INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Paganism—which consists of Wicca and Witchcraft, Druidry, Heathenry, Asatru, Goddess-worship, Ethnic Reconstructions, and many other traditions—is a movement that is still young and establishing its identity and place on the global religious landscape. The members of the movement confront a paradox of wanting to continue to grow and unify, and of also wishing to maintain its characteristic diversity of traditions, identities, and rituals. Not surprisingly, the modern Pagan movement has had a restless and schismatic formation period, most notably in the United States, but has also been the catalyst for some of the most innovative religious expressions, praxes, theologies, and communities.

In some ways, the nature of contemporary Paganism—polyvalent, syncretic, and creative—makes it difficult to formulate a satisfying and accurate definition of this religious phenomenon. The definition of Paganism submitted by Michael York* which has been promoted by the academic Pagan Studies series, edited by Chas Clifton and Wendy Griffin, puts emphasis on the commonalities between the various Pagan traditions. It includes sacred relationships and experiences that reach beyond monotheism and steps outside conventional institutionalized religious practices. Reliance on revelation or scriptures is de-emphasized in favor of relationships, and an immanent spirituality is also acknowledged that includes reverence for land and place, as well as reverence for the tangible living things and unseen participating spirits that inhabit it. Even this kind of overarching working definition does not fully capture the flux and ambiguity of contemporary Paganism. A nuanced understanding of this movement requires an extended treatment that explicates and describes the many facets of modern Paganism—a treatment that provides scholars and practitioners with a sense of Paganism’s rich diversity, as well as its characteristic ambivalence toward formal institutionalization, rejection of homogeneity, and fluid, permeable identity.

* Amplified in his contribution to this volume as well as in York’s book, Pagan Theology.
Ronald Hutton traced contemporary Paganism’s origins to mid-20th-century England in his historical study, *Triumph of the Moon*, where traditions like Wicca and Pagan Druidry sprouted up as offshoots of occult revivals and British identity movements from a century before. Once these movements moved across oceans—to the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand—and spread back across Europe, identifying and studying the contemporary Pagan movement became less about tracing origins and more about examining overlaps and patterns. In his historical overview of American Paganism, *Her Hidden Children*, Chas Clifton compares the origins and growth of the movement to a once-bare island, suddenly and simultaneously bursting with different life forms; no one origin can be discerned, but the abundance of diverse life creates a successfully flourishing environment where sustenance and growth is maintained for the whole island. Thus any comprehensive study of contemporary Paganism would naturally be interdisciplinary, would profile the many traditions identified as Pagan, would explore variation and creativity in theologies, rituals, and cultural transmission, and would explore dimensions within the ever-present tension between exuberant innovations and the cultivation of older traditions. It would also include explorations of religious identity politics, including issues of gender, ethnicity, and social class, which are as important a set of influences on contemporary Paganism as are magic and occult studies, fantasy and science fiction, and early anthropology.

As contemporary Paganism continues to grow and mature, new angles of inquiry are emerging, especially with regard to regional religious and cultural expressions; it is very likely that practitioners and scholars will be speaking in terms of “Pagan communities” rather than conceiving the movement as one large imagined community of interest and importance. This would be a natural outgrowth of the movement’s heterogeneous nature. What is also on the horizon with regard to contemporary Paganism’s shifting identity is its slow but continued forays out of the occult subculture and into mainstream dominant cultures and conventional cultural imaginations—the fight for American Wiccan veterans killed in action to have Veteran’s Affairs approve the inscription of the sacred pentacle on their gravestones being one example—which includes media and literature, while finding innovative new ways to remain an edgy, marginal spiritual alternative in what Pagans perceive to be a homogenized, disenchanted dominant religious milieu.