Introduction to the Special Issue on Contemporary Pagan Ecospiritualities

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This special, double issue of the journal (17.3 and 17.4) was initiated during the inaugural conference of Harvard Divinity School’s Program for the Evolution of Spirituality. The topic for this first gathering was ‘Ecological Spiritualities’. In email discussions we, the editors of these special issues, agreed that the topic called out for the participation of contemporary Pagan Studies scholars. In response to that call, we organized two sessions: ‘The Earth is Our Mother: Contemporary Paganisms and Environmentalism’ and ‘Being Pagan; Being of the Land: Ecospirituality and Earth-Based Activities among Contemporary Pagans’. The seven articles, three in the first of the two issues and four in the second, are revised and expanded versions of the papers presented during those two conference sessions. We also include several book reviews that complement, expand on, and further enrich the discussion.

Contemporary Paganism as an Earth-Based Religion

Contemporary Paganism has been described as a ‘disorganized religion’, in that it lacks any one central organization or text to determine orthodoxy or orthopraxis. Pagans look toward pre-Christian religions for inspiration. There are some well-established traditions of Paganism,
such as Wicca and Heathenry. On the whole, Pagans are tolerant of each other’s practices; however, the religious category of contemporary Paganism covers a large variation of Pagan practices, ranging from anthropomorphic polytheists to animists who form kin relationships with other-than-human persons and land spirits, to those with a more anthropocentric focus on human self-actualization (Harvey 2011). Approximately three-quarters of contemporary Pagans are solitary practitioners but some still form into groups (Berger 2019). When the religion began to spread during the 1960–80s, group practice had been the more common form but the publication of ‘how to’ books on how to practice alone, and increasing internet use, helped to spread the religion and to encourage solitary practice.

Rituals, practices, and spiritual experiences take precedence over belief among Pagans. Although there is no single, official, or universal position among all contemporary Pagans, there are similarities of practice, ritual, and worldview as practitioners read the same books and websites and repeat the same ideas in diverse venues (Cowan 2004). There are some umbrella organizations that provide newsletters (most often now online), organize spiritual retreats known as festivals, have open rituals for Pagans to join together, and in some instances have purchased land for gatherings and burials. All forms of Paganism follow a yearly cycle of celebration of the changing seasons. The exact number of these celebrations and timing differ among the different forms or traditions of Paganism. In all cases there is a sense that these holidays and their celebration put the participants closer to nature. Almost all traditions view the earth as sacred – the body of the Goddess, or the Goddess herself. That one must care for Mother Earth is an often-repeated theme and might even be part of a ritual celebration. Although there are few shared beliefs in the religion, most share a belief in Earth as an immanent divinity.

**Structure of this Double Issue**

The contributors to these issues explore the ways in which Paganism(s) influences individuals’ attitudes and behaviors toward the environmental crisis. There are debates within the literature about whether Pagans are earth-based in name only (Letcher 2004; Oboler 2004; Ivakhiv 2005; Davy 2005; Ezzy 2006; Jones 2006; Arthur 2008; Cusack 2010; Rountree 2012; Sommerlad-Rogers 2013; Klassen 2013; Berger 2019; York 2019; McLoughlin 2020). In part, the answer to this question is dependent on what constitutes political activism. Does one have to be part of an activist group such as Greenpeace or is it sufficient to adopt a tree or ‘rewild’ land on private property? None of the contributors
to these issues discuss direct environmental political activities, such as that done by environmental groups. Instead, they present a set of discussions of how contemporary Paganism, a self-described earth-based religion, helps to create an environmentally oriented mindset that has political implications for addressing the current environmental crisis. Some of the articles speak of actual political activities, such as starting programs to repopulate trees in an area or create open ‘wild’ spaces. The last article in the volume explores how environmentalism is woven into the extreme right’s political agenda.

The first issue begins with Bron Taylor’s ‘Bounding Paganism: Who and What Is In and Out, and What Does this Reveal about Contemporary Kinship-Entangled Nature Spiritualities’. In it, Taylor asks us to ‘explode the boundaries’ of our definition of Paganism, to encompass not just a religious or spiritual practice but a sensibility that embraces and celebrates nature. This sensibility, he argues, can be seen in experiences of nature, art, and science, among other places. It is distinguished by being nature-revering. Nature is seen as alive, to be interacted with, as something or someone to view as another in a relationship. It is a sensibility that makes caring for nature important and something to support. It is an essential attitude to encourage people to look seriously not only at their own behaviors but to begin to demand that their governments take protection of the environment seriously.

Giovanna Parmigiani then presents us with a powerful example of Taylor’s call for broadening the notion of Paganism in ‘Ulía: Relational Ontologies and Political Activism in Salento (Southern Italy)’. She describes the multiple ways in which olive trees, which are an essential part of the economy, culture, and life of Salento are given personhood. The trees are now dying from an invasive allochthonous bacterium which traveled to Salento from Costa Rica. Parmigiani describes a film that shows the tree being given death rituals, led by a priest, that are normally reserved for human beings. The olive trees are seen as persons, they are loved, they are mourned, and they are needed. It is this sensibility that underpins the political activism to save the trees that Parmigiani describes.

In “‘There’s Divinity in Everything Here’: Ritualizing Ecological Practice at Pagan Nature Sanctuaries’, Sarah M. Pike examines the ways that environmentally conscious practices are promoted and engaged with through ritual action at Pagan nature sanctuaries in the United States. Looking primarily at the opposition between domestication and wilderness and how Pagans negotiate this binary, Pike focuses on green burial and ecosystem restoration and the ways these, and other immersive activities, inform Pagans about concepts such as ‘nature’ and ‘the wild’. Pike concludes that Pagan nature sanctuaries
are locations that facilitate relationship-building between humans and the other-than-human world, as well as between the past, present, and future.

The second part of this double issue begins with Sabina Magliocco and Sadie Rittman’s analysis of ‘Fairies, Environmental Justice, and Re-Enchantment in Modern Pagan Narratives’. In it they focus on contemporary Pagan accounts of fairy encounters and what these can tell us about the relationships between environmental grief, ideas about environmental justice, and attitudes toward (re-)enchantment. The authors argue that Pagan attitudes to fairies are forms of folk environmentalism and folk ontology in which re-enchantment of the world is both a tactic for resistance to, and a conceptual response to, environmental collapse. Through casting fairies as environmental guardians, Pagans participate in a wider set of cultural responses to environmental crisis which encourage humans to engage in more sustainable practices through having personal, interactive links with animate nature.

Caroline Tully then writes about ‘Paradise on Earth: Feraferia and the Landscapes of the Mind’, using an ecocritical lens to explore an American Pagan religion called Feraferia which celebrates humans’ erotic union with nature. Tully demonstrates that Feraferia’s enchanted approach to the world finds resonance in contemporary ecological, ecofeminist, and eosexual thought. She argues for the essential value of many of Feraferia’s eospiritual concepts which heighten conscious awareness of human situatedness within the real physical world, not just on our own planet but within the surrounding space of our part of the universe.

Our closing two contributors explore environmentalism among Heathens – that is, Pagans who worship the gods of Northern Europe. One strand, folkish Heathens, have connections to the far-right, and exclude non-whites from membership. The other strand, inclusive Heathens, pride themselves on being welcoming to those of any ethnic or racial background. Specifically, in ‘Negotiating Ecological Relations Amongst Inclusive Heathens’, Barbara Jane Davy, explores the use of animal sacrifice in creating an environmental consciousness among participants in a blót within an inclusive Heathen kindred – a Heathen spiritual group – in Canada. Although animal sacrifices are rare in general among Pagans, they are typically part of blóts. The term blót translates as sacrifice. Davy asks readers to rethink their notions of gift giving, pets versus livestock, and what it means to honor the earth and all its beings.

Lastly, in ‘The Environmentalism of the Far-Right Pagans: Blood, Soil, and the Spirits of Land’, Helen A. Berger argues that many of the same concepts and ideas that have been presented throughout this
special issue that are elements of more left-leaning political views are also part of the far-right Heathens’ environmental agenda. She contends that the environmentalism of these far-right Heathens is sincere but interwoven with foci on purity and natural law notions that denigrate and exclude immigrants while advancing their own connections and concomitant rights to a particular land.

These seven articles do not and cannot present the entire spectrum of environmental views among contemporary Pagans. Our hope is that they will provide a wide range of views that will stimulate more discussion, more research, and possibly most importantly, more informed political action to address the accelerating environmental crisis.

Reviews of relevant books that explore Paganism and environmentalism are also included in these issues. The first issue includes Michael York’s review of GaeaGenesis: Conception and Birth of the Living Earth (A Love Story) by Oberon Zell, a well-known Pagan and founder of the Church of All Worlds, and Caroline Tully’s review of Carole M. Cusack’s, Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith, which discusses among other groups the Church of All Worlds, as part of a wider examination of the role of imagination and fiction in the Pagan worldview. The second issue includes Caroline Tully’s review of Annie Sprinkle’s and Beth Stephens’ Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth as Lover, which is an exploration of ecosexuality; a theme that Tully has developed in her article in this issue. This is followed by Michael York’s review of Kathryn Gin Lum’s, Heathen: Religion and Race in American History. This issue concludes with Bron Taylor’s review of Spirit in the Land by Trevor Schoonmaker, which in concert with his argument in ‘Bounding Paganism’, suggests a more capacious understanding of what counts as Paganism.

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References


