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New Directions in a Traditional Pennsylvania German Healing Practice: A Twenty-First Century Powwower

Powwowing, or *Braucherei*, in the Pennsylvania German dialect, has long been considered a dying or even extinct art. This was the dominant perception in the scholarly community when I began my investigations into the subject in 1998. Indeed, when I met with my dissertation committee at the University of Pennsylvania, it was decided that if I found and interviewed even one living powwower, that would count as a successful outcome for my research. As it happens, I discovered that powwowing, while not exactly thriving, is far from the relic of the past some have believed it to be (Kriebel 2007). By 2001 it was clear that not only was powwowing still being practiced in southeastern and south-central Pennsylvania, but that there was a great interest in powwowing by most of my non-powwowing consultants.¹ However, while some of the practicing powwowers I met indicated an intention to train a younger person, all of them were in their late fifties or older.²

Powwowing in the traditional manner tends to be a somewhat secretive art, a fact that caused me not a little inconvenience in my own work. Clients tend to learn about powwowers through word of mouth. However, when articles about my research, either by myself or local journalists, began to appear, I was contacted by several people seeking powwow treatment. I referred them to a couple of living powwowers who, in my opinion, seemed to practice in the most completely traditional manner and who also seemed most amenable to seeing new clients. They were the couple I refer to under the pseudonym of Julius and Daisy Dietrich (Kriebel 2001, 2007). But in 2004 I was contacted for another reason. Chris Bilardi, a man in his late thirties, whom I identify as Tom Barone in my book, but who has since given permission to use his real name, had seen one of my academic articles, and was interested in becoming a powwower himself.

I referred Chris to Daisy (Julius had passed on by this time), and she agreed to train him. Or rather, to see if he was meant to learn. Her method

of training takes ten weeks and requires prospective powwowers to memorize complex incantations and gestures in English, Pennsylvania German, and High German. If they are able to do this, then, in her view, it is God's will that they learn. She herself learned from her husband, who was taught by Ruth Frey, a well-known powwower in the Lehigh-Berks-Schuylkill County region who passed away before I began my research. Powwowing is traditionally passed from male-to-female, or female-to-male, although there can be exceptions to this rule.

In any case, Chris did learn from Daisy and has gone on to write a book of his own on powwowing, not from a solely scholarly perspective—although it does contain much solid research and socio-historical detail—but from the standpoint of a practitioner. By revealing the features and practices of what is today a very secretive art, Chris has violated what amounts to a taboo, since the general belief among powwowers is that only certain people are meant (by God) to be channels of His healing power. There is also the reaction of the larger Pennsylvania German cultural community, which, since the 1929 York Hex Murder Trial, has tended to be sensitive to charges of superstition and backwardness. Finally, Chris, who has a “day job,” has exposed himself to ridicule by those who do not understand the practice and are inclined to dismiss it as, at best, nonsense and at worst, the work of the devil.

Chris was also the subject of a recent article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, which prompted mixed reactions from online readers, some of whom descended into personal (and anonymous) attacks. It is noteworthy that this was the first article in the *Inquirer* dealing with powwowing since 1977, when a lengthier article on traditional powwower Maude Kreisler was published in the Today Magazine insert in the Sunday edition (Schreiber 1977). The article on Chris, while shorter, appeared on the front page of the Monday edition (Ecenbarger 2009).

Chris's book, while potentially controversial, is not without precedent. There have been other such books before by practicing powwowers, most notably John George Hohman's classic collection of powwow recipes, *Der Lang Verborgene Schatz und Haus Friend (The Long Lost [really Hidden] Friend)* first published in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1820. Other such “charm books” have been privately published, or, in most cases, remain in the homes of those who practice powwowing on what I have called a “nonprofessional” basis, treating only family and friends. And scholarly books and publications have not shrunk from revealing certain charms and practices. Moreover, in the late 1990s, an influential book by a popular neo-pagan author, Silver RavenWolf, appeared, claiming to reveal the true origins of powwowing in pre-Christian religion, and reinterpreting powwowing in a neo-pagan context.

In the balance of the article, I will describe Chris's life, which has taken a number of twists and turns, how he was led to become a powwower, and how he fits into the evolving practicing of powwowing in the early twenty-first century.

Chris's Background

Chris was born in Scranton and has lived in northeastern Pennsylvania his entire life. His father's family is of northern Italian extraction and his mother's is a mixture of English, Irish, and Welsh. As a young boy he witnessed sickness in his family, wishing from an early age that he had the power to make his family members well, a wish that he believes eventually led him to become a powwower. Growing up, he also had a strong interest in the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, and was aware of powwowing, but did not feel drawn to it at that time. Raised Roman Catholic, he was always very religious, and served as an altar boy. Having attended many youth retreats at St. Pius X Seminary in Dalton, Pennsylvania, Chris seriously contemplated becoming a Catholic priest. His religiosity was paralleled by an interest in the esoteric and occult. For example, as a teenager, he read both Aquinas and the work of Renaissance magician and philosopher Cornelius Agrippa. As an adult, he continued his study of ceremonial magic, reading hundreds of books on the subject.

He attended college from 1987 to 1991, starting at Keystone Junior College and completing his B.A. at Wilkes University. In 1992 he attended graduate school in sociology at Lehigh University. During his college years he became attracted to Buddhism after taking classes with a Quaker/Buddhist religion professor. However, his esoteric and religious interests and reading habits remained eclectic: "I devoured anything I could get my hands on."

From 1992 to 1997 he worked a variety of odd jobs, but in 1997 landed a more stable position as a technical editor. During his twenties and early thirties, Chris met a number of ceremonial magicians, alchemists, astrologers, and Wiccans and other neo-pagans. He became involved with various groups, "and practiced some things," though even today he is hesitant to discuss details of his magical activities. He does note that he was working directly with familiar spirits, but was "putting more in[to the practice] than getting out."

Chris was briefly involved with Santeria, the Afro-Caribbean amalgam of West African (Yoruba) religion and Native American and Roman Catholic practices, and one of his friends was a *Babalawo*, or high priest. While Chris still finds Santeria fascinating, he "just couldn't make a connection with what they call the ancestral current." Chris later attended sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies sponsored by the Bear Tribe, a group founded by writer and actor

Sun Bear (*nee* Vincent LaDuke), ostensibly to promote Native American spirituality among the wider population.³ However, Chris has now come to the conclusion that “Native American spirituality belongs to them.”

Chris attributes his attraction to esoteric practices to “a strong curiosity . . . I was greedy for knowledge and experiences.” In his opinion, curiosity and greed are two of the main drivers that lead people into magical activities. As he pursued his studies and became more involved with esoteric groups and practices, he came to believe that much of what he was doing was dangerous. He cites the work of magician and physicist Joseph Lisiewski as having made him aware of the dangers of conjuration: “If you don’t know exactly what you’re doing, you’re going to have terrible problems. In my own life, things got terribly chaotic, and the results, little as they were, weren’t worth the effort.”

The major difficulty in the use of ceremonial magic was, for Chris, that the magician frequently is unaware of spiritual dangers he or she may face. In his own practice, he found that mobilizing spiritual power had unintended consequences:

If you open up a doorway, there’s more than one thing that comes through. A lot of magicians today use psychological terms—Jungian—like there’s no reality. . . . Sometimes we hang around with spirits. They prompt us in ways we are not aware. Some people end up with poltergeist activity and terrible bad luck.

In his shift to powwowing, Chris retains the belief that we are surrounded by spirits, and regards powwowing as spiritual warfare. In his book, he refers to it as “the antidote to evil” (Bilardi 2009).

Shortly after he got married (1999), Chris turned away from ceremonial magic and became attracted to more benign folk magical practices that bear a resemblance to powwowing. These included *curanderismo* (an eclectic Latin American healing practice combining prayer, faith, and herbalism), *benedicaria* (a southern Italian healing practice grounded in a popular form Catholicism), and “cunning work” (a pre-modern English form of white magic). It was also at this time (2000) that Chris changed careers and began working in drug rehabilitation for a social services agency. It appears that his interest in healing united both his choice of livelihood and magical practice. Religiously, he had long ago left the Roman Catholicism of his youth, but had not yet returned to Christianity. “I was a nothing,” Chris says of his religious affiliation at this time.

Becoming a Powwower

However, the folk practices “made (him) receptive to the message” that he received one day while browsing a bookstore in Gettysburg in 2003. At that time, Chris found himself drawn to an old family Bible the store had

for sale. As he touched that Bible, he suddenly found himself filled with the conviction—"a Call"—that he had to become a powwower, which also meant returning to the Christian faith. As Chris describes it:

It wasn't that particular Bible—it was something that happened at a particular moment, and the object just happened to be . . . a conduit, a lightning rod, a touchstone. But that day I knew I needed to do this. When I look at the Bible today [that specific copy], it's just a nineteenth century family Bible—no sign of Brauche charms.

After that, Chris immediately began a process of learning more about powwowing, and found one of my articles on the Internet (Kriebel 2002). After reading the article he tried to track me down, and after doing a good deal of "detective work," managed to obtain my email address at Loyola College, where I was teaching at the time. We traded emails and finally spoke on the phone, where I interviewed him. After he "discovered Brauche," Chris says:

It completely changed my religious search. It's very specifically Christian work and I had to take that dimension of it seriously. And that took a long time for me to go into. And that brought me back, in some respects, to where I was in high school.

Chris explained that, while he was not of Pennsylvania Dutch descent, he felt a spiritual affinity to the Pennsylvania Dutch. He therefore explored specifically Pennsylvania Dutch sects. At the time of my first interview with him, Chris considered himself a Pietist, a follower of Conrad Beissel's sect that flourished at the Ephrata Cloisters. It was at that time that he asked to be referred to someone who could teach him powwowing.

The next time I spoke with Chris, he had successfully completed his training with Daisy Dietrich. Under the traditional system used by Daisy, this is not an outcome that can be guaranteed at the start, for she believes that not everyone is meant to be a powwower, and God selects only those He deems suitable to practice. About the time he learned to powwow, Chris changed careers again and became an information technology specialist. Traditional powwowers today cannot support themselves on the freewill offerings of their clients, so it is hardly unusual to have a "day job." However, because most of them grew up in a rural or semi-rural milieu, it is unusual to find them practicing such a technical profession.

It was about this time that Chris also began to become interested in traditional Latin Mass of Roman Catholicism and then Eastern Orthodoxy. It is not that he decided not to be a Pietist anymore. Rather, he felt the need to join the mystical impulses that led to his being drawn to Pietism to a more ritualized setting. He joined an Antiochian Orthodox congregation, a

major point of entry to Orthodoxy for Americans who grew up in another Christian tradition. Soon he found himself wanting to serve God in a more official manner, and considered becoming a deacon in the Orthodox church. The problem was that "they kept hounding me that Kelly [his wife, who does not share his Christian faith] had to become Orthodox." Chris was unwilling to ask her to undergo a ritual that would be, at best, meaningless to her. He sought another church "that would give you the option if you wanted to be a minister," without requiring Kelly to join. Eventually, he joined the Lutheran Church, which had no such requirement, and where he currently serves as an assistant pastor.⁴ He embraces the traditional doctrines of German Lutheranism, but remains a mystic, inspired by the works of Jacob Boehme, Conrad Beissel, Johann Kelpius, Julian of Norwich, and medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart and Hildegard of Bingen, along with magician-philosophers Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus. Christian mysticism informs and shapes his practice as a powwower.

Today Chris is a practicing powwower. His main clients are family members and friends, but he also treats others on a word of mouth basis. On cases in which he needs assistance, he consults with Daisy. He believes that he has a particular talent in healing pain, and it is not unusual for powwowers to specialize in certain classes of complaints. In an attempt to network with other powwowers, he became acquainted with a unique group of organized practitioners in Berks County. However, for reasons that will become clear below, he has become estranged from this group.

Folklorist Don Yoder has theorized that powwowing represents a remnant of Roman Catholic healing ritual, driven underground in the predominantly Protestant Pennsylvania German culture, and altered in transmission (Yoder 1990, 95). In light of this, the fact that Chris, who was not only raised Catholic, but exposed to Italian folk healing traditions as part of his early life, should have an affinity to powwowing is not surprising. However, it appears that his becoming a powwower triggered earlier impulses toward mysticism and clerical service, and affected the rest of his life. In a sense, powwowing represents an integration of many currents of Chris's spiritual life and career—a boyhood desire to become a healer, service to others, mystical connection to the divine, and esoteric practice—and places it in an overarching, meaning-giving Christian framework. As Chris says, "It all fits together for me."

Chris's Work in Relation to Other Contemporary Powwowers

Chris practices powwowing in the traditional way and considers himself a traditional powwower. Other traditional powwowers regard him that way, as well, and that is also how I have referred to him in this article. However, he differs from other traditional powwowers in some important ways. The

obvious differences are his higher level of formal education than most traditional practitioners and non-Pennsylvania German ethnicity, though he feels a great affinity to Pennsylvania German culture. However, in his use of charm books, even the Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses, which many have regarded as a "hex book," and his willingness to accept the term "magic" as a valid way of talking about pow-wow, he is something of a throwback. My research suggests that traditionalists today have by and large divested themselves of the trappings of white magic (use of non-biblical charms and material components) and, while still relying on Christian incantations and gestures, have more in common with spiritual healers outside the tradition than with earlier powwowers who consulted charm books in mobilizing supernatural power.

By contrast, Chris has embraced the tradition as it has existed in the past, as well as today. Moreover, he has stated that Christian powwowing incorporates medieval magical, mystical, and alchemical traditions which may be traced to Jewish Kabbalah, Christian Egypt, and pre-Christian Roman, Slavic, and Celtic practices. No other traditional powwower of whom I am aware, including Chris's teacher would make such a statement, or even be aware of such sources. Therefore, it may be better to think of Chris as a neo-traditionalist powwower. However, Chris is emphatic about the essentially Christian nature of powwowing, and like traditional powwowers, credits its results to the action of God working through him.

In a sense, Chris may be considered a theoretician of powwowing, enlarging his received powwow training with his esoteric and mystical religious background. His book is like Hohman's in that it includes a large number of recipes, but it goes well beyond it. Hohman never elucidated the General Brauche Circuit, as Chris refers to the procedure taught him by Daisy. In itself, this is not a theoretical contribution, but his explanation is. In addition, Chris's work contains a good deal of scholarly material, drawing from a variety of primary and secondary sources. In fact, while his book has been generally well-received, what mild criticisms there have been center on the fact that it includes more scholarly material than some practitioners want.

Why did Chris publish the secrets of powwowing at all, and why did he do so with such an academic bent? The key is to examine who the audience is. It is clearly not other traditional powwowers, though Chris does want to make more connections among this community in order to share knowledge, much as physicians do. Nor is it the population of rural ethnic Pennsylvania Germans. The book is aimed at two audiences, though for very different reasons. The first is the general public. Chris is writing the book for them because he sincerely believes in the healing power of powwowing and wants to share his knowledge "for the good of man and beast," as his subtitle

suggests. The second is a smaller segment of the public that may have heard about powwowing from other sources, and learned—in Chris's view—something that is not true. I am speaking about those who have read or learned about powwowing through what I will call the "New Age" practitioners of the art. I will henceforth refer to those individuals as "neo-powwowers," because, much like neo-pagans, with whom they share much in common, they have reinterpreted a traditional set of beliefs and practices and emerged with a new practice.⁵

In 1997 a book appeared called *HexCraft: Dutch Country Magick*, by popular neo-pagan writer Silver RavenWolf, and a year later was reissued with under the title *American Folk Magick*. In this book, RavenWolf (the Wiccan "Craft name" of Jenine Trayer, who lives in central Pennsylvania) describes powwowing as she learned it from Preston Zerbe, a traditional powwower working in Adams and York Counties. However, RavenWolf reinterprets powwowing as an originally pagan practice that was cloaked in Christian trappings in order to protect its practitioners from being labeled as witches.⁶ This is a common narrative among neo-pagans, who emphasize the victimization of supposedly pagan witches by Christians during "the Burning Times."⁷ RavenWolf also used the pagan spelling "magick," which has a more specific meaning in neo-paganism than "magic" does in common or academic parlance, to refer to the mobilization of power deriving from the sacred feminine and masculine principles.⁸ In the book she also claims, somewhat patronizingly, that her teacher was misguided in believing powwowing to be a Christian practice; rather, a "powwow artist" (her term) may follow any spiritual path, and pagans may substitute the Triple Goddess (Maiden, Mother, and Crone) for the Christian Trinity.

Needless to say, this is not an interpretation shared by traditional Pennsylvania German powwowers. Even neo-pagans have some trouble with it, as this review, by "Randall" at "The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum" (1998) reveals:

While I consider this one of Ravenwolf's best books, I do have two real problems with it. First, the author intermixes her theory that Pow-Wow is actually a version of the Old Religion disguised by a Christian overlay in with material on the history of Pow-Wow. While the author's speculation in this area is interesting, I believe it should have been kept a bit more separate from the history . . . One more minor problem is that while she sometimes provides both Christian and Pagan versions of chants and spells, she often only provides Pagan versions. This is true even when it seems obvious that she converted a Christian version into a Pagan version. This makes the book somewhat less useful than it could be to a Christian wishing to learn the system.

However, as the reviewer also notes:

I find Pow-Wow a fascinating magickal system. If you are interested in it, Ravenwolf's *American Folk Magick* is one of the few books in print devoted to the subject. It's probably the only one readily available.

It is this two-fold issue, the appropriation of Christian charms and reinterpretation in a neo-pagan context, and the fact that (as of 1998) her book was indeed one of the few popular books in print on powwowing that led Chris to write his book as a corrective from a traditional—Christian—point of view.

RavenWolf's position that powwowing is an originally pagan practice and that the Christian elements of powwowing are optional is shared by others. There has been a resurgence of interest in "heathenry," tied to the neo-pagan Asatru (a group that worships the ancient Norse gods), and that resurgence includes powwowing. As the Pennsylvania German Alliance for the Urglaawe ("Original Faith") website notes:

Our purpose is to weave the cultural experiences of the Pennsylvania Germans into the Heathen tapestry. Practices such as Braucherei and Hexerei as well as folklore and folk medicine will shed more light on the way our ancestors practiced the original faith (Pennsylvania German Alliance for the Urglaawe website).

The group also has a an online Yahoo! Group on "Hexenkunst: Hexerei, Braucherei, Der Urglaawe" whose purpose is "to discuss and explore the Pennsylvania German form of healing, also known in totality as Braucherei, and Hexerei, later as 'Pow-Wow.'" The group had 135 as of 2 January 2010. Its welcome page ends with a note to readers (capitals original):

This list is HEATHEN-focused, even though it covers the historical period of our Ancestors that have been Christian. The aim is to recover our Ancestral Folkfaith, our Urglaawe, which we believe exists as it has been practised [*sic*] in the Healing arts, Folk Arts, Food, Farming practises [*sic*], etc. of our people down through the ages.

An interest in "der Urglaawe" has also led to the reemergence of a type of powwowing practice that had been virtually extinct for decades in Pennsylvania—what I elsewhere refer to as "entrepreneurial" powwowing (Kriebel 2007), in which powwowers use their practice as a means of making money. In the past, such entrepreneurs openly charged for powwowing, a practice that became illegal with the passage of the Pennsylvania Medical Practices Act. However, today's powwowers charge substantial fees for teaching potential practitioners, something that is without precedent in the history of powwowing. In southern Berks County, Pennsylvania, a powwowing and herbalism business has been established that teaches powwowing in exchange for sizable tuition payments. The group also charges for an annual "Guild Membership" and attendance at monthly "Guild Gatherings."

This business—The Three Sisters Center for the Healing Arts⁹—is an interesting organization in itself that merits further study. The Center embodies a number of contrasts. If one types in the term “braucherei” into a web browser, the Center is the first hit that comes up—viewing the website provides a sense of the varied and, as some, such as Chris, believe, conflicting strands of belief that underlie its mission. Its stated mission is to preserve Pennsylvania German culture, especially knowledge of powwowing—the Center always uses the Pennsylvania German terms *Braucherei* and *Braucher* for the more familiar “powwowing” and “powwower,” respectively—and herbalism. In a 2008 interview with one of the founding members of the Center, Jesse Tobin, she reveals a clear knowledge of powwowing and appears to share the traditional understanding of the art (Shelly 2008):

Determined not to let go of a culture that she holds dear, Tobin continues to practice and educate others about Braucherei. While a few people denounce her efforts at traditional healing, she insists that it works, not because of any power she has, but because of the power of God and the Holy Spirit, which flows through her to the patient.

“I can’t do the healing,” Tobin said. “All I can do is open myself to the power of God.”

No traditional powwower I know, including Chris, would disagree with this statement. Indeed, the cultural model of healing among the Pennsylvania Germans appears to include a model of powwowing (*Braucherei*, often shorted to *Brauche* in everyday speech) in which the power comes through the powwower from God. That is why not only law, but custom, prevents the powwower from asking for payment for such services, although free-will “offerings” may be accepted (typically, these go to the powwower’s own church).

However, earlier in the same interview, Jesse notes: “It incorporates many aspects of healing and spiritual traditions . . . We see all of this melting pot of traditions” (Shelly 2008). This is not the way any traditional powwower or powwow client would describe the practice. Rather, they view it as a form of Christian devotion—“structured prayer,” in Chris’s words—with Jesus often being considered the first powwower. This more eclectic view of the practice is also evident on the Center’s website, which speaks of powwowing as a “spirit path.”

As of 2009, the Center charged \$25 for an annual Guild Membership, \$35 for member attendance at Guild Gatherings, and \$45 for non-member attendance. A \$10 surcharge was added for attendees who intended to take notes. The Center also charged \$700 for resident students (maximum class size 25) and \$800 for distance-learning students to take Jesse’s course, “Der Braucherei Weg” (The Powwowing Path, though the Center avoids the term

“powwowing” and in a hybrid of the Pennsylvania German dialect and English, renders it as “The Braucherei Path”). In her course, students:

explore the historical roots of Braucherei from pre-Christian times to present. In particular they will focus on the evolution of the mystical cosmology through the many waves of cultural influence in both Europe and America . . . Students will engage in active discussion of the *ongoing re-systemization* of this living but severely fragmented tradition. This course will prepare interested students for a future apprenticeship in the practice of Braucherei, should they choose to pursue it. (Three Sisters Center website, italics mine).

The “ongoing re-systemization,” Chris believes, is an attempt to rediscover an *Ur*-tradition of powwowing within pre-Christian religious systems. Indeed, an examination of the Center’s website and “Hollerbeier Haven”¹⁰ newsletter reveals much discussion of *Braucherei* as part of “the Urglaawe,” although it is not clear whether the Center is endorsing the Heathen view of the art. While he acknowledges that pre-Christian influences shape powwow charms, Chris shares with traditional powwowers a belief that the essence of powwowing—*Braucherei*—is Christian. Chris became interested in the group—he is on their e-list, though not a dues-paying member—in order to learn from other powwowers, but quickly received the feeling that “the girls down in Oley” as he calls them, were not practicing the same kind of powwowing as he was.

Anyone familiar with neo-paganism who reads the newsletter or visits the website will recognize elements “the Braucherei Path” has in common with Wicca, as well as Asatru, such as the “Wheel of the Year” and the importance of feast-days such as Halloween and May Eve. Indeed, a year after the article in the *Reading Eagle* appeared, one of the Center’s leading members informed Chris that Jesse was not a Christian, an assertion that seems at odds with her depiction in the news article. Traditionalists are divided on whether a powwower must be a Christian, or simply believe in the God of the Bible, but it is unclear from the Center’s literature whether anyone there falls into the latter category. Chris now believes that the people at the Center are trying to make *Braucherei* into a religion itself, something he opposes. In describing the practice, the Center refers to a “Braucherei tradition,” “Braucherei wisdom,” and “transition ceremonies . . . found among the Braucherei community,” all descriptions which make this interpretation plausible. Relations between Chris and the Center began to sour when he expressed his own Christian views on powwowing, and worsened sharply when he announced he was publishing a book offering instructions on learning powwowing.

Interestingly, according to Chris, the same member of the Center has expressed hostility to the scholarly study of powwowing, saying that in the past “academics got their filthy paws” on the art. I have not yet had an

opportunity to interview this individual to confirm this, but such an attitude would suggest a wish not to have secrets exposed. In itself, this is not remarkable—as noted above, powwowers tend to be secretive. But the secrecy has always been rooted in two sources—a fear of being ridiculed or considered a witch, and a sense that not everyone should learn powwow. It does not seem that either of these conditions apply to the Center which appears to offer instruction to anyone who has “committed” themselves to “the Braucherei Path.”

There are three other possible reasons for the hostility: concern that Chris’s book will encourage people to teach themselves, and that this could be dangerous; to prevent a product (powwow training) that generates profit from being given away for free; or a basic disagreement about what powwowing really is. The first possibility fits with a traditional interpretation of powwowing, for there has always been concern that anyone not properly trained—“apprenticed,” in the Center’s parlance—may end up being drawn into black magic. Traditional powwowers, knowing of Chris’s book, may well react negatively to it for that reason, although thus far those who seem to know the most about powwowing have given it the most favorable notices. The second possibility, based in economic considerations, is supported by the fact that “Guild Gathering” attendees are charged extra for each session in which they take notes, and therefore are paying for knowledge that is (presumably) similar to what can acquire in Chris’s book. The third possibility is based on the extent to which the Center’s practitioners have adopted a “Christianity is a veneer over heathenism” model of powwowing, versus Chris’s “Christianity is essential” model.

Some may wonder whether Chris himself should be considered an “entrepreneurial” powwower himself, since he is profiting from sales of his book. I’ve asked him why he published the book, knowing that the action was bound to be controversial, not just with neo-pagans or the followers of “the Braucherei Path” at the Center, but with traditional powwowers like himself. His answer has always been that he believed it was his Christian duty to write the book in order to present an insider’s picture of powwowing to counter the neo-pagan view as presented by writers like Silver RavenWolf and groups seeking to promote powwowing as an element of a heathen “Urglaawe.” As Chris notes, many people in such groups have an active disdain for Christianity, while others simply find it dull: “The J-word [Jesus] just isn’t very exciting for these people.”

As a scholar of powwowing—one of those filthy academics—my research, both ethnographic and documentary, indicates that whatever the pre-Christian influences on powwowing may be, it is undeniably a Christian practice at its heart. Ironically, by stripping powwowing of its Christianity or

downplaying that Christianity in the name of a broader spirituality, those who seek to preserve this traditional practice are actually transforming it into something entirely different. This is also Chris's position:

Now, there are folks out there who have, indeed, stripped as much Christianity as possible out of Braucherei, and then added on reconstructed heathen elements. However, once that process has been undertaken, what one ends up with is a totally different "creature," and is no long Pow-Wow or Braucherei in any sense that their ancestors would have understood or recognized it.¹¹

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, powwowing appears to be going in three different directions. The main line of traditional powwow, practiced by individuals who have quietly received the knowledge through friends, relatives, or powwowers who have healed them, is losing its magical character and becoming more similar in concept to healing prayer or spiritual healing. The other two lines of development are both influenced by esoteric sources outside the organically changing practice as it exists in the culture area. On one hand, there are the neo-heathen practitioners and the Center—which is at least tolerant of neo-heathen and neo-pagan interpretations—emphasizing spiritual development and treating powwowing as a "spirit path," part of an "Urglaawe," or even, if Chris is correct, something approaching a religion in its own right. Most Internet sources that relate to powwowing today are influenced by this "neo-powwowing" perspective. On the other hand there is Chris, who operates within the same Christian worldview as the traditionalists, yet with a strong mystical bent. While he has no organized group comparable to the Center or the various heathen groups, he is not the only Christian esotericist with knowledge of powwowing, and it is likely that at least some non-powwowers who read his book may become motivated to take up the practice in the traditional manner. Ironically, by breaking a taboo and revealing the secrets of powwowing to a mass audience, something a pure traditionalist would never do, Chris may be helping to preserve and perpetuate traditional powwowing in Pennsylvania and beyond.

Bryn Mawr College

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Notes

¹ Most of these individuals were former powwow clients, or family and friends of deceased powwowers.

² For additional information on powwowing beyond sources cited in the text, see the scholarly works of Don Yoder (1952, 1967, and 1976) and Barbara Reimensnyder (1982), and Arthur Lewis's popular book *Hex* (1969).

³ Sun Bear is a controversial figure who has been accused by a number of Native American groups of creating the Bear Tribe Medicine Society as a money-making organization and not a legitimate spiritual group.

⁴ Chris joined the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), the largest, but also most liberal, Lutheran subdivision in the U.S. He would have preferred to attend a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) church, but the nearest one was too far away from his home to attend regularly.

⁵ Most neo-powwowers would, however, resist this label and describe what they have done as stripping away a later Christian veneer to reveal an ur-practice, grounded, not in the Bible, but in Germanic pagan beliefs and rituals. Chris himself believes that powwowing has pre-Christian influences, but holds to the more traditional view that these influences are not central—Christ is.

⁶ Though if that was the intention, the disguise did not work—many Pennsylvania German people, especially among the clergy of the “church people,” have in the past regarded powwowers as no different from witches, drawing their power from the Devil, rather than from God.

⁷ Though most who were burned for witchcraft were Christian heretics, some of whom held similar beliefs as the Protestant denominations found among the Pennsylvania Germans.

⁸ Usually called in Wicca “the (Horned) God and the (White) Goddess,” or “the Lord and Lady,” though other, more personalistic deities (e.g. Astarte, Tammuz, Osiris, Isis, etc.) may be invoked, depending on one’s personal belief. One pagan high priestess I interviewed, a professional academic, referred to paganism as “a shopping cart religion,” which seems an accurate description.

⁹ The term “Three Sisters” is reminiscent of the three witches (“weird sisters”) in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, but also of the Triple Goddess of neo-paganism. I should note that I have not interviewed anyone, other than Chris, affiliated with this group. Accordingly, all of my information derives either from the Center’s own materials, interviews by others, or statements by Chris. When citing the published information on the Center, I use names recorded in these sources, but when citing information from Chris, I omit names. That does not mean I distrust Chris’s testimony, simply that I have not had the opportunity to interview these individuals myself, and it is my practice to provide anonymity for any source unless (like Chris) that person has given me permission to use their actual names.

¹⁰ “Hollerbeier” means “Elderberry” in Pennsylvania German. According to another article on the Three Sisters, it also has an association in Germanic myth with a wise, protective, earth mother goddess (Poncavage, 2007).

¹¹ Chris Bilardi, email message to author, 2 January 2010.

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