OBITUARY for a Neo-Pagan pioneer

by W. Holman Keith

It has been learned recently that the Rev. Gleb Botkin, founder and head of the Church of Aphrodite, is deceased. He and his wife, Nadine Botkin, died several years ago. Thus has passed off the scene quite possibly the first Neo-Pagan religious leader, at least here in America. The sign of Venus replaced the Christian cross atop his little chapel in West Hempstead, N.Y. where the writer attended the services there years ago. At that time, in the early 40's, there were three liturgies and four weekly services: Ceremony, Friday evening and Sunday afternoon, Vespers, Saturday evening, and Liturgy, Sunday morning - at which service there was a communion sacrament of bread and wine. The sacred icon was that of the Venus of Praxiteles, at the front of the sanctuary, and before this statue the Rev. Botkin, in priestly vestments, conducted the liturgical worship. "I believe in Aphrodite, the flower freed, sweetly smiling, laughter loving Goddess of love and beauty, the creator and mother of the cosmos, the universal cause, the universal mind," was the beginning of one of the services. The incense was frankincense and myrrh, the candles burning before the altar of heaven. The congregation joined in the extended credo and the prayers sung in a kind of chant, probably a form of the Gregorian chant.

The Rev. Botkin was a modern religious Pagan in his belief in The Divine Feminine and in a freer relationship between the sexes in the name and spirit of his faith. Although his West Hempstead church had only indoor services, and this was before the green revolution and our present environmental crisis, he was a nature lover, and as such a Pagan mystic. We see in him the very wide diversity of backgrounds, temperaments, attitudes and beliefs in modern Pagan religion. His father, Dr. Eugene Botkin, was court physician to the last czar of Russia. His early life therefore was close to the royal court. He prepared for the Eastern Orthodox priesthood. At the time of the Bolshevik revolution he and his family had to leave Russia with all speed. It is understandable that in the very nature of the case Rev. Botkin had very little use for communism. But neither was he fired with enthusiasm for democratic institutions. He seemed to think that the only solution to our human impasse was some kind of theocratic rule through the Aphroditian religion. Freedom of conscience took second place for him to a strictly informed conscience, from childhood on. Some of his specific views did not coincide with those of many Neo-Pagans. He did not believe in natural immortality: the metaphysical immortality or eternality of the absolute sentient subject, the "I" that each of us is, but in conditional immortality. The soul must come into the right relationship with the Goddess: if it is to escape extinction. Probably this belief was in line with that of the ancient mystery Religions, but many Neo-Pagans now either ignore the question of personal survival of death, or incline toward belief in natural immortality of all souls. Rev. Botkin was a monotheist in his doctrine of Deity. His interpretation of the meaning of love was so unitary in its thought - love as the concord that is the extreme opposite to strife - that for him the different kinds of love were not of the essence of this virtue. A virtue that transcends the antinomy of passion and peace in a higher lestitude of being. Rev. Botkin was not cooperative with other Pagan sects. He believed that he had the Goddess truth in his teaching in all its purity. In his way of thinking this truth is very simple. So simple and self-evident that many people fail to see it because of its simplicity. He has indeed made a contribution to the faith of the future. — W.H.K. (Thanks to GREEN EGG)

POSTSCRIPTUM: Nadine and Gleb Botkin were the world's first pioneers of classical Neo-Paganism. Their Church of Aphrodite was chartered by New York State in 1938. It was with great excitement that I first read of this Church, around 1952. William Seabrook covered the old-new cultus in "Notes on Part 3" of his book Witchcraft, first edition 1940, Harcourt Brace, currently re-issued in paperback. I have no doubt that the inspiration of the Botkins contributed heavily to my sudden and stunning conversion to The Goddess one afternoon during Spring of 1956, and to the subsequent founding, by myself and John Beggs, of HESPERIDES, a Paradisal Fellowship dedicated to the Eternal Muse of Wilderness, in Summer of 1957. Hesperides endured until She gave birth to FERAFERIA on Ostara, 1967, and is still a Sacred College within Ferafaria. We are certain Kore and Kouros have enclasped this unsung heroine and hero of the coming Age of the Divine Nymph, and that they feast now among groves and meadows of Elysium, where Aphrodite reigns supreme! We Pagans will join them one day, on some new path they are opening in the ever expanding spiral of the Cosmic Love Dance. May The Goddess and the Goddess-Given Gods grant them eternal Life in pursuit of Love ever new! May their Soul Trees for ever quicken to the adventure of passion, and unfold beautiful flowers of incarnation unendingly! For "all joys want deep eternity," as Nadine and Gleb Botkin, prime Priestess and Priest of Aphrodite, "The Supremely alive and Beautiful," have taught us anew! EVOEE KORE!! -Frederick Holmann Adams

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