# **Paganism and Politics: Neo-Pagan & Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe**

# *Book of Abstracts*

[***http://www.phil.muni.cz/relig/paganismpolitics2016/program.htm***](http://www.phil.muni.cz/relig/paganismpolitics2016/program.htm)

## Keynote Lecture 1

***Agita Misāne, M.phil., Advanced Social and Political Research Institute, University of Latvia***

**Are the Gods Back? Considerations on the Political Future of the Contemporary (Neo) Paganism**

This talk will concentrate on two closely related issues. Firstly, I will mention some tendencies that are observable in the relationship of contemporary Paganism and politics. Then, I will offer my thoughts why this relationship possibly develops as it does. The points for consideration are as follows.

Paganism and the political elites. Identifying as a Pagan is not an obstacle for holding a high political office (or, indeed, high social status in general) nowadays.

‘Invisible religion’ is not invisible any more – alternative religions are often present in the public space, institutionalized, commercialized etc., and this applies also to Paganism/Native faith movements. „From marginal to mainstream” is a path that is often followed by Pagans now. However, mainstreaming comes at a cost. A stereotypical Pagan is a *virtuoso* but we shall not ignore a growing group of nominal Pagans (who are more likely to be interested in entering political milieu). We may assume that there will always be Pagan groups or individuals that are critical of the political world and self-isolate from what they perceive as corrupt, aggressive and materialistic world of politics.

Even it is true that Central/Eastern European Paganisms have in the past embraced a more nationalistic, right-wing political path in contrast to their Western European counterparts who tended to affiliate with the Green movement or left liberal political thought, this difference has become blurred. From the political perspective, radical right and extreme right politicians form coalitions with a broad spectrum of religious groups and their preferred choice of religious collaborates are often Christian fundamentalist groups.

In order to interpret the above mentioned observations we should first consider that Pagan groups do not develop isolated from the general religious society. Religion is in the public eye again and that includes Pagan groups. After „secularization decades” when religion was perceived to be individual’s private choice and the political discourse commonly favored its remaining private, we now experience growing political activities of religious organizations and religious dignitaries. Their predominant concerns, however, differ in Western and Central/Easter Europe. Western Europeans care more for social justice, environment, human rights etc., Central/Eastern Europeans voice their opinions (and often exercise pressure on the governments) concerning public morality, reproductive health and education. In this respect, the Pagan communities can offer a more balanced approach to counteract the Christian and Muslim fundamentalists on a number of political issues.

The Pagan activities could also be interpreted in the light of mistrust and resistance to globalization that many Europeans share. This is evident in the very concept „Native faith” - this is how many groups identify themselves.

Finally, one overlooked aspect is the level of formalization of any given religion that plays a role in the way it functions in the contemporary society. Neo-paganism is a form of „invented tradition” and as such it may find it difficult to sustain itself without reference to other religious traditions (various esoteric teachings are common choices), alternative healing, and/or an intellectual teaching or ideology. Politics can also be a choice.

## Keynote Lecture 2

***Michael Strmiska, PhD, Global Studies Department, SUNY-Orange in New York State***

**Pagan Politics in the 21st Century: 'Peace and Love' or 'Blood and Soil'?"**

The lecture will begin by reviewing definitions and categories of Modern Paganism (Neo-Paganism) first introduced in the 2005 book Modern Paganism in World Culture and noting parallels with certain political trends in Europe and America today. Particular attention will be paid to how the rising tide of pro-nativist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in contemporary European and American politics mirrors certain views and values espoused by the more ethnically-oriented forms of Paganism, even though this seeming convergence of interests between Pagans and rightists at the political level is undercut at the religious level by the right-wing’s firm adherence to Christianity and rejection of religious diversity. Looking further back in time, the lecture will examine how the competing nineteenth century visions of ethnic-centered nationalism and universal humanism are replicated today in the more ethnic and traditional types of Paganism versus those that are more eclectic and universalistic in their outlook. Finally, the lecture will ponder the question of whether twenty-first century Paganism has more to offer humanity than a replay of nineteenth century ideologies and sentiments.

***Eglė Aleknaitė, PhD, Vytautas Magnus University***

**Participation of contemporary Pagans in heritagization and history politics: struggles of Pagans and Catholics in Lithuania at the end of the 20th- the beginning of 21st century**

Heritagization may be defined as a process used by various groups of the society to select and highlight aspects of past that help to create group’s identity and to gain power in relation to other groups. History is especially important for some groups and contemporary Pagans are among them.

In the 21st century, two worldview-based groups actively participating in heritagization and history politics can be distinguished in Lithuania: contemporary Pagans and Catholic intellectuals. They spread and establish their interpretations through scholarly publications and cultural activities (folk music revival, celebrations, etc.).

In their competing interpretations, both groups attempt to present themselves or their religious tradition as carriers of values or as forces important for development of Lithuanian nation, and attempt to establish corresponding aspects of history as Lithuanian heritage. Pagans accuse Catholics for destruction of Pagan religion and Lithuanian folk culture in general, while Catholics blame contemporary Pagans for collaboration with Soviet authorities in promoting visions of folk culture and Lithuanian ethnic identity created by Soviet ideologists. Both versions of Lithuanian religious and cultural history provide some valuable insights and at the same time promote some misrepresentations.

These struggles reveal much about visions, ambitions, and public activities of Lithuanian contemporary Pagans. In addition, as much of these struggles take place in academic milieu, they point out to the factor of worldview of researchers presenting their visions of religious history. Although worldview influence is inevitable in research on religion and culture in general, all histories should be read taking in mind this factor.

***Adam Anczyk, PhD, Jagiellonian University***

**Science and/vs Mythopoeia: some remarks in the margins of M. A. Murray’s “The Witch Cult in Western Europe”**

The discussion over the influence of scientific work and academics themselves on contemporary Paganism is a lively discussed topic since Markus A. Davidsen’s (2012) paper on the subject. Davidsen raised an issue, which was often discussed in more broader contexts in religious studies, of a confessionalist perspective within the discipline. My presentation will add a question to the debate: what about the cases, in which the process is – more or less – ‘unconscious’ to the researcher? Probably the most vivid example is the influence of Margaret Alice Murray’s The Witch Cult in Western Europe on conceptualizing roots of contemporary Pagan traditions, as well as rituals and customs. Even M. A. Murray was personally rather a sceptic, her writings surely had an impact on the movement. The possible answer is that, it may be not about the people, but methodology. Nevertheless, the issue of what impact research has on religious, social and political life remains here (especially when we are experiencing an emancipation of so-called engaged approach in social sciences). So it is a question we, as academics, may ask ourselves: what will be the ‘second life’ of our books and articles and will they withstand the power of the myth?

***László Kövecses, MSc., Independent Researcher***

**Un-national Estonian and Russian pagan identity?**

The central research question of the current paper asks whether it is possible to trace a general tendency within both Estonian and Russian Pagan individuals’ identity as shifting from national to sub-national (local) level?

Geographic proximity, cultural heritage and partly shared historical past make ethnic-Estonians and ethnic-Russians a suitable couple for comparison. Recently my Master’s thesis dealt with the role of religious communities in Estonian national identity formation in the past decade. It analysed a wide-range of primary sources, such as governmental and clerical censuses, online media content, a self-made multiple-choice question survey involving nearly 500 participants and 3 semi-structured interviews conducted with prominent members of religious organisations. Results showed that neither the Lutheran Church, nor the organisation for modern pagans, Maavalla Koda has a lasting role as the nurturer or maintainer of national sentiments within society. In fact, the vast majority of followers of the native faith movement feel more attachment to their regional or local area than to Estonia as a country. Similarly, when asked about their ethnic identity, they tended to categorise themselves primarily as members of their respective ethnographic group (Setu, Võru, etc.) living within Estonia. Estonian national identity was not of utmost importance for many of them.

This observation is especially interesting in the light of numerous scholars previously highlighting the strong nationalistic overtone of modern Pagan movements emerging after the collapse of the Soviet Union (e.g. Victor Shnirelman). On the other hand, an increasing number of researchers also observe this shift from the nation-centred mindset of native faith believers to the more localised, sub-national collective identity. Roman Shizhensky has done field work among Rodnovers, and when asking about what the concept of motherland means to them, surprisingly a substantial part of them replied “an area around which you can walk in one day”.

***Giuseppe Maiello, Assoc. Prof., Palacký University Olomouc***

**How much was important for Czech contemporary Pagans and Native Faith believers to have their own particular funeral**

In the beginning of the year 2012, after the dramatic dead of two relative young people, belonging to the first generation of Czech contemporary pagan and Native faith community, some other members of this community decided to organize a series of meetings targeted to find a concrete way to realize “pagan funerals”. The experiment failed despite the fact that the energies invested were considerable. The paper will present a short history of that experiment, mainly through the narration of the actors. The interviews are conceived as unstructured in order to build better rapport with the interviewees, usually reluctant to open up to scientists. Using the emic approach, the aim of the paper is to understand the insider view of the ways how the Czech contemporary pagans and Native Faith believers imagine a pagan funeral.

***Jan Merička, Bc., Masaryk University***

**Relation and Trends of Pagans to "extremism"**

The main aim of this article is to describe relations and tendencies of pagans practicing rituals and religious ceremonies towards extremism through methods of qualitative analysis, interviews and observations. The thesis focuses on subjective view of pagans through which we can understand internal processes within their community. Within the theoretical chapters, the view of pagans towards paganism and extremism will be defined. Main definitions from professional literature will be mentioned within this part to complete and compare the view on the topic mentioned above. Practical chapters of this thesis will be focused on specific attitudes of pagans, from which the generally applicable standpoints will be drawn. Based on this relations, a prediction of the tendencies of pagans towards extremism will be conducted. The thesis will also address and analyze possible triggers for the tendencies towards extremism.

***Jan Reichstäter, Mgr. et Mgr., Masaryk University***

**The decline of Celtic neopaganism in the Czech Republic?: Towards the factors of growth and erosion of the Czech celtophilia.**

The „Celt“ as a self-identification mark (on both sub-cultural and „ethnic“ level) came into fashion expressively among some alternative-artistic groups in the Czech lands after the Soviet occupation in 1968. The greatest „celtophilia enthusiasm“ began in 1990’s after the Velvet Revolution, in a correspondence to a political re-orientation of the country towards the West. In 1995 one of the well-known „pro-Celtic“ organizations in the Czech Republic was founded: The Brotherhood of the Celts (Bratrstvo Keltů). This society organized frequently cultural meetings (like calendar feasts or educational seminars) with the aim to remind the supposed Celtic past of the Czech basin in the pre-Slavic periods and to popularize the culture of the so-called „Celtic nations“. In 2015 its long-time leader Tomáš Křivánek proclaimed the end of traditional activities, even the end of existence of the organization itself. This event notably corresponds with the general decline of activities of the „Celtic“ groups in the country in the last 5-10 years.

This article summarizes the main factors (like political orientation, religious seeking, historical studies, ecological activism, gender movement) that stayed beyond the growth, but probably even influenced the decline of celtophilia (i.e. the main „emocional“ source for the Celtic neopaganism). The article also tries to evaluate whether the „Celtic“ identity of the present Czech people is going to extinct, or there happens rather a process of its transformations.

***Scott Simpson, Mgr., Jagiellonian University***

**Do Politics and Religion Mix in 21st Century Rodzimowierstwo?**

The 1930s antecedents of Polish Rodzimowierstwo were often vocally nationalistic in their ideology, as were many of the groups active in the 1990s. There was even a small anti-Catholic political party which drew on Pagan Slavic themes in the early post-communist period. But over time, overt political ideology has become less visible in Polish Rodzimowierstwo, with some 21st century communities even maintaining semi-official bans on political speech at religious rites. What has changed and why?

***Jennifer Uzzel, Durham University***

**Walking the Crow Road' An investigation into funeral practices among contemporary Pagans in the UK**

This paper will examine the emergent funeral traditions among contemporary Paganisms in the UK from the perspective of ritual, 'disposal' and memorialisation. It will focus on two ideas that appear to be gaining some prominence.

Firstly, it will consider the importance to some Pagans of a sense of continuity with a supposed pre-Christian past. Three examples of ways in which Pagans might seek this continuity will be given and discussed: The desire for cremated remains to be scattered or interred on or near ancient pre-Christian monuments; the huge popularity of 'All Cannings' long barrow, a modern reconstruction of a Neolithic chamber tomb completed in 2011 and designed to receive cremated remains; and the campaign to fully legalise outdoor cremation on wooden pyres spearheaded by the 'Natural Death' charity. While none of these concerns are purely or exclusively Pagan, they do appear to be central to many Pagans' concerns about their deaths and funerary ritual. We will consider why this sense of continuity is so important to many Pagans and what it can tell us about Pagan understanding about relationships with ancestors and with the land itself.

Secondly it will look at ecological concerns within the various Paganisms about sustainability and the 'gifting' of the body to the land at death. This will be considered in the light of the current move among certain groups in the UK towards 'Natural Burial' and the Pagan orientation to this way of thinking.

***Matouš Vencálek, Mgr., Masaryk University***

**Religious, Socio-cultural and Political Worldviews of Contemporary Czech Pagans**

This paper presents the results of a research inspired by Helen Berger’s Pagan Census, conducted among Czech Pagans. It explores the worldviews of Czech Pagans from different Pagan groups, regarding the questions of spirituality (e.g. the beliefs about afterlife, reincarnation or magic), society and culture (e.g. regarding LGBT rights, drugs or the status of women in society) and politics (e.g. regarding the market regulation, social welfare, as well as specific political party preferences). It focuses on the differences, as well as on the commonalities among various Pagan groups as the Pagan movement is highly diversified and sprouts from several different sources: some groups have emerged from naturalizing and romanticizing tendencies and emphasize the sacredness of nature, worship and respect for all of its creatures; while some groups have emerged from rather nationalistic tendencies and focus on the worship of the Gods and ancestors with strong emphasis on ethnic background.

***Miroslav Vrzal, Ing. Mgr. et Mgr., Masaryk University***

**Pagan terrorism? Pagan motives for church burnings in the early 90s Norwegian black metal subculture**

The church burning wave of the early 90s in Norway connected with black metal subculture is often associated with Satanism. Regarding the act of church burning, the term satanic terrorism is sometimes used. The paper aims to show that it is possible to speak (in some cases) about pagan terrorism rather than satanic terrorism. The reason is that some of the leading figures in the early Norwegian black metal subculture (especially Varg Vikernes) speak about their pagan motives for church burning acts. These church burners have seen themselves as the successors of old Vikings and “pagan warriors” in the age-long war against Christianity and its culture. Using Mark Juergensmeyer’s terms we can understand such kind of pagan fights against Christianity as one of the types of cosmic war where public performances with high shock value are used. The part of church burning wave in the early 90s can be therefore seen as the instance of the way paganism can make its potential to terrorism.