

Native Faith Movements in Europe: Intersections, Collisions, and Transformations of Religious Sensibilities

Review by Stephen D. Glazier

Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Europe: Colonialist and Nationalist Impulses

by Kathryn Rountree, ed.

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In recent decades Pagan and Native Faith movements have proliferated across Europe, but there has been little research addressing the social and political impact of these movements. Contributors to this volume explore the complex interplay of nationalistic impulses in contemporary Paganism, illustrating how nationalistic impulses play out, intersect, collide, and transform European religious sensibilities as evidenced by the establishment of the European Congress of Ethnic Religions (ECER) in 1998. Contributors to this volume also make it clear that European Paganism differs from Paganism in North America largely because European Pagans are strongly rooted in their local communities and focus more on issues of ethnic identity.

Pagan and Native Faith movements are notable for valorizing nature and for embracing polytheistic cosmologies, and for their diverse beliefs, practices, goals, and agendas. Some pagan groups attempt to recreate ancient religious forms, while other groups import elements from newer, foreign traditions like Wicca, Druidry, Goddess Spirituality, and Core Shamanism.

This volume consists of 13 chapters covering an array of European nations and local contexts (e. g. Sami Neo- shamanism in Norway, Danish Asatro, Swedish Heathenism, The Brotherhood of Wolves in the Czech Republic, Sakha Shamanism, Estonian Maausulised, Hungarian Paganism, Witchcraft in Berlin, Irish Paganism, Flemish Wicca, Goddess Spirituality in the Iberian Peninsula, Italian Paganism,

and Maltese Paganism). Most contributors are Anthropologists, but other disciplines -- notably History, Religious Studies, Folklore, and Psychology-- are represented. All European Pagan and Native Faith movements are not represented. As editor Kathryn Rountree points out, chapters in this volume “should not be regarded as ‘country studies’ but rather as studies of particular groups in particular countries” (p. 9).

Rountree’s introduction, “Context is Everything: Plurality and Paradox in Contemporary European Paganisms,” assesses Paganisms and Native Faith movements as products of “glocalization” – an interplay of global and local concerns. She suggests that Native Faith and Pagan movements in Europe are steeped in what she classifies as “colonialist and nationalist impulses.” These movements, she asserts, are very much products of local histories and European politics. Some movements -- like Wicca -- have readily adopted Anglo-American Pagan traditions, while other movements have adopted a “reconstructionist approach” and have sought to revitalize selected pre-Christian religious traditions tied to particular regions. Some Native Faith movements advocate a return to an “authentic” pre-Christian religion, while others do not.

Contemporary Pagan and Native Faith movements have been shaped by historical relationships within particular regions as in, for example, Estonia and/or the degree to which secularism has taken hold as in, for example, Sweden. Contributors point out that while Native Faith movements seem nationalistic in tone, most groups are accepting and inclusive of outsiders.

The first six chapters – dealing with Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Czech Republic – constitute the centerpiece of the book. Chapter 1, “Sami Neo-shamanism in Norway: Colonial Grounds, Ethnic Revival and Pagan Pathways.” by Siv Ellen Kraft documents a revival of Sami shamanism in Norway. Sami shamanism, she asserts, has multiple influences; for example, the founder of Sami neo-shamanism made trips to California in order to study under anthropologist Michael J Harner. Kraft cogently argues for a distinctive Sami shamanism in which Sami indigenous identity becomes increasingly important. She convincingly demonstrates how environmental protest and the changing status of indigenous peoples have shaped Sami cultural and religious traditions. Chapter 2, “It’s Not Easy Being Apolitical: Reconstruction and Eclecticism in Danish Asatro,” by Matthew H. Amster highlights the Danish cultural aversion to mixing religion and politics. Chapter 3, “Modern Heathenism in Sweden: A Case Study in the Creation of a Traditional Religion,” by Fredrik Gregorius explores a

curious paradox. Swedish Pagans present their religion as a “re-discovery” of authentic Nordic culture, while at the same time incorporating decidedly non-Nordic religions like Wicca (p. 12). Swedish Pagans draw inspiration from migrant religions like Hinduism and Haitian Voodoo and seek to position themselves among other Swedish “minority religions.” Chapter 4 “The Brotherhood of Wolves, Czech Republic: From Asatru to Primitivism.” by Kamila Velkoborska emphasizes diversity in the Czech Pagan scene. Velkoborska documents numerous disagreements, splits, and power struggles within the movement that revolves around Czech Wolfdogs (bred by members) and members who purport to live as modern hunter-gatherers.

Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 address political discourses surrounding Paganism and Native Faiths. Chapter 5, “Soviet-era Discourse and Siberian Shamanic Revivalism: How Area Spirits Speak through Academia” by Eleanor Peers shows how a revival of shamanism in Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, northeast Siberia, relates to a wider post-Soviet nationalist revival. Chapter 6, “In Search of Genuine Religion: The Contemporary Estonian Maausulised Movement and Nationalist Discourse” by Ergo-Hart Vastrik traces continuity between Estonian Native Faith movements and the followers of Maausk (Maausk = “the faith of the earth”) -- a religion that was banned by the Soviets in 1940. Chapter 7, “Emerging Identity Markets of Contemporary Pagan Ideologies in Hungary” by Tamas Szilagyi provides an account of Pagan “meta-culture” in Hungary. Szilagyi deftly charts the fate of Hungarian Christian churches that collapsed because they were unable to rebuild their sociopolitical base. Chapter 8, “Hot, Strange, Folkish, Cosmopolitan: Native Faith and Neo-pagan Witchcraft in Berlin's Changing Urban Context” by Victoria Hegner examines the relationship between Native Faith and nationalism in Germany. What happens when an American Pagan visits Berlin? Chapter 9, “Paganism in Ireland: Syncretic Processes, Identity and a Sense of Place” by Jenny Butler explores other ways of conceiving the relationship between paganism and nationalism. She convincingly argues that Irish nationalism and Paganism are drawn from land, monuments, myths, and Irish folk culture. Chapter 10, “On the Sticks and Stones of the Greencraft Temple in Flanders: Balancing Global and Local Heritage in Wicca.” By Leon van Gulik looks at tensions between eclecticism and traditionalism among Flemish followers of Greencraft Wicca. Two aspects of the Greencraft tradition 1) the Celtic tree calendar, and 2) Stone circles combine elements that are allegedly Celtic, but are no longer considered to be “authentic.”

Chapters 11-13 address issues of authenticity. Chapter 11, “Iberian Paganism: Goddess Spirituality in Spain and Portugal and the Quest for Authenticity” by Anna Fedele reports on the 2010 transplantation

of the goddess conference in Spain. She emphasizes the close affinities of Iberian Paganism and local Catholics. Chapter 12, “Bellisama and Aradia: Paganism Re-emerges in Italy” by Francesca Ciancimino Howell points out that the Italian Pagan community has indigenized and re-appropriated multiple religious traditions. Howell skillfully delineates diverse local and global strands. Finally, chapter 13, “Authenticity and Invention in the Quest for a Modern Maltese Paganism” by Kathryn Rountree looks at Maltese Paganism and the colonizing aspects of modern Paganism. Rountree points out that while the United States plays a major role in spreading the gospel of the goddess in Europe, American ideas have been met with a variety of local responses ranging from enthusiasm to disapproval.

Contributors to this volume do an excellent job of presenting descriptive and ethnographic materials to highlight the complex inter-workings of traditionalism and eclecticism. Above all, contributors highlight the importance of local sociocultural, historical, political, religious and environmental contexts in determining the diverse shapes that Paganisms and Native Faith movements have taken in the current sociopolitical space of Europe. Moreover, these studies illustrate how particular local contexts can inspire vastly “different responses” (p. 19). Contributors provide considerable ethnographic detail, but I come away from this volume wanting to know more about the rituals and belief systems of these religions and wanting to know what it would be like to be a participant in these movements. What is it about these religions that has made them so compelling to so many in such diverse social and political settings?

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