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Navigating fullness and exile in the low countries : constructing contemporary Paganism in- and outside of a secular frame

Navigating Fullness and Exile in the Low Countries: Constructing Contemporary Paganism In- and Outside of a Secular Frame

JEDIDJA VAN BOVEN

Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* opens with the three axes along which we can orient ourselves in moral and spiritual terms: fullness, exile, and a stabilized middle condition. Most of the time, Taylor argues, the human condition is not marked by either of the extreme ends of this spectrum – neither the moving yet confusing profundity of fullness, nor the melancholic absence of exile are permanent conditions. Instead, we strive to maintain some semblance of balance between these ends that keeps exile at bay and gradually moves towards fullness: "We come to terms with the middle position, often through some stable, even routine order in life, in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us."[1] Put differently, it is not either fullness or exile, but rather that fragile middle condition that marks humanity's experience and understanding of both ourselves and the world in which we operate. The question remains, then, how different forms of the sacred and the secular fit into this – how is our experience of the middle condition shaped by the fact that the West has become publicly, institutionally secularized? How is that experience different for those who are actively choosing to engage with spirituality and religion in a way that has marked differences from the organized religion that has faded in the West? This article outlines some of the narratives related to matters of identity and self-understanding used by contemporary Pagans that operate in a context generally perceived to be 'secular', though the definition of such a term is contentious at best. The case of the Netherlands, on which this article is based, has shown the complexities surrounding the

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1 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007, 6.

existence of lived religion in a supposedly secular environment: as will be discussed, the combination of a Protestant legacy and a "tolerant" secular present has led to a unique role for religion and non-religion in the construction of Dutch national identity. However, the implications of the growing number of Pagans in the Netherlands for this identity have not yet been researched extensively.[2]

Indeed, the so-called secularization thesis has been the subject of heated discussion across a variety of disciplines ever since its near-universal popularization in the 1960s. Eventually, secularization theory lost this unreflexive acceptance as a simple explanatory paradigm, and entered a phase in which it is treated as a much more complex narrative. Nowadays, changes in the religious landscape of Europe are being watched carefully by scholars and policymakers alike – not only quantifiable factors like church attendance are studied, but the growing number of contemporary Pagan communities has become a topic of interest as well.[3] However, while some work has been done on contemporary Pagan communities in the Netherlands,[4] it remains a relatively understudied area compared to the United Kingdom or United States.

In short, the following article attempts to link two strands of research: that of secularization studies and that of Pagan studies. While an in-depth discussion of the many facets of contemporary Paganism lies outside of the scope of this article, it is worth briefly turning to an ongoing discussion pertaining to the study of religion in the Pagan context specifically. Contemporary Paganism, also referred to as modern Paganism or neo-Paganism, is an umbrella term with a great deal of internal variety between its many communities and solitary practitioners. Various scholars have offered etic definitions of Paganism that clearly involve an ambiguous, internally diverse characterization. For the purposes of this text, par-

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2 James Kennedy, "Recent Dutch Religious History and the Limits of Secularization", in: Erik Sengers (ed.), *The Dutch and Their Gods: Secularization and Transformation in The Netherlands Since 1950*, Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren 2005, 27-43.

3 To name one example: 2021 census data from England and Wales showed that 74,000 respondents described themselves as broadly Pagan (compared to 57,000 in 2011), with 13,000 respondents indicating adherence to Wicca. Additionally, shamanism was identified as the religion expanding more rapidly than any other in these regions (though one may note that these categories are established by the developers of the census with little explanation regarding the differentiation between these labels). See Office of National Statistics, "Religion, England and Wales: Census 2021" [online], 4, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>, 29 November 2022 [13 January 2023].

4 Hanneke Minkjan, "Meeting Freya and the Cailleich, Celebrating Life and Death: Rites of Passage beyond Dutch Contemporary Pagan Community," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 14/2, 2012, 281-303.

ticularly the sampling of interview participants, the essence of contemporary Paganism may be found in their reference to pre-Christian European religious traditions. That is, while there are authors who take an even broader stance by including a greater number of non-monotheistic religions outside of Europe, this article follows Strmiska's use of movements engaged in the revival and reconstruction of these pre-Christian European traditions.[5] Movements may subsume various forms of witchcraft, including but not limited to different iterations of Wicca, as well as shamanism, Druidry, the Goddess Movement, Germanic heathenry and Ásatrú, and many others.

The difficulty in establishing a clearly delineated definition of contemporary Paganism combined with its relatively recent introduction into religious studies has led to a lively debate on the "proper" way of studying Paganism. In his article "What Is Wrong with Pagan Studies?", Markus Davidsen criticizes the scholarly approaches typically taken in Pagan studies. With a relatively high proportion of scholars of Paganism being practicing Pagans themselves, Davidsen is concerned about their presentation of an overly positive, ideologically charged view of "correct" forms of Paganism, thereby engaging in a "normative construction of the essence of contemporary Paganism."[6] However, many of these points were challenged by Ethan Doyle White, who described Davidsen's claims as overly reliant on a single edited *Handbook* and refuted the assumption that practicing Pagans who are also academics are unable to reflect critically on Paganism as a movement.[7] Although this article does not intend to resolve this particular debate, it is nevertheless useful to mention the discussion as part of the ongoing difficulties in reconciling the study of Paganism with concepts usually relegated to more traditional approaches in the sociology of religion. What follows is an exploration of the ways in which aspects of the broader, sociological level of secularization are used in the narratives of contemporary Pagans in the Netherlands, with particular attention on its use as a tool for self-understanding and self-legitimization.

The following analysis explores narratives as presented by contemporary Pagans based in the Netherlands. In total, 18 semi-structured interviews were used for data collection; the interviews were structured accord-

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5 Michael Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives", in: Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, Santa Barbara (CA): ABC-CLIO 2005, 1-54: 13.

6 Markus A. Davidsen, "What Is Wrong with Pagan Studies?", *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24/2, 2012, 183-199: 187.

7 Ethan Doyle White, "In Defense of Pagan Studies: A Response to Davidsen's Critique", *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 14/1, 2012, 5-21: 9.

ing to an interview guide with three main themes.[8] These themes were a) personal experiences with both contemporary Paganism and other religions, b) perceptions of religious change, and c) the relationship between Paganism, identity, and place. Informed consent forms were distributed prior to interview scheduling in accordance with research ethics guidelines at the University of Groningen and Jagiellonian University.

Respondent	Affiliation
I-1	Green witchcraft
I-2	Traditional witchcraft; eclectic Paganism
I-3	Eclectic Paganism; shamanism
I-4	Green witchcraft
I-5	Druidry; eclectic Paganism
I-6	Traditional witchcraft; eclectic Paganism
I-7	Druidry; traditional witchcraft
I-8	Traditional witchcraft; green witchcraft
I-9	Feri Tradition (Anderson)
I-10	Ásatrú
I-11	Germanic heathenry; shamanism
I-12	Traditional witchcraft; Wicca; Goddess movement
I-13	Wicca (Greencraft)
I-14	Eclectic Paganism (initiatory)
I-15	Goddess movement
I-16	Goddess movement
I-17	Ásatrú
I-18	Feraferia; Wicca

Table 1. Overview of the respondents

Initial contact with potential participants was established through a variety of platforms, including the Dutch-language forum of Pagan Federation International, two original Dutch online forums for Pagans, several Facebook pages dedicated to Dutch Pagan communities, and multiple online events organized through these platforms. The total number of

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8 Jennifer Baumbusch, "Semi-Structured Interviews in Practice-Close Research", *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing* 15/3, 2010, 255-258.

interviewees was reached partially through snowball sampling, in which participants were asked about referrals to other potential interviewees. Additionally, several contacts were generated through informal personal connections.[9] These connections improved diversity within the sample, as interviewees from a broader selection of groups were ultimately included in the research. However, the final sample included in the research (which included, among others, representatives of traditional witchcraft, Wicca, Druidry, Ásatrú, Feraferia, the Goddess Movement, and various interpretations of eclectic Paganism) was by no means random, or ultimately representative of contemporary Paganism in the Dutch context.[10] Rather, it should be considered as a sampling of the insights provided by some of its representatives, these insights helping us to understand the lived experience of secularization as a sociological process. The table below contains an overview of the respondents: their primarily affiliation, and the number with which they will be referred to in the analysis.

Secularity as Constitutive of the Modern Self

The classic forms of secularization theory (which typically presented the end of religion not only as universal, but as inevitable) that were popularized in the 1960s and 70s became the subject of much criticism, as an increasing amount of scholarship began moving away from defining religion solely in terms of its institutions. Religiosity began to be understood as more subjective, with an emphasis on individual agency and everyday "lived religion".[11] Heelas and Woodhead, for instance, developed the "subjectivization thesis", in which individuals emphasize personal experiences as sources of meaning and authority, rather than appealing to transcendent

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9 See Chaim Noy, "Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research", *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11/4, 2008, 327-344.

10 For a more comprehensive overview of Pagan groups in the Netherlands, see Hanneke Minkjan, *Nehalennia's Lowlands: Neo-Paganism in the Netherlands* [manuscript of a Ph. D. thesis], Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2021.

11 Vyacheslav Karpov – Manfred Svensson, "Secularization, Desecularization, and Toleration: Toward an Agency-Focused Reassessment", in: Vyacheslav Karpov – Manfred Svensson (eds.), *Secularization, Desecularization, and Toleration: Cross-Disciplinary Challenges to a Modern Myth*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2020, 1-39: 20. As discussed by Nancy Ammerman (*Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices*, New York (NY): New York University Press 2021) and Meredith McGuire (*Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), the notion of lived religion has become a popular approach for studying religious narratives and experiences in a variety of contexts. See also Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge: Polity 2000.

authority outside of the self.[12] This shift, from understanding religion as necessarily mediated by institutions towards a subjective approach focused on the individual level, has repercussions for the perceived secularization of Western societies in particular; more specifically, in the sense that the "emptying of God" from public spaces can be compatible with a continued widespread belief in that God.[13] Davie asserts that even in the Western European context, where classical secularization theory was believed to be most relevant, it might be the case that "Europeans are not so much less religious than citizens in other parts of the world as *differently* religious".[14] The complex role of institutions in the understanding of secularization also complicates the perceptions of particular societies as especially secular. As Droogers explains, it is not a given that the "de-churching" secularization of institutions is necessarily accompanied by the secularization of personal beliefs.[15]

And yet, the context in which Droogers was operating – the Netherlands – is one that has often presented itself as a secular one, both domestically and internationally. The Dutch refer to their history of religious tolerance as a point of national pride;[16] additionally, they are usually assigned to the category of Western European countries that, after long-standing Christian traditions, have turned to refer to secularity as an important constituent of national identity. The "culturalization of secular tolerance" in the Netherlands implies that the Dutch have come to understand themselves as not only inherently tolerant towards other religions as a byproduct of their history of religious pluralism, but also as culturally secular.[17] This entan-

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12 Paul Heelas – Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Malden (MA): Blackwell 2005, 9-10. See also Andreas Pietsch – Sita Steckel, "New Religious Movements Before Modernity?", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 21/4, 2018, 13-37.

13 Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age…*, 2.

14 Grace Davie, "Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule?", in: Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center 1999, 65-84: 65. See Mathew Guest, who emphasizes the changing forms of religion as a response to shifting societal circumstances: "In Search of Spiritual Capital: The Spiritual as a Cultural Resource," in: Kieran Flanagan – Peter Jupp (eds.), *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2007, 181-200: 182; see also James Beckford, *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, London: Unwin Hyman 1989.

15 André Droogers, "Beyond Secularisation versus Sacralisation: Lessons from a Study of the Dutch Case", in: Kieran Flanagan – Peter Jupp (eds.), *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2007, 81-100: 83.

16 See Cees Maris, *Tolerance: Experiments with Freedom in the Netherlands*, Cham: Springer 2018.

17 Markus Balkenhol – Ernst van den Hemel – Irene Stengs, "Introduction: Emotional Entanglements of Sacrality and Secularity – Engaging the Paradox", in: Markus Balkenhol – Ernst van den Hemel – Irene Stengs (eds.), *The Secular Sacred: Emotions*

glement of religious and secular elements in the construction of (national) self-understanding was previously explored by Huntington, who understands the broadly Western cultural identity as being influenced by its past religious heritage, but as being profoundly secular in nature in the present.[18]

But what does it mean to "be a human agent" in the secular West? Ever since his 1989 book *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*,[19] Charles Taylor – cited previously – has been building on the construction of self-understanding, and then particularly the understanding of the self as secular, which has become so commonplace. Taylor stresses that "secular" is a subjective category, but more importantly, that it is but one of multiple frameworks of understanding. Like Partridge, who described "rationalization" as having "purged the natural world of the supernatural,"[20] Taylor refers to the fading of institutionalized religion as the primary mode of self-understanding as the "naturalistic rejection of the transcendent."[21] However, despite the widespread nature of this rejection, it is ultimately a constructed one:

> So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call the 'immanent frame'. There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a 'natural' order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over against a possible 'transcendent' one (emphasis added).[22]

The immanent frame, then, is not neutral. It creates the presumption that society is irrevocably steering away from its competitor, the transcendent frame.[23] The emphasis here, according to Taylor, lies in the *presumption* – even if we know perfectly well that the immanent world has not totally replaced the transcendent one, this is nevertheless the narrative that has become so important to the self-construction of the West after the

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of Belonging and the Perils of Nation and Religion, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2020, 1-18: 1.

18 Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations", *Foreign Affairs* 72/3, 1993, 22-49.

19 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, ix.

20 Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West, Vol 2: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, London: T and T Clark International 2006, 44.

21 Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age…*, 548.

22 *Ibid.*, 542.

23 Ruth Abbey, "Theorizing Secularity 3: Authenticity, Ontology, Fragilization", in: Carlos Colorado – Justin Klassen (eds.), *Aspiring to Fullness in a Secular Age: Essays on Religion and Theology in the Work of Charles Taylor*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2014, 98-127: 92.

falling away of Christianity as the key to a common identity.[24] Thus, Taylor arrives at his conclusion that while the secular immanent frame is not per definition inevitable, its particular brand of "exclusive humanism"[25] has become the cornerstone of Western self-legitimization.

With the loss of traditional religious institutions as essential markers of identity, the task of legitimizing the self has become rather complex. Indeed, many experience a sense of loss and confusion as a result of the erosion of clear-cut societal structures, summarized by Flanagan as follows: "As modernity moves memory on, an increasing awareness arises that in the cultural cracks effected by progress, something of the spirit has escaped".[26] With this background in mind, the following section will explore how these "cultural cracks," both secular and sacred, and the ways in which they affect notions of the self are implied in the narratives of contemporary Pagans in the Netherlands.

Narratives of Pagan Identity in a "Secular" Country

As Hall remarks, religious practices such as contemporary Paganism and a variety of new religious movements are "no longer impersonal statistics descriptive of far-off lands… many practitioners of these faiths are citizens of our own cities and towns, people with whom we work, the parents of our children's playmates."[27] Other authors have also noted the ways in which Pagan groups complicate the story of religious change and identity-making. Strmiska remarks that "Paganism should not be attractive to people living in an era of high technology and scientific wizardry because it seems little more than a repackaging of random bits of folklore, mythology, and superstition. But attractive it remains."[28] Minkjan similarly refers to the notion of a "new spirituality of seeking" as defining of modern societies, echoing the dynamic character of the "market of ultimate significance."[29] Many members of Pagan groups follow these paths,

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24   Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe*, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press 2009 (1st ed. 1952), 195-206; Olivier Roy, *Is Europe Christian?*, London: Hurst Publishers 2019.

25   Andrew T. Lincoln, "Spirituality in a Secular Age: From Charles Taylor to Study of the Bible and Spirituality", *Acta Theologica Suppl* 15, 2011, 61-80: 62.

26   Kieran Flanagan, "Introduction", in: Kieran Flanagan – Peter Jupp (eds.), *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2007, 1-22: 2-3.

27   Douglas Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Valley Forge (PA): Trinity Press International 1997, 22.

28   M. Strmiska, "Modern Paganism…", 41-42.

29   Hanneke Minkjan, "De Nederlandse Godinnenbeweging Avalon Mystic Zoekt Haar Wortels, de Godinnen Nehalennia, Holle en Tanfana", in: Frans Jespers (ed.), *Nieuwe Religiositeit in Nederland: Gevalstudies en Beschouwingen over Alternatieve Religieuze Activiteiten*, Budel: Uitgeverij DAMON 2009, 129-158: 133; Anneke van

by which they explore a variety of groups, either within one or between multiple traditions, as the discussion below will show.

The following analysis highlights both quotes and indirect patterns from the interviews in relation to different concepts, which have been used to structure the remaining text. Respondents were given space to elaborate on particular answers if they wished, and the open nature of the interview led many to relate their perceptions of religious change directly to personal histories and the "lived" experience of religion.

Deinstitutionalization: Religion Without the Middle Man

One of the discursive strategies used most widely by respondents was their explicit separation of their identity as Pagans from religious institutions. The deinstitutionalization narrative, featuring themes of interpretative freedom, personal interpretations of Pagan beliefs and practices, and the perceived oppressive character of institutionalized religion, came up especially often in interviews with those who had previous experience with organized (monotheistic) religion. In this regard, religious practice among Pagans is presented as avoiding any association with established doctrine and precluding the necessity of religious institutions or religious leaders. These are, of course, related: doctrine is understood in these interviews as a more general marker of the various aspects of religious practice that are not formulated by individual practitioners themselves. It is associated with religious leaders, institutions, formalized rituals, and regulations that govern beliefs and practices.

A lack of doctrine was one of the most frequently given responses to questions regarding the experienced differences between contemporary Paganism and other religions, often functioning as an important reason as to why Paganism was appealing to respondents. Narratives regarding the perceived restrictive or rigid character of institutionalized religion were prevalent: "If you're in one of those monotheistic religions, you're being put in a bit of a straitjacket depending on the congregation you're in. There's always one or two people who say: this is how it is, and you shouldn't look anywhere else (I-5); We have no doctrine and no Bible, we don't have prescribed rules… only things that serve as inspiration." (I-10)[30]

Otterloo – Stef Aupers – Dick Houtman, "Trajectories to the New Age: The Spiritual Turn of the First Generation of Dutch New Age Teachers", *Social Compass* 59/2, 2012, 239-256: 241.

30　This quote highlights an important question: are current practices direct continuations of ancient traditions or modern iterations inspired by those traditions? Strmiska divides this cleanly into reconstructionist and eclectic Pagans (M. Strmiska, "Modern Paganism…", 18-19).

In more general terms, some respondents noted that they felt the role of institutions was changing, i.e. in Christianity as well: "The church is aging a lot here, but I don't necessarily think it's the church itself, but rather the form it comes in… I think faith is much more than 'the church', the building, the stateliness." (I-2)

Aside from this particular discussion, many respondents spoke about various characteristics of Christianity specifically. In terms of the sentiments expressed in those discussions, many of the outcomes echo what Strmiska has stated about the difficult relationship between Christianity and contemporary Paganism, namely that "in the popular discourses of modern Paganism… Christianity is frequently denounced as an antinatural, antifemale, sexually and culturally repressive, guilt-ridden, and authoritarian religion."[31] For instance, several respondents mentioned that they had been affiliated with or seriously interested in Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, and a wide variety of (ancient) philosophies as well,[32] but that their experiences with these religions was mostly positive – as opposed to their encounters with Christianity. A respondent who ran a store specializing in goods from various spiritual and religious traditions, located in a mostly Protestant region of the Netherlands, explained that "[t]he goal of my store was to bring people from different religions together, and I noticed that all sorts of people came up to talk to me – except for the Christian community, who were standing outside my door… when I went to give a lecture somewhere, they were standing outside with protest signs." (I-14) Another respondent noted that while negative experiences with Christian groups had been limited, he remembered one particular occasion: "I had one experience with a preacher who showed up at a *heksencafé* and started sending around mail bombs – I think I ended up receiving about 200 Psalms in my inbox every minute, so I had to contact my internet provider; then he started calling, so I had to change my phone number as well." (I-18)[33]

Nevertheless, there were a few respondents that mentioned they had had constructive interactions with churches and practicing Christians: "One of my first visitors was the local pastor. We had a very friendly conversation, I told him all about the old religion, and I asked, what brings you here? He answered: 'I'm the local pastor,' and I said, 'so we're colleagues then!'." (I-2) Another respondent had been seriously involved in religious dialog and discussions with Christian actors about religion and representation in

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31 M. Strmiska, "Modern Paganism…", 29.
32 Buddhism was mentioned most frequently out of all of these. Islam came up in one interview (I-16) as a religion of interest before Paganism.
33 A *heksencafé* (witch café) is an informal meeting of practicing Pagans, especially those involved in witchcraft, as well as outsiders interested in Paganism.

the church: "I took on the challenge of representing people with a disability within the World Council of Churches… I really immersed myself in Christianity, and I took that chance with open arms. It's not like the pastor is telling you what to do; instead I was talking to pastors about religion and faith, and that was very important." (I-9)

The focus of this article is not necessarily on interreligious dialog, but these examples go to show that the relationship between Paganism and Christianity is complex, and often contextually dependent. Furthermore, it would be inaccurate to present Paganism as being completely devoid of hierarchy – a few respondents mentioned that they had experienced a sense of doctrine within Pagan groups and that they eventually turned away from those groups: "…there's also a couple of Pagan groups where people have too tight of a grip on things, but I stay away from there." (I-5)[34] Although the dislike of doctrine is commonplace among practicing Pagans, there exists some degree of the formalization of beliefs in many groups, or at least the expectation of a base level of familiarity with the concepts, practices, and differentiating qualities of a given group. Moreover, many were aware that the language associated with Paganism is used by a wide range of groups. A respondent involved with Germanic heathenry mentioned that "some [groups] are very devout, they are like *zwarte-kousen* Germanic groups," (I-10) with *zwarte kousen* ('black socks') referring to a branch of Reformed churches in the Netherlands with a high degree of orthodoxy.[35] In other words, some caution should be exercised when relating Paganism versus any other religious practice to a particular degree of institutionalization.[36] Generally speaking, however, these narratives characterize the practicing Pagan as separate from the institution of religion, with some respondents avoiding references to their practices as "religious" at all, preferring to use a vocabulary related to spirituality or a lifestyle.

34　Also mentioned in I-3, in which the higher degree of institutionalization of initiatory Wicca was mentioned as a reason to not be involved with Wicca. This sentiment is not universal, as Wicca practitioners also mentioned (I-13) that they experienced Wicca as being much less restrictive than Christianity. See Léon van Gulik, "On the Pagan Parallax: A Sociocultural Exploration of the Tension between Eclecticism and Traditionalism as Observed among Dutch Wiccans", *The Pomegranate: The International Journal for Pagan Studies* 12/1, 2010, 49-70.

35　The Dutch Protestant church landscape is too complex to discuss here; for a study of some of these particular churches, see Anne van der Meiden, *Welzalig Is het Volk: Bijgewerkt en Uitgebreid Portret van de Zwarte-Kousen Kerken*, Baarn: Ambo 1976.

36　For instance, consider the house church movement in which small groups gather in a member's home; Tim Shapiro – Kara Faris, *Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities*, Nashville (TN): Abingdon Press 2017.

Individualization: Autonomy, Equality, Locality

A stronger emphasis on the individual's role in religious practices, be-
liefs, and rituals goes hand in hand with the decreasing reliance on tradi-
tional religious institutions. However, there are also ways in which indi-
vidualization specifically impacts perceptions of the Pagan self that go
beyond institutions (or the lack thereof); it is a complex idea that implies
notions of autonomy, subjectivity, and identity, all of which will be men-
tioned below.

Helen Berger claims that in the United States, the majority of Pagans no
longer operate in groups and instead have become solitary.[37] Among inter-
view respondents, solitary leanings were largely dependent on the indi-
vidual: some stressed their individual autonomy over any collective affili-
ation (I-3: "… the moment I develop viewpoints that don't fall under
Paganism, I will let Paganism go and find something else that suits me
better… I believe what I believe, and that currently fits well with the
Paganism label"), while others attributed significant value to operating in
a community, preferring to practice in groups (I-15). It is worth noting that
those focused on a more collective experience of Paganism often still pre-
sented that experience through a lens of individual spiritual development.
For example, a respondent mentioned that the coven she was involved in
allowed the group to share experiences together, which in turn "is impor-
tant for self-development." (I-12) Several respondents mentioned that they
had been introduced to Paganism by friends or relatives (I-2; I-3) and even
those that ended up mostly solitary had typically started out with a focus
on group practices (I-5; I-7). However, as the following sections show, the
autonomy in determining one's beliefs and practices as a Pagan formed a
common thread throughout narratives both from solitary and community
practitioners.

This thread of emphasizing the individual experience and interpretation
of Paganism, whether practiced in actual solitary contexts or in group af-
filiations, is relevant for the positioning of practitioners implied in the
narratives above. The discourse of secularization as a default mode in the
West described in the previous section is, aside from concepts like ration-
alization, also built on the idea of individualization, or that of the indi-
vidual being taken as the primary frame through which the lived experi-
ence is understood. This idea is mentioned by Fenn, who argues that
modern forms of both religion and secularity reproduce a highly demysti-

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37 Helen Berger, *Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans, and Others Who
Practice Alone*, Columbia (SC): University of South Carolina Press 2019.

fied, individualized concept of the self.[38] Even if one's Pagan beliefs are presented as a crucial label for understanding the world, some measure of aversion towards claims of universally applicable truths is commonplace;[39] not only is the respondent's own autonomy in determining their truth essential for this experience, but *other people's* autonomy is held as something to be respected – echoing the disdain for conversion and objective, universal applications of religious beliefs (I-11; I-14).

The move towards either solitary practices or informal group contexts may be of particular importance in the Dutch case. The Dutch sociocultural and political landscape for most of the twentieth century was often constructed through the lens of a process known as pillarization.[40] Under pillarization, Dutch society was largely stratified into four 'pillars' (Catholic, Protestant, liberal, and socialist), which informed voting behavior, media outlets, and education.[41] As such, the collective memory of being 'born' into a particular pillar is still fresh: "My parents… had been raised Catholic, and that was it. At that time – we're talking 1930s, 1940s – it was very much 'yes mom, yes dad,' and of course there were far fewer books about other faiths (I-5); Back in the day, under pillarization, if you were born in a particular village, it determined whether you were Catholic or whatever else. Now, we have more freedom to explore what truly suits us." (I-1) The memory of pillarization was very much alive in the narratives presented by these respondents. As pointed out by Van Dam, though, pillarization can itself be considered as a constructed myth that simply presents the Dutch case as highly stratified compared to other countries, or as possessing very little space for cultural and political dynamism.[42] Going back to the earlier discussion regarding the Dutch self-understanding as tolerant and secular, it is particularly interesting to add "formerly stratified, but presently dynamic and diverse" to that narrative – especially

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38 Richard K. Fenn, *Time Exposure: The Personal Experience of Time in Secular Societies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001.

39 This sentiment is also expressed by Feri Priestess Alison Harlow: "To some people, it seems like a contradiction to say that *I have a certain subjective truth; I have experienced the Goddess, and this is my total reality. And yet I do not believe that I have the one, true, right and only way.*" Quoted from Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, New York (NY): Viking Press 1986 (1st ed. 1979), 36.

40 J. Kennedy, "Recent Dutch…", 28.

41 The concept of pillarization was introduced by Arend Lijphart in *Verzuiling, Pacificatie en Kentering in de Nederlandse Politiek*, Haarlem: Becht 1967. See also Thomas Pettigrew – Roel Meertens, "The Verzuiling Puzzle: Understanding Dutch Intergroup Relations", *Current Psychology: Research and Reviews* 15/1, 1996, 3-13.

42 Peter van Dam, *Staat van Verzuiling: Over een Nederlandse Mythe*, Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek 2011.

as some responses indicate that this perception carries over to ideas about the Dutch religious landscape.

A second point with regard to individualization relates to the understanding of the relationship between oneself and the many deities and spiritual entities that make up Pagan belief systems. While the group affiliations of respondents were diverse and some engaged more explicitly with specific deities, a common point made in various interviews was that deities were understood to be operating on a level more equal to that of practitioners. In other words, gods and goddesses were often not worshipped in the classical ecclesiastical sense, but were engaged with on more horizontal terms: "In the large monotheistic traditions, God is above man: if you just crawl all your life, then maybe God will forgive you and you end up in heaven. For me, in Paganism, gods are next to us, and you can cooperate with them. That principle of equality is crucial for me." (I-3)

These comments echo much of what was discussed in the debate regarding deinstitutionalization in the sense that many respondents construct monotheistic religions as oppressive and hierarchical, with Christianity as the main target. Because Paganism is presented as more diverse, open to a variety of subjective interpretations, and unaffiliated with large formal institutions, it followed in many conversations that Pagans understand themselves as part of a more open and tolerant tradition. The issue of tolerance comes up again here, which points to the multitude of ways in which tolerance can be implied in the Dutch case – it is not simply a secular tolerance, though that is certainly true for many, but also an idea of tolerance that explicitly connects to religious identities (whether in the sense of religious pluralism or as the supposed "openness" of particular traditions over others).[43] This notion, being that the self has inherent value in the interaction with the supernatural, came up multiple times: "In witchcraft and Paganism, you are allowed to recognize yourself as important… in monotheistic religions, you have to be very humble as you worship an almighty God. It's a very passive way of experiencing religion; in witchcraft, you have to take action very consciously (I-8)"; "I really immersed myself in Christianity… but [it] really gave you the sense that God was completely good and you were completely bad. It was a bit of a handicap for me to be completely subjugated to God." (I-9)

Another respondent involved in the Goddess movement described the difference between monotheistic religions and Paganism as follows: "On one end, there's the idea of the pyramid – with humans at the top as created in God's image, versus a more circular image based on the notion that

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43 See Maarten Vink, "Dutch 'Multiculturalism' Beyond the Pillarisation Myth", *Political Studies Review* 5/3, 2016, 337-350.

we are all created in the likeness of God, whether you're a plant or a rock, a human or an animal… it's the principle of equality." (I-15) This more animistic principle of humans being equal to other forms of life also came up when a respondent stated that: "… humans are… not the crown on the creation. We are not more important than any kind of animal." (I-3)[44] In other words, the Pagan self is constructed as being on a much more similar level to other forms of life, and as a result, as embedded in the natural world rather than standing above it.

As mentioned in the context of general de-institutionalization, the fact that Paganism lends itself to being practiced without the aid of religious leaders or other intermediaries makes it attractive to those who want to remain solitary practitioners or who are averse to relying on imposed in-terpretations. This is also connected to another expression of individuali-zation, in which respondents emphasized their individual autonomy in designing their religious practices. The notion that religious leaders are not necessary for a meaningful practice of Paganism and its rituals came up multiple times in this context: "To me, the big difference [between other religions and Paganism] is that anyone can do it. If you're a Pagan, you can just do a ritual… And if there isn't anything that you like, you can write your own. And you can make it as small or as big as you want." (I-5) Or, in the case of a respondent from an Ásatrú group: "[Its] power lies in the fact that you can do it yourself, nothing is being imposed on you. In other religions, you'd need an intermediary, but here you can find your own con-nection." (I-10)

This idea relates directly to what Adler identified as an important rea-son for turning to Paganism, referred to as "religion without the middle man"[45] – religious practice without intermediaries like religious leaders. Even respondents that held more traditional leadership positions, e.g. teachers, were aware of the largely individual interpretations of Pagan practices that their students maintain: "I'm still going to be [a] solitary [witch]. I won't say I have a coven or a sibbe, I don't think it's suitable for the path that students take. It's so individual, everyone takes something different from it, and everyone learns differently." (I-2)[46] Indeed, the room for individual interpretation was presented as beneficial for preserving a

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44 Adler mentions that despite the high degree of diversity between iterations of contem-porary Paganism, animist beliefs are central to many of these iterations. M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon…*, 24-25.

45 The phrase is attributed to Gavin and Yvonne Frost, who founded the Church and School of Wicca in the United States; quoted in M. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon…*, 23.

46 The word "sibbe" is used in the Netherlands and Belgium to refer to a group of witches.

diverse community: "Everyone is accepted as they are, and I feel a very strong sense of community *because* those differences are allowed to exist." (I-1) The enormous diversity and individual subjectivity of contemporary Paganism is what makes it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions, but it is clear that the room for subjectivity is appealing. As so much value is attributed to diversity in the Pagan experience, respondents also mentioned patterns of syncretism, sometimes very practical: "I received a message from a [witchcraft] student saying that she had put Jesus on her altar, and she asked me if that was allowed. I told her that on my first outside altar, I had a Buddha statue myself." (I-2)

Another respondent similarly mentioned using an image of Buddha, describing her practices as "eclectic" with several influences from Asia as well as Native American concepts, like the medicine wheel (I-4).[47] As such, this sense in which individualization contributes to the perception of the Pagan self once more appeals to a sense of autonomy. The Pagan experience through the lens of contemporary individualism is one of subjectivity, autonomy, syncretism and pluralism, allowing space for "interpretive drift."[48]

The emphasis on individuality should not lead us to understate the relevance of communities and connections between Pagans. Interactions with other Pagans in- and outside of the Netherlands were commonplace, even among more solitary respondents. Many maintained connections with communities and individuals abroad, with some being part of traditions that originated outside of Europe, such as the Feri Tradition (I-9) and Feraferia (I-18). However, some respondents felt that the increasing globalization of Paganism itself carried the risk of alienating practicing Pagans from their local environments.[49] In a discussion specifically about

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47 For more on the interaction between globally transmitted elements of Pagan practices and local cultural factors, see Kathryn Rountree's study of Malta: *Crafting Contemporary Pagan Identities in a Catholic Society*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2010.

48 "…[T]he slow shift in someone's manner of interpreting events, making sense of experiences, and responding to the world", Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991, 26.
  On a related note, narratives related to 'coming home' to Paganism – rather than conversion in the traditional sense – came up frequently during interviews. The "coming home hypothesis" has been studied in great detail; see Eugene Gallagher, "A Religion Without Converts? Becoming a Neo-Pagan", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62/3, 1994, 851-867; Adam Anczyk – Matouš Vencálek, "Coming Home to Paganism: Theory of Religious Conversion or a Theological Principle?", *Studia Religiologica* 46/3, 2013, 161-171.

49 Alternatively, some suspected that globalization could potentially push groups to want to return to their "own" people and ultimately have the reverse effect (I-18).

heathenry and Germanic Paganism, a respondent with a background in archeology noted that "it's good that people are going back to their local surroundings a bit more now… it's too easy to just refer to Scandinavian culture, rather than to what's in your own backyard" (I-11); another respondent also underlined the importance of "connecting with what's nearby." (I-4) Local spaces associated with Pagan practices were mentioned, such as megalithic monuments, as well as deities linked to particular areas in the Netherlands (e.g. Nehalennia, a goddess originally worshipped around the Schelde river).[50]

It is clear that individualization and its constituent elements play a large role in shaping the self-understanding and even the self-legitimization of Pagans. In this narrative, the emphasis on individual interpretations, subjectivity, and the autonomy implied in determining one's religious practices sets contemporary Paganism apart from the other traditions practitioners have been involved with, and it permeates these stories with a feeling that contemporary Paganism is considered to be suitable for a free thinker who appreciates the individual's ability to shape their beliefs.

Public Perceptions, Authenticity and Media

With all this room for individual interpretation and subjectivity, it is not surprising that the various iterations of Paganism have become popular on various (social) media platforms – which in turn has elicited a wide range of responses from practicing Pagans, some of which are discussed here.

Public visibility turned out to be a point of some contention for many. Several respondents indicated that they were careful about sharing their Pagan identity with large groups of people or that they had encountered resistance when telling others: "I wanted to be taken seriously, and did not want to have to justify myself and my beliefs constantly, so I was cautious in sharing my experiences with others" (I-9; I-17; I-13: "I don't present myself as a witch to everyone, but my grandchildren are completely used to it."). While this was not true of everyone (i.e. those in leadership roles or with an active online presence in the form of websites or social media), most respondents were aware of their beliefs being easily misunderstood, and some avoided attracting public attention: "Whenever we do a ritual in public, we always assign one person to do our PR, to talk to passersby who want to know what's going on. We've never had a bad reaction, but I do

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50 Here, consider the *hunebedden* in the east of the Netherlands. Herman Clerinx calls these megalithic monuments "cathedrals from the Stone Age" in *Kathedralen uit de Steentijd: Hunebedden, Dolmens en Menhirs uit de Lage Landen*, Leuven: Davidsfonds 2001.

have to add that we don't do any 'hocus pocus' outside – we don't stand outside with knives, candles, and robes." (I-18)

Multiple respondents indicated that they had encountered stereotypes or other situations involving prejudice against Paganism, such as acquaintances assuming Pagans are satanists (I-3)[51] or Paganism not being taken seriously as a religion (I-2; I-6; I-9). Moreover, a few respondents alluded to the more folkish and sometimes extremist Pagan groups that have gained much attention in the news and which affect the public's perceptions of Paganism in general.[52] They displayed wariness – if not aversion – towards extremist groups and disliked being grouped together with them in mainstream discussions about Paganism.[53]

The public understanding of Paganism is complicated by the proliferation of digital spaces for Pagan communities, which has dramatically altered information sharing and the establishment of interpersonal connections, but has also made Paganism as a whole more visible to outsiders. The digital sphere was presented as generally beneficial to Pagan communities, especially concerning the dissemination of information: "I really get the sense that people are more open to [new ways of thinking], even just to things like meditation – that just wasn't a thing, at least not in popular culture in the 70s and early 80s. I think the internet plays a big role in that, because you can get information so much more quickly and easily (I-5); Access to information has made it much easier to join various groups, and it makes [Paganism] more familiar to others as well. You also don't feel like you're the only 'outcast in the village,' now I think: there's so many of us! (I-1); I remember when I got my first computer… the first thing I ever searched for was witchcraft." (I-9)

At the same time, however, several respondents were concerned about the commercialization of Paganism, or the development of a "hype" surrounding Pagan communities. Certain elements of Pagan practices have

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51 When it comes to public opinion, there has historically been a fine line between ancient Paganism and witchcraft – see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019 (1st ed. 1999), 172.

52 Various Pagan groups strongly emphasize racial-political dimensions of Paganism, often presenting it as the true religion of Europe while all other religions are presented as invasive. An example of this rhetoric can be found in Stephen McNallen, *Asatru: A Native European Spirituality*, Nevada City (CA): Runestone Press 2015. These more extreme perspectives, especially with regard to anti-Christian sentiments, are also explored in Miroslav Vrzal, "Pagan Terror: The Role of Pagan Ideology in Church Burnings and the 1990s Norwegian Black Metal Subculture", *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 19/2, 2017, 173-204.

53 One respondent noted that he tried to engage with both inclusive and folkish Pagans; though he was forced to remove a few extremist users from the page he moderated, he described these as outliers (I-17).

become somewhat of an aesthetic commodity in popular culture, including social media platforms and TV shows.[54] Netflix's recent reboot adaptation of *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* involves the Pagan sacrifice of a virgin, echoing the dramatized violence found in the 2019 folk horror film *Midsommar.* The conflation between various kinds of Paganism and Satanism in particular has been the subject of criticism among practicing Pagans.[55]

While these developments could help destigmatize alternative religious practices, they also generate doubts about the authenticity of these presentations of Paganism, especially among those who have been involved in Pagan communities for a considerable amount of time:[56] "I get the sense that with shows like *Vikings and The Last Kingdom*, heathenry and Paganism are becoming a bit of a hype. That's a good thing in that it generates support, but sometimes I think it defeats its own purpose a bit – and that's a shame. If people are genuinely interested, they will look past outward appearances (I-2); There's even glossy magazines about witchcraft now! It's become somewhat fashionable, with celebrities mentioning Paganism, or with practicing Pagans becoming celebrities themselves." (I-16)[57] The perceived overemphasis on visual elements with a lack of meaningful spiritual development was related to young Pagans (especially

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54 Aside from witchcraft, Germanic heathenry specifically have become increasingly popular on Instagram; see Burgert Senekal, "Ou Wyn in Nuwe Sakke: Die Onlangse Herlewing van die Germaanse Kultuur op Instagram", *Litnet Akademies : 'n Joernaal vir die Geesteswetenskappe, Natuurwetenskappe, Regte en Godsdienswetenskappe* 18/2, 2021, 132-160.

55 Several respondents alluded to this; one expressed suspicion and strong aversion towards Satanism as a whole (I-7), while another pointed out that her group doesn't believe in the devil at all: "The devil doesn't exist for us" (I-15). See Carol Kuruvilla, "Here's What Real Witches Think of Netflix's 'Sabrina' Reboot" [online], <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/netflix-sabrina-real-witches_n_5bdcb814e4b01ffb1d02366e>, [5 November 2018]; Leah Thomas, "Here's What COAS Is Teaching Us About Pagans… and What Pagans Actually Did" [online], <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/01/9295820/pagans-green-man-history-chilling-adventures-of-sabrina>, [28 January 2020].

56 The commodification of religious traditions has also been explored in other contexts; see Vineeta Sinha, *Religion and Commodification: Merchandizing Diasporic Hinduism*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis 2010.

57 Consider Susan Smit, a model-turned-author of historical novels that feature witches (Susan Smit, *De Heks van Limbricht*, Amsterdam: Overamstel Uitgevers 2021) and non-fiction books that describe her experiences with witchcraft (Susan Smit, *De Wijsheid van de Heks*, Amsterdam: Overamstel Uitgevers 2022). Pagan music and festivals have also become popular among the general public. See Serina Heinen, *'Odin Rules': Religion, Medien und Musik im Pagan Metal*, Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag 2017; Andy Bennett, "Paganism and the Counter-Culture", in: Donna Weston – Andy Bennett (eds.), *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, Abingdon: Routledge 2014, 13-23.

witches) in particular, who are more likely to be involved in highly visual platforms like Instagram or TikTok. A respondent referred specifically to the phenomenon of "Instagram-witches," with polished visuals, but a limited sense of community or spiritual growth (I-8).[58] The commodification of Paganism has also been occurring in more direct ways, as some groups have started working with membership fees, "which effectively makes you a customer, and then you have the right to expect something and to state your own demands." (I-18)

These discussions point to the matter of authenticity – more specifically, the notion that some Pagans consider themselves as more genuinely connected to their beliefs than others who are engaging in the social media-friendly brand of Paganism. Partially due to the aforementioned fear of being misunderstood, the interviews point to a strong narrative of an appropriately authentic Pagan experience, or rather, the fact that the category of Instagram-witches may be less authentic or knowledgeable than some.[59] The introduction of the digital sphere also has some repercussions for the self-understanding of Pagans as fitting within a particular locality – the ease of information exchange and the increasingly globalized character of Pagan movements, combined with the common reverence for the natural world and the embedding in that world that the aforementioned concept of equality implies, paints a picture of Paganism that is complex, and resultantly, not very generalizable.

Making Meaning In and Of a Secular World

Ultimately, the sum of secularization is greater than its constituent parts. It is difficult to operationalize secularization and these concepts are an approximation of some of the forms in which it manifests itself. However, in order to bring this analysis back to its point of departure – secularity as a self-legitimizing label – it is worth mentioning some of the more direct ways in which secularization as a whole was implied in the interviews.

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58 Natalie Mathews has written on the ways in which youth interacting with witchcraft through the lens of popular media has led to accusations of being inauthentic; Natalie Mathews, "Sabrina as a Sanction: Teenaged Witches and the Perceived Inauthenticity of Youth", *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25/8, 2021, 1017-1033. See also Christine Jarvis, "Becoming a Woman Through Wicca: Witches and Wiccans in Contemporary Teen Fiction", *Children's Literature in Education* 39/1, 2008, 43-52; Chris Miller, "How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok: Intersections of Digital, Consumer, and Material Culture(s) on #WitchTok", *Religions* 13/2, 2022, 118-140.

59 Respondents also expressed concerns about the fact that the internet's contribution to lowering barriers of access to Paganism may lead to new Pagans feeling lost or disoriented, or going about practicing their beliefs without proper guidance.

The self-understanding of respondents as operating in a markedly secular environment was a complex topic. Interviewees spoke about a noticeable degree of decline in the role of religious institutions (especially churches), agreeing generally on the ongoing institutional secularization of the Netherlands. In light of the extensive discussion of dogma, conversion, and the imposition of rules that became such a prevalent theme in the analysis, several respondents expressed the feeling that more people were coming to see the shortcomings of mainstream religion, and that the falling away of the church in particular created more room for new viewpoints (I-6; I-4). However, despite the room that a secularizing society creates for non-mainstream religious groups, an actual secular paradigm (the "secular-as-default" frame mentioned above) was not presented as a fully desirable societal structure.

Respondents emphasized the continued need for religion and spirituality, not so much in spite of as in response to the extent to which the public sphere is becoming increasingly secular (I-10: "Even though I wasn't raised with religion, I always had a need for it"). Many mentioned the notion that modern societies marked by the processes of secularization do not provide the "answers" or the meaning that people are searching for: "One of the negative effects of secularization is that people lose that kind of support, and that they end up searching. Slowly, more and more people are realizing that consumerism isn't everything either, so the question remains: how do you connect yourself to the bigger picture?" (I-15)[60]

Alienation from the natural world and rampant materialism were also mentioned as contributing factors to that feeling of being lost: "I think there is more of an interest, as people are experiencing this 'emptiness' … more people want to get away from the world's rat race (I-2); In this society, we have become so far removed from nature and our natural rhythms – it has done me a lot of good to return to those things. That also goes for mental health; we live in such a rat race, and it's really important to be still sometimes." (I-1) Put differently, the narratives surrounding the actual concept of secularization point to a complex, ambiguous relationship between the respondent and the environment. On one hand, institutional secularization was a common feature (or even assumption) in responses, both as a good thing (more room for new viewpoints, less imposition of doctrine) and as a bad thing (alienation, confusion, loss of meaning). On

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60 This very much corresponds to Heelas: "Those attracted to the more counter-cultural are uncertain – to put it mildly – that materialistic consumption provides the answers. It is not simply that consumption bodes ill for the future of the planet. It is also because those concerned have realized that there is more to life than identity as a consumer". Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Hoboken: Blackwell Publishers 1996, 140.

the other hand, the continued need for religion, meaning-making, and a connection with nature was emphasized – the secular default is not something to be strived towards. Nevertheless, the secular character of the world in which the respondents operate was presented as a given. Secularity forms the backdrop for these narratives; it informs the ways in which Paganism is presented as a suitable alternative, even if it does not take the form of a wish for the conversion of others. Contemporary Paganism, then, functions as an avenue through which a person can come to understand the self in an alternative way, a departure from the secularized national level and the hegemony that the "middle condition" has achieved. It is here that the secular and the Pagan are intertwined – these narratives would undoubtedly look different if they came from a deeply religious environment, in which pillars of meaning-making are clearly delineated and easy to trace. But the context of modernity in which these modes of self-understanding are employed is not like that, and the interactions between the secular and the Pagan are instrumental in informing such notions of the self and the world around that self.

Concluding Remarks

The field of Pagan studies is relatively young, at least compared to the disciplines concerned with the study of Abrahamic religions. It is not illogical that not much work has been done yet in terms of sociologically embedding Paganism in its broader contexts, considering how even the descriptive mapping of this complex collection of religious movements is not yet complete. However, as this article suggests, there is certainly reason to believe that contemporary Paganism is deserving of intellectual scrutiny – not only in order to fill a gap in existing research, but also in order to acknowledge the ways in which religious practice is becoming more diverse, diffuse, and subjective.

The elements that constitute Taylor's secular default of the Western context of this piece have provided a variety of insights into their usage as tools for self-understanding and self-legitimatization among Dutch Pagans. Some of the key elements of these narratives were:

1) *Dynamism*: allowing for interpretive drift and syncretism, presenting Paganism as tolerant and diverse, especially compared to other religious traditions;
2) *Autonomy*: the importance of individual interpretations of Paganism, focusing on subjectivity and a turn away from objective doctrine, presenting Paganism as accessible without institutions and as possessing a high degree of freedom in shaping practices and beliefs;

3) *Authenticity*: developments in the media landscape and religious change as a whole are impacting communication within Pagan groups as well as public perceptions of Paganism; difficult questions regarding the authenticity of 'online' Pagans and implications of a truer connection to Paganism.

To briefly conclude: the image of the Netherlands as a relatively secularized context has significant repercussions for the self-understanding of Pagans as a religious group. Institutionalized religion has lost a great deal of ground in a society possessing a default secular frame, marked by perceptions of tolerance, multiculturalism, and rationality. The contemporary Paganism story, then, is one of distancing and differentiating the Pagan self and its community from not one, but two "other" spheres: the secular frame itself by attempting more explicitly to lean towards fullness than the secular middle condition typically allows, but also the ideas of organized religion that have fallen out of favor. The framing of this article in the context of secularization necessitates the inclusion of broad, complex concepts that may manifest themselves in a variety of (ambiguous) ways. By connecting processes of deinstitutionalization, individualization, and pluralization to their on-the-ground use in narratives presented by Dutch Pagans, the analysis has sought to build on previous literature that connects aspects of an overarching sociological vocabulary to lived self-perceptions of a group that remains relatively understudied by sociologists of religion. The dynamic and diverse nature of a category as broad as contemporary Paganism allows for more in-depth research into the manifestation of these processes, and this article makes a tentative step in that direction.

SUMMARY

Navigating Fullness and Exile in the Low Countries: Constructing Contemporary Paganism In- and Outside of a Secular Frame

What do the experiences of contemporary Pagans operating in a supposedly secular environment mean for our understanding of the lived experience of not only religion, but also secularity? How can processes of secularization be understood as tools for self-understanding and self-legitimatization, rather than top-down concepts that precludes the need for further study of religion in contexts that are considered as largely having moved past the transcendent? This article examines the narratives of practitioners who use various elements of secularization discourses to construct their beliefs and self-understanding. Rather than simply considering contemporary Paganism as a response to processes of secularization, this article approaches secularization from the perspective of practicing Pagans in a more inductive way. It utilizes semi-structured interviews carried out among Dutch Pagans to make inferences about the impact of broader processes of religious change on the self-understanding of these practitioners.

Keywords: religious identity; secularization theory; contemporary Paganism; modernity and religion; the Netherlands

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