

## Virtual Special Issue: Folklore, Religion and Contemporary Spirituality

*Marion Bowman*, podcast read by Juliette Wood

For this Virtual Special Issue on Folklore, Religion and Contemporary Spirituality edited by Marion Bowman, a range of articles has been selected which exemplify the complex interrelationships between folklore and religion, the study of folklore and the study of religion, and the importance of folklore in both the formation and understanding of certain aspects of contemporary spirituality.

From these six articles we get some flavour of the myriad nuances, multiple histories and contextual detail that must be taken into account when trying to understand and analyse religion as it is lived. The reality and diversity of religion resides in “the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion,” as Don Yoder elegantly put it (Yoder 1974, 14). However, too often “popular” or “folk” beliefs, customs, material culture and practices outside a narrowly reified concept of “official religion” have been devalued or dismissed as quaint, mistaken, superstitious or deviant, not simply by polemicists assuming right is on their side, but by scholars of religion. As Norman Primiano has commented, however, “One of the hallmarks of the study of religion by folklorists has been their attempt to do justice to belief and lived experience” (Primiano 1995, 41). Particular aspects of folklore studies which complement the study of both “traditional” religion and contemporary/“alternative” spirituality include the disinclination to privilege written over oral forms; the recognition that belief spills over into every aspect of behaviour; and the appreciation of the dynamic nature of tradition, characterised by Henry Glassie as “the creation of the future out of the past” (Glassie 1995, 395). Folklorists have long researched contexts where narratives and worldviews are articulated, and rituals evolve, outside formal structures; where material

culture is valued as a means of expression and transmission; where myths are significant and the power of place is stressed. Historians, archaeologists, scholars of religion and other disciplines have increasingly realised that folklore and cultural tradition are necessary ingredients in comprehending “the big picture” in a variety of contexts.

Historian Ronald Hutton’s article “Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition” traces the twentieth century development of the eight festivals of the modern ritual calendar (midsummer and midwinter solstices, spring and autumn equinoxes, and four quarter days), widely believed by many contemporary Druids, Wiccans, and Pagans of various types to be “ancient” and/or “Celtic.” Highlighting the role of folklore (and indeed folklorists) in this process, Hutton usefully outlines key developments in contemporary Paganism(s) and helps to set the ritual scene for some of the other articles in this collection. The Wheel of the Year is now a reality in contemporary practice, regardless of its origins. Above all, however, Hutton’s article is an exploration of tradition, and different assumptions about and definitions of that term. As he points out, in 1893 Joseph Jacobs suggested in *Folk-Lore* (the earlier title of *Folklore*) that understanding how a particular tradition originated, developed and disseminated should be a prime objective for folklorists, while later folklorists (contrary to popular usage) have stressed that tradition is dynamic, creative, ever changing. Hutton contends that understanding the nature of tradition in modern society (in this case through the case study of modern Pagan festivals) “has implications for a broader appreciation of the nature of modernity, and its relationship with older ideas and customs, and of the changing place of religion in western culture.”

Writing on “‘Folklore’ and ‘Popular’ Religion in Britain during the Middle Ages,” Carl Watkins highlights the need to consider “religious culture” as an organic whole, and the importance of contextualisation. Pointing to the pitfalls of “fencing off” folklore as a special, separate object of study, he sees in the case studies he presents a spectrum of beliefs and behaviours that are highly context sensitive, rather than a series of easily

labelled “cultural compartments.” Watkins also cautions that we need to pay attention to the cultural formation of authors as well as that of the community described. This advice is relevant not only for accounts of belief, narrative and practice in the middle ages, as Torunn Selberg shows in her study of how new/alternative religiosity is narrated in Norway by outsiders and insiders. She analyses how terms such as “superstition” and “tradition” are used in discourse to dismiss or authenticate new trends, depending on the spiritual and cultural orientations of commentators and practitioners. Selberg points to the ambiguous and multivocal nature of language used in relation to the past, superstition, and tradition, in attacks on and the defence of religious multiplicity in contemporary Norway, but she situates this phenomenon in a much broader historical context.

Three of the articles in this Virtual Special Issue relate to significant places: Iona, Glastonbury and a variety of archaeological sites that have become “sacred sites” for contemporary Pagans. The ways in which people narrate places, particularly perceptions of their past(s) and their present significance, have a huge impact upon behaviour at and expectations of such sites.

Rosemary Power’s article focuses on the island of Iona, now a place of iconic significance for a wide spectrum of people with interests in contemporary Celtic spirituality (which encompasses Christianity, Druidry, and various forms of non-aligned spirituality). Power traces the intriguing story of Iona’s attractions for those involved in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century Celtic Revival, the important role of Church of Scotland minister and advocate of social justice, George MacLeod, who founded The Iona Community in 1938, and the ways in which MacLeod and the Iona Community creatively used myth, ritual, material culture, innovative liturgy, music and imagination to self-consciously “Celticise.” To some extent this has had unintended consequences, for a great variety of people now travel to Iona with expectations of encountering ancient and “authentic” Celtic religiosity.

Glastonbury's Holy Thorn Ceremony provides an example of how calendar custom can be used polemically in a religiously contested environment. The Ceremony draws upon the myth that Joseph of Arimathea brought Christianity to Glastonbury shortly after the resurrection of Christ (making Glastonbury "the cradle of English Christianity'), one "proof" being the Glastonbury Thorn which flowers twice a year, in spring and around Christmas. The custom of sending sprigs of the Christmas flowering thorn to the monarch was created in 1929 by Glastonbury's Anglican vicar, Lionel Smithett Lewis, a passionate champion of Glastonbury's vernacular Christian legends, in contrast to the his contemporary, the Dean of Wells, who was dismissive of the stories—demonstrating that "official" and "unofficial" religion are not neat compartments. The article demonstrates how the tradition (regarded popularly as ancient and immutable) has changed over the years, and how it has, to some extent, taken on new meaning in the context of Glastonbury's increasing spiritual pluralism, but it has nevertheless succeeded in helping to perpetuate the Joseph of Arimathea legend in Glastonbury.

Robert Wallis and Jenny Blain point to the complexity and diversity of Pagan understandings of and interactions with archaeological sites such as Avebury and Stonehenge, both in relation to modern Pagan "adaptations" of what are perceived to be folkloric traditions, and the development of "new folklores" of Pagan sacred sites. They outline ways in which varied Pagan (re)interpretations of archaeological sites, conceptions of "appropriate" ritual activity and seasonal celebratory behaviours have an impact upon the sites themselves and can involve negotiations (and on occasion conflict) with custodians and other users of the sites. What emerges strongly is the "restoring" or "restorying" of such sites as active ritual milieus with contemporary spiritual significance.

We are confident that you will find this Virtual Special Issue on Folklore, Religion and Contemporary Spirituality stimulating and valuable, in its demonstration of the vital, integrated role of folklore in religion and

contemporary spirituality in a variety of contexts. Two of the articles selected for this virtual edition are from *Folklore* 114, no. 3, 2003, the focus of which was religion, so if you have enjoyed this selection you might wish to look at other papers in that volume. We also provide a list of "Suggested Further Reading" from the *Folklore* Archive which includes multi-disciplinary articles on a range of topics, historical periods, geographical areas (Scandinavia, Hungary and Canada for example) and modes of transmission of folklore in relation to religion. There is much to explore in the fascinating territory of folklore, religion and contemporary spirituality.

### *References Cited*

Glassie, Henry. "Tradition." *Journal of American Folklore* 108 (1995): 395-412.

Primiano, Leonard Norman. "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife." *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (1995): 37-56.

Yoder, Don. "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion." *Western Folklore* 33, no 1 (1974): 2-15.