

**Michael F. Strmiska, ed., *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005, 382 pp., ISBN: 1851096086, hb**

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The essays that make up this edited volume provide a welcome addition to previous surveys of paganism and neopaganism [by Graham Harvey (2000), Joanne Pearson (2002), Shelley Rabinovitch and James Lewis (2002), and Sarah Pike (2004)] that focus mainly on the USA and the British Isles and on Wicca and its variants. Editor Michael Strmiska broadens this focus by including essays on modern pagan movements in Lithuania and Ukraine, Italian-American Stregheria, Asatru in Iceland and America, Heathenry in Great Britain, Druidry in Ireland, and pagans in the US military. This expanded focus remains organized around a European–American axis, allowing for intriguing discussions of parallels and contrasts between the various groups covered, without becoming a superficial “global encyclopedia.” The essays on eastern Europe highlight the “tenacious preservation” of folklore and customs in these more ethnically homogeneous former Soviet states and the ways these deep streams of cultural memory are reemerging in vibrant pagan movements.

Strmiska’s opening essay makes several interesting points about the terms “pagan” and “neopagan.” First, Strmiska traces the development of “pagan” as a pejorative term for pre-Christian polytheisms that threatened Christian dominance throughout northern and central Europe. He points out that modern pagans embrace the term precisely because it marks their break from conventional Christian belief and practice. They also are influenced, he maintains, by positive nineteenth-century anthropological, folkloric, and Romantic portrayals of European pagan religion. These portrayals cast pagan religion in a mysterious and alluring light and also showed how these traditions could be used to stimulate national pride and a respect for cultural patrimony among ethnic subcultures. Finally, contemporary pagans hope that by wearing the label proudly they can honor their pagan ancestors who fought to maintain their spiritual practices in the face of hostility and persecution.

Strmiska discusses the disagreements within the pagan community over the use of the term “neopagan,” noting that, for many contemporary pagans, the term is

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derogatory and unnecessary. These pagans are aware that the religious traditions they practice today, though inspired by pagan religions of past years, are reconstructions that may diverge in significant ways from earlier religious systems. They argue that this is true for many contemporary Christians, Hindus, and Muslims as well, yet no one calls these believers neo-Christians, neo-Hindus, or neo-Muslims. In the end, Strmiska allows the volume's authors to use the terms that best suit their purposes, which means both pagan and neopagan are used throughout the book. Though this can be irritating and confusing at times, it is a fair reflection of the contested and unsettled self-understanding of pagan groups in today's world.

Each of the essays that follow the introduction make the point that pagan religious movements are a return, a rebuilding, and a reimagining of pre-Christian indigenous traditions. Sabina Magliocco's chapter on Italian American Stregheria and Wicca demonstrates how Italian immigrants preserved their cultural traditions in America by continuing to practice the magic, rituals, and folk healing practices of the *streghe* (practitioners of Stregheria) brought over from rural Italy. Jenny Butler's examination of Druidry in contemporary Ireland fills a gap in the emerging field of Druidry studies by focusing on one group, the Owl Grove, and its associated orders, in the cultural setting of Ireland. She makes the point that no large-scale ethnographic research has been conducted on Irish neopaganism, and thus sets the benchmark for future research with her thickly described analysis of the history, ritual practices, and constructed identities of contemporary Irish druids.

The chapters on Asatru, Heathenry, Ukrainian native faith (*Ridna Vira*), and Lithuanian Romuva are rich in historical background, ritual practices and beliefs, and details of how contemporary practitioners of these traditions construct useable and satisfying pagan identities. Each of these essays is informed by skilled ethnographic research. The final essay on paganism in the US military is a fascinating consideration of the many challenges that pagans face within the Christian-dominated US armed services. This chapter also addresses the delicate and sensitive relationships between civilian pagans and military pagans, highlighting the ways that civilian pagan assertiveness can undermine the safe haven military pagans are attempting to carve out within the military subculture.

This volume is highly recommended for scholars of alternative religions, paganism, new religious movements, and contemporary religious developments.