

PAGAN FESTIVALS, BURNING MAN, AND RITUAL IN RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

An Interview with Professor Sarah M. Pike



WRSP: You've built a career around studying religion in the United States; where did this interest come from? Much of your research has focused on culturally alternative and non-mainstream communities, namely modern Paganism and radical environmentalism—were these things that you were interested in prior to moving towards academia?

Prof Pike: My childhood religious background was in a liberal Episcopal church my parents attended, though I became an atheist as an adolescent. Still, I remained curious, both intellectually and personally, about other people's religious worlds. Perhaps at first this was because they possessed something I did not and I wanted to find out why. Over time, this curiosity tended to be piqued by religious or spiritual individuals and communities who chose unorthodox beliefs and practices. Growing up, my parents encouraged a pluralistic view of the world and the need to understand others unlike myself (my father founded an alternative urban high school and my mother was a psychiatrist). They nurtured my suspicion of and critical approach to dualistic views of the world. In part for this reason, I gravitated towards communities that were demonized by the media or popular opinion, but that held values I found attractive, such as environmental commitments. Because these communities were often misunderstood, I was driven by a desire to make their beliefs and practices understandable to a larger public.

WRSP: As part of your PhD project, conducted at Indiana University, Bloomington during the 1990s, you focused on the modern Pagan festival circuit in the United States. Could you explain a bit about what modern Pagan festivals are like and how you set about exploring a topic that, at that time, was essentially unexplored territory for scholarly investigation?

Prof Pike: For a graduate class with the anthropologist Michael Jackson (now teaching at Harvard), I needed to find a research paper topic. Around the same time, I happened to walk by a small occult bookstore, The Eye of Osiris, in downtown Bloomington. The "Eye" was owned by two of the Pagans who started a nature sanctuary called Lothlorien in a wooded rural area outside of Bloomington. The

community that ran the sanctuary, the Elf Lore Family, held several festivals at Lothlorien during the year and I started attending them. What a find for a young religious studies scholar! Diverse religious traditions converged at these festivals in rural southern Indiana—Wicca, ceremonial magic, Druidism, Radical Faeries, Voudon, and others—and the material culture of costumes, altars, jewelry, and ritual objects of all kinds was fascinating, as were the many rituals that took place at these events. I soon discovered that Lothlorien's festivals belonged to a busy calendar of Pagan gatherings across the United States, each with its own character, but all offering a space for people who felt isolated from like-minded practitioners. Many of these festivals I visited in the 1990s continue today (at least they did before Covid-19). A number of them are planned around solstices and equinoxes and welcome anyone who wants to attend, regardless of their beliefs (or unbelief for that matter). They feature rituals, music, workshops on various traditions and magical techniques, body work, storytelling, dancing around bonfires, and vendors selling books, clothing, and ritual tools.

WRSP: The monograph derived from your PhD research, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, was brought out by the University of California Press in 2001. It was part of a selection of pioneering studies of modern Paganism that emerged between 1999 and 2005, alongside works by the likes of Ronald Hutton, Helen Berger, Susan Greenwood, Sabina Magliocco, and Kathryn Rountree. Was there much communication and interaction between these scholars during the late 1990s and early 2000s, or did you feel that you were all conducting your research very much independently of one another?

Prof. Pike: When my research began in the early 1990s, it was early years for the Internet, so easily accessed social media connections that we take for granted today were not available. The first scholar I met studying Paganism was Sabina Magliocco, whom I met at a Pagan festival when I was just starting my field work. For a few years, she was the only other person I knew who was studying Paganism, but not long after that I met Pagan theologian Michael York at the American Academy of Religion (AAR) through the New Religious Movements (NRM) Group. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the NRM Group played an important role in supporting scholars of Paganism, before Contemporary Pagan Studies became its own program unit at the AAR. The NRM group's annual AAR sessions and evening reception were important spaces for networking, and probably where I also met Helen Berger and Graham Harvey for the first time. So, I knew about these scholars' work when it was published, but there wasn't much networking, for me anyway, outside of that AAR context.

WRSP: In 2004, Columbia University Press brought out your book, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*, a useful introduction which was probably the first textbook-style monograph to cover both phenomena. Was this book your own idea or something that the publishers requested you put together?

Prof. Pike: Columbia wanted a book on New Age religion in America as part of a series on religion in the U.S. and I was the one who pushed to include contemporary Paganism. I tried to use the opportunity to explore common roots of New Age and Paganism, as well as their significant differences, in a slim volume designed for general readers. That was a challenge. Deep ethnographic work is where I feel most comfortable and when that book was finished, I swore I'd never write another textbook again!

WRSP: You've published several articles and book chapters on the Burning Man festival that takes place in the Nevada desert, with a focus on topics like ritual and sacred space. There are obvious commonalities here with your work on modern Pagan festivals; was it a straightforward transition from researching one to the other? What do you feel a perspective rooted in the study of religion brings to the study of an event like Burning Man, which is not officially framed as "religious"?

Prof. Pike: The credit for my discovery of Burning Man belongs to a student in a seminar I taught at the beginning of my career at California State University, Chico in 1997. This student came up to me after the first class when I had introduced my research interests and asked if I'd ever heard of "the biggest Pagan festival ever," which he said was Burning Man. It's not a Pagan festival of the type I wrote about in *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, but it does raise many similar issues. At the time, Burning Man was often trivialized by the media and demonized by conservative Christians. It probably still is, to some extent. But I saw it an important cultural phenomenon, especially in its role as a site for expressions of being spiritual but not religious. It went on to grow and spread into multiple events around the world as well as influencing a large network of other similar events, usually referred to as "transformational festivals." Burning Man showcased so many fascinating religious themes and was a venue for cultural experimentation and ritual improvisation that deserved to be taken seriously. People made pilgrimages to Burning Man's site in the desert and described their experiences as "spiritual" and "transformative" in this space apart from and in opposition to ordinary life, all themes that came up in my research at Pagan festivals. The event included specific religious rituals held by religious communities, such as Zen meditation, as well as ironic takes on religion in many of the art works on display. Burning Man also offered large-scale collective ritual events and sacred spaces, such as a temple for memorializing dead loved ones constructed every year in the center of the festival.

The Temple has been the main focus of my research since 2001. Throughout the week of the festival, tens of thousands of "Burners" make offerings at the Temple. They write letters to the dead, create altars out of photos and mementos, read strangers' messages, look at strangers' photos of their beloved dead, meditate, weep, and pray. It's a beautiful space that is burned to ashes in a sombre ritual involving thousands of Burners on the last night of Burning Man before everyone returns home. The Temple is certainly not a "religious" site in the traditional sense, as it is not connected to an institution or ancient tradition. However, it serves many of the functions of sacred spaces and collective rituals in other religious contexts.

WRSP: Your most recent book, *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism*, was published by the University of California Press in 2017. As you describe it in the book's introduction, *For the Wild* is "a study of radical environmental and animal rights activism in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America." At various points in the book you also highlight the presence of new religions like contemporary Paganism and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in that milieu. What set you on the path to conduct this project and how did you overcome any initial suspicion among activists?

Prof. Pike: In the first decade of the twenty-first century, I began reading about activists who were being charged as "eco-terrorists" and were receiving severe prison sentences for actions that harmed no living beings. I wanted to find out what was behind the terrorism label and what motivated these young people to risk their freedom for trees and nonhuman animals. I wrote letters to prisoners since they had already been charged and sentenced and had less to lose by telling their stories. And fortunately for me, they wrote back. They were articulate, thoughtful, and their stories

were compelling, belying their characterization in news headlines as crazy and dangerous. Some of them had political agendas (anti-capitalism), but most of them had spiritual motivations that included a deep love for the nonhuman world, a profound sense of compassion for the suffering of other beings, and a deep anger for the destructiveness of our culture.

To find out more about what was happening in activist communities, I attended their gatherings, which were open to anyone. At that time, between 2009–2016, there was a lot of paranoia, based on actual cases of FBI informants and undercover agents in their midst. My approach, which I also took in my earlier research with Pagans, who had their own fears around anonymity, was to hang out informally, participate in protests, and let these activists get to know me. Some activist event organizers asked me not to write about anything but my own experience, and I honored that. Others were grateful, once they had some trust in me, to have more accurate accounts of their intentions and commitments circulating in public.

WRSP: The past decade or so has seen a blossoming of research on the intersections between religion and environmentalism, a development that probably owes much to the efforts of Bron Taylor. What do you see as the prospects for this broader field of research, as well as its value in a period of escalating environmental devastation?

Prof. Pike: Bron Taylor deserves a huge amount of credit for founding the International Society of Religion, Nature, and Culture (ISSRNC) and getting religion into larger environmental studies conversations. But he is one of many other important figures in an early generation of scholars training graduate students, organizing conferences, and writing books and articles that shaped this field. Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, Rebecca Gould, Laurel Kearns, David Haberman, Adrian Ivakhiv, these are just a few names of religious studies scholars, along with Bron, who deserve a lot of credit for bringing ecological issues into religious studies venues and for promoting the importance of studying religion to understand and address environmental issues. The field of religion and ecology could not be more important at our current historical moment and the growth of this field, especially among younger scholars, is exciting. The ISSRNC that Bron founded, with its conferences and journal, continues to be an essential organization promoting scholarship on religion and ecology and supporting younger scholars. It is currently under the leadership of religious studies scholars Evan Berry and Lisa Sideris, whose research is especially relevant to compelling contemporary issues such as oil extraction and climate change. Scholars of religion and ecology have stepped up to focus on a number of urgent topics, such as racism and white privilege in the environmental movement, environmental justice, and religion and climate change, including climate denial among religious people.

WRSP: How has your work been received, both within the communities that you have studied and among scholars of religion and related topics?

Prof. Pike: My work on contemporary Paganism has been well-received, especially by readers who knew little about Pagan religious worlds. Other scholars have told me they appreciated gaining a better understanding of Pagan religious practices, since my publications tend to focus more on ritual than belief, which is well-covered by other writers. Colleagues tell me they gain a sense of the lived religion of Pagans through my work. To my great relief, Pagans have also had positive reactions to my books, for the most part, even though I discuss issues of tension and conflict that do not idealize their communities. Most of these issues are ones Pagans themselves debate, so nothing I have

written was surprising to them. I was especially happy to be told by one Pagan festival organizer some years back that she made her staff read my book!

As for activists, their reception has been generally positive, although a few have expressed discomfort at being examined under an academic lens. Some asked me to not include quotes from interviews I did years before I was ready to publish *For the Wild* because their thinking had changed, and I had to delete some quotes that I really wanted to include. Most important is that in the case of both Pagans and radical activists, they recognized themselves in my writing, even if they might not agree with every aspect of my interpretations.

WRSP: Are there particular areas in the study of modern Paganism, or the study of animal rights and environmentalist activist communities, that you think are crying out for more in-depth research?

Prof. Pike:

- Research on Paganism beyond North America, Europe, and Australia is still scarce.
- No one has yet written an extensive study of Radical Faeries or the Church of All Worlds, both fascinating communities that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.
- Another pressing topic, though quite challenging on the ground, is Paganism in U.S. prison populations. The AAR has held a number of workshops for directors of prison chaplains that I and other scholars, usually those of us specializing in non-Christian religions, have participated in. These chaplains' questions and the issues they deal with are interesting and problematic given the constraints of our penal system.
- Pagans in the military is another topic that deserves sustained scholarly attention.
- As for activism, climate activism is getting some scholarly attention, but deserves more. Many religious communities are active in climate protests, especially on the boundary of protest-ritual, such as creating funerals for extinct species, and many non-religious protesters have spiritual/religious motivations.
- On the animal rights front, *For the Wild* could have been twice as long if I'd expanded my coverage of animal rights activists. How did the ethical commitments of this movement kickstart the trend towards veganism and how are ethics and morals involved in contemporary vegan practices and beliefs? How do animal rights activists live their beliefs in contexts such as animal sanctuaries?

WRSP: What projects are you presently working on? Do you have any forthcoming publications that we should be keeping an eye out for?

Prof. Pike: In terms of forthcoming work, I have an article on virtual Burning Man during Covid-19 coming out soon in a special issue of *Religion* on "Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic." I'm also in the process of working on a special issue on transformational festivals for the *Journal of Festive Studies*, co-edited with anthropologist Graham St John, which is scheduled to be published in January 2023. The other topic I have published on recently is the ancestral skills movement, which has received no attention from scholars. A growing number of gatherings across North America focus on reviving and teaching about pre-industrial skills such as fire-making, basket-weaving, foraging for food, and other survival-type skills that are identified as ancient. The focus of my research is on ritualized activities in ancestral skills communities and how they express and

constitute particular kinds of relationships between humans and plants or nonhuman animals. My recent articles on this topic are “Prayerful Living with Animals in the Ancestral Skills Movement” (in *Bloomsbury Religion in North America*, 2021) and “Rewilding Hearts and Habits in the Ancestral Skills Movement” (in a special issue on “Ethnographies of Worldviews/ Ways of Life” in *Religions*, 2018).

I’m currently working on two research projects that are in the areas of ritual studies and religion/spirituality and ecology. One is on Pagan nature sanctuaries, revisiting some of the themes I wrote about in *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, but focusing more on interactions with specific landscapes and their nonhuman inhabitants. The other project that is currently taking most of my time and attention is about ritualized responses to recent catastrophic wildfires in California, including everything from Indigenous-led restoration work to memorial events. When I’m not teaching, you might find me planting seeds in the 2018 Camp Fire burn scar, coppicing willow, or doing biomimicry, such as creating “beaver” dams.

Professor Pike, 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/>)

Sarah M. Pike is Professor of Comparative Religion at the California State University, Chico. An accomplished ethnographer, she is the author of *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (2001); *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (2004); and *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism* (2017). She has also published research on the Burning Man festival and the ancestral skills movement.

WRSP Interviewer: Dr Ethan Doyle White