

Mariya Lesiv. *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. xvi, 221 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$65.00, cloth.

Mariya Lesiv's ground-breaking monograph about contemporary Ukrainian Paganism gives a comprehensive overview of a topic that has been little studied before and offers a solid core for future research. It is based on extensive fieldwork within the adherents of this religion and a thorough study of the background literature. Although the Ukrainian Pagan movement is relatively small, it provides a fascinating viewpoint to other societal topics as well, such as the construction or definition of Ukrainian national identity and the post-Soviet religiosity in the area. Therefore, this book will undoubtedly be of interests to scholars from various disciplines.

The chapters of the book focus on some of the most central and unique features of the movement, such as questions of monotheism and polytheism, the visions of the ancient past and the Ukrainian nation, as well as nature and the aesthetics of the movement. Although in this respect the monograph somewhat resembles a collection of essays, there is hardly any overlapping in the chapters and the text proceeds as a coherent narrative. Lesiv's analysis is self-reflective, and she often recounts stories about her fieldwork, which not only enliven the text but also help to support her argumentation.

Lesiv focuses on the three largest Ukrainian Pagan movements: RUNVira, Native Faith, and Ancestral Fire. These three cases also nicely illustrate the diverse and constantly negotiated nature of contemporary Ukrainian Paganism. Lesiv notes that while RUNVira is a highly politicized movement, Native Faith is more focused on folklore, and Ancestral Fire, on magic. The differences between these three are discussed throughout the analysis of various topics. Lesiv has acquainted herself with both the Ukrainian Pagan community and the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada. Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism originally emerged in Canada and was brought from there to Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even today, most of the RUNVira groups can be found in North America. However, in the case of Ancestral Fire, the influence of Russian Paganism, especially of the Church of Ynglings, seems undeniable and the analysis could have benefitted from a discussion of Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi's past in Russian esoteric circles.

In her opening chapter, Lesiv introduces Western Paganism as a context for the later discussion of the Ukrainian material. While this chapter is likely to be welcomed by many readers, for scholars of religion it seems

somewhat superficial, especially in comparison to the following chapters. However, this is one of the disadvantages of writing on a topic, which has not been addressed so often and which has the potential to hold the interest of a variety of readers. Lesiv begins the analysis of Ukrainian Paganism in a careful examination of the various sources the adherents use, such as folklore, the reconstructions of some ancient and historical cultures, professional and alternative science, and popular culture. She is right in pointing out the importance of tracing all these different sources in order to understand the worldview of the movement.

After summarizing the history of the contemporary movement of Ukrainian Paganism, Lesiv proceeds to the analysis of the cultural context of the movement in one of the most fascinating chapters of the book, "Boundaries and Borders." She discusses the way in which the adherents construct an alternative ethnic and religious identity vis-à-vis both the mainstream society and the Soviet past. In scrutinizing their different self-identifications, Lesiv is sensitive to the variance between the groups. Despite the alternative nature of Paganism, it reflects many tendencies of the surrounding society, such as the emphasis on collectivism instead of individualism, hierarchism, and conservative gender roles.

The following chapters discuss the views of Ukrainian Pagans on the nation, divinity, and nature. As in previous chapters, Lesiv's analysis is insightful and sustains a dialogue with relevant theories concerning the topics under discussion. Ukrainian Pagans often emphasize and value authenticity, but as Lesiv notes in her chapter on syncretism, the movement can be seen as an exemplar case of the way in which religions borrow and indigenize elements from each other.

The last analytical chapter addresses aesthetics and beauty. Given Pagans' emphasis on expressiveness and creativity, their rituals and material culture provide a plethora of interesting material. However, on the basis of this lavish material, Lesiv also makes a very important analytical pronouncement on the future of the movement. She suggests that especially the younger Pagans are drawn to the movement expressly for the aesthetically and emotionally pleasing rituals, not for the political ideology. In this regard, despite the collectivism and conservatism, Ukrainian Paganism seems to be shifting closer to Western Paganism with its individualistic and expressive values. Also, as Lesiv points out in the concluding chapter, despite its anti-modern and anti-global ideology, Ukrainian Paganism is in many ways a very modern and very global movement. Lesiv's notion of Ukrainian Paganism as a form of "indigenizing modernity," as one of the multiple modernities, is a highly interesting new opening to the theoretical debates on contemporary Paganism in general.

Lesiv's book is a must-read for scholars of contemporary Paganisms and religiosity in Eastern Europe, but it would also deserve to find readers among both an academic and non-academic audience alike who are interested in Ukrainian society and politics in general. In closing, it is easy to concur with the words of one of the endorsers of the book, Douglas E. Cowan: "Lesiv is clearly in control of the relevant background and has a very interesting story to tell." Moreover, the sentence could be continued: "and she knows how to tell it."

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