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

3–4 June 2016, Brno, Czech Republic

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On the 3rd and 4th of June 2016, a conference named Paganism and Politics: Neo-Pagan & Native Faith Movements in Central & Eastern Europe took place in the Open Gardens in Brno. Altogether eleven researchers and academics participated and presented their contributions to this event which was organized by the Department for the Study of Religions. Why was this meeting held and why is it important to discuss a connection between Paganism and politics? Neo-Pagan and Native Faith movements are not only associated with spiritual or sacred aspects and deities, but they are also overlapping and seek to attain some important political and social aspects. These groups are forced to reflect on contemporary political and social trends, problems and questions that are typical for their time and place. Their efforts to revisit pre-Christian religions in Europe sometimes shows an underlying discontent with the conditions of contemporary life and a wish to change them into something more related to Paganism.

The first key lecturer was Michael Strmiska from SUNY-Orange, New York State. His speech was called “Pagan Politics in the 21st Century: ‘Peace and Love’ or ‘Blood and Soil’?” He started by presenting some definitions and categories of Neo-Paganism, or modern Paganism. Thereafter, Strmiska highlighted the mirroring of some current political trends in America and Europe, as for example anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment, especially in more ethnically-oriented forms of Paganism. He explained these tendencies and considered the possibility of a connection between ethnic Paganism, nationalism, and right-wing groups. These connections can be seen as visions of ethnic-centered nationalism replicated today in a part of modern Paganism which stand in opposition to the competing universal humanism of Pagan branches which are more eclectic and universal in their outlook. According to Strmiska, Paganism is not equal to racism. Nevertheless, it is sometimes closely connected to politics.

The next speaker was Giuseppe Maiello from Palacký University in Olomouc. His speech was devoted to the following question: “How much was it important for Czech contemporary Pagans and native Faith believers to have their own particular funerals?”. He argues that the new generation of Pagans has a different approach to death because these days even the young die quite often, for example in car accidents and so on. The very first generation of these young Pagans has died only recently or is still alive. He spoke about The Burial Society, established in 2012, which is trying to find a more satisfying solution for Pagan funerals than current traditions – unfortunately, this initiative has not been successful, but more people should continue to find a way to achieve this goal. According to Maiello, it

is really important to expand our theoretical knowledge of Pagan funerals and he underlined the difference between a burial and a funeral.

The third lecture was given by Jennifer Uzzel from Durham University in Great Britain. Her speech was called “Walking the Crow Road: An Investigation into funeral practices among contemporary Pagans in the UK.” She therefore spoke about funeral traditions as well, but mainly from the perspective of ritual, disposal, and memorialization. Uzzel mentioned the importance of presumed continuity with a pre-Christian past for Pagans, and argued what it shows about Pagans and their relationship with their ancestors and the land. She also spoke about ecological concerns associated with Pagan burials.

After a lunch break, the next lecture was presented by Scott Simpson from Jagiellonian University in Krakov. His lecture was dedicated to the following question: “Do Politics and Religion Mix in 21st Century Rodzimowierstvo?” Rodzimowierstvo he defines as groups and individuals who practice Slavic spirituality and follow Slavic traditions from pre-Christian times with an emphasis on historical and ethnographical resources. It also has some political aspects – for example socio-nationalistic ideas, strong and authentic anti-Christian thoughts, and much more. But Simpson pointed out that Rodzimowierstvo has no political relevance – there is no politics among its members, there are no photos with the president, and so on. He also showed that similar movements can be found elsewhere too, even in the Czech Republic.

The fifth speaker was Jan Merička from Masaryk University in Brno. His speech was called “The Relation and Trends of Pagans to ‘Extremism,’” and he aimed to describe the relations and tendencies of Pagans towards extremism. Many people do not know what *Paganism* and *extremism* mean, and they automatically connect extremism with nationalism. Paganism, according to Pagans themselves, is more like spirituality and is connected to magic, personal philosophy, pre-Christian traditions and religious cults, the worship of old Pagan gods, spirits, and so on. An academic definition of extremism is problematic. Pagans understand this term in their own way – as connected with xenophobia, elitism, intolerance, racism, etc. Merička argued that there is no relation between extremism and modern Paganism because Paganism simply cannot have a political aspect.

The next lecturer was Matouš Vencálek from Masaryk University in Brno, as well. His lecture was about “Religious, Socio-cultural and Political Worldviews of Contemporary Czech Pagans”. He presented the results of his research among Czech Pagans which showed the differences and commonalties between particular Pagan groups in key questions such as spirituality (for example beliefs about an afterlife and magic), culture and society (for example drug use or the status of women in society), and politics (for example social welfare, political preferences or market regulation). The Pagan movement, according to Vencálek, is highly diverse and has roots in many different sources – some groups have emerged from romanticizing and naturalizing tendencies and emphasize the sacredness of nature, while some have arisen from rather nationalistic tendencies and worship their ancestors with a strong emphasis on ethnic roots. His research showed that in economics there were no substantial differences, but in questions considering the death penalty or multiculturalism, the differences between particular Pagan groups were quite marked.

The seventh speaker, Miroslav Vrzal, was from Masaryk University as well. His speech was called “Pagan Terrorism? Pagan Motives for Church Burnings in the Early ‘90s Norwegian Black Metal Subculture” and considered terms like *Pagan* and *Satanic terrorism*. According to Vrzal, the reason we can talk about Pagan terrorism instead of Satanic is that some of the leading figures in the early ‘90s church burning wave, especially Varg Vikernes, spoke about their pagan motives for such acts. Some of them consider themselves followers of the Vikings and refer to Odin as a god of war and death and as an enemy to the Christian God. Their motivations are that Paganism is their heritage and nature, and that the burning of churches is part of the Pagan awakening. According to some of them, it is revenge for the previous destruction of Pagan burial grounds and temples. The feeling that current society is already under attack is also very important for these people who consider their actions as a performance, as an act of destruction to spread fear and Pagan beliefs. Vrzal noted that these so called *Pagan warriors* distance themselves from Christianity and tend to militarism and right-wing sympathies.

Vrzal was the last lecturer of the first day, and after his speech a special social event was prepared for the participants. It was a private concert by a band called Barbar Punk from Brno, their musical style can be described as punk-folk, and it took place in an underground, post-apocalyptic pub in Brno known as Kryt (in English Shelter, Bunker or Vault). The whole evening was unconventional and students of religious studies were also invited, and they had the opportunity to meet and talk with the lecturers. It was a valuable experience for them, and the whole evening was simply unforgettable for all who attended.

The first speaker of second day, and the second key lecturer of whole conference, was Agita Misāne from University of Latvia. Her lecture was called “Are the Gods Back? Considerations on the Political Future of Contemporary (Neo) Paganism”. She aimed to mention some observable tendencies in the relationship of contemporary Paganism and politics. Moreover, she presented her thoughts as to why this relationship is developing the way it is. Misāne talked about Paganism and political elites, she argued that Paganism is nowadays not an obstacle for holding high political office or high social status. Her next point was that invisible religion has become clearly visible – alternative religions are permeating the public sector; they are becoming institutionalized, commercialized, etc. This is connected with her observation that Central/Eastern European Paganism has become more nationalistic and right-wing compared with Pagans from Western Europe, where left-wing, liberal political thought and the Green movement have been dominant. But she added that this difference has become blurred because radical and extreme right politicians have been forming coalitions with a wide spectrum of religious groups, for example, Christian fundamentalist groups. Misāne argued that Paganism is developing within general religious society, it has become a public matter and therefore has had to deal with current world problems. From its wider perspective, according to Misāne, it can offer a more balanced approach to many of these problems, for example counteracting the Muslim and Christian fundamentalists on several political issues. She also noted that for Paganism, as an “invented tradition” it is hard to sustain itself without reference to other traditions, ideologies, or teachings – and for this reason, politics can also be a choice.

The next speaker, ninth in the order, was László Kövecses as an independent researcher. His speech was called “Un-National Estonian and Russian Pagan Identity” and he asked the following question: is it possible to track a general tendency within Estonian and Russian Pagan individuals as shifting from a national to a sub-national, local level? He presented the Native Faith movement in Russia and showed that this Pagan society is variously oriented – from alternative spiritualities and scientific, national movements of youth to subcultures, and so on. In their self-identification, according to Kövecses, there are notable non-national tendencies. Ethnic identity is, of course, still important to them, but rather in the meaning of local rather than national. Even here the idea of nature is persisting and becoming more significant.

The tenth lecturer Adam Anczyk, from Jagiellonian University in Poland, talked about “Science and/vs Mythopoeia: Some Remarks in the Margins of M. A. Murray’s *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*”. He considered the unconscious influence of Paganism on academia, and conversely, of academic research on Paganism. As an example, he presented the case of Margaret Alice Murray, whose book, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, had a marginal influence on the conceptualizing roots of contemporary Paganism. According to Anczyk, she was rather a skeptic, but still her writings had a considerable impact on the current Pagan movement. And this despite the fact that she was criticized by many academics, for example Eliot Rose or Marcus Altena Davidsen. Could that not be about the people, but about her methodology? Anczyk argued that this may be true. But a more important question, according to him, is for academics to ask what the second life of their books and articles will be and whether they will withstand the power of the myth?

The last speaker was Jan Reichstätter from Masaryk University. His speech was called “The Decline of Celtic Neopaganism in the Czech Republic: Towards the Factors of Growth and Erosion of Czech Celtophilia,” and he aimed to summarize the main factors of the growth and successive decline of interests in Celtic Neopaganism. He noted, that the greatest wave of *Celtophilia* emerged in 1990’s, after the Velvet Revolution, as an answer to political re-orientation towards the West. The Brotherhood of Celts was founded in the Czech Republic in 1995. This organization has held many cultural meetings in order to remind us of the supposed Celtic past in pre-Slavic periods and to popularize the culture of Celtic nations. Unfortunately, in 2015, the leader of this organization proclaimed the end of all activities and of the society itself. Reichstätter pointed out that this tendency has corresponded with the general decline of activities of Celtic-oriented groups in the Czech Republic. Why is that? He argued that it could be because of political disorientation and scientific uncertainties – there are no Celtic sacred places that we know of, no archaeological findings, and even the toponymy is Slavic and not Celtic.

The conference ended, but the lecturers spent some extra time on a general discussion of the thoughts and ideas presented in the preceding two days. General questions were asked: Does Paganism attracts extremists more than other religions? Are Pagans involved in politics in individual countries? Are Pagans homo-politicals? For all of these questions, the answer was always: it depends. It depends on the particular country, group, and even the particular individual.

There are many other influences that must be taken into consideration. Paganism itself can also be apolitical and focused more on individual growth and belief than on political and social problems, but of course, is it hard to separate these aspects of modern life. The possibility of the next conference was also discussed, as well as possible topics of investigation. According to the lecturers, these might be lifestyle and daily life of Pagans, regular rituals, fashion, food, habits, and much more. Let us hope that this conference was not the first, and also the last, on the topic of Paganism because, as we all saw, there is still much to talk about.