



FÓRUM

Researching Contemporary Paganism: an interview with professor of comparative religion Sarah M. Pike

Pesquisando paganismo contemporâneo: uma entrevista com a professora de religiões comparadas Sarah M. Pike

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One of the most prominent researcher in Contemporary Paganism in North America is Sarah M. Pike, professor of comparative religion and Director of Humanities Center of California State University in Chico. She is author of two important studies on this subject: *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and The Search for Community* (University of California Press, 2001); *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (Columbia University Press, 2004). Both works considered seminar ethnographic studies in the Pagan Studies field, being the first, the result of five-year ethnographic study of Pagan festival participants.

With the increasingly research on contemporary pagan groups in Brazil, become clearer the necessity to dialogue with scholars with a more accurate acquaintance and experience on this subject. In this sense, this interview with Professor Pike aims to present her main ideas for Brazilian researches interested in Contemporary Paganism.

1. Could you tell us how did you become interested on New Religious Movement, specifically Contemporary Paganism?

When I was in graduate school in the U.S. in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was widespread misunderstanding of new religious movements that led to disasters like Waco in 1993 when an entire community of Branch Davidians was killed by American law enforcement agencies. While the Davidians were Christians, demonization of other groups, including contemporary Pagans, was common then. I was drawn to the study of new religions because it seemed urgently important to try to increase public understanding of religions considered strange or unfamiliar, especially in the news media and law enforcement. At the same time, I met some

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local Wiccans and learned about the Neopagan nature sanctuary, Lothlorien, a short drive from where I was living, so my project fell into place.

2. **Your work on Contemporary Paganism is very influent on development of subsequent researches. The idea of community for contemporary pagans was so extensively worked on your book *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001). Could you tell us about the concepts and ideas of community for contemporary pagans? Do you believe that contemporary pagans in other contexts follow the same dynamic in relation to this search for community?**

My first encounter with Neopagan communities was on the Internet, where in the early 1990s they were quite active early on sharing knowledge and information before most other religions had discovered the many uses of the Internet. A number of Pagans were involved in computer related fields, which in part accounts for them being early adaptors of electronically mediated communication. The Internet really revolutionized Neopaganism in the U.S., which had previously relied on word of mouth, networking through occult shops and books. Solitary practitioners who had been quite isolated found a community online.

But my focus was on the creation of community at Neopagan festivals in particular, especially where community concerns sometimes came into conflict with the needs of individuals and personal expression. One of my first sights at my first Pagan festival was a sign reading “Welcome Home,” thus the themes of Paganism being “home” and “family” became important to my understanding of community. If a Pagan festival or the larger Pagan community was home, this was because many Pagans did not feel at home elsewhere in society or were still “in the broom closet” where their birth families were concerned. Festivals, rituals and circles of many kinds helped to build community, from the largest public spiral dance to the smallest coven circles.

Pagan groups were also very welcoming and inclusive communities, especially toward gays, lesbians and gender nonconforming people, at least in comparison to the broader society. Community was where they could be themselves in all these ways, not just spiritually. In many cases, then, “community” was also created against a society in which many felt ostracized, or in opposition to Christianity, which many had rejected. My sense is that the search for community has changed somewhat: there are many more online communities for Pagans and less of a sense of being an ostracized minority, more social acceptance for Pagans in most areas of the U.S.

3. **Since the publication of your book, the movement grew up, spread and gained more visibility. The globalization approached groups and individuals around the World. In this sense, do you think the search for community in a global context challenge us to think Contemporary Paganism as a Global Religion?**

Paganism is not “a” global religion although its many influences have spread globally and it has many manifestations around the world. Paganism certainly has global dimensions. The Internet and especially social media insure that there are continuities across time and space between different Pagan traditions. Some forms of Paganism such as Wicca or Asatru are clearly global. However, for many, but certainly not all, Pagans, local landscapes and local histories are also important. Some new forms of nationalistic Paganisms such as those in Russia and the Ukraine have a very different sense of what community means and may be more closely linked to heritage, while most of the Neopagans I studied in the U.S. were creating community that was not dependent on heritage, though there were exceptions to this.

4. **In your opinion which causes contributed, both historically and sociologically to growth of Contemporary Paganism in U.S.?**

Again, the Internet had a huge impact since suddenly information that was hard to find became widely circulated and accessible, especially to young people. Teenagers especially could more easily discover knowledge about Paganisms. Networking and organizing became much easier with social media, so that people who might not otherwise have encountered Paganism could now easily find out about events and classes. Neopagans have also made aggressive use of the Internet for educating the public and organizing around religious freedom issues. They have played prominent roles in online journalism, so that public knowledge of Paganism has increased considerably. Every time a religious freedom issue concerning Pagans drew public attention, there were Pagan spokespeople ready to explain their beliefs. In this way, some of the growth has come from increasing public understanding of Paganism as well as a fading of old stereotypes. Another factor that is significant is the growing trend in the U.S. of the “spiritual but not religious” category. Many of these people are open to blending beliefs and practices from different traditions: a bit of Buddhism and a bit of Paganism, for example. This is a population that is generally more receptive to non-Western and pre-Christian worldviews.

5. **In Brazil, there are many magical religions as Umbanda and Candomble. We know in US there are a context of plurality too. How Contemporary Pagans dialogue with this plurality?**

Neopagans are increasingly involved in dialogue with interfaith groups that include Christians, Muslims, Jews etc., usually in the context of working together on social issues or learning about each other's beliefs and practices. Pagan teachers, for instance, typically have a presence at pluralist events like the World Parliament of Religions. They actively seek interfaith contexts in which they can be recognized as one legitimate religious choice among many. In terms of other religions that have been marginalized such as Vodou, Santeria or Native American traditions, these relationships have been more troubled. Many Pagans have borrowed from these other religious cultures, sometimes respectfully working with Native teachers or Vodou priestesses, sometimes not so respectfully taking practices out of context. Native Americans have often resisted this kind of borrowing and have seen it as a kind of cultural appropriation that perpetuates colonialism.

6. **The relationship between humans and natural environment is a recurrent theme in your researches. Why is it important consider this topic in a religious study perspective?**

We live in a world in which the natural environment is changing rapidly because of human impacts. How humans understand their relationship with nonhuman species and landscapes is of central importance to our future. How nature comes to matter to us, becomes sacred, valuable, or of moral worth are all issues that religious studies and ritual studies can help us understand. Most Neopagans believe that everything is interconnected and that the natural world is alive with spirit and meaning. Such an orientation suggests other possible ways of being in relationship with the more than human. Scientific knowledge alone is not enough to fully understand our relationships to the environment and to nonhuman animals or how we might make such relationships more sustainable and meaningful in a changing world.

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