

***The Pomegranate Returns from the Underworld:  
A Letter from the Editor***

Chas S. Clifton

After nearly three years in the publishing equivalent of the Underworld, *The Pomegranate* has been reborn, with a new, academic publisher, Equinox Publishing Ltd, a new editor and editorial board, and a new subtitle: *The International Journal of Pagan Studies*.

*The Pomegranate's* story began in 1996, when Fritz Muntean, a graduate student in religious studies at the University of British Columbia, and his friend Diana Tracy, living across the border in Oregon, decided to create a new journal "to provide a scholarly venue for the forthright and critical examination of Neopagan beliefs and practices." For the next five years, they and a loose coalition of helpers worked to produce and mail *The Pomegranate* on a quarterly basis for a growing number of readers, who began in turn to recognize its importance to their personal and academic interests. Many scholars working in the area of contemporary Paganism and nature religion were introduced to *The Pomegranate* in 1997 when Muntean and Tracy brought the journal to what was only the third meeting of the Nature Religions Scholars Network (NRSN), a group meeting in conjunction with the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> The synergy was obvious, and NRSN members increasingly contributed to the pages of *The Pomegranate*.

Five years, however, brought changes. After putting out eighteen issues,<sup>2</sup> editor Fritz Muntean felt moved in new directions, so together he and I began to approach several journal publishers to see if one would add *The Pomegranate* to its list. The wheels turned slowly, but turn they did, and in 2003 we reached an agreement with Janet Joyce, managing director of Equinox Publishing Ltd, to add *The Pomegranate* to the list of

1. For more information about the Nature Religions Scholars Network, visit <http://chass.colostate-pueblo.edu/natrel/>.

2. Those earlier issues of *The Pomegranate* that Muntean edited are available on CD-ROM. For ordering information, visit <http://chass.colostate-pueblo.edu/natrel/pom/>.

new and existing journals that her firm would publish.<sup>3</sup> Under the new arrangement, *The Pomegranate* becomes a fully peer-reviewed journal with an interdisciplinary approach, an editorial board representing various disciplines, and the mission of being the first academic Pagan studies journal ever.

What do we mean by “Pagan studies”? Certainly, our editorial vision is not of “irreligion” nor of Wordsworth’s “creed outworn.” Pagan studies exists because Paganism lives. In his essay in this issue “Paganism as Root-Religion,” Michael York addresses that question of definition. In an earlier *Pomegranate* article, York had defined Paganism as “an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by individual or community with the tangible, sentient and nonempirical.” Unpacking his own definition, York showed that it allowed multiple, localized forms of religious expression with multiple expressions of the divine or supernatural.<sup>4</sup> York’s definition, as formulated in 2000 and subsequently in his book *Pagan Theology*, consciously excluded dualistic Gnosticism or Manichaeism or the *soma sema* (the body is a tomb) formula of certain Greek philosophers, even when they arose in the context of Classical Paganism. “Paganism, therefore, allows the divine to manifest in and as the material, whatever else it may be. But paganism eschews any true hierarchy between the temporal and the permanent, between the physical and spiritual, or between this-world and the otherworld.”<sup>5</sup>

As York’s earlier *Pomegranate* article noted, our understanding of paganism – which he spells with a lower-case “p” when discussing it as a religious attitude, defined above, and with an upper-case “P” when speaking of its newer, self-conscious manifestations, such as Wicca – is intertwined with the “emergent rubric of nature religion.”<sup>6</sup> In her book *Nature Religion in America*, Catharine Albanese notably explained how, for her, “nature religion” describes a “symbolic center” – nature as a source of sacred value, and the “cluster of beliefs, behaviors, and values that encircles it.”<sup>7</sup> To Albanese, the term was a scholarly construct; however, when her book appeared in 1990, the term “nature religion,” or its near-synonym “earth religion,” already had at least a twenty-year history among contemporary Pagans in the United States, at least, as a somewhat

3. For more information, visit the Equinox web site, <http://www.equinoxpub.com>.

4. Michael York, “Defining Paganism,” *The Pomegranate* 11 (February 2000), 4-9.

5. Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

6. York, “Defining Paganism,” 7.

7. Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6-8.

euphemistic self-description. That these new descriptors came to be employed around 1970, the year when the first Earth Day heightened the growing social and political strength of the environment movement, is no coincidence. American Pagans responded to what Albanese (and, before her, the historian Roderick Nash<sup>8</sup>) would later identify as a key reference point in the national consciousness, a source of sacred – and hence, political and social – value, and neatly align themselves with it. From these different but related uses of the term “nature religion” comes a debate to which York refers: Which category includes the other? Is “nature religion” all paganism and more (“natural healing,” for example) or does small-p paganism encompass all manifestations of nature religion, even when they appear within one of the commonly designated world religions? Such books as the 1998 anthology *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World*, with its emphasis on the self-conscious large-P world of contemporary Paganism, make it clear that the editors, in their words, see “Paganism as a general and inclusive category . . . [all] nature religions in the sense that they involve a reorientation towards, and a resacralisation of, both external nature and our own physical embodiment.”<sup>9</sup> In the arena of general usage, “nature religion” and “Paganism” are today virtually synonymous.

From an editor’s perspective, however, this discussion is far from trivial. Pagan studies, as a subdivision of the larger study of religions, exists, I have no doubt, because scholars of contemporary Paganism (many of them practitioners themselves) found and continue to find themselves not completely at home in such categories as “new religious movements” or “feminist religion.” The impetus for the category of Pagan studies comes, then, from two directions. One is the academic acknowledgement of contemporary Pagan religions’ movement into the public eye, for example, the participation by Pagan clergy in interfaith organizations (when they are permitted to do so), or, particularly in the United Kingdom, Pagans’ entry into discussions over how to manage monuments such as Stonehenge when those sites are viewed not merely as ancient monuments but as sites of continued Pagan religious practice, construed as “indigenous religion.”<sup>10</sup> Second, and equally important in the editorial formation of this journal, to set forth an audacious redefinition of the

8. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 1983).

9. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel, eds., *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 1.

10. See, for example, Robert Wallis, *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans* (London: Routledge, 2003).

term “pagan” as Michael York has done gives us room to reexamine from fresh perspectives all manifestation of ancient Pagan religions, not as way stations on the route to monotheism but as valid religious expressions on their own.

Academic conferences on Pagan studies in the UK began a decade ago. The first international conference in Pagan studies was organized by Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1993. A larger event, the “Nature Religion Today” conference at the University of Lancaster in 1996, produced the volume cited above. Its organizers viewed contemporary Paganism as “part of a widespread cultural response to the decay of main-line religions and to a widely felt awareness of ecological crisis.”<sup>11</sup> In the United States, perhaps the first gathering of scholars in Pagan studies was an informal meeting held during the joint annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature in Philadelphia in 1995, which coalesced into the Nature Religions Scholars Network, to which I referred at the beginning. In 1998, the NRSN began a tradition of meeting the day before AAR/SBL convened, hearing presentations of academic papers, and discussing, among other topics, the desirability of having a peer-reviewed journal in Pagan studies. In November 2003, Cat McEarchern, an American graduate student at the University of Stirling, Scotland, transformed that gathering into the first day-long Conference on Contemporary Pagan Studies (CCPS); a second such conference is planned for 19 November 2004 in San Antonio, Texas, with the theme “Making a Place for Ourselves: Contemporary Pagan Studies and Current Theory.”

Three of the 2003 CCPS papers are showcased here. In different ways, they participate in ongoing conversations about the self-image of contemporary Paganism. Regina Oboler addresses the commonly accepted self-description of contemporary Pagans as nature religionists with some bedrock sociological research to see if and how they are ecologically conscious and politically active. Her research raises an interesting question: If Pagans are indeed more likely to be environmental activists than are Americans in general, is that activism due to religious views or to an overall higher educational level than the population at large?

In a different vein, Chris Klassen and Paul Thomas explore the mining of ancient Paganisms by contemporary practitioners. Klassen questions the utility of feminist Witches’ use of metaphors of colonialism and postcolonialism in understanding their own identities as members of a still-fragile new religious movement. She critiques such well-known Pagan writers as Starhawk for at times “falling into the identity of

11. Pearson, et al., 1.

victim." Thomas, similarly, discusses how the Sumerian goddess Inanna is re-visioned and somewhat pacified by today's Goddess worshippers who may in fact by essentializing Inanna be merely reflecting their own internalized gendered conceptions, bringing those ideas to the ancient texts that they claim as their own heritage.

Although not presented at CCPS 2003, Brian Hayden's "How Religion Changed in the Bronze Age" is part of a book, *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion*, that, among other concerns, addresses the notion of peaceful, matrifocal "Old Europe," an imaginal realm whose existence is important to many feminist Witches.<sup>12</sup> Hayden's larger work draws on the discipline of cultural ecology, which attempts to show how ecological factors such as the physical environment, energy sources, and survival strategies shape human cultural institutions. He also argues that the human capacity for ecstasy enables us "to create binding relationships with other people or institutions or ideals associated with those states."

Douglas Ezzy, in "Graphic Ontology: Levinas, Sacred Landscapes and Cities" conducts his own conversation with the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is known for proposing that all ethics begin with the encounter with the Other; Ezzy, then, asks how and if nature can be the Other, not only when it is romanticized as a harmonious whole and not only when it is viewed as separate from the human-made environment.

In "The Emergence of the Goddess Mary from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages," Dana Kramer-Rolls assembles additional evidence for a continuity of goddess-worship into nominally Christian Western Europe, going beyond the well-known affinity of the Roman cult of Isis and that of Mary. She argues that the cult of Mary can be better apprehended from the Pagan perspective of Late Antiquity rather than that of orthodox Christianity.

Finally, *The Pomegranate's* "editor emeritus," Fritz Muntean, continues as books-and-letters editor. He has collected reviews of significant new works in Pagan scholarship from the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Canada, and the United States. I urge anyone interested in reviewing for *The Pomegranate* or in seeing their book reviewed to contact him at [fmuntean@telus.net](mailto:fmuntean@telus.net).

Potential contributors should contact me at [chas.clifton@colostate-pueblo.edu](mailto:chas.clifton@colostate-pueblo.edu). For information on subscriptions, please visit the Equinox Publications website [www.equinoxpub.com](http://www.equinoxpub.com).

12. Brian Hayden, *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003).

*Bibliography*

- Albanese, Catherine. *Nature Religion in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Hayden, Brian. *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003.
- Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, 1983.
- Pearson, Joanne, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel, eds. *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Wallis, Robert. *Shamans/Neo-Shamans: Ecstasy, Alternative Archaeologies and Contemporary Pagans*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- York, Michael. "Defining Paganism," *The Pomegranate* 11 (February 2000): 4-9.
- . *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*. New York: New York University Press, 2003.