

## FROM RODNOVERIE TO ISLAM: RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN MODERN RUSSIA

### An Interview with Dr Kaarina Aitamurto



**WRSP:** Your main research has been on the Russian religion of Rodnoverie, or Native Faith. For readers unfamiliar with this tradition, could you give us a brief overview of what it is?

**Dr Aitamurto:** The term *Rodnoverie* comes from the Russian words *rodnaya vera* (“native faith”) and refers to a religion that is based on pre-Christian Slavic spirituality. The question about the terminology is actually quite complex and there seems to be a recent tendency to define Rodnoverie more narrowly as a distinct form of Paganism that does not even include all groupings that subscribe to the Slavic tradition in Russia.

While the origin of the movement is still debatable, there were groupings and authors who had begun to explore Paganism by the 1980s and which were able to become public after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There are many versions of modern Slavic native faith and continuous debates are conducted on who has the right to call themselves a representative of this tradition. Despite the differences, some common features can still be found. The ritual calendar is based on folkloric tradition with such celebrations as the midsummer festival, Kupala, and the winter solstice, Kolyada. In addition, some main deities, such as Perun, Veles, and Mokosh, have their own days of celebration. The festivals usually take place in nature, in front of deity statues, and around fire. The festivals are usually organised by the communities or umbrella-communities, of which there are a couple. Naturally, there are also solitary practitioners who do not participate in the communal festivals.

As in many other Pagan religions, there are debates both about what we can know about the pre-Christian tradition and how faithfully it should be followed today. Though the pictures from the festivals of Rodnoverie communities often resemble each other, the ritual practices—like the theology—are continuously developing and negotiated. An interesting feature (that I actually

noticed only after starting to study Islam in Russia) is the central role of literature and reading in Rodnoverie. Although it is a relatively small movement,\* there is much literature published on the topic. This is perhaps not so surprising, because some studies suggest that people with higher education and students are overrepresented among Russia's Pagan community. The majority of Rodnovers also live in cities and scholars of the topic agree that there are more men than women in the movement.

\*=There are no exact numbers but the estimations I have recently encountered usually suggest at least two hundred thousand people.

**WRSP:** Did you have a pre-existing interest in modern Paganism prior to embarking on your research with Russian Rodnover communities in 2004? What was it that sparked your interest in the topic and led you to conduct PhD research on it?

**Dr Aitamurto:** Back in the late 1990s, when I was thinking about a topic for my masters' thesis, I found a newspaper article about Wicca, which it described as a feminist women's religion. This intrigued me and I eventually based my thesis work on interviews with Finnish Wiccans. I became so fascinated with the topic that I decided to continue studying it in my doctoral thesis, although this time in Russia. The country was somewhat familiar to me, and I had already learned the Russian language at school. I was aware that there were Wiccans in Russia but there were hardly any references or publications on the topic.

I started my research through esoteric bookstores and stalls as well as inquiring if my Russian colleagues knew any Wiccan groups in Russia. Every way I turned there were hardly any signs of Wicca and questions about the topic usually led to ethnic Slavic Paganism. To be honest, I was initially a bit reluctant to change the topic of my research because it was the feminist aspect of Wicca that had appealed to me. In contrast, contemporary Slavic Paganism seemed emphatically patriarchal and conservative. Moreover, infrequently it was linked to intolerant nationalism. In many respects, this ethnic Paganism with its emphasis on warrior spirit and admiration of masculinity seemed to represent an opposite to the kind of feminist spirituality that had originally drawn me to Paganism. However, gradually I became captivated by Slavic Paganism. First, I have always loved Russian culture and folklore so, of course, being able to gain a new perspective on it was fascinating. Secondly, it was intriguing to notice that Rodnoverie contained many similar features to the forms of Paganism I had encountered previously and which had initially drawn me to it: the emphasis on independent thinking and individual freedom, a connection to nature, the central role of aesthetics and play in religious practice.

**WRSP:** In your book, you describe encounters with Rodnovers who adhere to far-right political ideologies, a topic that you have written about elsewhere, as in your chapter titled "The Rise of Paganism and the Far Right in Europe" (2020) for the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Barring a few exceptions (most notably Mattias Gardell), such ideologies have tended to be avoided by a great deal of scholarly research on modern Paganism, at least in Western Europe and North America, but how significant do you think that they are for our understanding of modern Paganism as a global phenomenon?

**Dr Aitamurto:** While far-right and racist Pagans probably form a minority, and in some countries just a small fraction, of the Pagan scene, omitting these kinds of groups from the analysis of the global

phenomenon would lead to both a biased portrayal and a partial understanding of it. The reasons why topics such as racism and nationalism are understudied in Western studies of Paganism are of course understandable. People often prefer to study things that they find fascinating and which they want others to know about too. This was indeed also my motive in choosing Wicca as the topic of my master's thesis. Another probable reason is that there are still many prejudices regarding modern Paganism and that therefore many scholars feel it is their responsibility to evaporate rather than increase these. Having said that, the situation was almost the opposite in the Russian study of Paganism, especially in the 2000s; there, the majority of studies focused solely on ultra-nationalism, racism, and anti-Semitism in Slavic Paganism. Admittedly, addressing these topics is important, especially considering what a huge problem racism is in Russian society. However, some studies also seemed to set out to demonstrate that there is not and cannot be reconstructionist Paganism without nationalist exclusions.

This kind of approach is anchored to the common misconception of religions as something that can be demarcated and revealed in some "pure" or "original" form. In reality, religions evolve, change and have countless interpretations. Christianity, for instance, can motivate both crusades against "infidels" but also selfless acts of compassion. In a similar vein, Paganism can be understood and presented in several, even conflicting ways. In general, the attempts to find borders around particular religions often limit our understandings of them and exclude some aspect. A prominent example of this are the claims that some unpleasant phenomena are just misuse of religion for political purposes. I understand the desire to vindicate religions and their innocent adherents, but such an approach seems intellectually dishonest. It is true that some far-right groups use Pagan symbols and rhetoric very superficially, but nonetheless that is one of the manifestations of Paganism in our times. An interesting question is why one religious tradition, or the idea of it, gets translated differently in different contexts and by different actors.

**WRSP:** What has the response to your work been, both from Russian Rodnovers and other Pagans themselves, and from academics working on these subjects?

**Dr Aitamurto:** To be honest, I think I have been in a privileged situation because, as I mentioned before, so much of the early research on Russian Paganism took such a negative attitude toward it. Therefore, I have got the impression that many have valued my research as more neutral or objective. Of course, I have also received feedback regarding some mistakes or what someone has considered as misinterpretation, and I have valued this too.

In recent decades, the study of Paganism has diversified greatly and there are interesting studies on such varied topics as Pagan food culture or biographies of certain central thinkers. Although I am not very active in studying Paganism in Russia anymore, I have kept in contact with some of my colleagues and friends in that field. The situation in the study of minority and especially newer religions in Russia is quite delicate at the moment. For example, some prominent scholars have lost their jobs after publicly opposing the labelling of certain religions or groups as extremists (a label which, in Russia, results in them being banned). Despite this pressure, I greatly admire my Russian colleagues who have continued to write balanced analyses of contemporary Paganism.

**WRSP:** With Scott Simpson, you also put together an important edited volume on *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, which came out in 2013. How did this project come about and where do you think the study of modern Paganism in Central and Eastern

Europe stands at the moment? Do you think that there is sufficient interaction between those working on Pagan religion in these regions and those working on it in Western Europe and North America?

**Dr Aitamurto:** The idea for that book came from James R. Lewis and when I started to look for possible contributors, I met Scott Simpson online. Back then, there were usually one or two scholars of Paganism in Central and East European countries and it was wonderful to be a part of the process when the networks between scholars began to emerge. In ten years, the study of Paganism in Central and Eastern Europe has advanced in “leaps and bounds”. There are more scholars and active networks. The basic idea of our book was to outline the history and the current situation of Paganisms in different countries. However, now this field of inquiry has moved on from just offering descriptions of different geographical areas into focusing on different aspects of Paganism and using different case studies to participate in larger debates, whether it is, for example, politics and Paganism or the debates about indigenous traditions. There is also much more contact and dialogue between Eastern European and Anglophone scholars of the topic, although of course there could always be more international collaboration.

**WRSP:** Have you explored much of the Pagan scene in Finland? What does that look like?

**Dr Aitamurto:** I have not actively followed the Finnish Pagan community since the 1990s. I thus have a very partial knowledge of it and am hesitant to say anything general. In the 1990s, Wicca had a very central role in the emergence of the new Pagan networks in Finland. Back then, some of the main discussions addressed such issues as the division between eclectic and traditional Wicca or whether philosophical Satanism can be counted as a part of Paganism. Reconstructionist groups drawing on local traditions were rather few and for many the idea of ethnic Finnish Paganism was associated with certain earlier, marginal far-right groupings. Since the early 2000s, the interest in pre-Christian traditions in Finland has grown. In 2014, the first modern Pagan group to successfully gain formal registration as a religious organization was Karhun Kansa (the People of the Bear), which follows the Finnish pre-Christian tradition.

**WRSP:** Your work has since moved on to look at the presence of Islam in Russia. How is that progressing and what outputs can we expect? Do you see interesting parallels, or very distinct differences, between the place of Islam and Rodnoverie in contemporary Russia?

**Dr Aitamurto:** My study of Islam in Russia has turned into more of a mosaic or quilt patch than a coherent research project. When I started to work on this topic I focused on the “obvious” cases of Islamic organizations and mosques. However, it soon turned out that Islam as a lived religion cannot be captured by interviewing the muftis of established organizations and reading the literature, published by the Muftiates or publishing houses, which are connected to them. This is of course the case regarding virtually all religions, but I would argue that this is especially pertinent regarding the Muslim community in Russia. In line with the political authoritarianization, there is a pressure to channel all Islamic religiosity to the hierarchical, state-sanctioned Muftiates. At the same time, migration has rapidly diversified the Muslim community in big cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. Even though many local Muftiates make efforts to reach the new migrant community, they still often seem to represent a completely different world and are occasionally criticised for not always understanding the life or even the religious traditions of the migrants.

Although I had conducted some interviews with the representatives of migrant Muslim religious communities, I realised that I had very little understanding of how Islam configures in the everyday life of Muslims. Therefore, I was very happy to be invited to take part in the project “Migration, Shadow Economy and Parallel Legal Orders in Russia” that was conducted between 2016 and 2019. Religion was not the focus of the project, but in our interviews with Central Asian migrants living in Moscow we also included questions about religiosity. I am definitely not an expert on Islam among Central Asian migrants in Russia, but this fieldwork offered me a new perspective on Islamic religiosity in the European part of the country. I am at the moment in the process of writing an article on the basis of my fieldwork, but I think that in future, I will focus more on the publicly available material on Islam while also using the insights I have gained. A fascinating topic is, for example, how the established Muftiates and mosques seek to integrate migrants into their community and how they perceive them.

The reason why I have decided to relinquish or at least minimise the role of fieldwork and interviews is the precarious situation of Islamic actors or Muslims in general, especially of migrant background, in contemporary Russia. For example, although in our interviews in Moscow we asked about such sensitive topics as corruption and harassment by the police, often the questions that scared the respondents most were whether they attended mosques often and whether religious networks provided them support in their everyday life. This can be explained by the fact that under the auspices of its anti-terrorist policies the government has implemented ruthless repression of religious activists. However, I had already noticed that even some Russian representatives of the established organizations preferred to repeat the official rhetoric about the respected position of Islam in Russia rather than address certain challenges faced by the community. Therefore, I concluded that the ethical challenges of ensuring that no harm or discomfort would be caused to the people who are being studied might prove too demanding. Getting proper access to migrant communities is not impossible for an outsider and I have some brilliant Russian colleagues who have produced fascinating ethnographic studies among these groups in recent years. However, that would require much time on site and unfortunately, I do not have the opportunity for that at the moment.

In many respects, Islam and contemporary Paganism are on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Paganism is connected to Russian nationalism and in this way to the “majority,” while Islam is increasingly often the target of nationalist rhetoric and Muslims are associated with negative portrayals of migrants. At the same time, Islam is one of the four so-called “traditional religions” in Russia, the representatives of which regularly appear in stately events and have meetings with the president, while Paganism can be argued to belong to the group of new religious movements, which are still often labelled sects. In their own ways, both religions are thus infrequently associated with social problems and consequently are in a precarious position. The similarities and differences in the challenges these two religions face and the way they respond to them certainly seem to beg for a closer look. In fact, just before the coronavirus pandemic I participated in a conference panel in which we analysed the use of expertise in those cases where religious minorities like Muslims and Pagans have been persecuted for extremism. The misuse of anti-extremist laws is a very topical issue in Russia and I would like to address that in future too.

**WRSP:** Dr Aitamurto, thank you for taking part in this interview; I look forward to reading your future endeavours!

**Dr Aitamurto, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!**

**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,**

**Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)**

**Dr Aitamurto** is the head of training at the Aleksanteri Institute, which is the Finnish Centre for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Helsinki. A specialist in the study of religious minorities in the Russian Federation, much of her research has focused on the Rodnoverie or Native Faith community in that country. Both her PhD and her subsequent first monograph—*Paganism, Traditionalism, Nationalism: Narratives of Russian Rodnoverie* (Routledge, 2016)—were devoted to this modern Pagan new religious movement. With Scott Simpson, she also co-edited *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Acumen, 2013). Dr Aitamurto's recent research has focused on the Islamic migrant communities living in the major cities of European Russia.

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**WRSP Interviewer:**

**Dr Ethan Doyle White**