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“Nature, Ecology, and Religious Responses to Climate Change”: A report on the 21st EASR annual conference, 19-23 August, 2024

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The annual conferences of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) bring together more than 500 specialists from the various sub-disciplines of the study of religion, but also scholars from other disciplines, such as folkloristics, anthropology, philology, and political sciences, who share a common interest in religion. The 21st Annual Conference, which focused on the topic of “Religion and nature,” took place in Gothenburg, Sweden, and was hosted by Gothenburg University.

One of the ways of expressing the main theme of a conference and guiding the discussions during the event is through keynotes. On this occasion, the organizers invited five plenary speakers who, in their presentations, touched on the overlap between nature and religion in very different ways.

Siv Ellen Kraft’s speech focused on “sacred geographies” in the Sapmi region in northern Norway, related to religion, heritage, and the increasing politicization of both. The second planned keynote speaker, Laura Feldt, unfortunately had to cancel her participation at the conference and was replaced by Aaron Hughes, whose provocative presentation claimed that religion does not offer a solution to the climate crisis but, quite the contrary, continues to power climate change, and that data that seemingly indicate the opposite are based on cherry-picking. As expected, this sparked quite critical comments (“Thank you for the presentation. I didn’t like it very much.”). A similar reaction was provoked by the last keynote speaker, Jeffrey Kripal, whose speech on modern esotericism, the paranormal, UFOs, and the boundaries of scientific knowledge was first met with a long silence, then questions that interrogated the very basis of his presentations.



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Of course, the topic of religion and nature could not be discussed without the American scholar Bron Taylor being present. His keynote also presented a critical view of established religions' potential to turn 'green' while emphasizing the emergence of what he calls Dark Green Religion, a general increase in environmental awareness that often goes together with considering nature sacred in very different ways.

Terry Gunnell's keynote speech (partly a keynote show) focused on *Völuspá*, a part of Poetic Edda that tells a graphic story of the creation and end of the world. Recent interest in the Viking era in popular culture has produced interest in the old Norse religion but also influenced perceptions of the environment. The presentation highlighted the parallels between the apocalyptic messages of today's environmentalists and a poem from a thousand years ago.

As for the panels, as expected, the titles were dominated by the words "green", "eco", or "sustainability", with topics exploring the responses to the climate crisis by different religions, spiritualities, and esotericism or their overlaps and their connections with environmentalism. Also, as expected, the topics that include "green," "eco," or "sustainability" in their titles were far from neutral. Therefore, it was not surprising to sometimes listen to presentations in which the positions of scholar and activist were hard to distinguish.

Because of the topic of my own presentation, my main focus was on the panels related to contemporary paganism, where authentic harmony with nature is often part and parcel of the ideology. However, it is difficult to identify positive examples where contemporary paganism actually engages with environmentalism – the lines between rhetoric and reality are vague at best.

Since EASR conferences are quite inclusive – which is inevitable for annual events – topics were also represented in which the link with nature and nature conservation was less direct, but which are important as analytical frameworks or practical outputs for the study of religion, such as the topics of religious literacy and religious education. As for the theoretical framework, there were two sessions consisting of three panels each. The first revolved around issues related to the definition of religion, while the second focused on the "worldview"-framework as a new alternative to the concept of religion.

Surprisingly, non-religion and secularity seem to have faded somewhat from conference agendas. Some years ago, these topics were often mentioned even in calls for papers, but at this year's EASR conference, they were represented only marginally – mainly by two panels focusing on nonreligion and violence. Mythology was also largely absent – it was addressed in some presentations (including Terry Gunnell's keynote), but not



at the panel level. Hence, the vast majority of the presentations seemed to have primarily a social scientific perspective.

One of the things that stood out (mostly) positively at the conference was the critical attitude of the participants. A critical approach is one of the fundamental principles of research, even if many compromises are usually made in the context of collegial interaction. This conference followed this line – one could not only see polite academic tolerance but also critical remarks on the data, their interpretation, and the whole theoretical framework.

All in all, the conference went well and was memorable. Both in the keynote speeches and the panel discussions, there was ample discussion of many new ideas and findings, there was passion that never went beyond the bounds of propriety, and there was plenty of engaging and constructive criticism as well as the response to it. The organization was excellent, and the conference ran very smoothly. From a personal point of view, I particularly enjoyed the Nordic style of communication concerning the brevity of introductory and closing speeches.