Although Todres (2007) has developed a similar approach, my methodology has several original features, notably the Focusing Interview. My chosen methodology was very effective in accessing the embodied knowing of my participants, a tacit knowledge which Nonaka and Takeuchi note is "hard to formalize and communicate" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995: 56). My methodology is effective and can be applied with minimal training, so it can be usefully applied elsewhere.

## **WIDER RELEVANCE**

My research is significant for research into Paganism, New religious movements, embodiment, cognitive neuroscience and religion, religion and nature, spirituality and social change, and ecopsychology. I am engaged in all of these areas, in some cases proactively. It is impractical to discuss the relevance of my research to all these areas, so I shall focus on several key topics.

### ***- Relational Epistemologies***

Many of participants explain their intimate relationships with aspects of the organic environment in terms of spirits of place, and I use a situated embodied epistemology

to understand this process. Both take my work close to the discussion of relational epistemologies and ontologies (Bird-David, 1999). Harvey explains that contemporary animists are concerned with "particular ways of being related to the world" that challenge "discourses that divide spirit and flesh, soul and body, subject and object ... people and environment, and so on" (Harvey, 2005: 83). Ingold's work on the "poetics of dwelling" is grounded in a relational notion of personhood where the self inheres "in the unfolding of the relations set up by virtue of its positioning in an environment" (Ingold, 2000: 11). Exploring how my work engages with this "new animism" (Harvey, 2005: 83) lies beyond the scope of this thesis, but fruitful discussions remain to be had.

### **- *Re-enchantment Theory***

Several theorists of Eco-Paganism - including myself - use the language of enchantment (Letcher 2001a; [Chaper 7](#)). Although such use is not intended to engage with Weber's re-enchantment hypothesis, it does raise the question of whether Eco-Pagans are 're-enchanted'. Ruckbie defined Weberian re-enchantment as using "non-rational modes of knowing, a reevaluation of mystery, mythologization, magical practice and the seeking of magical salvation, the belief in personal gods and in a living, spiritual world in which everything is interconnected, an individual perception of empowerment, a high level of the extent of re-enchantment in everyday life and attitudes (saturation of the life-world), the objectivisation of culture, of 're-' enchantment (a perceived change in beliefs and attitudes) and a resistance to disenchantment" (Ruckbie, 2005). Ruckbie's research into mainstream Pagans concluded that they were re-enchanted, because the majority of his sample showed all these traits. A few of these traits are apparent amongst Eco-Pagans, who typically believe in an interconnected world and emphasize personal empowerment. There is some mythologization amongst Eco-Pagans, but I found less than Letcher (inter alia, 2001b, 2004) or Butler (2003), which suggests that the movement has changed over time. While one could argue that "non-rational modes of knowing", are apparent amongst Eco-Pagans, this dualistic characterization implies that mind is to rational as body is to non-rational, which this thesis disputes. (See, inter alia, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5).

I conclude that most of the 're-enchantment' traits are not found amongst Eco-Pagans, and those that are - a sense of connection and personal empowerment - are adequately explained by the processes of connection and the enactive process model. In contrast to my approach, Weber's theory is quite disembodied and ignores the power of place, but without engaging in an extended critique of the re-enchantment hypothesis, it simply doesn't explain Eco-Paganism as well as my alternative.

### **Further Research**

#### **- *Situated Embodied Cognition and Religious Practice***

My research shows the importance of situated embodied cognition in Eco-Paganism, yet this remains almost uncharted territory for religious studies, so the potential for further research is considerable. To my knowledge, no research has been done into the impact of different physical spaces, understood as a whole

sensorium, on religious practice. This approach could be applied to practice in the organic environment, in homes, and in religious buildings, either those built for the purpose or adapted by worshippers. This is such a huge field that further suggestions remain beyond the scope of this thesis, but I have identified Cross Bones graveyard, discussed in Chapter 8, as my next research project.

### **- Motivation**

Research, notably my own, shows that the processes of connection have a positive effect on activist motivation (inter alia, Cobb, 1997; Plows, 1998b; Wells and Lekies, 2006). This in itself deserves further research, but my fieldwork also strongly suggested that Eco-Pagan practice can enhance the wilderness effect, and thus increase motivation (Chapter 9). Anderson found it difficult to sustain his activism when he no longer lived on a protest site, finding that "in normal/civil society other aspects of the self re-emerge, themselves encouraged and strengthened by the norms, prohibitions and customs of these spaces" (Anderson, J., 2004: 53). My research suggests that Eco-Pagan practice could have ameliorated that situation, but this remains no more than an enticing possibility. Given the importance of the topic, the question of the role of situated embodied cognition in human motivation is a key area for future research.

### **- The Felt Sense in Religious Practice**

I noted in chapter 4 that although my research is historically and culturally situated, there is clear potential in exploring to what extent my theory works in other contexts. Most of the participants in my research used the felt sense in their practice, and previous research suggests that the same is true of other contemporary Pagans. (See Chapter 8: *The Felt Sense and Somatic Modes of Attention*). It seems at least likely that the felt sense plays a key - and unrecognised - role in contemporary Pagan practice, and this would benefit from further research.

### **- Cross Cultural Eco-Paganism**

My research focused on UK Eco-Paganism, and although my findings are consistent with work done in the USA (inter alia, Salomonsen, 2002; Taylor, B., 2001), there is evidence of significant differences. Taylor reports the kind of ecstatic ritual practice at US protest sites once found in the UK (Taylor, B., 2001: 228), and discovering whether such practice still occurs would help explain its current absence here. It is less clear how the US equivalent of urban Eco-Paganism would compare with the UK form. The differences between US and UK Paganism are under-researched, and a comparative study of Eco-Paganism would prove valuable. Very little research has been undertaken into Australian Eco-Paganism, but urban and site based forms exist, notably the 'feral' eco-activists who St John compares with the Twyford Donga Tribe (St John, 2000: 208). One key question would be to what extent Eco-Paganism in other countries emerged from a relationship to place, and how influential cultural factors, like Starhawk's books, are: In essence, are the findings of this thesis cross-cultural?

## **Conclusion**

My argument set out the main findings of my research, and concluded that the

processes of connection and thinking with place are the keys to understanding embodied knowing in Eco-Paganism. I presented my contributions to research, which I outline in my closing paragraph. The interdisciplinary nature of my work makes it relevant to a number of fields, so I only consider its relationship to key debates before making suggestions for further research.

So, to answer the question posed at the start of this chapter, what has changed, now that this thesis has been written? This thesis presents the first detailed ethnography of Eco-Paganism and highlights its importance. In doing so, I show how place, often neglected in religious studies, is fundamental to spiritual experience, thus encouraging new approaches to research. I offer a new model of embodied situated cognition and demonstrate its practical application to religious studies: given the relevance of the enactive process model to ecopsychology, I suggest it has wider explanatory potential. Furthermore, I show how the felt sense, previously absent from Pagan studies, can provide a new approach to the field. My methodology has contributed to the development of Focusing as a tool of phenomenological research. Finally, my theorization of the processes of connection has considerable potential, notably for religious studies and ecopsychology, and I, for one, will continue to explore their powerful influence.