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- 1 Sociologist and Religious Studies scholar Helen Berger has written multiple works on contemporary Witchcraft and Paganism. Her research and many publications make her one of the most respected and known voices in the field. *Solitary Pagans* is the first book written that provides a systemic overview on the role of solitary practitioners, which amounts to over three-quarters of contemporary Witches and Pagans (p. 1). The book is based on “The Pagan Census Revisited” survey which was a follow up to “The Pagan Census”, another research survey that was completed fifteen years prior. This focused, data-rich text will provide a critical reference source for all scholars of Pagan Studies. Aside from supplementing current research, *Solitary Pagans* provides a wellspring of new provocative questions for future exploration.
- 2 In her book, Berger compares solitary Pagan practitioners with those affiliated with organized groups, and also with the general population. While she includes comparisons from Canada and the United Kingdom, Berger’s research is primarily centered on the United States, as this population provided the most robust sample size to draw from. “The Pagan Census Revisited” survey was distributed online and is currently the largest one of its type (p. xv). Her primary focus throughout the text is “an exploration of which demographic groups practice alone and how being solitary

influences their spiritual practice, interconnection with others, and political commitment” (p. 19-20). Berger’s research concludes that the contemporary Pagan community has become more homogenized, rather than less, due to members using the same source materials, and thus practicing alone did not have a large impact on Pagan beliefs. Having an alliance or commitment to a group or coven does however impact one’s actions, causing members to be more politically and socially engaged.

- 3 Berger begins by laying out the foundation of the contemporary Pagan world and describing her research methods. In chapter two, Berger delves deeply into the demographics. Besides the basics of age, gender, education, income, she also provides data about how practitioners were introduced to the tradition, how open they are in discussing their beliefs and practices, and initiations. In most topics she provides easy-to-read tables, breaking the data down further to include age/generation and comparisons between group members and solitaires. According to Berger, the overall demographics have not changed drastically over the past fifteen years, but there are some consistent differences between solitary practitioners and group practitioners. Pagans are still primarily female and better educated than the average American; however, solitaires label themselves as eclectic, while group practitioners are mainly Wiccan and are slightly more educated and older than solitaires. It is also interesting to note that Paganism has spread throughout the heartland and is no longer a coastal phenomenon (p. 56-57).
- 4 The heart of Berger’s argument is focused in chapters three through five. Chapter three centers on exploring the role of individualism in American religion and the premise that Americans are becoming more isolated than in generations past. This section investigates the relationship between solitaires and the general community. It also looks at recent trends in religious communities, especially since the Internet’s influences on religious practices are becoming clearer. Berger argues against the idea that Pagans are more isolated, but rather points to contemporary trends in religiosity that are also expressed by the “spiritual but not religious” community. Through the use of the Internet and technology, the meaning of *community* is changing (p. 82-86).
- 5 While chapter three looked at questions of identity and isolation, chapter four investigates various Pagan beliefs and practices that are currently popular, especially related to the practice of magic. Berger asserts that there has been a significant shift as the religion has changed from being seen as a magical religion to an earth-based one (p. 87). She looks at the relationship between metaphysical beliefs and magical practices, and how that relates to gender. She found that gender had a sizable effect on one’s practices but was minor when related to social activities (p. 119). While women were more likely to practice divination, men reported regularly performing magic at a higher rate (p. 98). Overall, her exploration of the role of gender in belief, and the idea of female ethics being based in radical empathy was thought provoking and an important lens with which to approach the topic.
- 6 Chapter five focuses on politics and social engagement, exploring whether solitaires are less engaged than group members or average Americans. She looks at four main political issues that came up as the most commonly cited political priorities in her survey results for contemporary Pagans: environmentalism, women’s rights, gay rights, and animal rights. This section was especially robust and supports her arguments related to the relationship between solitary and group practice with political engagement. Berger finds that while contemporary Pagans are more active than

average Americans, group practitioners are more active than solitaires. There is also some disparity between how members identify and what actions they actually take making it similar to many mainstream religions (p. 153-152). Lastly, the concluding chapter not only revisits the overall arguments presented, but it provides more analysis related to current and future trends in the field.

- 7 There is no shortage of quantitative data in this book, and she is careful not to overstate the conclusions that can be based on the data. This leads the writing to seem somewhat repetitive in certain sections as she parses out the data. It is not always an enjoyable read if one doesn't savor quantitative analysis. The data is presented in standard tables and could be presented in more dynamic forms to illustrate her key conclusions. This book is clearly aimed at scholars in the field and having some background knowledge in Pagan Studies and Witchcraft is ideal when approaching the text. In addition to field knowledge, access to Berger's prior study *Voices from the Pagan Census* would be beneficial, although she discusses the most critical changes that occurred over the fifteen-year span. Most of her research focuses on North American respondents, so there is a regional limitation.
- 8 Besides answering her own research questions related to political and social engagement and its relationship with solitary versus group practices, Berger draws together ideas from multiple theorists and places her research within the context of other work in the field. Her ideas about how contemporary Paganism, a "disorganized" religion, and the rise of solitary practitioners indicate changing forms of religiosity in the 21st century because of social and technological changes are provocative and ripe for exploration. She argues that rather than diversity, we are seeing homogenization as individuals use the same sources to grow their beliefs. She concludes that while being alone doesn't influence beliefs greatly, it affects how people practice the religion and their political engagement.
- 9 While required reading for scholars of Pagan Studies, *Solitary Pagans* would also interest scholars of New Religious Movements, and contemporary religious trends, North American alternative religions, nature-based religions, and politics and religions in the 21st century. It provides us with critical new data and will inspire many novel research questions in the field.