

Ly de Angeles, Emma Restall Orr, and Thom van Dooren, eds., *Pagan Visions for a Sustainable Future* (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2005), 312 pp., \$17.95 (paperback).

*Pagan Visions* is an edited volume of essays assembled to compensate for what the book's editors claim is a lack of good literature on Paganism. The introduction describes how most people in the world are introduced to Paganism through "superstar Pagans" and "cash-register Druids." (xviii) The implication is that a more authentic Paganism, as opposed to the Paganism of popular authors who promote a kind of New Age spirituality to sell books and merchandise, holds the potential to foster sustainability by enhancing the human capacity for re-sacralizing the world.

As someone with research and teaching interests in the area of environmental sociology and the sociology of religion, I approached *Pagan Visions* with a hope of finding materials that I might assign to my students that will give them greater insights into the subject of green spirituality or green romanticism. To that end, I found the book to be useful, even though the compiled essays vary in quality. The concluding chapter by van Dooren is quite insightful, and I may indeed assign it to my environmental sociology class. However, not all the chapters were as good.

In one chapter, Susan Greenwood is critical of her impressions of interacting with Pagans: "I thought that people would automatically be interested in the natural world; however, I found from my anthropological research among London Pagans in the early to middle 1990s that there was more emphasis on ritual and psychospiritual 'internal' nature as personal experience rather than a connection to, or even an interest in, the environment." (70) Her comments imply that too much of what passes for Paganism today emphasizes the psychospiritual over practical or socially transformative considerations. Unfortunately, the same criticism could be used to describe most of the essays in this book. Several of the chapters offer pleasant discussions about empathy with nature and the need for sacred community. But the discussion remains quite abstract and offers little in the way of models of what such a sacred community would look like or plans for achieving such a community.

At least two chapters offer a straw-man portrayal of Christianity and other monotheistic religions. A brief survey of environmental statements by mainline Christian churches indicates that they, too, have thoroughly incorporated the insights of contemporary ecology. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's "Caring for Creation" is a good example. I got the impression that the authors preferred to think of Christianity as it was portrayed in Lynn White's 1962 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," rather than actually understanding Christianity.

White's article came up explicitly in the chapter comprised of van Dooren's interview with Val Plumwood. Plumwood and van Dooren seem to agree that since White's article was published, "it has been widely acknowledged within academia that both religion and spirituality are intimately bound up with our ecological problems." (230) At the same time, however, Plumwood concedes that White's article led to "an industry of refutation" of White's article (230) These seem to be contradictory statements. Could an industry of refutation arise in academia if it was so widely acknowledge among academics that White was really on to something?

Of course, it is not at all widely agreed that there is a link between religion and the ecological crisis. In fact, one of the great challenges in environmental sociology and the sociology of religion is how to explain the lack of connection between people's actions and their stated beliefs and values (more on the incongruity problem below). Furthermore, a good number of scholars have pointed out that White's attempt to pin the industrial revolution and commodification of people (labor) and nature (industrial resources) on the ancient Israelite is quite absurd. Theodore Hiebert's *The Yahwist's Landscape* is an excellent example.

A few of the authors in this book also seem to think that we could resolve our ecological crisis through some appeal to an ancient religion other than Judaism or Christianity. However, such efforts, including Akkadia Ford's chapter on the religious confession of ancient Egypt, come across as quite anachronistic. Historians and philosophers have described how the conception of the autonomous self is a thoroughly modern and Western construct. To claim that this Egyptian confession is a "personal ethic" is an imposition of a modern mindset and a modern ethical perspective upon ancient people.

In the same chapter, however, Ford offers a moment of clarity when she asserts, "Magickal ecology is concerned with the study of living things now, in particular, the ongoing effects that development in science are having and will potentially have in the future upon magickal work in the twenty-first century." (59) This emphasis on the present study of living things seems to permeate many of the essays. And it was this emphasis that led me to consider that Paganism might have something to offer modern environmentalism.

Essays by Ford, Orr, van Dooren, and Ezzy offer interesting insights when the authors discuss the need for a religious movement that takes seriously knowledge from the field of ecology, as well as from the social sciences. Val Plumwood's discussion on how modern science rivaled and replaced religion and then became its own dominant religion highlights the point (as long as we recognize that this is a functionalist definition of religion). Insights from ecology indicate the need for a paradigm reflecting the organicness and interconnectedness of life, as opposed to

the prominent scientific paradigm of a mechanical and disconnected world. Douglas Ezzy's essay on the human connectedness with a mountain pushes readers in that direction:

I am part of The Mountain, and he is part of me....The water that I drink every day, that becomes my very lifeblood, is sourced from streams that flow down The Mountain. The air that I breathe typically comes in cold winds blowing off The Mountain. Much of the food I ate as a child was grown in our backyard garden on the slopes of The Mountain. Physically and biologically, the Mountain is part of me. (162)

Such descriptions resonate and serve to accomplish exactly what Ezzy sets out to do—namely, to animate the world. (However, I am not sure why Ezzy uses a male pronoun to refer to the mountain.) His discussion on using animism to counter anthropocentrism is quite an ingenious strategy for appealing to modern people. After all, it seems quite unrealistic that we could usurp the dominant conception of the autonomous self with that of biocentrism. But stories of the interconnectedness of our bodies with the earth's water, air, and food can certainly serve to animate our world.

As I indicated earlier, I also read *Pagan Visions* with the hope that it might offer some ideas about addressing the incongruity problem. In both environmental sociology and the sociology of religion, researchers find a gap between what people say they believe and value and how they act. In the United States, for example, public opinion polls consistently indicate that between two-thirds and three-quarters of people are interested in protecting the natural environment, even if it were to cost them economically. And yet, there is little evidence that people are making sacrifices for the sake of the environment or that policy makers are responding to such public sentiments.

Probably the most common approach to addressing the problem of incongruity is to say that people fail to hold their beliefs strongly enough. A more insightful perspective is to consider how there might be larger social structures that affect our actions. For example, nature and people are both treated as commodities in our society, which means that the value of people and nature is determined more by supply and demand than by personal beliefs and values. At least two of the essays in this volume take this issue seriously. Ezzy, for example, acknowledges that the most pressing impacts on the environment cannot be reduced to the level of individual choices, but rather are shaped at the structural level by politicians and big businesses. As he points out, there are many legislative and infrastructural changes that could be made to promote sustainability. And van Dooren's comment about the need to build a sacred community on the foundation of an ecologically considerate worldview

acknowledges the importance of collective action over that of individual choices.

If Pagans succeed in establishing the kinds of sacred communities described in van Dooren's concluding chapter, they might indeed contribute to a more sustainable future. I am not talking about the activism described in the chapter with the Starhawk interview, which struck me more as psychospirituality than a struggle for actual social change. Rather, I am wondering if there is something unique about Paganism and the promise of sacred community that might lead people to create things like eco-villages or to transform their cities into greener places. Until that happens, however, I remain unconvinced that Paganism offers much more than any other religion does in promoting a sustainable future for our world.

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