

Jefferson F. Calico, *Being Viking: Heathenry in Contemporary America* (Sheffield: Equinox: 2018), 509 pp., \$42.55 (paperback)

As an academic, but also a long-time Heathen and theologian, books like this always create something of a conundrum for me. I feel compelled to engage on multiple registers and I find myself reading such works with bated breath. I wonder how they will shape outsider perceptions of Heathenry, and whether or not they will present, as much as possible, a thorough and accurate account of the various theological positions, ideological fault lines, and denominational discords that make up the contemporary religion. Perhaps the author will examine only the most accessible of the mainstream branches, giving readers a skewed and un-nuanced view of this complicated body of faith. Several pages into Jefferson Calico's *Being Viking* I was able to heave a sigh of relief. While not perfect, this book is one of the most thorough and meticulously researched on Asatru and Heathenry to come out of religious studies in the last decade. It puts its academic predecessors to shame.

As one might expect in a book on what is still considered a "new" religious movement, Calico begins by examining the history of Asatru in America. Unlike previous authors (such as Matthias Gardell or Jennifer Snook) he attempts to provide a thorough overview of the evolution of this tradition within the United States and does not limit his book solely to the influence of race and racism in American Heathenry (a much overdone and generally inaccurate method of approach). His book is unique in that he examines various "tributaries" of thought and experience that have fed into what has become modern Heathenry. Likewise, Calico examines more recent positional shifts within the overall community. While he does utilize contemporary Paganism as a jumping off point for examining the differences in the Heathen "movement," he does a good job at highlighting the ways in which Heathenry had very different origins than modern Pagan religions like Wicca and Druidry, and as such developed significantly different cosmological structures, religious identities, and ethics.

The first half of the book (chapters 1-3) examines the history of American Asatru. Here it is important to note that while Calico is aware that Asatru is only one denomination of American Heathenry,

he does tend to use “Asatru” interchangeably with “Heathenry” throughout the book. It is a small quibble, and he is immediately upfront about this usage (5–6). He relies a bit heavily on Jennifer Snook’s rather questionable book *American Heathens*, and perhaps of necessity touches rather extensively in his opening chapters on the development of Wicca and contemporary Paganism, against which Heathenry is then contrasted, but overall does an excellent job of tracing the religion’s development through German Romanticism, the *Volkish* movement, and the “Neo-Pagan Explosion” of the 1970s. It should be noted that this book examines only American Heathenry. The religion’s development in Iceland, Scandinavia, and Europe had different origins and trajectories, something the book would have benefited from addressing (although he does reference this in the subtitle of the book itself).

Calico’s third chapter discusses Stephen McNallen and Metagenetics, and their consequent influence on folkish Heathenry. Here he provides one of the most unbiased and in-depth examinations that I have thus far encountered from a non-Heathen author. He does perhaps grant pop culture (149–50) too great an influence as a potential “tributary” for Heathen development, but given that the influence of pop culture has been a relative hot spot within the contemporary community over the last decade, its presence cannot be ignored. I was particularly pleased to see one of the newest denominations mentioned—*Urglaawe*, which focuses on developing and practicing Heathenry through the experience, language, and history of German settlers in Pennsylvania, in the region known as *Deitscherei* (201). This denomination has only really gained ground in the last decade and its inclusion shows the depth of Calico’s research. Likewise, Calico demonstrates the influence of online Heathenry in developing ideological divisions. As the community is still largely separated geographically across the United States, (the impact of which Calico also discusses) the Internet has become an important means of communication and development of theological and social discourse.

The second half of the book is devoted largely to examining the impact of Heathen identity on one’s self-concept, family dynamics, and social self. Calico does a fairly decent job of engaging with recent issues within the community, such as what might well be called the ‘polytheistic revolution’ (i.e. the rise of a significantly theistic orientation amongst contemporary Heathens and other Pagans). It should be noted that Calico does not use such a weighted term. Instead, he notes that the communities and Heathens with which he engaged

were very “gods-focused” (270). Likewise he discusses the difficulties of building community and the ways in which a lack of long term geographically unified polytheistic communities continues to hamper the theological and cultural growth of the religion (281). Throughout, Calico consistently emphasizes that these communities are still “young,” continually negotiating their identities, and are communities in the midst of ongoing theological and social flux. This is an important insight about a group of religions consistently academically marginalized (inaccurately) as hotbeds of racism.

I was surprised that while he ignores many of the important theological and denominational divides within the religion, like the controversy over whether or not to venerate Loki (which he mentions once or twice in passing but does not significantly evaluate), Calico does include a chapter on animal sacrifice. For many Heathens, this is the most important offering one can make. Calico does a good job of describing the process of *blót*, the reasons for sacrifice, and how the animal is typically treated. He does not discuss the role of divination in determining what is to be done with the slaughtered animal, presenting an image of sacrifice that always resolves in a communally shared meal. This image is accurate in the majority but not in every case. Still, he provides a nuanced and sympathetic view of the practice, addressing outsider concerns thoroughly. He does note that he himself, despite very thorough field research, did not attend a sacrificial *blót*. The only other work on *blót* thus far has been that of Michael Strmska and myself (and mine has been theologically oriented toward the Heathen community) so this was a welcome addition to the corpus.

Finally, Calico’s concluding chapters address the role of magic and by extension gender within Heathenry. This is the weakest section of the book and depends far too heavily on access to one or two mainstream practitioners. With the exception of Diana Paxson and her group Hrafnar, this strand of practice within contemporary Heathenry has been almost entirely driven by outliers and controversial practitioners. While Calico does mention the most well-known of these (Raven Kaldera), he relies almost exclusively on the insights of mainstream denominations and practitioners notoriously hostile to the work being done on the fringes. By doing so, Calico silences important voices within Heathenry. These are voices that have over the course of twenty years helped change and shift the center of the religion to one that is more closely oriented around devotion to the gods and more open to nuances of gender, sexuality, and identity.

Overall, however, this is the most thoroughly researched book to come out of academia thus far about contemporary Heathenry. It addresses a broad scope of issues relevant to the development of Heathen consciousness and community, traces the development of this body of religions quite thoroughly, and attempts to engage with more recent influences. I do question the usefulness of repeatedly using Wiccan and contemporary Pagan sources (338), particularly Michael York's theological work, which does not reflect a Heathen or even particularly polytheistic approach to religion and gods, as a lens through which to evaluate Heathenry. This is especially so given that Calico early on established (accurately) that Heathenry is not a "Neo-Pagan" religion. (Calico uses "Neo-Paganism" as an umbrella term for the many theistic and non-theistic Paganisms that have developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Within many American Polytheistic communities like Heathenry, the use of the term "Pagan" can be very controversial. This is primarily based on the word's presumed inclusion of non-theistic religious perspectives as equally licit to more gods-oriented ones and the impact this may have on devotional practices and liturgical structure.)

I also found myself wanting more in-depth engagement with various theological controversies that have dogged the religion for thirty years and have as a result shaped the identity of specific denominations. This is largely absent within this work. That being said, *Being Viking* is an up-to-date, highly researched and eminently readable study of American Asatru and Heathenry within the greater field of religious studies. It provides a thorough analysis of the development of Heathenry from its beginnings in the United States through the 2000s, and through meticulous ethnographic inquiry, grants its readers a glimpse into liturgical practice, social gatherings, and the ways in which the Heathen religious identity are expressed in family, community, and social organization. It should be the go-to book for any academic interested in learning more about this body of religions.

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