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Primetime Paganism:
Popular-Culture Representations of Europhilic Polytheism in *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*[*]

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Abstract
This article provides a critical examination of the politico-religious content of the highly successful television series *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*. By comparing and contrasting two very different representations of ethnically-marked "European" polytheism, I seek to uncover underlying trends in contemporary attitudes towards reconstructed "native faith" among peoples of European origin, particularly in contrast to "imported" monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). This article makes several tentative claims about the protean nature of religious identity in the context of popular culture. First, that traditional filmic treatments of pagans *qua* villains is shifting, with contemporary popular culture allowing for more nuanced framing of Western forms of polytheism. Secondly, that such popular-culture representations of paganism have direct impact on certain contemporary Pagans' personal spiritual paths by promoting and influencing the "invention of tradition" among a population which manifests non-traditional religious identities.

Keywords
paganism, popular culture, identity politics, *Vikings*, *Game of Thrones*

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Introduction

Representations of paganism in popular culture are a highly politicized affair, particularly since the rise of the religious right in the United States in the late 1960s, and similar conservative shifts in other parts of the Western world. Anti-"paganism" crusaders have condemned various targets from the rock musical *Hair* (1967) to *The Twilight Saga* (2008–2012) fantasy film series. Under the broad and amorphous rubric of "paganism," critics have included a host of content, themes, and tropes, everything from lycanthropy and voodoo to crystals and angels.[1] In North America, popular culture's role in "corrupting" youth via romanticized depictions of the occult, psychic powers, and magic is a frequent refrain among cultural conservatives, Christian leaders, and other groups who espouse traditional values and mores.[2] In "post-Christian" Europe, campaigns against "pop-culture paganism" have been less strident, but are nonetheless extant, including campaigns against pagan Black Metal in Scandinavia, attacks on J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series by the Catholic Church, and bans on Halloween celebrations in Russia.[3] Concurrently, a number of scholars have demonstrated the influence of mass media on the religious identity of contemporary Pagans, specifically practitioners of Wicca. For such Pagans, novels, films, music, and television series are foundational elements of their religious identities, thus affirming the centrality of popular culture in "real world" practices and politics.[4] While I will explore the recent

1 A clarification of terminology is in order here. In this article, I use the capitalized "Paganism" and "Neopaganism" to refer to contemporary religious practices and paths associated with nature-venerating polytheism (e.g., Druidry, Ásatrú, and Romuva), whereas the lower-case "paganism" refers undifferentiated religious practices and beliefs associated with the various folk traditions of pre-Christian Europe (which, in certain cases, may also include contemporary Paganism). For more on the nomenclature debate, see Ethan Doyle White, "In Defense of Pagan Studies: A Response to Davidsen's Critique," *Pomegranate* 14, no. 1 (2012): 5–21.

2 See Richard Kyle, "The Occult Roars Back: Its Modern Resurgence," *Direction* 29, no. 2 (2000): 91–99 and Bill Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).

3 See, respectively, Kennet Granholm, "'Sons of Northern Darkness': Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music," *Numen: International Review for the History of Religions* 58, no. 4 (2011): 514–44; Cindy Wooden, "New Attention Given to 2003 Cardinal Ratzinger Letter on Harry Potter," *Catholic News Service*, 14 July 2005; and Kirit Radia, "Russia's War on Halloween." *ABC News.com*, 26 October 2012.

4 See Carrol L. Fry, "The Goddess Ascending: Feminist Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in Marian Zimmer Bradley's Novels," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 1 (1993): 67–80; Sabina Magliocco, "Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art Among Contemporary Pagans," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State Universi-

history of pop-culture paganism (and its critics) in this article, my focus is on a highly circumscribed aspect of this larger phenomenon: positive representations of Europhilic polytheism in contemporary mass media. This is done through a critical analysis of indigenous, place-based polytheism in two highly successful, theologically-preoccupied television series: the History Channel's *Vikings* (2013–present) and HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–present).[5] *Vikings* follows the exploits of Ragnar Lothbrok, his wife Lagertha, and his brother Rollo, three characters loosely based on historical figures from medieval Scandinavia. Adapted from George R. R. Martin's series of epic fantasy novels entitled *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–present), *Game of Thrones* details a grand conflict between a handful of noble houses seeking to dominate Westeros, an island (resembling Britain) off the coast of a much larger world-continent named Essos (suggestive of Eurasia).[6] The series is set in a medieval-like world replete with sorcerers, dragons, giants, and the walking dead.

These series have been selected for two reasons: the centrality of religious conflicts (specifically polytheism versus monotheism) in their narrative arcs and their popularity among both viewers and critics.[7] Rather than focusing on "pastiche paganism"[8] so often analyzed by scholars and condemned by cultural conservatives, this article's subject matter is far narrower in scope. By focusing on representations of native "European" polytheism, I hope to demonstrate the increasing influence of popular culture on postmodern religious identity.

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ty of New York Press, 1996), 93–120; Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloi, eds. *New Generation Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Maria Beatrice Bittarello, "Shifting Realities? Changing Concepts of Religion and the Body in Popular Culture and Neopaganism," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 2 (2008): 215–32; and Helen A. Berger, and Douglas Ezzy, "Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 501–14.

5 In addition to the television series, I also analyze the content of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* epic fantasy novels, upon which the series is based.

6 This is particularly evinced by the notion that Westeros' "southrons" are pampered and effete, while the "northmen" are uncouth and uncultured, closely mirroring the cultural divide in contemporary England; see Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (Boston and London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008).

7 According to *The Guardian* newspaper, *Game of Thrones* had become the "most talked about," "critically acclaimed," and "widely watched" show on television by 2014; see Sarah Hughes, "Sopranos Meets Middle-earth: How Game of Thrones took over Our World," *The Guardian*, 22 March 2014. In its first season, *Vikings* emerged as the top new U.S. cable series of the year and earned three Emmy nominations.

8 Generally speaking, a mixture of Gardnerian/Alexandrian Wicca and occultisms drawn from various European and non-European sources; these subsets of Wicca are named for their founders, Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) and Alex Sanders (1926–1988), respectively.

In the case of *Vikings*, the contest between medieval Christianity and Nordic paganism is overt, forming much of the plotline of Season One and thus requiring little in the way of intellectual excavation. In *Game of Thrones*, an allegorical reading of the text is employed, positing the indigenous, polytheistic, nature-revering religions of Westeros as "European" and the foreign, proselytizing, monotheistic faith of R'hllor as Christianity (and Islam).[9] The primary aim of this article is to shed light on the growing acceptability of Europhilic paganism in contemporary Western popular culture, specifically the paths of Heathenism and Celtic Reconstructionism. I argue that this is emblematic of larger socio-political trends associated with anti-egalitarianism, anti-modernism, and anti-globalism triggered by the post-Cold War international order.[10] In the conclusion, I connect this representation to the invention of tradition, arguing that such cultural production is not neutral, and, in fact, such pop-cultural forms of Western esotericism have important effects on politico-religious identity among certain subsets of society.[11]

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9 This reading departs from Martin's declaration that the religion of R'hllor is loosely based on Zoroastrianism; see Jaron Daniël Schoone, "'Why Is the World So Full of Injustice?': Gods and the Problem of Evil," in *Game of Thrones and Philosophy: Logic Cuts Deeper Than Swords*, ed. Henry Jacoby (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 154–67.

10 See, for instance, Alain Minc, *Le nouveau Moyen Âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993); Marion Bowman, "Cardiac Celts: Images of the Celts in Paganism," in *Paganism Today*, ed. Charlotte Hardman and Graham Harvey (London: Thorsons, 1996), 242–51; Lorne L. Dawson, "Anti-Modernism, Modernism, and Postmodernism: Struggling with the Cultural Significance of New Religious Movements," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1998): 131–58; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, B*lack Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University, 2002); Granholm, "'Sons of Northern Darkness'"; David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy, and Christine Milligan, "Timing and Spacing Celtic Geographies," in *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, eds. David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–17; Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Joshua Buckley and Michael Moynihan, "What Does It Mean to be a Radical Traditionalist?" *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition 1* (2002): back cover; Alain de Benoist, *On Being a Pagan*, trans. Jon Graham (Atlanta: Ultra, 2005); Lauren Bernauer, "Modern Germanic Heathenry and Radical Traditionalists," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred*, ed. Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2006), 265–74; and Michael Spiegel, "Character in a Post-National World: Neomedievalism in Atwood's Oryx and Crake," *Mosaic* 43, no. 3 (2010): 119–34.

11 See Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–13 and Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, "Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 25–48.

The Pop-Culture "Pagan": Vampires, Witches, and Wiccans in Mainstream Media

Establishing the genesis of popular culture's fascination with paganism is problematic. Certainly, the Romantic Movement—which glorified Teutonic gods, the chaos of Nature, and pre-Christian tribalism—is an obvious starting point, though representations of pagans and paganism in popular fiction go back much earlier in the history of Western Civilization.[12] The publication of folkloric national epics, including *Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1812), *The Kalevala* (1835), and *Lāčplēsis* (1888), sparked a popular interest in the pre-Christian past of the various European peoples. The same can be said of quasi-academic works like James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* and Charles Leland's *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* . The long nineteenth century, characterized by the rise of industry and the dawn of modernity, stimulated an artistic backlash which saw pagan themes glorified in the works of William Butler Yeats, Richard Wagner, Isadora Duncan, and others. While Britain's lifting of the centuries-old ban on witchcraft in 1951 is often cited as the key catalyst for the emergence of contemporary Paganism in Western Europe and North America,[13] popular-culture representations of paganism *qua* pre-Christian, polytheistic practice remained rather diffuse until the late 1960s, when various forms of counter-culture entered into the realm of mass media. The same cannot be said for more generic depictions of the occult, which have been a regular subject of popular culture from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* onwards.

During the 1930s, an obsession with the supernatural and the macabre became the norm in many avenues of cultural production, particularly Hollywood films and the emergent medium of comic books;[14] however, a cultural shift in the 1950s tamped down cultural producers' enthusiasm for such themes,

12 See Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

13 See, for instance, Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations: C.1650 – C.1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); David Waldron, "Witchcraft for Sale! Commodity vs. Community in the Neopagan Movement," *Nova Religio* 9, no. 1 (2005): 32–48; Peter Jennings, *Pagan Paths: A Guide to Wicca, Druidry, Asatru, Shamanism and Other Pagan Practices* (New York: Random House, 2008).

14 See, respectively, Sean Cubitt, "The Supernatural in Neo-Baroque Hollywood," in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 47–65 and B. W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

except when clearly yoked to larger questions of identity associated with the Cold War.[15] The dawning of the so-called "Age of Aquarius" signaled a transformation in popular culture wherein various forms of paganism/Paganism, especially the practice of witchcraft, nature religion, and new forms of religion delinked from Christianity (and its Abrahamic brethren, Judaism and Islam) came into vogue. Festivals at Glastonbury, Stonehenge, and other sites of "ancestral stones" quickly entered into the mainstream media culture, marked most vividly by the premier of the motion picture *The Wicker Man* (1973).[16] The cult film, which depicts a Celtic Reconstructionist sect luring a devout Christian to their Hebridean island for a Beltane sacrifice in a wicker colossus, brought the phenomenon of (murderous) contemporary Paganism into the movie houses of Britain and North America.[17] *The Wicker Man* dovetailed with both the "cult scare" of the 1970s and the explosion of interest in Earth-based and New Age religions.[18] A decade later, author Marion Zimmer Bradley introduced a generation to the magic-practicing pagan women of Arthurian times

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15 See Cynthia Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination* (Madison: Popular Press, 2001).

16 See Steven Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

17 *The Wicker Man* is based on David Pinner's 1967 novel *Ritual*, which was set in Cornwall, not Scotland. A 2006 film remake starring Nicholas Cage retooled the original plot by transforming the religious community into a women-only Goddess sect residing on an island off the coast of the U.S. state of Washington; see Mikel J. Koven, "The Folklore Fallacy. A Folkloristic/Filmic Perspective on *The Wicker Man*," *Fabula* 48, no. 3–4 (2007): 270–80; Benjamin Franks, Stephen Harper, Jonathan Murray, and Gary Carpenter, eds., *The Quest for the Wicker Man: History, Folklore and Pagan Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2007); Adrian Ivakhiv, "Cinema of the Not-Yet: The Utopian Promise of Film as Heterotopia," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature & Culture* 5, no. 2 (2011): 186–209; and Marion Gibson, "Wicker Men and Straw Dogs: Internal Colonialism in Celtic Novels and Films 1968–1978," *National Identities* 15, no. 2 (2013): 139–56.

18 Following 1968, the U.S. media sensationalized cult activity, resulting in what might be deemed mass "panic." The 18 November 1978 events at the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana marked the apex of this trend; however, a subsequent wave of hysteria occurred in the 1980s following a series of often spurious reports of Satanic cults engaging in ritual abuse and human sacrifice; see James A. Beckford, *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1985) and David Frankfurter, "The Satanic Ritual Abuse Panic as Religious-Studies Data," *Numen* 50, no. 1 (2003): 108–117. For an overview of the evolution of contemporary Paganism, see, for instance, Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), and Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America* (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman Altamira, 2006).

in *The Mists of Avalon*, presaging a flurry of pro-feminist, Wicca-friendly pop literature, motion pictures, and other media.[19]

From the 1980s onward, the growing power of cultural conservatism and its frothy critiques of paganism in American society, and Western Civilization more generally,[20] did little to curtail the proliferation of occult themes in popular culture, as evidenced by the popularity of media products such as the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game, dark metal music, the *Conan* comics series and motion pictures, and the "teen witch" genre, including *The Craft* (1996), *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation* , *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and *Charmed* (1998–2006).[21] Since the dawn of the new millennium, the trend has quickened with the undeniable worldwide success of the novel *cum* film franchises of *Harry Potter* (novels, 1997–2007; films, 2001–2011) and *Twilight* (novels, 2005–2008; films, 2008–2012), as well as Peter Jackson's film adaptation of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* saga (2001, 2002, 2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012, 2013, 2014). Not surprisingly, "culture warriors"[22] and Christian fundamentalists have sought to discourage consumption of such media due to their purported tendencies to weaken Judeo-Christian values, traditional morality, and parental authority.[23] However, the Religious Right's opprobrium has

19 See Fry, "The Goddess Ascending" and J. Lawton Winslade, "Teen Witches, Wiccans, and 'Wanna-Blessed-Be's': Pop-Culture Magic in Buffy the Vampire Slayer," *Slayage: The Journal of the Joss Whedon Studies Association* 1, no. 1 (2001).

20 See, for instance, Constance Cumbey, T*he Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1983); Bob Larson, *Larson's Book of Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999); Texe Marrs, *Dark Secrets of the New Age: Satan's Plan for a One World Religion* (Austin: Rivercrest Publishing, 2000); Pat Matrisciana, *Popculture Paganism* (Jacksonville: Jeremiah Films, 2009); and William Schnoebelen, *Wicca: Satan's Little White Lie* (Ontario: Chick Publications,, 2011).

21 See Maia A. Gemmill and Daniel H. Nexon, "Children's Crusade: The Religious Politics of Harry Potter," in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 79–101; Michael Moynihan and Didrik Søderlind, *Lords of Chaos: The Bloody Rise of the Satanic Metal Underground* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2003); Jeffrey Richards, "From Christianity to Paganism: The New Middle Ages and the Values of 'Medieval' Masculinity," *Cultural Values* 3, no. 2 (1999): 213–34; and Winslade, "Teen Witches, Wiccans, and 'Wanna-Blessed-Be's'."

22 See Bill O'Reilly, *Culture Warrior* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); NCR, "The 'Culture-Warrior' Model," *National Catholic Reporter* 48, no. 22 (2012): 28; and John Dombrink, "After the Culture War? Shifts and Continuities in American Conservatism," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 42, no. 3 (2012): 301–21.

23 See Roberta Harrington, "Fundamentalists in a Frenzy over Power of the Occult," *Sunday Herald*, 17 October 1999, 10; Richard Kyle, "The Occult Roars Back: Its Modern Resurgence," *Direction* 29, no. 2 (2000): 91–99; Marc Lavine, "Opponents Warn of Satanic Plot as Harry

been typically focused on popular culture products that appeal to youth, thus perhaps explaining why neither *Vikings* nor *Game of Thrones* has received much attention from the various corners of society that so vociferously denounced Buffy, Bella, and Bilbo, although the two series' undeniable appeal to certain socially conservative (though decidedly anti-Christian) ideals may also partially explain this lack of criticism.[24]

Radical Traditionalism and Celticism: Paganesque Identity Politics in Europe and the "White Dominions"

While enthusiasm for popular culture products which glorify Europe's pagan past partially stems from larger societal trends including a shift away from traditional religion to more personalized mystical experiences and understandings, a desire for recreating the (lost/imagined) bonds of community rent asunder by liquid modernity can also be viewed as an important factor.[25] Such media craft a realm where the *primitive* is valorized and the *civilized* is rejected. The ongoing primitivist backlash seems to be a rather predictable outcome of periods of social conflict and populist alienation.[26] Contemporary Western

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Potter Hoopla Snowballs," *Agence France-Presse*, 16 November 2001; Stephen Hume, "Fantasy Casts Welcome Spell in Age of Uncertainty," *Vancouver Sun*, 9 November 2001, F2; Tim Stanley, "Blood Oath Twilight Generation." *The Spectator*, 29 December 2012, 10. However, it should be noted that there have also been end-of-days, occult-themed media products which reinforce conservative Christian values and worldviews, including the *Left Behind* series (1995–2007); see Jason Dittmer, "The Geographical Pivot of (the End of) History: Evangelical Geopolitical Imaginations and Audience Interpretation of *Left Behind*," *Political Geography* 27, no. 3 (2008): 280–300.

24 Targeting a much younger demographic, and lacking the explicit contrast (and competition) between polytheism and monotheism, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* (2005–2009) series of novels (and film adaptations) has nonetheless been condemned by certain Christians for presenting a multifaceted and attractive "substitute for the Christian worldview" rooted in pagan theology and values, and even as a tool in the resurgence of paganism; see J. B. Cheaney, "Among the Pagans: Percy Jackson and the Olympians," *Redeemed Reader*, 15 March 2011, accessed on 7 February 2014. http://www.redeemedreader.com/2011/03/among-the-pagans-percy-jackson-and-the-olympians/

25 See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge and Boston: Polity, 2000).

26 See Truzzi, "The Occult Revival as Popular Culture"; Frank Trentmann, "Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994): 583–626; Richards, "From Christianity to Paganism"; and Daniel Chirot, "A Clash of Civilizations or of Paradigms?: Theorizing Progress and Social Change," *International Sociology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 341–62.

Paganism in its various forms represents one strain of this epiphenomenon, which also includes extreme environmentalism, "prepper"-style survivalism, and anarcho-primitivism.[27] Reflecting an interest in ethnic heritage as much as spirituality,[28] Euro-centric Paganism entails religious affiliation with one (or more) of the indigenous, pre-Christian faiths of the European continent. These can be roughly categorized into one of four geographic fields: northern; western; southern; and eastern (see Table I).[29] While not necessarily mutually exclusive, most contemporary Western Pagans affix their religious identity to one of these traditions, though often supplementing their beliefs and practices with influences from other religious traditions, most notably shamanism, New Age and "invented" religions, and/or various Eastern faiths (especially Hinduism and Buddhism). The embrace of contemporary Western Paganism is certainly not confined to the European continent; on the contrary, the United States, Canada, and Australia—the most populous of the so-called "White Dominions"[30] established through British overseas imperialism—have all seen a dramatic upsurge in the practice of reconstructed Paganism and new religious movements (NRMs) associated with European identity. Among the *völkisch* strains of Germanic (northern) and even Celtic (western) Paganism, the connection between religious and ethnic identity is acute, and often important to practitioners' political culture.[31] In some cases, this affinity is so strong as to be accurately classified as a form of "white separatism."[32] Such orientations are often in direct contrast with the pluralist, relativist, egalitarian, and globalist orientations of many Wiccans and Goddess Worshippers who also identify as

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27 See, respectively, Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009); Emily Matchar, "Inside the Prepper Survivalist Movement" *Outside*, 10 July 2012; and John Zerzan, *Future Primitive Revisited* (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2012).

28 See Collin Cleary, "Knowing the Gods," *TYR: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 1 (2002): 23–40.

29 It is important to note that recent archeological research demonstrates that distinguishing between these traditions in the ancient world is highly problematic, given the fluidity of belief and the prevalence of "religious borrowing" across Europe, particularly in the north of the continent. However, the vehemence with which current Pagans delineate the borders between their religiogeographic identities only serves to reinforce the argument that the "invention of tradition" is key to understanding current trends. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer of the draft of this article for pointing this out.

30 See Charles More, *Britain in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

31 See Egil Asprem, "Heathens Up North: Politics, Polemics, and Contemporary Norse Paganism in Norway," *Pomegranate* 10, no. 1 (2008): 41–69.

32 See Betty A. Dobratz, "The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racialist Movement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (2001): 287–301.

Table I: *Spatio-Cultural Groupings of Contemporary Western Paganism*

Religiogeographic Orientation	**Ethno-Linguistic Affiliation(s)**	**(Neo)Pagan Paths**
Northern	Germanic	Ásatrú, Heathenry, Odinism, Wotanism, Theodism, Ariosophy
Western	Celtic and Celto-Romano	Druidry, "Old Religion," Celtic Reconstructionism, Wicca, Goddess Worship
Southern	Hellenic and Latinate	Hellenismos, Religio Romana, Stregheria (*la vecchia religione*)
Eastern	Baltic, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric	Romuva, Dievturiba, Ridnovira, Rodnoverie, Vedism, Maausk, Suomenusko, Ösmagyar Vallás, Oshmari-Chimari, Vos

Adapted from Robert A. Saunders, "Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism."

Pagan;[33] however, such a confrontational esprit does have parallels in Baltic and Slavic (eastern) Pagan traditions which glorify the "warrior culture," affirm traditional gender roles, openly espouse ethnocentrism, and critique contemporary civilizational norms.[34]

Correspondingly, there exists a suite of parallel political orientations which mobilize contemporary Paganism for ideological purposes, roughly paralleling the ways in which the "great" faiths (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) are employed for political projects in the twenty-first century. Radical Traditionalism (RT) is perhaps the most obvious of these ideologies. Drawing inspiration

33 See Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

34 See Victor Shnirelman, "'Christians! Go Home': A Revival of Neo-Paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (An Overview)," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 2 (2002): 197–211; Marléne Laruelle, "Alternative Identity, Alternative Religion? Neo-Paganism and the Aryan Myth in Contemporary Russia," *Nations and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 283–301; Réka Szilárdi, "Ancient Gods—New Ages: Lessons from Hungarian Paganism," *Pomegranate* 11, no. 1 (2009): 44–57; Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson, *Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe* (Abingdon: Acumen, 2013), and Mariya Lesiv, *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 2013).

from the works of Julius Evola (1898–1974), the editors of the journal *TYR: Myth—Culture—Tradition* represent the primary mouthpiece of this movement. Joshua Buckley and Michael Moynihan define the concept of Radical Traditionalism as such:

> It means to reject the modern, materialist reign of "quantity over quality," the absence of any meaningful spiritual values, environmental devastation, the mechanization of over-specialization of urban life, and the imperialism of corporate monoculture, with its vulgar "values" of progress and efficiency. It means to yearn for the small, homogenous tribal societies that flourished before Christianity—societies in which every aspect of life was integrated into a holistic system.[35]

In her study of the connection between RT and various strains of Norse Ásatrú and Germanic Heathenry, religion studies scholar Lauren Bernauer contends that Radical Traditionalism provides a "philosophical depth" to the faith, as well as providing a reservoir of ideological texts (including writings by Oswald Spengler, Anthony Ludovici, and Alain de Benoist, among others).[36] Through RT's interest in Western esotericism, other avenues of intellectual and ideological interrogation are also plumbed, specifically the Ariosophy of Guido von List and Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky.[37] In addition to the intellectual activities of *TYR*, Radical Traditionalist thought is also articulated in more popular forms, namely in folk metal lyrics by bands such as Amon Amarth, Metsatöll, Turisas, and Allerseelen, among others.[38] Often aligning their words with the "values" of Vikings and other pre-Christian peoples of northern and central Europe, neo-folk metal bands are well known for including anti-civilizational/anti-Christian rhetoric in their songs. As one commentator observes, Viking black metal and similar genres evince "an extreme reaction against mainstream European culture [while] emphasizing a natural connection with ancestral lands [...] All however see Christianity as the common enemy."[39] Consequently,

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35 Buckley and Moynihan. "What Does It Mean to be a Radical Traditionalist?," back cover.

36 Bernauer, "Modern Germanic Heathenry and Radical Traditionalists."

37 See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1992).

38 See Kennet Granholm, "Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Mediation and Practice," *Correspondences* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–33. In fact, Michael Moynihan, one of the co-editors of *TYR* and co-author of *Lords of Chaos* (2003), is the lead singer of Blood Axis, an American neo-folk band which espouses RT sentiment in its lyrics; certain volumes of *TYR* include sampler CDs with tracks from artists who share the journal's mission.

39 Simon Trafford and Aleks Pluskowski, "Antichrist Superstars: The Vikings in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal," in *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture*, ed. David

there is a strong underpinning of the notion of hierarchy, kingship, hyper-masculinity, and the notion of "chosenness" among RT-minded Heathens, as well as an embrace of "personal spiritual paths."[40] This stands in stark contrast to the systematic and exclusivist theology, egalitarianism, universality, and shepherd/flock-like structures of monotheistic Christianity (and Islam); such Pagan themes—as will be discussed below—are found in abundance in both *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones*.

While less overt in its politicization of contemporary Paganism, the relationship between the rather amorphous ideology of Celticism and contemporary Western Paganism bears some resemblance to Radical Traditionalism and northern contemporary paganism.[41] Celticism is "a place-based reaction to globalization and modernism,"[42] which is used to provide meaning to the lives of people who have Celtic ancestry or identify as "cardiac Celts," i.e., feel themselves to be Celts regardless of genetics or place of birth.[43] It is not surprising then that Celticism has been mobilized for everything from devolution of political power in the United Kingdom to separatism in the American South and northern Italy to anti-immigration activism.[44] Alan M. Kent recounts J. R. R. Tolkien's reference to Celticism as a "magic bag" into which "anything may be put, and out of which almost anything may come."[45] While

W. Marshall (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 67–69.

40 Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 115.

41 Certain right-wing British nativists, who embrace Celtic and "Ancient Briton" Paganism and other forms of esoterica, have recently begun to employ the notion of "radical traditionalism" as a mechanism for attracting adherents; see Amy Hale, "John Michell, Radical Traditionalism, and the Emerging Politics of the Pagan New Right," *Pomegranate* 13, no. 1 (2011): 77–97.

42 Harvey et al., "Timing and Spacing Celtic Geographies," 8.

43 Bowman, "Cardiac Celts."

44 See, respectively, Peter Berresford Ellis, *Celtic Dawn* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 2002); Euan Hague, Benito Giordano, and Edward H. Sebesta, "Whiteness, Multiculturalism and Nationalist Appropriation of Celtic Culture: The Case of the League of the South and the Lega Nord," *Cultural Geographies* 12, no. 2 (2005): 151–73; and Michael Dietler, "Celticism, Celtitude, and Celticity: The Consumption of the Past in the Age of Globalization," in *Celtes et Gaulois dans l'histoire, l'historiographie et l'idéologie moderne*, ed. Sabine Rieckhoff (Glux-en-Glenne: Centre Archéologique Européen, 2006), 237–48. It is important to note that while most adherents of RT align with some form of Neopaganism, many of those who embrace Celticism do not, and in some cases, Catholicism (or Anglicanism) forms an integral part of their identity; however, in this article, I focus on expressions of Celticism that embrace pre-Christian religious and civilizational orientations.

45 Alan M. Kent, "Celtic Nirvanas: Constructions of Celtic in Contemporary British Youth

reinforcing the ideological polysemy of Celticism, this quote also points us to the fantastical fundament of Celtitude, an imaginary in which fairies, shape shifters, and magic reign, as well as a repository of myths associated with a besieged (white/indigenous) people tenuously clinging to the "Old Ways" at a geographic fringe, facing down the juggernaut of (Roman/Christian/British/global) "civilization" (a theme which is quite familiar to viewers of *Game of Thrones*).[46] Given such a pregnant nexus of ideas and imagery, it is not surprising that a host of folklorists, dramatists, and novelists have drawn inspiration from the mythical "Celts" over the past millennium,[47] not least of whom is George R. R. Martin.

Radical Traditionalism and Celticism are just two strains of the multifaceted and multivalent "culture-based, identitarian politics" of contemporary Paganism in Europe, the Americas, and the Antipodes;[48] however, they represent elements of the political spectrum which are quite distinct from the standard political orientations of "mainstream" Pagans, i.e., supportive of social justice, pluralism, multiculturalism, and globalism.[49] While most Pagans aver that their belief and practice represent an unveiling of lost knowledge, those who gravitate towards the sort of politicized contemporary Paganism associated with RT or Celticism tend to embrace what might be deemed European indigenism: a quasi-*völkisch*, spatially-privileged, ideological orientation that mimics the approach employed by indigenous movements in the Americas and Australia.[50] Whereas many Wiccans and Goddess Worshippers forge their identities in response to imagined persecution during the so-called "Burning Times," i.e., the witch-mania of the Early Modern Period (though often expanded to the Middle Ages as well), those of the more *völkisch* bent construct their identities against the very implementation of monotheism in Europe. This

Culture," in *Celtic Geographies: Old Cultures, New Times*, eds. David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 210.

46 See Trafford and Pluskowski, "Antichrist Superstars." Providing an interesting complement to Heathen Metal, the past 15 years has seen the rise of Celtic metal with strong pagan themes, with bands such as Primordial (Ireland) and Eluveitie (Switzerland) producing music with themes similar to that of the Nordic metal bands, though with the addition of pipes, fiddles, and tales of Celtic heroes and sacred nemetons.

47 See Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

48 See Hale, "John Michell."

49 See Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

50 See Gardell, *Gods of the Blood* and Richard Borshay Lee, "Twenty-First Century Indigenism," *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 4 (2006): 455–79.

results in condemning aspects of Christianity that many non-*völkisch* Pagans would embrace: renunciation of violence, unconditional love, human equality, etc.[51] For such Europhilic Pagans, the *Männerbund* ethos of *Vikings* and religiously-informed neo-orientalism *Game of Thrones* provides a validation of their rejection of what they see as the hypocritical moralism of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), going as far as to cast the "foreign" monotheists as duplicitous villains and their imported faith as alien, destructive, and socially debilitating. Furthermore, by providing a rich (non-traditional) religious fiction, these media products contribute to the invention of tradition among contemporary Pagans, allowing consumers of such popular culture to reify socio-cultural distinctions between themselves and the monotheistic masses.[52] Most disturbingly, the frequent and graphic violence depicted in such media can enflame "religio-ideological totalism," potentially predisposing practitioners to acts of aggression in the real world.[53]

"How Can You Be a Christian When You Walk among Our Gods?": Religion in *Vikings*

Created and written by Michael Hirst, veteran of the historical dramas *Elizabeth* (1998) and *The Tudors* (2007–2010), The History Channel's *Vikings* is a Canadian-Irish production that follows the rise of the eighth-century Norseman Ragnar Lothbrok (Travis Flammel). In Season One, the ambitious Ragnar, working in secret with his brother Rollo (Clive Standen) and the gifted shipwright Floki (Gustaf Skarsgård), leads a team of raiders across the North Sea to Britannia, despoiling Lindisfarne. Upon their return to Scandinavia with treasure and slaves, the rovers spark the ire of their myopic chieftain, Earl Haraldson (Gabriel Byrne). The earl claims their booty for himself, save one item: the Norse-speaking, Anglo-Saxon monk Athelstan (George Blagden), whom Ragnar captured in England. Ragnar's wife, Lagertha (Katheryn Winnick), a

51 An interesting academic parallel to the two popular-culture products discussed herein is Robert Kaplan's post-9/11 treatise on the conduct of war, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (2002), which argues for a reevaluation of contemporary attitudes to war-making, proving a fillip to "radical traditionalist" approaches to conflict drawn from the history of the pagan Greece, Rome, Eurasia, and China.

52 See Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 1–24.

53 See James R. Lewis, *Violence and New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

renowned shield-maiden in her own right, accompanies the Vikings on their second, properly-sanctioned raid on England. Upon their return, Ragnar and Haraldson vie for power, with Ragnar defeating the earl in single combat. Following a pilgrimage to the holy city of Uppsala, Ragnar swears fealty to King Horik (Donal Logue), though his brother—who covets Lagertha—plots against him, allying with the dour Jarl Borg (Thorbjørn Harr) against the seemingly affable king.

Religion is a key component of nearly every episode, with much of the emotional drama hinging on questions of faith. As one reviewer framed it, "The Norse people's religion […] is presented not as window dressing but as a driving force in their decisions—the notion of Valhalla and dying a good death, for instance, is everywhere."[54] In the opening scene of Episode 1 ("Rites of Passage"), Ragnar witnesses a grim Odin, the All-Father and supreme deity of Norse paganism, wandering a corpse-strewn battlefield in the eastern Baltic. He is accompanied by ghostly Valkyries descending to claim the souls of the heroic dead.[55] Communing with the unseen world is also introduced early on, with the clan's disfigured *seiðmaðr* ('seer') accurately divining the future and Floki's seemingly-truthful claim to be able to "look inside the trees" to find the right planks for his longship. In the second episode, "Wrath of the Northmen," there is a recounting of the tale of *Jörmungandr*, the World Serpent, and his cataclysmic battle with the thunder god Thor. Later, on the westward sea passage, a storm threatens to sink the intrepid sailors. Rollo frets, "Thor is striking his anvil. He is angry with us. He wants to sink us." However, Floki ventures a different interpretation of the divine intervention: "Thor is celebrating. He is showing he cannot sink this boat!" This religious egalitarianism is contrasted directly with an interspliced scene showing the authoritarian structures of faith at the Lindisfarne monastery, where the cenobites' soon-to-be-realized fears are silenced by a dictatorial prelate. The fluidity of pagan belief and the essential role of individual interpretation are reinforced in Episode 3 ("The Dispossessed"), when Rollo and Ragnar debate about Valhalla and Ragnar tells his brother, "[y]ou have *your* Odin and I have *mine*." A sharp contrast is also drawn between Christian and pagan belief in this episode as Ragnar

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54 James Poniewozik, "History Launches Vikings (and an Action-Packed Bible)," *Time*, 1 March 2013. http://entertainment.time.com/2013/03/01/tv-weekend-history-launches-vikings-and-an-action-packed-bible/#ixzz2qxQ4hcZH

55 In sharp contrast to the armor-clad Asgardian superhero portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in *Thor* (2011), Odin appears in his "wanderer" guise looking like a disheveled pilgrim. Throughout the season, the viewer is regularly alerted to the god's presence through the appearance of ravens, his traditional harbingers, including when Ragnar slays the earl.

questions his thrall Athelstan about his monastery's wealth: "Why does your god need silver and gold? He must be a greedy god like Loki."[56] The question goes unanswered, a particularly interesting development given that Athelstan is well-versed in Norse language and culture, having been trained as a missionary to the Scandinavian pagans.

In Episode 4 ("Trial"), the Vikings return to Northumbria, preying on church-goers in Hexam. Upon their return to Scandinavia,[57] Ragnar is charged with murdering the earl's half-brother. As his tribulations grow, Ragnar's faith in the gods, with whom he feels a personal kinship, grows stronger just as the earl begins to doubt their very existence. Over the next two episodes, the "priest" Athelstan grows closer to the pagan faith, intrigued by the depth of its theology and sincerity of his captors' adherence. Back in Northumbria in Episode 6 ("A King's Ransom"), we witness a "learned" bishop instructing the king that the Northmen have been sent by God to punish the Saxons for their "many sins and transgressions" as an even more superstitious nobleman is convinced they were sent by Satan. However, after the Vikings capture the king's brother in battle, the Christians are forced to treat with the invaders. King Aelle (Ivan Kaye) demands one Northman convert to Christianity to conduct the truce; Rollo unexpectedly volunteers but is sharply condemned by Floki, the most vituperative critic of the Saxons' faith, who chastises Rollo for renouncing his ancestral gods.[58]

Meanwhile, Lagertha dispenses justice in Ragnar's stead, defusing a conflict over infidelity by instructing the clan that Heimdallr, revered guardian of the Bifröst Bridge, had taken the guise of a mortal and blessed a childless house with life. In Episode 7 ("Sacrifice"), in an effort to petition the deities for realization of the seer's prophecy that he will "father many sons" following Lagertha's recent miscarriage, Ragnar and his family (including the newly-freed Athelstan) embark on the ninth-year pilgrimage to the Temple at Uppsala

[56] Though a foster-brother of the All-Father, the god Loki (who was born a frost giant or *jötunn*) is generally reviled for his treachery, particularly following his role in the death of Odin's son, Baldr.

[57] There is little in the way of geographic specificity when it comes the location of "Kattegat," the main town in Season One. The mountainous setting portends Norway, but the name reflects either modern-day Denmark or Sweden.

[58] Floki, who regularly mocks Christianity, is incensed by the "conversion," however false it might be, refusing to take Ragnar's lead in kneeling at the service and instead spitting in the river in which Rollo (now Rolf) is baptized. When Aelle's troops violate the truce and attack, Rollo becomes a berserker, slaughtering the most "Christians" in a bloody retort to Floki's warning that Odin will never forgive him for what he has done.

(an event famously recounted in Adam of Bremen's eleventh-century *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*), where the Norsemen bask in "the living presence of the gods." Secretly, Ragnar hopes that Athelstan will offer himself as a willing sacrifice to the Æsir (Norse gods) he has seemingly embraced, but despite allowing his blood-baptism as a pagan, his heartfelt extolling of the praises of Thor, and his three-time denial of his Christianity to the high-priest of Uppsala, he refuses.[59] Instead, the sympathetic character Leif (Diarmaid Murtagh) volunteers, a poignant validation of the authenticity of the religiously-informed *Männerbund* of Ragnar's clique. In the final episode of the season, "All Change," Ragnar and company visit an ancient ash tree (reputed to be the World-Tree Yggdrasil) on a mission for Horik as the Seer reveals he is in danger from the "magical world."

From both a textual and visual standpoint, *Vikings*, with its unapologetic glorification of Norse paganism and bitter critique of Saxon Catholicism, is transgressive in its depiction of religion in medieval Europe. While there is no shortage of popular cultural products that condemn medieval Christianity,[60] there are precious few examples where paganism is positively contrasted with monotheism (particularly in cinematic or televisual media). Quite the contrary, pagans have long served as the "Other" in action films, destined to be vanquished by a godly/God-like knight in shining armor.[61] As film critic Ross Crawford points out, Hollywood depictions of medieval faith usually cast an atheistic (or anachronistically secular) protagonist, who works against the corrupting influences of religious hierarchies. However, Ragnar is genuine—even fervent—in his belief; accordingly, "*Vikings* challenges the viewer to engage with the theological context of both these cultures."[62] This engagement is particularly interesting when pagans and Christians are set in direct opposition, and the viewer is encouraged to identify with the former.

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59 Symbolically staging this transformation, we witness a Lindisfarne bible, kept in secret, fall apart in Athelstan's hands as he prepares to depart for Uppsala.

60 Representative examples include *The Name of the Rose* (1980 [novel]/1986 [film]), *Pillars of the Earth* (1989 [novel]/2010 [television miniseries]), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005).

61 See Richards, "From Christianity to Paganism." However, two comparatively recent films, *Valhalla Rising* (2009) and *The Thirteenth Warrior* (1999), place monotheism and Norse paganism on relatively equal footing, with the former lambasting Christianity and paganism equally and the latter invoking a sort of anachronistic multiculturalism that value Islam and paganism equally.

62 Ross Crawford, "Religion, Raids, and Ragnar(ök): Series One of 'Vikings,'" *Fickle Fascinations*, 5 May 2013. http://ficklefascinations.com/2013/05/05/religion-raids-and-ragnarok-series-one-of-vikings/

Employing media analysis and an ocular-centric perspective, Viking religious gatherings are shown in warm, welcoming colors and suggest mirth and camaraderie; for instance, the beauty with which Uppsala is filmed, purposefully represented as an Asgardian paradise, is nothing short of breathtaking. Christian religious functions meanwhile are gray, solemn, and cold. Actors portraying the Saxons are always pale, callow, and half-starved in appearance (except for the fat, sweaty, and decidedly villainous-looking Aelle); conversely, the Northmen are tanned, hale, and ever-confident. When it comes to sexuality, Athelstan's prudery is consistently framed as silly, particularly when he refuses numerous sexual overtures despite his apparent desire to participate (the symbolic "punishment" for sex outside of marriage so common in Hollywood media narratives is completely absent from *Vikings*).[63] From an ideological vantage, Christians—when invoking their faith—are presented as hypocritical, vainglorious, and vindictive: in one scene, King Aelle decries the Vikings as heathens and barbarians as he throws one of his loyal retainers into a pit of vipers, mocking him for his faith in the everlasting life granted by Jesus Christ. In opposition, pagans are depicted as genuine and modest. Breaking with a century of cinematic canon, Floki boldly profanes Christian sites and symbols, but is never punished for it (such violations of "moral" norms would, in previous filmic narratives, result in a violent and untimely death for the transgressor). Children even enter into the visual poetics of the show, as the Saxon king's timid and obviously overly-mothered son is contrasted with the boldness of Ragnar's boy Bjorn (Nathan O'Toole), shown taking care of the farm back in Scandinavia while the Saxon prince cowers at court. While not everything about paganism is presented positively in contrast to the Christian "Other" (particularly the troubling ease with which humans sacrifice themselves), reviews of the show recognize that the program does break from standard treatments of medieval faith.[64]

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[63] On gender and film, see Carrie Tarr and Brigitte Rollet, *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001).

[64] Film scholar Harry Brown argues that the series effectively "sanitizes" the pagan ritual of human sacrifice, allowing Ragnar to "retain his sheen of heroism and generosity," making it something to celebrate rather than scorn: Harry Brown, "Plastic Pagans: Viking Human Sacrifice in Film and Television," in *Ethics and Medievalism: Studies in Medievalism XXIII*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 114.

"The Seven Have Never Answered My Prayers, Perhaps the Old Gods Will": Religion in *Game of Thrones*

Created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, HBO's *Game of Thrones* is a fantasy-based political thriller that centers on a clash of kings for control of the Iron Throne, which confers lordship over the island of Westeros. Based on co-executive producer George R. R. Martin's multi-volume *A Song of Ice and Fire* (SIF) series, the primary focus is on the warring Stark and Lannister clans, but also includes important subplots featuring the Targaryens (the displaced line which once ruled the seven kingdoms of Westeros), House Greyjoy (rulers of the Hebrides-like Iron Islands), and the Night's Watch (guardians of the Hadrianesque, 700-foot wall in the north that keeps the ungovernable Wildlings and undead "White Walkers" at bay), as well as a host of secondary characters. In Season One, Eddard Stark (Sean Bean) reluctantly agrees to become the primary advisor to King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), ultimately losing his head to the late Robert's loathsome son, Joffrey (Jack Gleeson), the incestuous progeny of Queen Cersei (Lena Headey) and her brother Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau). Season Two hinges on the chaos created by warring pretenders to the throne: Joffrey, Robb Stark (Richard Madden), Renly Baratheon (Gethin Anthony), Stannis Baratheon (Stephen Dillane), and—from afar—Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke). Season Three sees Renly assassinated by a demon "squirmed from out [the] womb" of the Red Witch, Melisandra (Carice van Houten), the Ironborn declaring their independence from any king, and a northern war between the Wildlings and the Watch. Political intrigue comes to the fore with minor houses and entrepreneurial individuals like Jon Snow (Kit Harington), Petyr Balish (Aidan Gillen), and Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) shaping the future of Westeros; the climax occurs when Robb is slaughtered by his own bannermen at his wedding.[65]

According to Martin, religion in *Game of Thrones* is "enormously important,"[66] despite the fact that some have criticized the series for giving short shrift to questions of faith, a central theme in the novels.[67] The faith that is completely indigenous to

65 The King in the North and his bride are symbolically united through handfasting, a Pagan tradition popular in the British Isles, and one which as seen a sharp resurgence in recent decades; see Robert A. Saunders, "Pagan Places: Towards a Religiogeography of Neopaganism," *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 7 (2013): 786–810.

66 Interview with George R. R. Martin, *Game of Thrones - Season 2* [DVD]: Religions of Westeros, HBO (2012).

67 See Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Women and the Thrones," *New York Review of Books* 60, no. 17 (2013): 40–44. Interestingly, the word "religion" is not mentioned once in any of the five

Image 1. The Godswood of Winterfell. Used with permission.

Westeros is that of the Old Gods. Originally a form of animism practiced by the non-human Children of the Forest (non-humans akin to the *Sídhe* of Irish myth), the faith of the Old Gods was adopted by the First Men, human settlers from Essos. These humans established a form of worship that outwardly resembled Gaulish Druidic practices. In contemporary Westeros, the faith is still kept by those living in the north, including the Stark clan. Religious practice occurs outdoors, typically in a "godswood" where sacred weirwoods grow (see Image 1). This is evidenced in "Winter is Coming" (Season 1, Episode 1), which shows Ned Stark seeking forgiveness for taking the life of a deserting retainer beneath "trees with bark as white as bone and dark red leaves that look a thousand bloodstained hands."[68] In the western coastal extremes, the "reaving and raping" Ironborn worship the Drowned God, an underwater deity, whose priests must be drowned and resuscitated to take their orders. These seafarers do not fear death by drowning as they believe they will enter a glorious submarine "heaven" of mermaids and other supernatural beings (somewhat analogous to the chthonic Otherworld of Celtic myth).

novels of the series.

68 Robert J. Schwalb, *A Song of Ice & Fire RPG: A Game of Thrones Edition* (Seattle: Green Ronin Publishing, 2012), 24.

At the time of narrative, the dominant religion in Westeros is the Faith of the Seven, a comparatively recent import to island. This faith dates back some 6,000 years, arriving with the colonizing Andals, who destroyed many of the godswoods and carried out a near total genocide of the Children of the Forest. Supplanting the Old Gods in most of the country, the religion—symbolized by a seven-pointed star—venerates seven gods, Jungian archetypes of the so-called "One God." The male gods are the Father, Warrior, and Smith; the female gods are the Crone, Mother, and Maiden (strongly reflecting the three aspects of the Triple Goddess of contemporary Wicca).[69] The seventh god is the faceless, deathly, ungendered Stranger. Like Catholicism, there is a hierarchical priesthood of *septons* (male) and *septas* (female), as well as several orders of monks and nuns, and a litany of prescripts to follow (Ned Stark, the unrepentant animist, blithely remarks to his southron wife about the gods of the Faith: "It's your gods with all the rules").[70] Relations between the northern and southern faiths are comparatively amiable, as evidenced by the intermarriage of the Old Gods-worshipping Starks with the Seven-observant Tullys, and the predilection of knights to swear oaths on both the "old gods and new."

The Faith of the Lord of Light, a "vaguely Semitic" belief system with "furious moral absolutism,"[71] possesses a small (but growing) number of followers in Westeros, although it is a common faith on the super-continent of Essos. Its deity, R'hllor (pejoratively known on Westeros as the "Red God"), is the god of heat, light, and life; he is opposed by the Great Other, "the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror." The religion is rooted in ecstatic visions, miracles, and a fear of the night, with a messianic prophecy that a great hero will return bearing a flaming sword. The zealot Melisandre of Asshai (the Red Witch) from the "exotic East,"[72] advisor and priestess to one of the claimants of the Iron Throne, Stannis, is mostly closely associated with the faith in the series.[73] She uses her shadow-binding witch-

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69 See Fry, "The Goddess Ascending."

70 In the novels, there is also the so-called Faith Militant, a Jesuit-like order of priest-soldiers who were disbanded when they posed a threat to temporal rulers (though they reform during the chaotic "clash of kings").

71 Mendelsohn, "The Women and the Thrones," 43.

72 Mendelsohn, "The Women and the Thrones," 40.

73 There is an interesting role reversal in the casting of *Game of Thrones*, given that Sean Bean and Carice van Houten both appeared in the medieval pagan-themed *Black Death* (2010). Van Houten's character Langiva, a purported witch with power to raise the dead and ward off bubonic plague, attempts to defend polytheism and traditional European folk practices against (male-chauvinist) Christianization, embodied in the crusading knight Ulric (Bean). Ultimate-

craft to kill from a distance, ultimately turning Stannis into a "radical devotee" of her religion, part of a larger calculated effort to convert all of Westeros through hierarchical diffusion.[74]

Such obvious engagement with religious themes is what principally separates *Game of Thrones*/SIF from *Lord of the Rings*, despite the frequent comparisons between the two epics. According to one commentator, "the deep, Christianizing sentimentality of the world-view expressed in *Lord of the Rings* is foreign to Martin,"[75] while Martin (a lapsed Catholic) has pointedly critiqued the (fervent) Tolkien for sidestepping a discussion of religion in his epic series: "[T]here's no priesthood, there's no temples; nobody is worshiping anything in Rings."[76] However, both of these authors can be seen as sketching "moral cartographies" through their narratives.[77] Tolkien presents a Manichean world where Western/Christian values win the day against threats emanating from the barbarous oriental periphery;[78] while Martin's imagined realm lacks such moral absolutes, it likewise presents existential threats that emanate from eastern realms. By linking the besieged peoples of Britannia-like Westeros to polytheism and indigenism, however, *Game of Thrones* presents a text which cannot be read as pro-Christian, or even friendly to monotheism.

In a pivotal moment during "The North Remembers" (Season 2, Episode 1), Melisandre demands that Stannis burn the sacred wooden idols of the Seven, therein symbolically severing his subjects' links to their Westerosi faith (see Image 2); Melisandre intones:

> We offer you these false gods. Take them and cast your light upon us for the night is dark and full of terrors. After the long summer, darkness will fall heavy on the world. Stars will bleed. The cold breath of winter will freeze the seas and the dead shall rise in the north.[79]

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ly, Ulric is sacrificed as a martyr for his Christian beliefs and Langiva is exposed as a charlatan (triggering a wave of witch-burning). The film's predictable, pro-Christian plot is remarkable only in its stark contrast with *Game of Thrones*.

74 Andrew Zimmerman Jones, "Of Direwolves and Gods," in *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*, ed. James Lowder (Dallas: Smart Pop, 2012), 116.

75 Mendelsohn, "The Women and the Thrones," 43.

76 Martin quoted in James Hibberd, "*EW* Interview: George R. R. Martin Talks 'A Dance With Dragons'." *Entertainment Weekly*, 12 July 2011, accessed 7 February 2014. http://shelf-life.ew.com/2011/07/12/george-martin-talks-a-dance-with-dragons/

77 See Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

78 See Margaret Sinex, "'Monsterized Saracens,' Tolkien's Haradrim, and Other Medieval 'Fantasy Products'," *Tolkien Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 175–96.

79 The Red Priestess plays on current events in the narrative, obliquely referring to a red

Seeing the desecration of the Faith's idols, the head priest of Dragonstone, Stannis' keep, challenges those gathered: "All you men were named in the light of the Seven? Is this how you treat the gods of your fathers? Are you so eager to spit on your ancestors?"[80] However, it is too late. Like the Saxon pagans whose axis mundi, the Irminsul, was so easily felled by Charlemagne because their gods failed them,[81] so too do the Seven burn and so shall these souls be forced to adopt the new faith.

Such ethnicized treatments of faith resound throughout *Game of Thrones*, and even more so in its source material, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The narrative puts forth a strong critique of the "oriental" nature of Melisandre's faith, while simultaneously linking it to the darker forces of the universe including blood sacrifices and demons. The connection to Abrahamic monotheism is consistently reinforced: this universalist, proselytizing religion of the "East" arrives in Westeros with the sword, seeking to banish all other systems of belief. In her analysis of the Charlemagne-Saxon conflict, religious studies scholar Carole Cusack seems to be channeling *Game of Thrones* when she states, "Monotheism is in essence universalizing and intolerant, where polytheism is local and pluralistically legitimate. When monotheism encounters pluralist beliefs, its instinctual tendency is deem the 'wrong' and to eradicate them."[82] Likewise, followers of R'hllor (the Lord of Light) are described as "instruments" rather than "agents," reflecting the pastor-shepherd dynamic of Levantine religions in opposition to the believer-centric theology of contemporary Paganism. Reflecting radical Christian theology, Melisandre, in the highly-promoted HBO trailer for Season Four, intones, "[t]here is only one hell—the one we live in now." While this statement may seem appropriate given the bloody chaos generated by the "clash of kings," it should not be dismissed so easily in the context in which it is delivered. Like many evangelical Christians, the Red God's faithful seek an end to suffering in this life, an outcome that can only be brought about with the end of the world.

Adding to the allegory, the unflinching righteousness of the Red Faith,

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comet that has filled the sky as well as reports that Westeros's multiyear summer has come to an end, signaling the beginning of an unpredictable period of winter, as well as reports of undead White Walkers.

80 Shortly thereafter, the septon attempts to murder Melisandre by drinking from a poisoned chalice from which he has just taken a draught, but fails as she transmutes the toxin and he dies horribly, further proving her otherworldly powers.

81 See Carole Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission: 'Indigenous' Religion and 'World' Religion in the Early Middle Ages," *Pomegranate* 13, no. 1 (2011): 33–51.

82 Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission," 42.

Image 2. The Burning of the Seven at Dragonstone. Used with permission.

which treats all other beliefs as false and their gods as abominations, evokes parallels with both Christianity and Islam. Conversely, as the story unfolds, the reader/viewer learns more about the allure of the inherently "local," earth-bound faith of the Old Gods, a fact reinforced by the southron Sam Tarly's (John Bradley) "conversion" from the Seven to the Old Gods upon joining the Night's Watch and coming face-to-face with the horrors of the arctic northern reaches. *Game of Thrones* frames this as right and proper, allowing Sam, the seemingly-doomed, corpulent bookworm from the south, to be transformed into an unlikely hero in the north. As the books progress, Martin reveals that the Old Gods watch with "a thousand unseen eyes" and the Children of the Forest are real, not mythical creatures. There is also an inherent condemnation of abandoning autochthonous practices, when the author informs us that the "old gods have no power in the south" due to the felling of the sacred weirwoods millennia ago. Taken collectively, there are powerful lessons to be learned here, not least of which are that the "Old Ways are best" and to "beware of ideas (and people) from foreign shores." While Christian thinker David Lose's assertion that "Martin's universe yields no unambiguous path

to salvation from religion,"[83] it is quite clear that the monotheism of the Red God is to be foresworn.

Pop-Culture Europhilic Polytheism, Mediatization of Religion, and Identity Politics

Contemporary Western Paganism is a vibrant, meaningful, and increasingly accepted belief system in Europe, North America, and the Antipodes. Seen by many as an "indigenous revitalization movement,"[84] certain Pagan paths are embracing identity politics at the local, national, and even global level in an effort to gain greater recognition of the validity of their religion and achieve protections under the law currently afforded other sectarian groups.[85] Concurrently, Pagans engage with a variety of cultural products associated with the (re-)invention of lost traditions and practices, with popular culture being a particularly fecund area for such actions. However, Pagans are far from alone in using media products for such ends, especially those which might be deemed occult. In the words of Christopher Partridge, "[t]he late modern age since the 1960s has witnessed the emergence of a political and cultural context that has proved particularly conducive to the proliferation of broadly esoteric ideas."[86] It is readily apparent that "fantasy entertainment—fiction, television, movies, games—has moved ever closer to the center of mass culture over the past couple of decades,"[87] while scholars are increasingly recognizing the importance of popular culture in shaping religious beliefs and functioning as a medium of dissemination for a variety of non-orthodox spiritual ideas.[88] Visual media is particularly evocative as Paganism scholar Adrian Ivakhiv argues:

> Visual images can move us in this way not because they harbor a mysterious power over us, but because, through carrying and condensing meanings in forms that involve us emotionally, they mobilize a power that is already ours […] in this

[83] David Lose, "The Gospel According to 'Game of Thrones'," *Huffington Post,* 6 June 2013, accessed 8 February 2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-lose/the-gospel-according-to-game-of-thrones_b_3395995.html

[84] Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission," 47.

[85] See Saunders, "Pagan Places."

[86] Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," paper presented at the First International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism, Stockholm University, 27–29 August 2012.

[87] Mendelsohn, "The Women and the Thrones," 42.

[88] See Asprem, and Granholm, "Constructing Esotericisms."

> sense, [visual media are] a form of world-production, but the worlds so produced are neither identical to the world that preceded them nor completely different from it.[89]

There is a particular allure to media products associated with the violent, pagan Dark Ages and the incumbent "role models and value systems" associated with the period.[90] Easily conflated with magic and fantastical creatures, the genre lends itself to those seeking to reinvent the past by establishing new cultural traditions. This is particularly true among those who have rejected not only globalism, but also nationalism, seeing the latter as a Trojan horse for the former given the current trends towards neoliberalism and multiculturalism. Instead, a neo-tribalist model for the creation of new (yet convincingly *authentic*) community is sought. This ideology is particularly strong among certain quarters of Europe's radical right, including many contemporary Pagans from the Heathen and Celticist paths. According to Jacob Christiansen Senholt, "[t]he radical right unanimously, in one form or another, see European pre-Christian traditions as the only real and credible alternative to Christianity and as a form of spirituality that both acts as a bulwark against the 'onslaught of modernity' and at the same time is fulfilling tradition in line with basic European values."[91] Therefore, when popular culture depicts European native traditions[92] in a positive light vis-à-vis (imported) monotheism(s), it is an important development, since media is a perpetual construction site of identity, serving both as a mirror and a forge.[93]

If religion in popular culture is a "reflection" of religion in our own world,[94] and given that many young (and not-so-young) people are looking for new areas of thought and expression, then it is not surprising that "popular culture animates" interest in alternative faiths and identities.[95] An exemplar of this phenomenon is Ale Glad's post on the site "An Ásatrú Blog: Exploring the

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89 Ivakhiv, "Cinema of the Not-Yet," 191–92.

90 Richards, "From Christianity to Paganism," 213.

91 Jacob Christiansen Senholt, "Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 256.

92 See Prudence Jones, "The European Native Tradition," in *Nature Religion Today Paganism in the Modern World*, eds. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 77–88.

93 Kennet Granholm, "The Secular, the Post-Secular, and the Esoteric in the Public Sphere," in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013), 309–29.

94 Zimmerman Jones, "Of Direwolves and Gods," 108.

95 Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary."

Northern Troth."[96] The aforementioned sacrifice of Leif (*Vikings*, Season 1, Episode 7) prompted the author to write a substantive, historical analysis of the concept of "worth," lambasting its current meaning as a "synonym for financial value." The author goes on to make a "speculative" assessment of who in society would represent a greater boon as the sacrifice's "lifeblood would sustain the community in the same way as the lifeblood of any animal." Ultimately, the author completes his thought-experiment in a thankful manner to the show's creators for "shedding light on an ancient custom that we just don't understand today." As an Ásatrúar, or North Germanic Pagan, Glad employs the mediated world of *Vikings* as part of his larger declared project to "help rebuild our faith."[97]

Blogs are a common form of religious expression for contemporary Pagans, as well as a popular zone for fellowship, allowing them to espouse their own ideologies and commune with like-minded individuals. While posted prior to the premiere of *Vikings*, Ásatrúar Glenn Bergen lauds the deeds of the real-life Ragnar Lodbrok, stating, "I honor him on both March 28th, and on whatever date Easter actually falls on in a given year. Two digs at the Christians are always better than one, and Ragnar's exploits I feel warrant it. All Hail, Ragnar Lodbrok!"[98] Given the extant interest in this famous Northman among Heathens, it is not surprising that the community has whole-heartedly adopted *Vikings*. What is more interesting is how those open to other spiritual paths view the narrative, something that creator Michael Hirst had in mind during filming. In an interview, he noted that "[a]s the season goes on, you understand where the gods came from, you understand the attraction of the pagan worldview and the pagan gods. It's interesting for, let's say, a North American, largely Christian audience for the first time to be presented the pagan worldview that they overthrew, that they replaced, and what it meant."[99] As Hirst suggests, his show attempts to challenge accepted notions about faith in the European historical context, visually reifying what historian Michael Strmiska, writing on the

96 Ale Glad, "Human Sacrifice on History's Vikings," *An Ásatrú Blog: Exploring the Northern Troth*, 22 April 2013, accessed 8 February 2014. http://www.asatrublog.com/2013/04/22/human-sacrifice-on-historys-vikings/

97 Glad, "Human Sacrifice on History's Vikings."

98 Glenn Bergen, "Ragnar Lodbrok : History and Legend," *A Follower of the Old Ways*. 27 March 2011, accessed 7 February 2014. http://www.anindependentasatru.com/-blog/ragnar-lodbrok-history-and-legend

99 Hirst quoted in Stacey Harrison, "'Vikings' Get an Epic 9-Part History Channel Makeover," *Zap2It,* 3 March 2013, accessed 7 February 2014. http://blog.zap2it.com/frominside-thebox/2013/03/vikings-get-an-epic-9-part-history-channel-makeover.html

"recovered history" of medieval paganism, labels the "deflation of the grand narrative of Christian supremacy" and confuting the "notion that European civilization is one and the same as European Christianity."[100] Meanwhile, the series breaks down, even reverses, the "imaginal construct" of the pagan as Other.[101] Through allegory, *Game of Thrones* does likewise, but adds an orientalist patina to the discussion, making some of these critiques even more pointed.

The question of religion in *Game of Thrones* as an exposition on contemporary European polytheism/Paganism sparked a lively debate on the popular pagan forum *The Cauldron* (http://ecauldron.com/).[102] Throughout the blog entitled "Religion in Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire,"[103] contributors identify parallels between their own (mostly Wicca-Celtic Reconstructionist) faith and the practices and beliefs associated with the Old Gods and the Seven, while almost unanimously recognizing the Faith of the Lord of Light as Christianity.[104] Several of the bloggers either reported experiences of enthusiasts attempting to replicate the practices of the followers of the Seven or the Old Gods, or predicted that Martin's fabricated faiths would soon follow Jediism, becoming "real world" (albeit invented) religions.[105] In an interesting exchange, Riothamus12 asks stephyjh,

> Do you model your life and philosophy after movies? Religion isn't just some convention you show up to dressed like your favorite character from Lord of The Rings or Dune. Even if you don't subscribe to that point of view, if you got Harry Potter jokes directed at you just for being pagan and believing in magick it might sour your attitude (26 Aug 2013 03:10 AM).

To which, Morag responds, "Yes. TV shows, too. So say we all" (26 Aug 2013 03:20

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100 Michael Strmiska, "The Evils of Christianization," in *Cultural Expressions of Evil and Wickedness: Wrath, Sex, Crime*, ed. Terrie Waddell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 67.

101 See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

102 On another blog, "Dorian the Historian" (2013), has crafted an intricate rendering of *Game of Thrones*/SIF as Ragnarök, suggesting how each character represents some aspect of the mythical Norse apocalypse, prompting an explosion of responses from readers who see the narrative as instructive of how to live at the end of time.

103 Carnelian, "Religion in Game of Thrones/A Song of Ice and Fire," *The Cauldron: A Pagan Forum*, 19 July 2013, accessed 7 February 2014. http://www.ecauldron.com/forum/showthread.php?7344-Religion-in-Game-of-Thrones-A-Song-of-Ice-and-Fire

104 For a description of the Reconstructionist Paganism, see Michael Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 1–54.

105 See, for instance, Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

AM). Riothamus12 retorts,

> To me it says one treats such things as mere entertainment a.k.a. the convention analogy. That is something I don't like anyone doing. I don't worship my Gods to entertain myself I do it because I seek the truth, because I seek wisdom, because I want to do that which is right, and because I want to thank them for what they have already done to guide me. Their rites and them (sic) are to be treated with respect. I find joy in my reverence, but it is a greater joy. I treat these things with the seriousness they deserve (26 Aug 2013 03:49 AM).

Jack, who prompted the debate, chimes in, "That you still think that says to me that you aren't actually listening to what people are saying. It isn't that religion is entertainment. It's that entertainment can inform religion" (26 Aug 2013 03:56 AM), calmly reflecting the idea that film, television, and other visual media represent a "semiotic landscape […] a human-made, cultural construct of systematically related signs and sign systems."[106] A flurry of follow-up responses were dedicated to users sharing and sourcing the religious and philosophical fundaments to which they adhere, including Pagan-friendly axioms from *Dune*, *Babylon 5* (1993–1998), and *Gladiator* (2000).

As many viewers and critics have suggested, *Game of Thrones*, with its glorification of "indigenous" (*read* European) paganism against "Eastern" (*read* Middle Eastern) monotheism thus shares a great deal with the successful reboot of *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009). The new *Battlestar Gallactica* addressed religious themes by pitting space-travelling humans, who practice a diasporic form of Græco-Roman paganism, against genocidal androids who are "devoutly monotheistic and deeply unforgiving of alternative beliefs."[107] The timing and political content of the series resulted in reviewer/audience framing of the biomechanical Cylons as al Qaeda "stand-ins,"[108] thus—by default—making the humans equivalents of denizens of the European(ized) "West." If this reading is employed, *Battlestar Galactica* can be seen as similarly promoting Paganism against the homogenizing (or in the case of *Battlestar*

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106 Jeff Hopkins, "A Mapping of Cinematic Place: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis) representation," in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film*, eds. Stuart Aitken and Leo E. Zonn (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 47.

107 Lynnette R. Porter, David Lavery, and Hillary Robson, *Finding Battlestar Galactica: An Unauthorized Guide* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2008), 235.

108 Iver B. Neumann, "'Religion in the Global Sense': The Relevance of Religious Practices for Political Community in *Battlestar Galactica* and Beyond," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 3 (2011): 387–401.

Galactica, genocidal) force of monotheism. While it may be that the Europhilic polytheism theme in popular culture proves fleeting, *Vikings* and *Game of Thrones* are not the only examples of the trend. Building as it does on the "teen-witch craze" of the 1990s, this shift towards adult manifestations of Western esotericism and the occult seems—in hindsight—somewhat predictable when correlated with shifting generational tastes associated with music and other forms of popular culture.[109] Reflecting current shifts in culture overall, such developments are not trivial given the increasing use of mass media as pliable tool for inventing traditions.

In addition to providing a critical examination of the political and religious content in the highly successful television series *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*, this article has attempted to demonstrate that popular-cultural treatments of European polytheism (Paganism) are shifting. Once unthinkable in Hollywood, pagans are now emerging as heroes in narratives which pit them against monotheistic adversaries, who range from villainous (Aelle) to diabolical (Melisandre) to annihilationist (Cylons). I have argued that there are a number of reasons for this transformation: cultural trends associated with primitivist backlash and/or Europhilic identity that afford market space to such new narrative directions; growing interest in non-orthodox spirituality (including contemporary Paganism) among the generation born after 1968; and the rising importance of popular culture and new media as zones for the transmission of heterodox religious ideas.

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109 See Granholm, "Ritual Black Metal."

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