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Contemporary Pagans Go into Politics: Workshop “Paganism and Politics: Neo-Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe”

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Open Gardens, a beautiful green area right in the middle of the centre of Brno, hosted a Pagan studies conference on 3-4 June 2016. It was part of a series of Pagan conferences which originated in Poland. As the conference became global over the years in terms of the countries represented, it was a natural step to move the event abroad. The 2016 conference was the first organised outside of Poland, this time by the Department for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University in Brno. It explored the relationships between contemporary Paganism and politics (political ideas, movements, parties), especially in the European context.

The conference was inaugurated with a keynote lecture by Michael Strmiska (Suny Orange College, Middletown, NY), a noted researcher in contemporary Paganism in both cultural and comparative contexts.¹ His lecture “Pagan Politics in the 21st Century: ‘Peace and Love’ or ‘Blood and Soil’” summarised the twofold nature of the “Pagans go into politics” process, and presented interesting insights into his ongoing research on European Pagans’ attitudes towards the Ancestors. Contemporary Pagans’ political views are probably as plural as the movement itself; nevertheless, there are groups that are very keen on political ideas and whose foundational values are constituted on radical-left-wing (such as the Reclaiming movement), or radical-right-wing (such as Odinism, Neo-Germanic movements, or some Polish Native Faith groups) ideologies. This makes contemporary Paganism an interesting field of study in terms of examining mutual influences between political ideas and the evolution of new religious movements.

The first session of the workshop concentrated on funerary practices and customs amongst Pagans in the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom. As the population of contemporary Pagans becomes older sta-

¹ Cf. Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2005.

tistically, issues concerning funeral arrangements, including both spiritual and practical problems, are of more concern than a decade ago. Giuseppe Maiello (Palacký University Olomouc, “How Important Was It for Czech Contemporary Pagans and Native Faith Believers to Have Their Own Particular Funeral”) spoke about the idea of the Burial Society for Czech Pagans, while Jennifer Uzzel (Durham University, “Walking the Crow Road: An Investigation into Funeral Practices among Contemporary Pagans in the UK”) presented a plethora of possibilities for Pagans to arrange their burials and funeral ceremonies in the UK (with an emphasis on so-called “natural burials”). The cultural factor plays a major role here – the UK seems to be more liberal and open with respect to burial law than Central and Eastern Europe.

After the break, Scott Simpson (Jagiellonian University) presented very interesting insights into Pagan engagement in politics based on his longitudinal inquiry into the Polish Pagan scene, in a contribution titled “Do Politics and Religion Mix in 21st Century *Rodzimowierstwo*?”. Although the Polish Native Faith movement started with a certain political programme (a national-socialist one), founded on the ideas of Jan “Stoigniew” Stachniuk (1905-1963), it has changed, as more and more followers and sympathisers of *Rodzimowierstwo* are interested primarily in its religious form, and political views amongst Native Faith followers have thus become more pluralised. Simpson discussed the reasons for this switch – for example, growing interest in Polish *Rodzimowierstwo* among groups that are not primarily politically-oriented, such as the Polish metal scene or historical re-enactment groups (Simpson referred to it as “changing the neighbourhood”). As for other factors, Simpson mentioned the history of political engagement on the part of Polish Pagan groups (which was rather unsuccessful), contacts with Western Paganisms (being more pluralised with regard to their political views), and, last but not least, the fact of *Rodzimowierstwo* becoming more of a “second generation religion”, which may – as other “second generation” new religious movements – be less radical in its tenets. After Simpson’s interesting lecture, Jan Merička (Masaryk University) delivered a presentation about Pagans and extremism, opening the floor to a discussion on which Pagan beliefs and social behaviour may be labelled as “extremist”.

In the following session, conference participants had an opportunity to peek into statistics. Matouš Vencálek (Masaryk University), in his paper on “Religious, Socio-Cultural and Political Worldviews of Contemporary Czech Pagans”, presented data on political attitudes and sympathies within the Czech Pagan scene. His survey showed that contemporary Pagans are more likely to support the smaller parties (most of which are not represented in the Czech Parliament, such as the Pirate Party – very

popular among Pagans – or the Green Party), which could be, in my opinion, understood as a sign that Czech Pagans are mainly countercultural, and might be disappointed with the Czech political scene. After internalising a great deal of tables and diagrams, we moved on to the last presentation of the day, entitled “Pagan Terrorism? Pagan Motives for Church Burnings in the Early 90s Norwegian Black Metal Subculture” by Miroslav Vrzal (Masaryk University). Vrzal, in his bird’s eye view of the Scandinavian Black Metal scene, specified motifs for the church burnings that can be attributed to Paganism, and provided an analysis of the infamous Varg Vikernes case. His presentation as well as the following discussion raised an important issue; the question of whether church-burning can be labelled as religiously (Pagan) motivated terrorism.

The second day of the conference welcomed a plenary lecture by Agita Misāne (University of Latvia), who presented the public image of the Latvian Neo-Pagan scene. Latvia has currently a “Pagan president” in office, Raimonds Vējonis from the Green Party (a union of the Greens and Farmers). Although he is not an active practitioner in any Latvian Pagan group, he has, as Misāne mentioned, described his religious interests as “Pagan” on his Facebook page. In Poland, some people declare themselves “believers, but not practitioners” (*wierzący, niepraktykujący*), and I think this self-declaration of faith may suit Vējonis’ Paganism. Agita Misāne’s lecture made me wonder about how and why new religious movements, especially those with few followers – and therefore with, theoretically, lower social impact – are going public, and what factors support a group’s success in this respect. My intuitive guess is that the cultural environment may play a vital role: groups representing values and ideas distant from the mainstream may encounter more resistance on the way up from their cultural niche than movements appealing to core cultural values (the use of words like “tradition”, “heritage”, “roots” may help) and supported (or at least accepted) by the political power in charge. This resistance, or lack thereof, might also depend on the ways in which power hubs define the aforementioned terms. It is possible that Baltic Pagan movements, although using similar or even the same rhetoric as Slavic groups, may be closer to their cultural mainstream than Paganism in, for example, Poland, which is – within its religious and cultural system – more peripheral or countercultural.

After this interesting lecture we were introduced to the varieties of Estonian Paganism by László Kövecses in his presentation “Un-National Estonian and Russian Pagan Identity?”. The proceedings finished with two papers presenting cases pertaining to specific cultural settings in Pagan studies. The first one, by Adam Anczyk (Jagiellonian University), described the reception and mythopoeic character of Margaret A. Murray’s



The Witch Cult in Western Europe, and the second, by Jan Reichstätter from Masaryk University, dealt with Czech Celtophilia and the hypothetical decline of Celtic Paganism in contemporary Czechia.

The two-day workshop was full of interesting presentations, discussions (I liked the idea of the summarizing “general discussion” at the end of the second day), and networking, in a friendly, family-like atmosphere, at the great venue of Brno’s Open Gardens, and thus, overall, demonstrated the skills of the organizing committee. Tributes should be paid here to Matouš Vencálek, who was the man in charge. Finally, I would like to point out that, at least for me personally, the conference was highly educational and I took away much more than I usually do from big conferences. There is a need to organize such events and, besides, it may be observed that Dunbar’s number is also valid for scientific conferences.