

James Ambrose Wilde

Professor Carol A. Panaccione

Elementary German I

20 December 2019

German Paganism Today

“A vibrant and diverse spiritual community has emerged...” writes Carl McColman about the new Pagan movement (1). This movement seeks to continue religions long displaced by Christianity. It comes in many different forms: freeform and organized, accepting and intolerant. In any case, Neo-Paganism gives new life to ancient German beliefs.

Pagan is a vague term that refers to many kinds of people. Historically, the ancient Romans used it to refer to anyone not living in the city; “pagan” is Latin for “rustic” (McColman 6). As Christianity rose to power, the word evolved to describe anyone who was not a Christian (6). This was no kindly-given title; even the Romans used it like an urbanite might use “redneck” today (6). The modern usage of the word can refer to any person who follows a set of practices or beliefs derived from a pre-Christian culture (6).

In ancient times, the cultures who influenced modern Paganist thinkers thrived. Before Christianization, the Celts (Emmons) and more recently the Germanic peoples (Salisbury) held onto the area that is now known as Germany. From 300 B.C.E., the Celts were spread from Italy to Turkey, but their range and influence began to dwindle as both the Romans and Germanic peoples encroached on their land (Emmons). The Germanic peoples were descended from

tribes indigenous to a small section of Scandinavia, giving them many cultural and religious similarities (Salisbury). Up until sometime around the sixth century B.C.E., they migrated south into what the areas now called the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Germany (Salisbury). Over the course of a few centuries, the Christianization of Europe led to the religions of these two cultures to be all but erased from history. Neither the Celtic (McCaffery) or Germanic (Salisbury) pagans had a writing system, leaving only archaeological evidence, contemporary Greek (Emmons) and Roman writers, and Christian monks centuries later to tell preserve their faith (Salisbury). An example of how this Christianization occurred is the story of Saint Boniface, a seventh-to-eighth century Christian missionary who did his work in Germanic lands (Frassetto). A defining moment of his life was when he, to convert the pagans of Thuringia, felled a sacred oak to prove the power of his god over all of theirs (Frassetto). Sacred groves and trees, like the one Boniface cut down, were the holy sites of the Germanic religion, comparable to altars or temples ("Germanic Religion"). This historical context brings an explanation as to why modern Paganism is more up to interpretation than most religions, and why some Pagans might see Christianity as an enemy of their faith (Strmiska 29).

There are a few popular misconceptions about these new Pagans that should be dispelled. The first of these is the idea that pagans are devil worshippers (McColman 7). Much of this myth comes from the fact that, when Christianity came to Europe, the old gods became regarded as demons and devils (7). The second is that animal or human sacrifices are still widely accepted, or even expected, by modern Pagans (8). Sacrifices to the gods are still made by Pagans today, but they are most often in the form of food, praise, or even flowers (8). A third is that all Pagans are Wiccans or that all Wiccans identify as Pagans (55). There exists a

subset of Wiccans who feel that their unique traditions and beliefs are not aptly described by the vague, widely encompassing term of “Paganism” (55). On the other side, there are Pagans who feel like Wicca is a modern romanticizing of old beliefs rather than Paganism proper (55). In the end, most agree that Wicca is a large subset of Paganism, with some outsiders even confusing the two terms (55).

The present-day groups considered Pagan are not easy to talk about as one whole, consistent group, for that is not what they are (McColman 13). That is not to say that they do not have a few commonalities that bring them together under the banner of Paganism. According to Carl McColman, “...*most* pagans have some degree of reverence for nature and *most* have some sort of devotion to the Goddess...” (6). The Goddess he refers to is a motherly deity of three cyclical forms that represent the life stages of a woman and the phases of the moon (102-103). She represents concepts associated with the Taoist concept of Yin: acceptance, darkness, and form (100). Also often worshipped is the God, a much vaguer counterpart to the Goddess. He can be compared to Yang, representing action, light, and force (112). Exactly what his relation is to the Goddess is very much up to interpretation. There is a viewpoint that calls him her son, and another her lover. (118-119). There are many more divinities worshipped by Pagans (46). The Wiccans tend to devote themselves to the Goddess and God as the primary manifestations of a universal Spirit with other deities being different manifestations of the Goddess and God, while revivals such as Druidism tend to worship a pantheon of unique deities (46).

Today, the form of Paganism with the most followers is Wicca (McColman 43). The religion has its origins in 1954, with Gerald Gardner’s *Witchcraft Today* promoting a religion

based on Margaret Murray's theory that those who medieval Europeans called witches were practitioners of a surviving pre-Christian European religion (44). Even though Murray's theory has been criticized by modern academics, the religion lives on, evolving (44). Some self-identifying Wiccans have even rejected the idea that their religion is that of medieval witches (Mankey). To define Wicca is no easy task. There exist both polytheistic Wiccans, atheistic Wiccans, and Wiccans who worship only the Goddess (Mankey). According to Jason Mankey, "Wicca is a tradition best defined by its practices and use of language, not so much by the beliefs of its adherents." Some practices he lists include the use of magical circles to simultaneously protect its users and store energy, the celebration acknowledging seasonal change, and using distinctively Wiccan tools for religious purposes (Mankey). The language Mankey refers to is that which, at the surface level, implies polytheism, like mentioning Goddess and God. Carl McColman sees it a bit differently, claiming that Wiccans believe that there is a Goddess and God who are manifestations of spirit energy, and may just be one deity in different forms (46). Whatever interpretation is more valid, it is true that Germanic deities and spirits can be recognized in Wicca. It is equally true that Wicca has a presence in the German speaking world. On Instagram, the hashtag '#deutschlandshexen', 'Germany's witches' in English, has over 1,300 posts ("#Deutschlandshexen"). A Wiccan German-language Instagram blogger going by the handle of "geistundmagie" has over 13,000 followers, and a fellow of hers, "miss.prosperina", is not too far behind at over 12,000 followers.

Another popular form of paganism comes in the form of revivals. These are attempts to recreate a religion or culture that is extinct using myths, archaeology, and folklore (McColman 62-63). Asatru is a revival of the pre-Christian Germanic religion, and Eldaring is a German

community that follows it ("Eldaring.de"). The basis of their religion is taken from the traditional beliefs of all Germanic peoples, but they look at all their sources carefully: they are aware that the accounts they use may not be fully comprehensive ("Selbstverständnis"). Eldaring is a small group, with about 350 members as of May 2018 ("Mitgliedschaft"). This does not mean that they are alone; the Troth associates themselves with them ("Troth Official Links"). The Troth describes itself as "... an international Heathen organization based in the United States..." ("About the Troth"). By 'Heathen', they mean that they follow the same religion that the pre-Christian Germanic peoples did; they follow Asatru ("About the Troth"). The Troth has stewards, volunteers who act as community guides ("Frequently-Asked Questions"), in twenty-two U.S. States, Canada, Ireland, The U.K., and Germany ("Steward Map").

When speaking of the most influential branches of Paganism, there is a controversial subject that must be brought up: the neo-Völkisch ideology, or Folkish Paganism. It refers to a Paganistic spirituality that revolves around the ideals of white supremacy ("Neo-Völkisch"). All neo-Völkisch belief systems are continuations of the Völkisch movement of the late nineteenth century. This movement sprung forth in the late 1800s, from anger at a rapidly changing world, a world that seemed to be forgetting its past ("Neo-Völkisch"). Guido Karl Anton List those feelings into the belief system of Ariosophy: a religion of social Darwinism and white supremacy ("Neo-Völkisch"). Select circles of this influenced German politics heavily in the early twentieth century, bringing the National Socialist Party into power ("Neo-Völkisch"). In other words, Völkisch Paganism, old and new, is Nazi Paganism ("Neo-Völkisch"). Even a few of the highest-ranking Nazis—namely Himmler and Hess—were avid Ariosophists (Jones & Pennick 218).

Adolf Hitler, on the other hand, disagreed with the outlook, saying, "Our old mythology ceased to be viable when Christianity implanted itself" (218). Furthermore, Jones and Pennick stated that the Nazi party outlawed numerous Pagan groups and sent their followers to die in concentration camps (219).

If Pagan beliefs were not just suboptimal but actively worthy of death to the original Nazis, why do any modern Nazis find it so beguiling? The answer is threefold: the origins of Christianity, the nature of it, and how those contrast to Paganism. The most important reason is that Christianity originated from a middle eastern branch of Judaism, a combination of two things Nazis have little to no tolerance for. Second in importance is that Christianity has many messages of love, kindness, and tolerance, bringing influential neo-Nazi Hendrik Möbus to dub it a "'praise-the-feeble' religion" ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). Finally, Paganism is entirely what the believer makes it. There is no Bible, no core tenets to at least technically abide by, nothing and nobody to stop them. It can be a purely European religion; the enemies of the gods can be associated any religious or ethnic group; it can be molded to fit an ideology.

David Lane was one such Nazi Pagan. Abused, surrendered, and eventually adopted, he showed some indecorous quirks to his adoptive family: he had a fascination with Adolf Hitler, he often did the Nazi salute, and he liked to take the role of a Nazi soldier when playing pretend with his adoptive brother ("David Lane"). As he grew, this taste for bigotry stuck, and he ended up publishing his first piece, "The Death of the White Race" in 1978 ("David Lane"). His posting of the pamphlet around Denver caught the eye of the local Knights of the Ku Klux Klan branch, who made him their organizer ("David Lane"). Lane continued down this path of racism, and in 1983 he joined the newly formed Bruders Schweigen, later called The Order ("David Lane").

With this group, David Lane would commit numerous robberies and help plan the murder of talk show host Alan Berg ("David Lane"). For these crimes, he was sentenced to a few decades short of 200 years of jail time ("David Lane"). With nothing else to do in prison, Lane filled his schedule with writing. He penned the "14 Words" and "88 Precepts", making the number fourteen a popular neo-Nazi symbol today ("David Lane"). Here in jail Lane was converted to Paganism, and he forged his own form of Wotanism ("David Lane"). This branch was much like other forms of Folkish Paganism: it used Germanic religion to support a white supremacist worldview ("David Lane"). He and his wife, who he married in jail, ran the 14 Words Press to pump out propaganda for Wotanism. ("David Lane"). It was quite effective, as the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that "... Lane is worshipped as a folk hero by other imprisoned white followers of Asatrú and Odinism." On May 28th, 2007, David Lane died in prison ("David Lane"). Neo-Nazis hold the 30th of June as a global day of remembrance for him, with rallies held in his name around the United States, and in England, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia ("David Lane").

Another plentiful source of folkish Pagan propaganda is the National Socialist Black Metal scene, which Hendrik Möbus of Absurd illustrates well. On April 23rd, 1993, Möbus and two of his bandmates lured, bound, and murdered their classmate Sandro Beyer ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). For this they were jailed, and although Möbus was let out on parole, he quickly found his way back in ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). During their imprisonment, the band recorded and released music and networked with their fellow Nazi Pagans ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). As soon as Möbus was let out on parole, he seized control of both black metal label Darker Than Black Records and of the German branch of neo-Nazi group Heathen

Front ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). He was intent on spreading his influence, and effective. Heading a national branch of the Heathen Front was good for networking, but the records label was arguably a better strategic choice. Not only can music catch one's interest, it can hold it and stick itself in the listener's head. More importantly, the black market for hate music had potential: Möbus headed Darker Than Black in 1998, and a 1999 Interpol report claimed that neo-Nazi music made \$3.4 million in Europe in 1999 ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). However, after going back to jail, Darker Than Black was raided and shut down for distributing Nazi propaganda ("Arrest of German Neo-Nazis"). Today, Absurd is held in high regard by the national socialist black metal scene, having a 2018 music festival named after their album "Asgardsrei" (Moynihan).

For better or for worse, any given idea can be lost and found again. Neo-Paganism illustrates this well. Ancient traditions and beliefs lost to time and religious conquest have been rejuvenated and adopted for many reasons. Some seek to find their own people, others to revive lost faiths, and a few seek to back up an ideology of hate. With this new interest of old beliefs, the faiths of ancient German peoples are coming back to life.

Works Cited

- "#Deutschlandshexen." Instagram, Instagram, www.instagram.com/explore/tags/deutschlandshexen/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- "About the Troth." The Troth, The Troth, 15 June 2016, www.thetroth.org/about-troth.html. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- "Arrest of German Neo-Nazi Reveals Growing Internationalization of 'White Power' Music Scene." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, The Southern Poverty Law Center, 6 Dec. 2000, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2000/arrest-german-neo-nazi-reveals-growing-internationalization-white-power-music-scene. Accessed 1 Dec. 2019.
- "David Lane." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, The Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/david-lane. Accessed 13 Dec. 2019.
- "Eldaring.de - Gelebtes Germanisches Heidentum." *Eldaring.de*, Eldaring, eldaring.de/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019. Translated with Google Translate.
- Emmons, Jim Tschen. "Celts." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*, ABC-CLIO, 2019, ancienthistory2.abc-clio.com.ccriezp.idm.oclc.org/Search/Display/575993. Accessed 16 Dec. 2019.
- Frassetto, Michael. "Saint Boniface." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*, ABC-CLIO, 2019, ancienthistory2.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/593275. Accessed 16 Dec. 2019.
- "Frequently-Asked Questions - Policies." *The Troth*, The Troth, 10 Nov. 2019, thetroth.org/about-troth/faq-troth-policies.html. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- geistundmagie. "Sonia | Hexe (@Geistundmagie)." *Instagram*, Instagram, www.instagram.com/geistundmagie/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- "Germanic Religion." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*, ABC-CLIO, 2019, ancienthistory2.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/594516. Accessed 16 Dec. 2019.
- Jones, Prudence and Nigel Pennick. *A History of Pagan Europe*. Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1999.
- "Neo-Volkisch." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, The Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-volkisch.
- "New Brand of Racist Odinist Religion on the March." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, The Southern Poverty Law Center, 15 March 2000, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/1998/new-brand-racist-odinist-religion-march. Accessed 13 Dec. 2019.
- Mankey, Jason. "What Exactly is Wicca?" Web blog post. *Raise the Horns*. Patheos, 22 March 2017, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/panmankey/2017/03/what-exactly-is-wicca/>. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- miss.proserpina. "•χάρος ☩ ελεχ (@miss.proserpina)." *Instagram*, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/miss.proserpina/>. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

- “Mitgliedschaft.” Eldaring.de, Eldaring, eldaring.de/mitgliedschaft/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019. Translated with Google Translate.
- Moynihan, Colin. “Heavy Metal Confronts Its Nazi Problem.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 19 Feb. 2019, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/heavy-metal-confronts-its-nazi-problem. Accessed 14 Dec. 2019.
- McCaffery, Elisabeth. “Celtic Religion.” World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras, ABC-CLIO, 2019, ancienthistory2.abc-clio.com.ccriezp.idm.oclc.org/Search/Display/934754. Accessed 16 Dec. 2019.
- McColman, Carl. *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Paganism*. Penguin Group, 2002.
- Salisbury, Joyce E. “Germanic Peoples.” World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras, ABC-CLIO, 2019, ancienthistory2.abc-clio.com.ccriezp.idm.oclc.org/Search/Display/576079. Accessed 16 Dec. 2019.
- “Selbstverständnis.” Eldaring.de, Eldaring, eldaring.de/sample-page/selbstverstaendnis/. Translated with Google Translate.
- “Steward Map.” The Troth, The Troth, thetroth.org/about/leadership/stewards.html. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.
- Strmiska, Michael F. *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*. ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005. PDF file.
- “Troth Official Links & Resources.” The Troth, The Troth, www.thetroth.org/resources/troth-official-links-resources.html. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.