

HEATHENS IN AMERICA

An Interview with Dr Jefferson F. Calico



WRSP: For readers who may not be familiar with the topic, could you give us an idea as to what the modern Pagan religion of Heathenry is?

Dr Calico: Heathenry is a new religious movement/milieu that looks to ancient Norse and Germanic cultures for inspiration in creating contemporary approaches to life, spirituality, and the world.

From a historical perspective, the “modern Pagan religion of Heathenry” can be traced back to a particular set of people and religious awakenings in the early 1970s. I look at this historical process in chapter one of [my book] *Being Viking* (2018):

For these early adherents, the religious entrepreneurs of Asatru, the Norse heritage, history, customs, and stories suddenly and powerfully took on more than historical and cultural significance. They awakened to a new life-way, a paradigm that could transform life, a roadmap for the creation of a new culture. The Christian age was over. The time had come for the old gods to reassert themselves amongst their human kin in the reconstruction of an ancient religio-cultural community (58).

Ideologically, Heathen and Heathenry or Heathenism are umbrella terms covering a diverse array of more specific approaches. That diversity encompasses differences in orientation along political/social lines (this spectrum is the one of which most observers are aware), but also differences in theological, cultural, ethical, and aesthetic opinions and approaches. For American Heathenry, I think that my book *Being Viking* and Jennifer Snook’s book *American Heathens* (2015) both describe some of that diversity among Heathens.

What makes it Heathen—rather than historical re-enactment or Vikings fandom for instance—is a shared spiritual core. This includes texts (the Lore), Gods, ancestors, nature spirits often called “land

vaettir” (because Heathen LOVE to use words derived from Old Norse and other Germanic languages. Really, a Heathen gathering isn’t complete if someone doesn’t drop some Old Norse or Anglo-Saxon), concepts, runes, time, and rituals—derived from the pre-Christian cultures of northern Europe.

As I said to a writer from [“How Stuff Works”](#) Heathens look at these pre-Christian traditions of the past as repositories of ancient sacred wisdom and lifestyles that connected humans and their communities to the cosmos and to each other in ways that are holy and sacred. For Heathens, reconnecting to these spiritual resources—the ancient wisdom, beings, and forces—is a return to a fully human life—living “tru.” The old ways (Forn Sed or *forn siðr*) established relational networks to these resources and beings that nourished human life and produced thriving. In *Being Viking*, I devote chapter four, “Spears and Shieldwalls,” to a discussion of this Heathen concept of life. Rather than the “coming home” idea that been used to describe Pagan conversion, I would use “re-connecting” to talk about how Heathens relate to their religious system.

WRSP: Where did your interest in Heathenry come from and what led you to pursue your doctoral research on this new religious movement? Did you have a longstanding research interest in new and alternative religions?

Dr Calico: I can look back into my personal history and see how many moments played into my craft and practice. I have been interested in religion and culture for as long as I can remember and was encouraged to explore these aspects of life through reading, experiences, and friendships. Living in an Inupiaq community in northern Alaska opened my eyes to the importance of culture as a human phenomenon. Stepping into a classroom for the first time to teach world religions came to be a challenging and deeply creative experience for me.

Many of us have experienced paradigm-shifting moments during our educational journeys—those moments of discovery that unfold for us along new and unexpected paths. These moments arise from all sorts of stimuli—disciplined reading, insights from our teachers, and from seemingly random “aha” moments, to name a few. In my own journey, one of those moments came for me in reading Carole Cusack’s *Invented Religions* (2010). The cumulative effect of that book rescued me from a previously dismissive attitude about new religious movements and opened a new world of scholarly interest. I had entered my PhD program initially intending to pursue research on Islam. However, a conversation with my supervisor—strangely enough about the 1994 Olympics hosted by Norway—caused me to re-evaluate and drew my attention to the growing presence and influence of Paganism in the contemporary world. As I discuss in the introduction to *Being Viking*, an offhand question in a graduate seminar stirred my initial curiosity about Heathenry and led to it becoming a major interest. A chance conversation with a friend, Dr Thad Horrell, while walking to an American Academy of Religion (AAR) venue in San Diego led to a new line of inquiry and research that helped me to better understand the tributaries of American Heathenry. Rather than one over-riding passion, my interests and work have been nudged along by these sorts of important and transformative experiences.

WRSP: The study of modern Paganism (including the study of Heathenry) has tended to be dominated by practicing Pagans, but—if I understand correctly—you are not coming at Heathenry from a practitioner perspective. How do you feel that this status as an ‘outsider’ impacted your

reception when conducting participant-observation with Heathen groups, and has it impacted your interactions with other scholars of Paganism?

Dr Calico: Look, fieldwork is difficult. It raises all sorts of challenges. When engaged in fieldwork, all of us who are doing anthropology and ethnography bring aspects of identity, personal history, and value/ideology differences that must be negotiated with our host communities and within ourselves. As a guest in people's homes and religious events, researchers are being invited into sacred and intimate settings, so respect and trust is essential. I quickly found that methodology has ethical implications and in this regard Jone Salomonsen's work on methodology was influential for my approach. The relationship with a host community and different individuals therein is a process, an ongoing effort to analyze, evaluate, and respond. I do not think it is categorically different for "insiders" except that the issues and dilemmas themselves may vary. And the stakes are potentially higher for those who are devotionally committed to the religions they study. Insiders also experience a range of responses from their communities and face challenges in negotiating their presence and their relationships. I think—for some insiders—the relationship with their religious community is forever changed for better or worse by their research experience. I do want to push back against a dichotomizing assumption that "outsider" and "insider" are clearly definable terms. Both insiders and outsiders can and do take both emic and etic perspectives during the research process. The methodologies we employ for fieldwork should weave us through both of these perspectives, thereby complicating the outsider/insider perspective. That said, the goal for both insiders and outsiders is always good research.

But yes, as an outsider certain difficulties presented themselves from the outset. When I was attempting my first field experience with a Heathen group, my positionality (i.e., the institution with which I was affiliated for my PhD work) was an immediate red flag to my hosts. This was no surprise to any of us. There were good reasons for their hesitancy. Any religious group—and particularly Pagans who have experienced religious persecution from hegemonic religions—want to protect the integrity of their events, and avoid persecution and exploitation. From my perspective, this was a challenge that I was committed to working through. And to their immense credit, the group did not simply cut me off. They were willing to enter into a discussion and negotiation that resulted in the leadership of that group getting to know me and granting permission to attend their religious event as a researcher. Several of those leaders went on to become friends and collaborators and are people whom I greatly respect. As I moved among Heathen religious communities and groups during fieldwork, similar vetting processes took place repeatedly. From my perspective, the onus is on the researcher to establish and maintain working relationships. There are always people who are going to be suspicious and even hostile, and some people with whom work is not possible—but that's okay. For the most part, I found that Heathen people were careful but hospitable and willing to take a risk with a stranger as long as trust can be established. I am grateful for the many Heathens who spoke with me about their religion and shared their thoughts and experiences.

Regarding the scholarly community, I feel strongly that we should avoid tribalizing our fields of study along lines of religious affiliation. As scholars who want to understand the world more fully, insularity is not a positive trait. Positionality is important and we need to be serious about how it impacts our work. However, it should not be a barrier to scholarly inquiry or participation in scholarly community. Any field of study benefits from participants from a variety of perspectives. Are there limits to scholarly inclusivity? Of course, some positionalities do create conflicts of interest. Work that promotes anti-social, racial, and religious persecution is to be shunned. But generally speaking, scholarly communities should strive to be generous in whom they include as constructive participants.

WRSP: Have you observed changes in the American (or international) Heathen community since you started your research on the topic in 2010? Obviously, there has been growing ideological polarisation within U.S. society during the last decade; has this had a significant impact on Heathenry?

Dr Calico: The ideological polarization has dramatically affected Heathenry in the American context. We have observed a hardening of folkish positions* as well as the emergence of anti-racist and inclusive Heathen identities—these aren't new by any means, but have attained a new degree of prominence. I think that the older generations of Heathens, even those who were anti-racist, were more likely to hold a "live-and-let-live" perspective. These early generations of Heathens were part of building the religion with few adherents, little infrastructure, and resource scarcity. This situation impacted their understanding of community. However, due to incidents of racial violence, change in the American culture, and growth of the Heathen community, ideological positions within Heathenry have also become more pronounced and Heathens are more willing to draw hard and fast ideological lines such as [Declaration 127](#) denouncing the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) for discrimination based on "ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity." I see Heathenry experiencing a couple of "reformations," an earlier one that sought to weed out Christian influence in Heathen culture and lore, and a current one that directly confronts the legacy of racism and neo-Nazi ideology. As an example, consider the new edition of [U.S.-based Heathen organisation] The Troth's tome *Our Troth* (2020), which contains a new chapter dealing with the influence of Völkisch and Nazi tributaries on the development of contemporary Heathenry.

The importance of the internet has only increased in the last decade. Heathenry has seen the emergence of more extra-organizational voices— influencers with their own social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Patreon. And on the far-right of Heathenry, ideologues have shifted toward alternative social media like Gab and VK as they have been de-platformed from mainstream social media sites. That is an important structural change. And these voices are often exploring new ways of being Heathen. Both ideological sides of Heathenry have seen the growth of new forms of (online) community that are not primarily religious in nature. More than just getting people together to do a ritual, Heathens are increasingly exploring cultural and lifestyle issues and thinking about how these work out in the contemporary world.

* = WRSP: Folkish Heathenry is a wing of the religion that generally argues that Heathen practice should be restricted to members of a putative Northern European/Germanic/Nordic racial group. Typically, it is characterised as being politically right-wing to far-right.

WRSP: What has the response to your thesis and book been like? How have Heathens themselves responded to the work, and what was the response at the primarily Christian environment where you conducted your doctoral research (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky)?

Dr Calico: It has been rewarding to find *Being Viking* showing up in bibliographies, presentations at the AAR, and being used constructively in the research of other scholars. I hope it will continue to be a springboard for further work. And I hope it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Heathenry as much more than a hot mess of far-right racism. I think my book has a lot to say for those who will take some time with it.

I chose to pursue my PhD in World Religions where I did for a variety of reasons. One of the benefits of that program was being able to work very closely with my supervisor, Dr James D. Chancellor. He was an impressive and inspiring ethnographer and researcher, and a great teacher, who wrote an important work on the new religious movement known as the Children of God, or The Family (*Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (2000)).

Generally speaking, those of us who are researching and writing about Paganism and/or other socially controversial religious communities—and especially those of us who do intensive fieldwork with those groups—find ourselves potentially misunderstood by both our host and home communities. This experience of mistrust is an old story for all sorts of cross-cultural people. As anthropologist Mary Douglas elucidated, doubts and suspicions about purity are frequently raised against boundary-crossers. Again, it is something that I find myself continually negotiating.

While the research for *Being Viking* began during my dissertation, it grew and expanded as I moved on from that degree program. So *Being Viking* is not a revision of my dissertation. It was a significantly different work. It reflects my own growth as a researcher and my continued interaction with the Heathen community. The book was guided by a completely different set of advisers and editors. Again, I can't speak too highly of my editors Chas Clifton, author of *Her Hidden Children* (2006), and Scott Simpson, co-editor of *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (2013), and the team at Equinox Publishing. They all made significant contributions to my life as a scholar.

WRSP: What do you see as the areas of Heathenry that really require further academic research?

Dr Calico: How is Heathenry contributing to the re-emergence of polytheism in the West? And what is this polytheism like? How might it be like and unlike the polytheism of the ancient past and the polytheistic continuity of other world religions?

I am especially interested in how Heathenry changes the daily life and practices of people in the real world. How does Heathen practice and ritual create new networks—religious, social, economic—that build more sustainable ways of life? Scholars such as Barbara Davies and Rune Hjarnø Rasmussen are exploring these areas in their work.

As Heathen culture continues to change, scholars like Jennifer Snook are helping us to see into the diversity of the Heathen world, looking at how Heathenry manifests in different political spheres and flows into other subcultures. More work could be done on the permutations of Heathen identity.

We need to learn more about the influence of the internet on Heathenry. Scholars such as Ross Downing have just begun to explore the complex forms that Heathenry is taking online.

Stephanie Schnurbein and other scholars have done a lot of work in uncovering and explicating the völkisch and Traditionalist tributaries to the contemporary confluence of far-right racism and violence. There is still work to be done in understanding this.

WRSP: Are you continuing to pursue research into Heathenry or are you switching focus to other topics? Have you any forthcoming projects that we should be keeping an eye out for?

Dr Calico: My ongoing research into Heathenry looks at how certain groups have propagated a white supremacist and nationalist agenda in recent years. In this vein, my chapter "Performing 'American

Völkisch” is included in the recently published book *Paganism and Its Discontents: Enduring Problems of Racialized Identity*, edited by Holli S. Emore and Jonathan M. Leader (2020). I am also presenting work at the American Academy of Religion along these lines. At the 2020 AAR I presented to the New Religious Movements Unit on “White Nationalism and the Performance of Religion in Heathenism,” which looked at Heathen internet memes and racist radicalization. For the upcoming 2021 AAR, I along with other scholars of Heathenry will be presenting to the Pagan Studies and the Religion and Ecology units on the impact of blood and soil ideology in Heathenry. Over the years, the AAR has played an important role in my research process and scholarly life. I have valued and benefited from the hospitality of the Pagan Studies group and the New Religious Movements group as spaces to present research and to refine my work.

In addition to Heathenry, since moving to the Appalachian region, I have a growing interest in Appalachian religion. I am hoping to pull together a project on Paganism in Appalachia in the near future.

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

Dr Calico, 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 Calico is an associate professor at the University of the Cumberlands in Williamsburg, Kentucky. He completed his PhD at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky in 2013, for which he conducted research into the Heathen community in the United States. His research on this topic has also resulted in his first monograph, *Being Viking: Heathenism in Contemporary America*, published by Equinox in 2018.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr Ethan Doyle White