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## *Introduction: Paganism and Its Others*

MIROSLAV VRZAL – SCOTT SIMPSON – MATOUŠ VENCÁLEK

Growing from roots including 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism, Romantic Nationalism, and the occult revival, Modern Paganism is a highly diverse movement manifesting in a dazzling range of shapes and forms. Modern Pagans seek to build a valid continuation of ancient traditions and belief systems in the contemporary world, but they do so in various ways. The source material employed by any individual or community can range from meticulous readings in carefully-curated history and archaeology, to inspirations from science fiction and fantasy. Their ultimate goals can be just as varied, with some seeking liberation for their nation and others seeking liberation for their gender or sexuality. Quite often, when faced with such a broad and diverse field, academic questions arise about where the borders of this field should lie. What is properly within the borders of “Modern Paganism” and what should be demarcated as “other” fields?

Furthermore, as this diverse, vital, and continually-evolving movement has grown over the past decades, it has found itself entering into interaction with an increasing array of other “others”. Every expansion into new territory brings new actors, institutions, and ideas onto its horizon. These “others” may at times be political parties or governments, or they may be entrenched religious organisations that do not welcome competition. And as Modern Paganism becomes more visible to the public eye, we also see representatives of Modern Paganism thrust into new public roles as they react to climate change or war. Sometimes, the “other” may also be academia peeking in to see what Modern Paganism is up to.

In 2016, the desire to explore these interactions led to an international conference entitled *Paganism and Politics* held at the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University in Brno in the Czech Republic. The conference, organised by Matouš Vencálek and Miroslav Vrzal in collaboration with Michael Strmiska, one of the leading contemporary scholars in the field of Pagan Studies, was itself a continuation of a series of conferences *Neo-Pagan & Native Faith Movements in Central & Eastern Europe*, which had been held in Krakow, Poland, between 2008 and 2014. Last year, in June 2022, another international conference was held in Brno,



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titled *Paganism and Its Others*, with Michael Strmiska and Scott Simpson as keynote speakers, and Miroslav Vrzal, Matouš Vencálek and Michal Puchovský as organizers. The conference *Paganism and Its Others* was held in hybrid form and attracted participants from across the globe including the USA, Canada, India, New Zealand, and many European countries.

As guest editors of this special issue of *Religio*, we are honoured to present you with four papers based on revised and expanded presentations from the conference. In the first article, **Oksana Smorzhevská** from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in Ukraine focuses on a very timely topic, as she explores the idea of the warrior in Ukrainian Native Faith, an idea which has assumed new salience and urgency in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. **Muhammad Amirul Haqqi** from the University of Szeged, Hungary, presents the findings of his research among LGBTQ+ practitioners of Wicca in Hungary, in which he explored the ways these Wiccans transcend the traditional binarity of this dualistic religion. **Jedidja van Boven** from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands conducted her research among Dutch Pagans, providing rare insight into how some of the processes associated with secularisation (typically discussed in relation to large dominant religions) interact with the self-construction of the identity, beliefs and self-understanding of Modern Pagans. Last but not least, **Tomáš Kubisa** from the Slovak Academy of Sciences shares results from his groundbreaking fieldwork, laying out how 'Vedic Slavism', a movement originating in the Russian Federation, has appeared in and become adapted to Slovakian realities.

We believe that these articles will provide the reader with new perspectives on some interesting and very current topics in religion, with a special focus on regions and communities that have so far remained on the sidelines of academic study.