

Paganism and its Others: Editor's Introduction

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Abstract

Editor's introduction to selected papers from the "Paganism and Its Others" conference held at Masaryk University, Czech Republic, in June 2022. The theme of the conference is explained as an analysis of "Us vs. Them" identity construction in contemporary Pagan movements.

Keywords: Paganism; identity construction; politics; new religious movements

On June 13–14, 2022, the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University in the city of Brno in the Moravian region of the Czech Republic held a conference on the theme of "Paganism and Its Others."¹ Most of the participating scholars were from a variety of Central and Eastern European countries, with keynote speakers from Poland and the United States, and several speakers from Asian countries providing viewpoints on religious phenomena outside of the Euro-American context of most modern Paganism.²

1. Special thanks to Matouš Vencálek, Miroslav Vrzal and his wife, Ivona Vrzalová; Šárka Vondracková; and others in Brno for their work in organizing the conference, and kind appreciation is expressed to the Department for the Study of Religion at Masaryk University for its important support.

2. The keynote speaker on the first day of the conference was the author of this introductory essay, Michael Strmiska of SUNY-Orange (Orange County Community College) in Middletown, New York. Scott Simpson of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, spoke on the second day. Professor Strmiska's keynote lecture is included in this special issue.

A selection of papers from this conference have already been published in the *Religious Studies* journal published in 2023 by Masaryk University, *Religio*, in its Volume 31, no. 1 issue.³ The special issue of *Religio* started with an introductory essay jointly authored by the Czech scholars Miroslav Vrzal and Matouš Vencálek and the aforementioned keynote speaker, the expatriate American professor Scott Simpson. It then showcases the following conference papers: “The Hero-Warrior in the Worldview and Practice of Contemporary Pagans In Ukraine,” by Oksana Oleksandrivna Smorževs’ka; “Challenging the Binary Principles : LGBTQ+ Wiccan Practice in the Berkano Wicca Tradition on Hungary,” by Muhammad Amirul Haqqi; “Navigating Fullness And Exile In The Low Countries : Constructing Contemporary Paganism In- and Outside of a Secular Frame,” by Jedidja van Boven; “Vedic Slavism in Slovakia: Ideology and Practice,” by Tomáš Kubisa. The issue also contains a “Notes from the Conference” overview of the conference papers prepared by Stanislav Gubančok.

The conference was conceived by its organizers as an opportunity to reflect on the construction of identity in modern Pagan movements in relation to “Others” – both positive and negative, both admired and reviled – that form the conceptual framework of contemporary Paganism. The basic question is, if Pagans see themselves as “Us,” who are the “They” or “Them” that Pagans define themselves in either antagonistic opposition or sympathetic relation to?

Being that modern Paganism is a category of religion differently defined and variously understood by both its practitioners and its scholarly observers, I will use my prerogative as one of the scholars who has over many years attempted to provide a rough working definition to do so again here. Modern Paganism is *generally* – though by no means only, absolutely or universally – understood as a contemporary effort to revive pre-Christian religious traditions of European origin.⁴ Therefore, most contemporary Pagans are either people of European descent with interest in European traditional spirituality, or people in other regions who identify with European spiritual traditions. Whether this generally European orientation

3. This special issue of *Religio* is available as a free download at <https://journals.phil.muni.cz/religio/issue/view/2545>, also <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-1-3>.

4. Michael Strmiska, “Introduction: Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives” in Strmiska, ed., *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2005): 1-54.

allows for combination with spiritual traditions of other regions as well as contemporary “New Age” phenomena are matters of much debate, as is the equally sticky issue of the extent to which contemporary Pagans should focus on recreating pre-Christian traditions and reject adding on elements developed in later times. Should Paganism today be the most faithful possible approximation of beliefs and practices from one thousand or two thousand or three thousand years ago, with a continual striving for ancient “authenticity,” or should the pre-Christian past be but one reference point among others?

Modern Paganism can accordingly be classified as *reconstructionist* (highly concerned with recreating past European beliefs and practices) versus *eclectic* (allowing for inclusion of non-European and non-antiquarian elements in combination with whatever pieces of the past are seen as viable and relevant) and, alternately and complementarily, as *ethnic* (focused on traditions of one particular ethnic group or “people” from one specific region) versus *universal* (taking particular traditions that may have originated among one ethnic “nation” as open to universal use and adaptation by people of any and all ethnic origins and identities, also allowing for the kind of interconnection and cross-cultural combination noted as “eclectic.”)

These categories hint at the kinds of Others likely to be involved in Pagan identity construction. With the “pre-Christianness” of Paganism resulting from the often violent processes by which European Pagans were “converted” into Christians and by which Pagan traditions were suppressed and nearly forgotten, Christianity stands out as the ultimate Negative Other for modern Pagans. This antagonistic relationship is periodically reinforced by the continuing efforts of contemporary Christians to repress, replace, revile or subordinate non-Christian religions worldwide. The other side of this negative status conferred on Christianity is the highly positive status conferred on Indigenous peoples and traditions as well as other non-Christian traditions and peoples who have likewise suffered from the repressive tendencies of Christianity over the centuries.

The Hindu tradition and people of India stand out as highly Positive Others in this regard not only because of their experience of suppression but also because of the ancient Indo-European links and parallels that can be traced between many European mythologies and religions and those of Indian

Hinduism.⁵ Pagans also admire Hinduism as a kindred religious tradition that was never suppressed to the extent of Paganism in Europe. With reference to the Indian historical context, where Islam was formerly one of the main agents of repression of Indian “Paganism” – that is, Hinduism – Islam and Muslims also serve as Negative Others for many Pagans.

The construction and interpretation of negative and positive Others by modern Pagans is also affected by and expressed through popular culture and politics. The article by Miroslav Vrzal explores how various permutations of heavy metal rock music in northern and eastern Europe have served Pagan movements in these regions as sources of inspiration and means of dissemination. Metal music and musicians may therefore function as Positive Others for Pagans who follow this kind of music as well as fans of this scene who become devotees of Paganism as well. Taking up a tragic situation of the current moment, Matouš Vencálek examines how the invasion of Ukraine launched by Vladimir Putin in February 2022 has divided Slavic Pagans in the two warring countries into opposing camps, despite their obviously quite similar traditions, and been incorporated into wartime propaganda on both sides of the conflict.

Slovenian scholar Manca Račič offers a different angle on Pagan Others by exploring an interesting case of folklore with pre-Christian aspects being interpreted – or invented – to establish a cultural movement with quasi-religious elements, if not quite a full-blown “Pagan” religious movement. Here, supposedly authentic traditions claimed to derive from the sacred pre-Christian past constitute the foundation of a Positive Pagan Other, with the caveat that the “authenticity” of the traditions and the methods employed in their “discovery” are very much open to dispute. Those aware of the tortured history of the Wicca and Goddess Spirituality movements in either defending or distancing questionable interpretations of European history embedded in the early history of these movements will find similar dynamics at play in this intriguing case study.

Robert-Catalin Barbu’s study of syncretic interaction between folkloric “Pagan” traditions and Orthodox Christianity in Romania complicates the usually clear-cut, us-vs.-them binary opposition between Christianity and Paganism that generally prevails in Pagan

5. Michael Strmiska, “Eastern Religions in Eastern Europe: Three Cases from Lithuania,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2013): 49–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2012.719305>.

contexts. Here, pre-Christian Romanian Pagan beliefs and practices that live on in Romanian religious folklore are shown to survive into modern times by being incorporated into the very Christianity that claims to reject the validity of such “Pagan” traditions. There are no clear Others here, just a theological muddle that seems to serve the interests of all concerned – so long as no attempt is made to precisely delineate the dividing lines between different religious traditions. As Barbu’s paper does not address contemporary Pagan revival movements in Romania, with his article being more historical than anthropological in scope and spirit, it is to be hoped that further research will examine the relationship between actual modern Pagan movements and their relationship with the dominant Orthodox Church in Romania.

It is hoped that the readers of these articles will experience the same excitement as we did in Brno on those mid-June days in 2022 when we gathered for this conference. Understanding who Pagans see as their Others is an important step in delineating the base, boundaries and contours of modern-day, twenty-first-century Paganism.

There were still other papers from the conference not included here nor in *Religio* that I hope will find future publication either in this journal or elsewhere.