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Interview with Michael Strmiska

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On behalf of Sacra: Michal Puchovský, Matouš Vencálek[1]

Michael Strmiska is Associate Professor of World History in the Global Studies Department at SUNY-Orange (Orange County Community College) in New York State in the USA and has also taught courses on Modern Paganism and New Religious Movements at Hampshire College in Massachusetts. He was the editor and a contributing author of *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*. His research on Baltic and Norse-Germanic Paganism has been featured in a number of journals including *Nova Religio*, *The Pomegranate* and the *Journal of Baltic Studies*. In the fall of 2015, he was a visiting lecturer at Masaryk University where he taught the courses *Myth and Religion of Northern Europe* and *Neo-Paganism and New Religious Movements*. Dr. Strmiska is currently at work on a book entitled *Unchristian Eastern Europe: Pagans, Jews and Gypsies*. His research interests include Pagan afterlife beliefs, the political dimensions of modern Pagan and Native Faith movements in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and the United States, as well as the interaction between popular culture and Paganism, and developing ethnically rooted but non-racist forms of Paganism.

Sacra: Hello Michael, let's start the interview. I would like to ask how you got into the study of religions?

Michael Strmiska: I started to get interested in my early teenage years. I liked to read a lot from an early age. I think of two different influences. One is kind of funny while the other one is more serious. The funny one was when I was 10 or 11. I read *Thor* comic books and I think it planted the seed of interest in Scandinavian stuff. But then when I got older, I began to explore more intellectual things. I became interested in Carl Gustav Jung and through him many doors were opened to a lot of things like symbolism, Eastern religion, and his idea of the collective unconscious, which I still find quite interesting. I think his idea of archetypes is still valuable even though we may need to make some adjustments to it.

Also in this period, in my teens, there were lectures on the radio by a British writer named Alan Watts who was one of the chief proponents of Eastern religions, a great popularizer in the 1960s–1970s. He was not really so respected as a scholar, and he may have been unfairly underrated as he was not part of the traditional academic structure, but he was a good storyteller, a good speaker, and his taped lectures were played on radio. I listened to them very faithfully. That

[1] Thanks for help with the interview transcription to Václav Ketman and Jan Král.

really stimulated my interest in Eastern religion. When I went to college, I went to quite an unusual school since it did not have traditional classes or majors. Instead, it had a series of projects that you'd do to progress toward your degree, which were called Division I, Division II, Division III. This was Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where I have been back more recently to teach a course on Modern Paganism and New Religious Movements, similar to what I am now teaching at Masaryk.

As a student at Hampshire, I initially wanted to focus on comparative religion but then midway through my studies I became nervous about jobs, a career, and the future so I added a secondary focus on psychology and mental health work. I got experience working with people with psychiatric problems and my final project at the college was not about religion but about schizophrenia. I was particularly interested in whether schizophrenics and people with such psychotic conditions are having a spiritual experience. I began thinking that maybe some of them are so I started to study the topic and at the same time I was getting experience working with real mentally ill people. I became very unhappy with the state of psychiatry because I could see that the tendency was more and more to just use medications to just suppress anything that was problematic. My feeling was that with something like schizophrenia, there are different categories but there are maybe some people who are actually having a kind of mystical experience like what a shaman would go through. They would release their spirit and act strange and crazy, but eventually they would move through the process and may come back with new knowledge and wisdom. So some of the schizophrenic people I met have such a condition and some of them really did have a lot of religious and mythological symbols and themes.

Eventually I decided to leave the mental health field and I returned to the earlier interest in comparative religion. When I was working in mental health, one of my roles would be to conduct group therapy. I discovered I liked to work with groups, I like the interaction, but I realized it would be nice to do this but with more intellectual topics and that got me thinking about teaching. I started a Religious Studies graduate program centered on mythology at Boston University. I did it for a couple of years although I was not sure about the direction, for which reason I eventually dropped out. Then I changed schools. I went to the University of Wisconsin and enrolled in a very strong South Asia Religions of India program that was my master's program. While I was there, I also had opportunity to study Old Norse. I was studying Sanskrit, Hindi, but also Old Norse and also reading the old texts. In Wisconsin I really became aware of Indo-European comparative theories like Dumézil's.

Then I got homesick for Boston and came back to the program which I left before to finish the PhD, at Boston University. That might have been mistake because I didn't really have people who could be supportive to my interests there. I worked with David Eckel, expert on Indian Tibetan Buddhism, and Carl Ruck, specialist in Greek mythology, and they were great guys and very kind to me but neither were very much into Hinduism, Scandinavian mythology or Indo-European studies, which were the things I was trying to master. Taking advantage of a program that allowed Religious Studies students to study at other institutions besides their home college, I had the chance to take classes about Celtic myth-religion with Professor Patrick Ford at Harvard University. I planned my dissertation to be

about after life beliefs of ancient Indo-European peoples. The idea was to have a stool—I should say I mean chair, not table, as I believe in Czech *stůl* means table, ha ha—with three legs: one "leg" would be old Vedic-Hindu-Indian myth and religion, the second "leg" would be Norse, and the third "leg" Celtic. I worked on this for years and as often happens to people doing dissertations, it started taking forever and ever so finally I made the painful decision, along with my committee, to eliminate the Celtic part. The final dissertation was a comparison of early Indian Vedic Hindu afterlife beliefs with those of Norse-Germanic-Scandinavian religion. I focused on afterlife beliefs and practices related to two particular groups: women and warriors. I found in both areas that there weren't so many beliefs about women. You had to look really hard to find some evidence about women's afterlife beliefs and funerary practices and you'd find some at times but there was never much. There is a fair amount about warriors. The Vedic religion does mention warriors' paradise. In the Hindu context, the warrior becomes a model for asceticism. So the mystic is a kind of warrior, you know, fighting different a kind of battle.

In the middle of the writing, I got a fellowship to study in Iceland for one year, from September of 1996 to June of 1997. This was a Fulbright Fellowship, fantastic program. That was very good for developing my language skills. Iceland was where I first encountered a real Pagan group, Ásatrú, or more precisely, Ásatrúarfélagið (the Ásatrú Society or the Ása-Faith Fellowship). First, I didn't think about it very seriously but more as just something to do: someone said I should go, so I said "okay" and I went! Glad I did. The ritual I went to was a fall equinox ritual and it was very beautiful, very creative, very open ended, and there was nothing dogmatic about it. That gave me a very good impression of Ásatrú. After getting to know the people in Ásatrúarfélagið for a few months, some of them still very good friends of mine, it occurred to me that hey, I was a young academic and this was a great opportunity for me! I realized that that this was a good topic for research and I could write something about this. This is how I got started as a scholar of Neo-Paganism or as I prefer to call it, Modern Paganism.

Sacra: That leads me to another question – how did you get to study Ásatrú?

Michael Strmiska: Actually, in Boston in the early 1990s I met some people with interest in Scandinavian Paganism and we were talking about doing something, to make an organization, develop rituals, and so on, but it didn't go anywhere since it was just a loose discussion. It was in Iceland where I really felt like I saw something valuable that I would enjoy participating and continuing in. I came back to the States in June 1997, but a year later I made a trip to Iceland just for further research on Ásatrú. I did interviews with a bunch of people and collected more information. And then by this time I got a teaching position in Japan at Miyazaki International College, a unique, English-language college in Japan that was looking for native English speaking faculty. While I was in Japan, I published an article about Ásatrú. In Iceland. As a matter of fact, the first place where it was published was a small university journal in my Japanese university. Then I took that version and I submitted it to *Nova Religio*. They suggested changes and after these were done, it was published in 2000. After that was published, I finally finished my dissertation in 2001, getting the PhD in 2002. About six months later,

Frank Korom, one of the people from the committee offered to me the chance to create a book that would be a survey of contemporary Pagan religions. It was to be a part of the series that included one about modern Islam, one about modern Buddhism, and finally modern Paganism. That became my main project for the next several years. The book was about different Pagan movements in Europe, the UK—not sure if it is or isn't part of Europe, and I don't think they know, either—and the USA, but I put most of it together while living in Japan! The final part of the work was completed in Lithuania and the USA, however.

There is also a separate stream I have to explain. When I got the news that I would have the fellowship to go to Iceland, which was going to be in September of 1996, I decided to celebrate this by making my first trip outside of America to my ancestral country, which is Lithuania. That is my ancestral country on my maternal side. On the paternal side, my ancestry is Czech, more precisely Moravian (Strmiska). I went to Lithuania in February of 1996. It was my first time outside of the US and a funny memory is that when I went there, there was a really heavy snowstorm. I didn't care since I was so enthusiastic. I went tromping around the streets of the Old Town through twenty five cm of snow, freezing my ass and my toes off, but I didn't care because I was so excited to be there!

On that trip I met the leader of the Lithuanian Pagan group, the late Jonas Trinkūnas, as well as his wife Inija Trinkūnienė, who is the leader nowadays, after the death of Jonas in 2014. Through my interest in Marija Gimbutas, via Indo-European studies, I had been aware of Baltic mythology and religion. So, starting in 1996, I had a connection to the Pagans in Lithuania and then two years later, before I went to Japan, Jonas invited me to participate in the first meeting of the World Congress of Ethnic Religions (WCER) in 1998 in Vilnius. That's where I met Giuseppe Maiello, who I believe you know. He was there representing Czech Pagans because, as you know, he developed one of the very first Czech-Slavic Pagan groups. I met quite a few people there at the WCER meeting who I have stayed in touch with.

In fact, just when I leave you today, I have to go print out something for a friend in the Greek Pagan movement the Supreme Council of the Gentile Hellenes (Ypato Symvulio Ellinon Ethnikon). They are involved in a court case that's about fighting for their rights, you know, to practice the religion without suffering persecution. Since Greek society is so dominated by the Greek Orthodox Church, it's very hard for anything else, any other religion, to exist there. So anyway, he wants a letter from me, as a respected scholar dealing with such religions, to explain what modern, ethnic Paganism and to give my opinion about the Gentile Hellenes.

Sacra: Maybe you could speak some more about your experience in Iceland.

Michael Strmiska: Well, the thing I always go back to is that Solstice ritual. What I'd like to add was that it was organized in such a way that it was possible for people to participate on different levels, from different perspectives, and with different needs. The basic situation was a circle around the fire and we had some traditional food and drink. We were way out in the countryside, no electric lights, in a stone enclosure that may have been something used in sheep-farming, I am not sure. In the distance, beautiful mountains, open country around us, the night

sky with stars above us, fantastic setting. We had this dried, smoked lamb cut with a knife and each person took a little piece to eat and then they passed around mead and we drank that. There were people reciting poems, some saying prayers and some people just making any kind of statement they wanted to make, either about life, or toward the gods. So it was a really open forum for religious or poetic or personal expression. As a kind of substitute for sacrifice, they had a big banner that was a big cloth, a long piece of green fabric, and then they had this white paint. Everyone was invited to paint some kind of symbol on it, something important to them, and then we'd burn that. So it was like everyone's collective thought and contribution was in there and it got burned as a sacrifice. And that was pretty much it, a simple ritual.

I came to understand that Ásatrú there was developed by a group of people who were very much into Old Norse literature. They were artists, poets, intellectuals; cultured people. So for them it was partly the way of maintaining the religion that goes along with the old poetry and the old Icelandic culture. In fact, the first leader that they call the allsherjargoði, or the high priest of Ásatrú, Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, was a very skilled poet. He was a rural guy, a farmer, but he also was a real expert on certain kinds of medieval Icelandic poetry. He was said to compose in those styles. I really like this artistic side of Icelandic Ásatrú, which also made it, I think, less dogmatic and more flexible and more humorous. There was a lot of humor in the people I talked to.

Iceland is special too because they really have the sense of the land being alive. A lot of people believe this although I don't know how many, are always people who believe that elves and land spirits live in the land. They make jokes about it, some people deny it, but the belief lives on. It is a beautiful and very inspiring landscape so it's very understandable to have the feeling that the landscape is alive. There, I got the sense of Ásatrú being connected to nature, and being artistic as well as open-ended. Then I went back, first to America, and then to Japan.

Sacra: And you've lived in Japan and worked at university there for five years. How did you get to Japan?

Michael Strmiska: I went from Iceland back to America for about a year and a half, from mid-1997 to end of 1998, then to Japan in January of 1999. The way I ended up in Japan is a good example of how it's always smart to always be involved in a lot of different activities because you never know what they will lead to. In the nineties, when I was in graduate school, you know, like most graduate students I needed money, and I'd always had a lot of foreign friends. I always enjoyed that. I'd offer them help with editing their papers and things like that, or you know, help them with their English. So I decided "Hey, I can make a little business out of this!" I put up signs as an English tutor and helped people either in developing pronunciation or many people just wanted conversation practice, because they had studied English but they weren't very confident in it. I helped people who were students with their writing, I helped immigrants with applications for visas and things like that, I helped business people with business stuff. That was great experience since I knew people from all around the world. From Chile to Colombia,

to South Korea and Japan, Jordan, Tunisia, and Switzerland. A huge variety of places like Russia and Saudi Arabia.

I had a lot of Japanese clients in particular, so through knowing Japanese people I became very comfortable with them and the idea of Japanese culture and society. So when I saw this job advertised for teaching at this American style college in Japan where most of the teaching would be in English, I was interested to give it a try. They wanted native English language instructors. I applied and was interviewed at an airport in America, not in Japan. So I took the job not knowing what the life in Japan would be like really, I just jumped at the chance and said "Ok, I'll try it." Looking back, I can't believe I did it, because going to a foreign country that you have never been to before, where you don't know anyone and you don't know the language is quite a gamble! I thought I'd only stay one or two years because it's the kind of place where every year you get a one year contract but I thought it was quite pleasant and it really gave me a lot of free time to work on my dissertation, so I ended up staying 5 ½ years. That's why I was able to finish my dissertation since it was good situation there for me to do academic work.

So that was a great experience all by itself, but beyond that, being in Japan I feel I learned a lot about Shinto, and I was also exposed to Japanese Buddhism. It was not just the experience of the knowledge of religions, but the college also gave me a certain amount of research support. In being there, I was able to come to Europe a number of times, with funding from that school, so that's how I came to do more research in Lithuania which also extended to Latvia. I was able to go to a couple more meetings of the World Congress of Ethnic Religion*s*- one was in Athens, one was in Antwerp, Belgium. That worked very well. I also made my first visits to the Czech Republic and to Hungary in that time. I have to confess, Michal, I did not stop in Slovakia. Sorry about that! Ha ha.

Sacra: I have one follow up question. Is there anything you brought from your previous studies of mental health to the study of religion? Is there anything you use from that experience?

Michael Strmiska: I think maybe this is one reason why I really, deeply distrust reductive models. Working with mentally ill people I see how variable people are, how particular someone's experience can be. So I don't like reductive models that try to reduce everything to one factor or another. I actually think it's truly been more valuable for teaching. Being a counselor made me more sensitive to people and that's useful for teaching, I try to realize that students are different, they need to receive information and develop their own understanding in different ways, at different speeds. So that's probably the main thing.

Sacra: Now we can move on to your Lithuanian and Latvian experience and Paganism. How did you get in touch with the local Pagan groups and why were you interested in them?

Michael Strmiska: Well, with Lithuania there've been two different reasons. One is that it's one of my ancestral countries, so I was curious about it. Remember too that I was born in 1960 so for much of my life Lithuania was impossible to visit

since it was sealed off. Most Americans didn't know it existed. They just thought it was a part of Russia. Secondly, through learning about European mythology and religion, I had realized that the Baltic States, particularly Lithuania, are really special because they were the last ones to become Christian. There are different opinions, but according to some, Paganism lived on in folklore.

So I knew it was a special place to visit. How I made contact with the leader of the Pagan group, Jonas Trinkūnas, I really can't remember anymore. I think I must have been just looking for information and somehow I got his address. Although, I know what it was! I had gone to the Baltic Studies conference and I met a man called Audrius Dundzila, today he calls himself Rudra Vilius Dundzila. I believe that "Rudra" is a name he gained through studies with a Hindu religious master or guru in Chiacgo. Back in the 1990s, Audrius was the American leader of the Romuva movement, a branch of Romuva in Chicago. We became friendly and when I told him I would visit Lithuania, he said "Oh, you should really look up Jonas Trinkūnas, he's the leader of Romuva there." So he gave me the address, I think it was probably at that Baltic Studies conference in Boston in 1995. This was basically pre-e-mail! People were just starting to use e-mail and this was long before Facebook. So, with the address from Audrius, I actually sent Jonas Trinkūnas an actual, physical letter via actual postal mail and he wrote back saying "Yes, please come, I will meet you."

I can remember when I came to Vilnius, I was going to be there for about five days or something. I remember I waited about three days to go see him because I was so nervous about meeting this important man. When I got to see him he was like "Where have you been? I've been waiting for you, I thought you were coming." He was a very knowledgeable man, with deep knowledge of mytologyh, folklore, folk music, very kind and humble. We spent hours talking about Baltic mythology and religion. I was partially asking about afterlife stuff because it was related to my dissertation. I also was learning about the new Pagan movement. He died in 2014, almost two years ago.

Now his wife Inija is the leader and I'm also friendly with her so that's been very good. In fact, I arranged for a tour group to go to Lithuania last May, in 2015. During part of it, we had some Pagan experiences and one was with Inija, and her fellow Romuva Pagans. They conducted a ritual for us with sacred fire and singing of Pagan songs celebrating the Lithuanian gods and goddesses. It was kind of touristy but for the people visiting it was eye-opening since they did not realize that this kind of thing existed, actual Pagan religion in the twenty-first century.

Sacra: Why did you decide to study the relation between Baltic Pagans and music?

Michael Strmiska: It arose from what I observed. I saw that the music was really, really central. I think part of it, you know, any activity, I like to see hands on the personality and inclinations of the main people involved. It happens that Jonas Trinkūnas and his wife Inija, when they were younger, they both were folklore collectors and they have been skilled singers of the old songs. Music is central in their lives and so it's central in their Paganism.

There's also a more objective reason. In the Baltic area, the main area where we've got a lot of mythological information and religious sentiment is in their folk music. It is all preserved in their folk songs. The Trinkūnases developed their interest in Paganism first of all through their research into folk music. Jonas and Inija are (or were, in case of Jonas) became great folk singers *and* they love the music deeply. It truly is a storehouse of Baltic Pagan lore and that's also true of Latvia and of Estonia. That is when I became interested in this. Trinkūnas and Romuva had a music group offshoot called Kūlgrinda, which means 'hidden path"—Romuva means "sanctuary." I learned from them that the "hidden path" idea traces back to medieval Lithuanian history when they were fighting against the Teutonic knights, the Germanic crusaders, they'd often fight and kill them in the swamps because they knew how to get around the swamps safely and the Teutonics would not. So the hidden path is under the water in the swamp, a safe way to go. It also has the connotation of fighting against Christian missionary expansion.

Anyway, I also noticed there's a contrasting, alternative form of folk music there, shall we say a folk metal scene. There are some people who are strictly into acoustic, tradtional folk, but folk metal was supplementing this, taking some of its influence from Scandinavian metal. So I just became very interested and I thought that it was a good topic to explore and I realized that there was kind of a feedback between the two, between the music and the religion. The Pagans draw some of their inspiration from the old folk music when the folk music gets performed traditionally, but also when it gets modernized and rock and electric instruments are added It makes it more exciting so it becomes a really great way to reach young people. And, the people who play and listen to this music get introduced to the old Pagan mythology and religion, and in this way, each side feeds the other, a musico-religious feedback loop. So that's pretty much why I developed this interest, and it was worthwhile project that I enjoyed.

Oh yeah, something else with that maybe. This is a theme that I have in my second article on that topic but I want to develop it further, perhaps in a new article. I think religion is never an all or nothing affair in terms of how it functions in people's lives. It can be a big concern of your life or it can be very small, maybe it could even be zero, but the zero doesn't concern us, because then you're not involved in religion. For those who do care about religion, there is a whole spectrum of possibilities. Is it really central, really important, do you think about it seriously, or is it just something you participate in occasionally, casually?

So I think that Pagan music shows the spectrum really well, because some of it is very serious, it's meant to be almost like hymns. Other music may just be using Paganism as a kind of like a decoration, you know, like to provide atmosphere to the music. So for that second category, the more casual, I developed the term "Pagan-esque". So when we say something is Pagan, we mean it's serious. If it's just sort of fooling around with that, then we can just call it "Pagan-esque".

This is not really unique to Paganism. We find the same dynamic in any religion. Yesterday I was talking with my Masaryk students and they were joking that in Buddhism, the fat-bellied Buddha that you see in Chinese restaurants, well, it's not exactly serious Buddhism, but it's like a kind of reference to Buddhism, so it's kind of like "buddhist-esque". We have so many trappings of Christianity

everywhere. We know what they mean but they mean different things to the people and it doesn't mean everyone is a serious Christian just because there's Christian stuff around.

So I'm interested in a spectrum or continuum of different degrees of religious intensity and different degrees of involvement. I think it's a good model to use in thinking about how different people relate to religion, again, without being reductive, without saying everyone only does it one way, because they don't, people do it in different ways.

Sacra: And what about the relation to music in Ásatrú?

Michael Strmiska: Unfortunately, Scandinavians don't have the same kind of storehouse of really ancient music like the Baltics have – the *daina* (folk song). A lot of what we have in Scandinavian folk music today is only a few centuries old at best. A lot of it is a music that was performed for festivals and it doesn't really have a deep religious meaning. I mean, I could be wrong and there might be more to it but that's my impression.

What's funny though, if you compare the two, the Balts have the Scandinavians beat when it comes to music. They've got the music. But the Scandinavians have the Balts defeated when it comes to mythology and texts. The Icelandic literature, you know, as we've discussed, is so rich and it's a really great advertisement for Norse Paganism, although they don't really have the music.

However, in recent times I think there have been Scandinavian artists and musicians, who are trying to develop "Pagan-esque" or "Pagan-ish" music. I think it's interesting that some of it takes its inspiration from the Sami people. That's a whole different twist on it and it's interesting to see how it develops. Although to just go back to tie it together, I don't think the Scandinavians have the same access to music that the Balts do or to historically grounded pagan folk music. So the Baltic Pagans have advantage in that respect.

Sacra: You were the chief editor of one of the most known textbooks in Pagan studies called *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*. How did you get the job and what was your key to decide which articles you are going to choose for the textbook?

Michael Strmiska: It was Frank Korom, somebody in my dissertation committee, who chose me. He was the editor of the series about modern religion. Somehow he got the idea to ask me if I knew enough people to make a volume with different contributions by different authors- and I did. I think it was a nice project. What I was trying to do was based on two particular ideas. The first - no Wicca. And it wasn't really because I was anti-Wicca. Well, maybe at that time I was, a little bit. In the circles I was moving in there were ethic religion people and they tend to oppose to Wicca. More importantly, I was thinking that Wicca has already gotten a lot of attention in the western scholarly publications. It would be good to shine a light on things that were not so well known. That's why I made the effort to have a chapter on Lithuania which I also helped to write. There was one also written about Ukraine. Then there was also supposed to be one on Latvia, but unfortunately the woman who was going to write it wasn't able to put it together

in time so we had to leave that out. The idea was to show a variety of forms of Paganism. I asked each writer to do it in a somewhat ethnographic manner. We tried to include interviews with actual people, observations of actual rituals, and most of the people operate with that.

Of course everyone has their own styles, so people do it in different ways, but I was pretty pleased with the result. I still must say that I like my own introduction, the overview essay. I like how I set up the issues there. I think it's a good basic text to look at for someone studying Paganism.

Sacra: I know you are also active in the public space. You even have a blog called "The Political Pagan" so I wanted to ask you about your civic activities.

Michael Strmiska: Well, about the first thing you mentioned, you will notice that my name is not on the blog. I maintain distance, because I am aware that in the professional world, academic or otherwise, Paganism can be used against you. Although it wouldn't be very hard to figure out the blog is me...

Sacra: There are photos of you on it. But I found the link to the blog on your personal web page...

Michael Strmiska: Again...the blog is either not well disguised or not very competently concealed but because I don't have my name on it, there is some distance and disguise provided. My university never had a problem with me being involved in Pagan stuff. I can say, "Look, yes, I have this thing, but I don't have my name or the university's name there." I am a little paranoid about that. The real reason the blog came about was because of how I felt when I returned to the US after my time in Japan (1999-2004) and Lithuania (2004-05). I think I mentioned this before, but just to be clear, after Japan I spent a year in Lithuania. I had a second Fulbright fellowship teaching in Lithuania. That's the year when I thought it would be a great opportunity in Lithuania to learn more about Paganism there.

I didn't have much luck making contacts with Lithuanian Pagans. I didn't really gain much new information. I instead stumbled upon these Eastern religion groups, the Karma Kagyu Diamond way, a Buddhist group derived from Tibet traditions, and the Hare Krishnas, that is, ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). I did a little research project on that which then I put aside. I came back to it 5 years later, did more interviews, and then published it in 2013 in the *Journal of Baltic Studies*, under the title "Eastern Religions in Eastern Europe: Three Cases from Lithuania."

Let me tell you how I got into researching theses Eastern religions in Lithuania. Once again, this is a good example of how you never know where your activities or contacts will lead you. So it's always good just to keep open, to be open to a lot of people and see what happens. In Lithuania, in the city of Šiauliai where I was teaching at the local university, I was asked to teach an English course. It wasn't part of my university job. Just some community group with th,e idea "you are American, you know English, you can teach English". Well okay, I didn't really want to but I should, they're being nice to me, I will be nice to them. It turned out to be really great.

In the group of people I taught, there was very strange and diverse group of people. I had everything from a 6 year old girl to a 80 year old man in this class. They had different levels of English. We had fun, we sang Johnny Cash and Christmas songs and did various things.

Anyway, there was one person there who at first I did not notice anything special about. Then, after several weeks he disclosed to me that he was a former Hare Krishna member. They had been very active in the 1970s and 80s back when it was dangerous to be a Krishna in Lithuania. Then other contacts I discovered were in the Karma Kagyu Diamond Way group, which was active in a number of citiesin Lithuania. So I just started spending time with those people and then I realized that this was an interesting phenomenon to look at. The most interesting contrast I found in that research project was that the Krishna people don't just care about religion, they care about the whole cultural tradition identity, and to them it's all one package.

I kind of disagree when I heard about the experiments of cognitive-oriented colleagues who are apparently trying to prove that there is some kind of difference between religion and religious and religious expression or religious art. To me it's not such a useful approach, because I think these things are deeply interwoven. It's like, I don't know, trying to understand your hand by cutting it off at the wrist. It doesn't make sense to me. Living context is VERY important.

I'll finish this point quickly. The Krishna people care very much about their cultural background. It's like each of their temples is a little India. The Karma Kagyu people in Buddhism are the opposite. They don't care at all about the cultural background. To them, Buddhism is just a technology that anyone can use anywhere, it has nothing to do with culture. I find that contrast really interesting. If you compare it to Paganism, Paganism cares very much about the cultural background so it's more like Krishna people in that way.

Anyway, back to the blog. When I got back to America, I wanted to make contact with the Ásatrú people, hoping to join the group but I soon hit an obstacle. I thought that many people I was communicating with or meeting had a conservative, right-wing political perspective that I just couldn't agree with. I mean, they were sort of typical conservative American people: They love guns, they love the military, they don't like government programs, all these kinds of things. There also was some sort of racism with some people, not all of them, but some. I realized that there was a certain category of people who were not racist but were racist-friendly. In another words, they may be more or less indifferent toward people of other racial or ethnic identity, but they don't mind if someone else makes jokes or is nasty to those people. In my opinion, that's a major problem on its own, because a passive, indifferent attitude easily translates into passive support for racism and such things.

Anyway, I began to have discussions with people, and I began to think: "You know, what I really would like to do is find some liberal, leftist-minded people and we could form our own little Norse Pagn subgroup together." However, I couldn't find any, or at least not in my local area. Everyone I met was on another wavelength and I began to get into really heated arguments online with people. So finally I created this blog to just have an outlet to say like: "Hey, are there any liberal Norse Pagans out there?" That's really the genesis of the blog.

Over time, I think the blog has lost some of its value because at the beginning, the blog had lot of interaction and lot of arguments with people. Conservative people would angrily reject what I was proposing. I think eventually they gave up. They just saw me as a hopeless case, an incurable multi-culti, liberal fool, and they did'n't want to bother anymore. Nowadays, I still find the blog a good place to try out ideas, because it's written in a kind of straightforward popular style. It's not really "academic", so to speak, but it's a place to test ideas that might be later used either for religious scholarship or for religious development. I still hope to gather a group where we will perform our own kind of tolerant, open, non-racist, non-militaristic Ásatrú.

Sacra: Regarding your activities in the public space – I know you're also involved in some campaigns against fracking…

Michael Strmiska: Yes, but that's not something specifically Pagan-oriented. It's something going on right in my area and it's a really sad thing. These companies that do the fracking, this hydrofracturing for natural gas, they're rapidly expanding facilities all across the USA. It's really scary because they move so fast, they're well organized, and have lots of money. If anyone tries to stop them, goes to the courts or tries to protest, then these corporations get out there with hundreds of lawyers and they know every detail of the laws. Many politicians are favorable to them because they think it's good for economic development so I helped to put some protests together and I designed some chants. I tried to also get my college involved but I found many of my colleagues in my college in the USA are either sort of neutral, they don't want to be involved, or they're even more on the pro-corporate, pro-business, conservative end of the spectrum and they are okay with this kind of development. It's still continues even if I am not there now, but I keep getting postings that my friends back there are doing protests, trying to slow down the process. The particular thing with that issue and these plans to build big power plants right in my city is that it can potentially cause a lot of air pollution and also pollute the water supply. It will have these two big tanks, one full of oil, the other with ammonia, that could explode. It could cause the whole city to be consumed in a fireball. Well, not quite that but it would kill a lot of people. So yeah, I am happy to be involved and for many years I was the kind of person who just thought about and talked about environmental things, but never really did anything. This is just in my backyard so I thought I should get involved and I have met some great nice people along the way.

Sad thing is, that not many young people got involved. It's mostly older people like old hippies, or people who are a little bit younger, like me, but not too many people in their twenties. I think it's partly because of economic pressure. Where I live and where my college is, it's a rather poor area. Most young people's main concern is how do I get a job and how do I survive. I try to talk more about idealistic things but they don't have like-mindedness about the topic.

Sacra: There's one topic left: Czech Republic and Czech Paganism. How did you get in touch with the Czech Pagan groups and why did you decide to go to the Czech Republic and teach for 6 months at the Masaryk University?

Michael Strmiska: My first exposure to Czech Pagans was... Actually, two things are deeply interconnected. First, four years ago at a conference in Riga in Latvia, I met Milan Fujda and Luboš Bělka. I enjoyed them a lot, I was impressed by them. I already was planning to make a visit to Czech Republic and they said: "Oh, you should come to Brno, we can arrange some discussions for you." Then I got into a network with people of Masaryk University and I had a few different meetings. Some were like just students from college and some were local Pagans. Then the same things spread to Prague. My meetings in Brno and Prague were both, first March 2012, then March 2013 and that's where, really, for the first time, I saw really different types of Pagans. I mean it was like day and night. In Prague one night I met a few sort of hippies in a tea house, that was really cool and mellow, with lots of ginger and things like that. Then the other night was in this smoky pub with mostly right-wing rocker types, very, very gothic. I thought these attitudes were so different, it was like the hippies and the Nazis, well that's little too extreme, but you understand what I mean by that.

Then, I had the discussions with the department here. They were saying that a lot of people here are interested in Paganism and that it would be nice to come here and teach. Actually, first I applied for a Fulbright grant from the US government. I tried two years in a row. Each time it was approved on the USA side and rejected on the Czech side. It's a two-staged process and soon I started to think that people in the Czech government or in Czech academia didn't really like Paganism so much. Then, Aleš Chalupa had the idea to apply for a Czech ministry of education grant and that worked. That's why it took several years to finally get here. In my time here I hadn't really done much with Czech Pagans here. My main project that I got started here was about Pagan Afterlife Beliefs. You notice it actually goes back to my dissertation, back to my roots, so to speak.

That was mainly an internet survey. It took a lot of work because it ended up being adapted for number of different countries. The work still isn't done but I got some good cooperation from the Czech Pagan Federation. We did an English language survey and we have a plan that we'll also develop a Czech language version. I think in other countries we'll do that too. It's particularly important to have the native language included to reach older people. It's mostly younger people who have a fair amount of English functionality, but older people may not. What is nice is that the internet program I'm using called Survey Monkey lets me set up the questions in the same order, with the same options, so even if I can't understand the language I still can understand what the results mean. Of course I can discuss them with colleagues from those countries. The last two weeks I didn't really have time for the research, but probably after New Year I'll be working on it more and I feel bad about that. I had a plan to have a meeting with the Czech Pagans about the survey, but the time was just running out and I'm doing a little bit of traveling which takes some time.

Let me just say something about Czech Pagans. I found it really interesting what diversity there is and yet cooperation between different groups does not have very much antagonism. Of course, only some, but generally speaking, it seems like cooperative atmosphere. I'm very impressed by the Wolf Cult (Vlčí Kult), I really think they have potential. It's kind of a danger for them I think because they have potential to become a very popular movement. It really seems cool to do all this

tough stuff in the forest and be a wolf. They have to watch out so they don't become the McDonald's of Czech Paganism! Ha ha, I'm joking. I think they'll be fine and I think they will be a popular movement but I don't fully understand them. I know this other great scholar, Kamila Velkoborská and she's doing really serious work on the Wolf people. I think she will be the one to tell the story of that group and she'll do it really well. I was hoping to meet her this month, but I can't meet her because she is so busy with her "wolf" research.

I think the chapter that Anna Dostálová did for Scott Simpson's book *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* is quite a nice survey. I mean I know people that have reservations about it. You always will have problems when you comment on what is in your own country and in your own group etc., but I think she did a good job at trying to explain the diversity. It is very hard thing to capture in a short work and it's too bad she apparently doesn't plan to do any more scholar work.

Apart from my Pagan research, I have this book project. It has been taking my time for years and unfortunately, with really slow progress. I hope I'll finish it one day, even if now I have to go back to my afterlife survey. The name of the book will be *Unchristian Eastern Europe* and the initial plan was to have a section on Pagans, a section on Jews, and then also the Roma. The Roma don't fit exactly because nowadays many Roma are in fact Christians. But in the past they were not accepted as a Christians and they bring with them a lot of non-Christian heritage. Roma Christianity is not mainstream. I suppose with what especially happening these days, the book should also have a section on Muslims. It's a difficult book to write, because I am not an expert on these things. It's more a matter of collecting information and giving a decent overview plus some additional analysis and commentary. My initial inspiration was that many people abroad, when they think of Eastern European countries, not Czech Republic, but say Poland, they concluded, "ah, completely Christian, completely Catholic." WRONG!! In fact there's a thriving Pagan scene in Poland. Historically, there was, you know, many Jews there. The situation is similar in other countries too.

There's just so much diversity and I think it's a very important question today because of the controversy about Muslims. Central and Eastern Europe is still unsure whether it wants to be more diverse or less. I think the trends of nationalism in the last two hundred years push towards a single ethnicity sense of identity. This really goes against the history of the region since it is a history of diversity. The book and the project are really dear to my heart. I just have to find more time for it. I did manage to do a few interviews and to collect some information about Roma while I was here. Just the other day, I did a tour of Jewish sites in Brno, so that project is slowly moving, but I hope it'll move more quickly.

Sacra: There is going to be a Pagan conference in June 2016 in Brno. As one of the chief organizers, could you explain about the conference a little bit?

Michael Strmiska: I contributed the theme, which is Paganism and politics. That's because, for one reason, you know in our region, in our time, some Paganism has a really strong ethnic focus and somewhat right-wing politics. Then in another places, and also here, other Pagans are more shall we say on the left side or the

green side, being interested in gender equality, being LBGT friendly, and pro-environment, so the theme is to invite people to consider how different forms of Paganism engage with different kind of political ideologies and identities. Let me say also, I am hoping that the teaching I did this semester was good. It was my first time teaching here, so it's always a little rough the first time. I am hoping to come back in maybe two years.

Sacra: Last question. Do you have some funny stories from your research of Pagan groups around the world?

Michael Strmiska: It's a tough question because, after so many years, there are many funny stories and probably many things that I have forgotten. You mentioned a photo that's on my blog. It's the one with men dressed in medieval style, holding swords against my neck. That was from the WCER meeting in 2005 in Antwerp.[2] I didn't know they were going to do that and suddenly Koenraad Logghe, one of the organizers said, "Michael, come here!" It seemed that it was going to be some kind of human sacrifice, with me the offering. That was a funny moment and made a nice photograph. I learned a long time ago that in the most terrifying situations you should act calmly and smile.

Sacra: Do you want to say anything to the readers of Sacra?

Michael Strmiska: I hope the study of Paganism will continue here. It's a field in its early stages so there's a lot of room for development and for different approaches.

Sacra: Thank you for your time and for this interview.

[2] World Congress of Ethnic Religions.