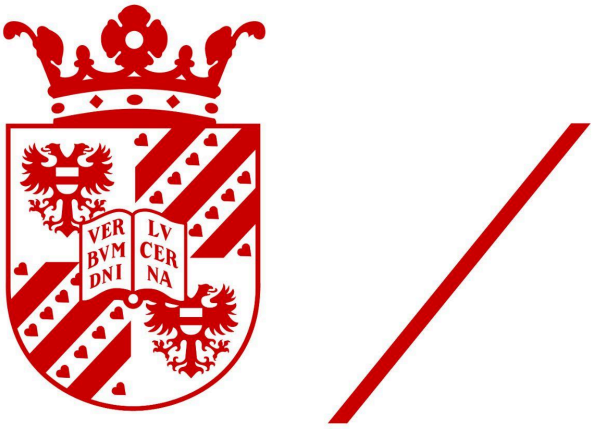
Reimagining the Sacred in the Anthropocene

Contemporary Paganism and Witchcraft and the possibility of an Ecological Conscious Narrative



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1. Introduction

> *"Because the changes to the earth's ecosystem are human-wrought, we are left wondering who we are, and how some of us could have so wrongly interpreted the relationship between nature and culture to cause such disruption. If what we were told was good has suddenly become bad, how are we to think about ourselves and our values? If we are destroying the earth that sustains us and all of sentient life, what does it even mean to be good? The shock to our self-understanding is momentous."*
>
> - Arianne Conty (2023, p. 19)

After Nobel Prize-winner Paul Crutzen introduced the term in 2000, a number of Earth scientists have argued that the *Anthropocene* should be recognized as the official successor to the Holocene[1]. The Anthropocene marks a new phase in Earth's history in which natural processes and human activities have become so deeply intertwined that the future of the planet is inseparable from the actions of humanity and vice versa[2]. It has brought about a shift that transformed our understanding of the relationship between humanity and the natural world[3].

In this light, and amid "the shock to our self-understanding", the need for an ecologically conscious worldview is more urgent than ever. A worldview that places humans alongside nature, instead of above it, moving to an ecocentric worldview instead of an anthropocentric one. An anthropocentric worldview places humans at the center of value and moral concern. Nature is often seen primarily in terms of its usefulness to humans, such as resources to be managed, controlled, or consumed[4]. An ecocentric worldview, on the other hand, sees the natural world as a whole and a central focus. It emphasizes the importance of all living and non-living elements of the Earth, not just their utility to humans.[5] Turning such an ecocentric worldview into words remains a challenge in itself, however. The introduction of the Anthropocene has sparked a search for a narrative capable of reimagining the

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[1] Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and Francios Gemenne, "Chapter 1: Thinking the Antropocene," in: *The Antropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*. (New York: New York, Routledge, 2015) 1.
[2] Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Will Steffen, and Paul Crutzen. "The New World of the Anthropocene," *Environmental Science and Technology Viewpoint* 44, no. 7, (2010) 2231.
[3] Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil and Francios Gemenne, "Chapter 1: Thinking the Antropocene," 2-3.
[4] Andrew Brennan, and Y. S. Lo Norva, "Environmental Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2024 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/ethics-environmental/.
[5] Andrew Brennan, and Y. S. Lo Norva, "Environmental Ethics,"

human–nature relationship and, crucially, of reshaping our understanding of reality. What that narrative looks like, however, depends on whom you ask.

Conty explores in her work *Grounding God: Religious Responses to the Anthropocene,* a range of ontologies that might re-enchant the human-nature relationship with meaning, proposing a new worldview that might be the answer to our search for a new narrative. She starts by examining the potential root of the current problems we now face, proposing that Western Modernity has separated humans from nature and has positioned them as its masters. This view relies on dualistic thinking: mind over body, culture over nature, and humanity over the earth. Western Modernity emphasizes progress, economic growth, and resource exploitation, which has resulted in the crisis we now face today[6].

Conty argues that the solution to this problem can be found in the field of religion. She follows Walter Benjamin's lead in turning to 'other ontologies that have been buried from view and digging them up to see if they might provide *messianic* potential for envisioning a different and open future'[7]. She proposes that what we now need is a new cosmological imagination[8], a way of seeing the world that can guide a more sustainable and relational way of living.

Religious Studies scholar Sideris likewise turns to religion, but approaches it from another perspective. Instead of examining Western Modernity, she investigates whether scientific narratives such as the *Epic of Evolution* and the *New Genesis* movement are fit to tell the new story. These movements attempt to inspire ecological consciousness by framing scientific knowledge in mythic terms. Sideris questions whether these "eco-myths," despite their intentions, can truly foster the emotional and ethical transformation needed for deep environmental care.[9]

She explains myth as a narrative framework that shapes how humans understand and relate to the world[10]. For Sideris, privileging scientific knowledge over lived, embodied experiences of nature is insufficient to ignite the kind of ecological passion these new myths aim to cultivate[11]. Instead, she argues for a "return" to religious myths: symbolic stories that

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[6] Arianne Conty, "Introduction: One Earth, Many Worlds," *Grounding God : Religious Responses to the Anthropocene*. SUNY Series on Religion and the Environment / Harold Coward, Editor. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023) 8.
[7] Arianne Conty, "Introduction: One Earth, Many Worlds," 2.
[8] Arianne Conty, "Introduction: One Earth, Many Worlds," 3.
[9] Lisa H. Sideris, "Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 9 (2015) 148-149.
[10] Lisa H. Sideris, "Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age," 139-141.
[11] Lisa H. Sideris, "Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age," 148.

convey moral and metaphysical insights. Something that tells a story and, in doing so, shapes our perception of reality.

This thesis builds on such insights from Conty and Sideris by examining a contemporary religious tradition that has received relatively little academic attention in environmental discourse: contemporary Western Paganism and witchcraft[12]. Often grouped under the umbrella of "nature-based spirituality," these traditions emphasize the sacredness of nature, a sense of wonder toward the Earth, and a deep awareness of interconnectedness. They challenge the modern view of nature as passive or mechanistic and offer relational ways of understanding the world.

This research examines whether the ontologies and cosmologies grounded in Paganism and witchcraft can contribute to the kind of *religious* narrative that Sideris and Conty call for: one that supports an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric worldview. Given these notions, I will evaluate whether contemporary Western Paganism and witchcraft can help communicate a narrative that shifts from a human-centred to an earth-centred way of seeing the world. Particularly, one that encourages humans to evaluate their relationship with nature. This research does not offer a definitive recommendation but instead seeks to provide an exploratory examination, from which the conclusion will emerge.

Although nature-based spiritualities have frequently been associated with ecological awareness, it remains a relatively novel line of inquiry to examine whether their underlying ontologies and cosmologies can function as narratives in the way discussed by Sideris and Conty. These traditions are often decentralized, pluralistic, and grounded in animistic beliefs[13], which resist easy systematization and acceptance. However, it is these characteristics that may be essential to their relevance. Their emphasis on the sacredness of nature, their interpretation of myth, and their relational embeddedness with other agents could offer a compelling starting point for a new *ecologically conscious narrative*. A narrative that adopts an ecocentric perspective on the human–nature relationship and seeks to establish a new ethic of care for the environment. This new narrative may help address the problems identified by Conty and Sideris concerning the abstract and universal claims often found in

[12] Paganism is capitalized, as explained in section two of this thesis, because it refers to a recognized religious identity. In contrast, witchcraft is not capitalized, as it denotes a general practice rather than a formal religion or organization. The terms witchcraft and witch refer to the practice itself, while Paganism and Pagan refer to a religious tradition. Further discussion can be found in section two.

[13] As discussed in both York, Michael. *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* and Gaskill, Malcolm. *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*.

scientific or non-religious worldviews. The goal of this research is to better understand how Paganism and witchcraft might contribute to the broader discussion of environmentalism.

This thesis thus aims to answer the research question: *To what extent can the ontologies and cosmologies of contemporary Western Paganism and Witchcraft serve as an ecological consciousness narrative for the Anthropocene, when evaluated against the criteria of cultural plurality, scientific compatibility, wonder, and spiritual significance?* I aim to answer this question by analyzing the ontological assumptions regarding nature, humanity, and the divine within these traditions, and by exploring how their cosmologies shape understandings of the human–nature relationship. Before outlining my approach to the research question, I will briefly clarify the meanings of *ontology* and *cosmology*.

Ontology and cosmology are philosophical terms that refer, respectively, to the study of being, existence, and reality[14], and to the study of the origin and structure of the universe[15]. Here, "ontological assumptions" refer to implicit beliefs about the kinds of entities that exist and how they are situated in relation to humans and the natural world. These assumptions are often embedded in a tradition's cosmology. For instance, in *The Spiral Dance*, a key text in contemporary Neopaganism by Starhawk, she writes: 'Love for life in all its forms is the basic ethic of Witchcraft. Witches are bound to honor and respect all living things, and to serve the life force.'[16]. This statement reflects an ontological and cosmological perspective in which all forms of life are expressions of a unified and sacred life force. Within this framework, the Earth is not merely material but is also seen as divine, interconnected, and worthy of reverence. This idea stems in turn from Pagan cosmology in which divinity is not transcendent but immanent, present in all beings and forces of nature[17].

Before exploring the ontologies and cosmologies of contemporary Paganism and witchcraft, this thesis first contextualizes these traditions within their contemporary Western expressions. By drawing on the work of scholars such as Michael Strmiska, Owen Davies, and Malcolm Gaskill, I outline how terms like "Pagan" and "witch" have evolved from historical insults into reclaimed identities, and how Paganism has emerged as a diverse,

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[14] P. M. Simons, "ontology," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 2, 2025. https://www.britannica.com/topic/ontology-metaphysics.

[15] Christopher Smeenk, and George Ellis, "Philosophy of Cosmology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/cosmology/.

[16] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 20th Anniversary Ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999) 49.

[17] Dennis D. Carpenter, "Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview," In: *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*. edited by James R. Lewis, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) 50-53.

modern religious movement. This section also clarifies the conceptual distinction between Paganism as a religion and witchcraft as a practice. This contextualization offers a framework for understanding the origins and development of these nature-based spiritualities within contemporary thought. Gaining this background is essential for the discussion of the core principles of Paganism and witchcraft in section four, as well as for the analysis presented in section five.

Building on this, section two turns to the broader question of how narratives, particularly those with religious or mythic qualities, can reshape our understanding of the human-nature relationship in the context of the Anthropocene. This part of the thesis develops a conceptual framework for what an ecologically conscious narrative must entail to be meaningful. Drawing on scholars such as Kevin Schilbrack, Clifford Geertz, Lisa Sideris, and J. Baird Callicott, I show that religion and myth provide structures that influence how people perceive reality. From this analysis, four criteria emerge: the narrative must be culturally inclusive, aligned with scientific understanding, capable of inspiring genuine wonder, and infused with spiritual significance. This framework will serve as a tool for answering the research question.

To assess whether contemporary Western Paganism and witchcraft can function as an ecological consciousness narrative, section three identifies three central themes that structure their ontologies and cosmologies: nature and animism, conceptions of divinity, and the cyclical nature of time. Although the specific content of these themes varies across the diverse Pagan approaches discussed in section one, their presence is consistent across regions. Drawing on both academic sources and practitioner materials, this section illustrates how these themes inform a worldview where nature is sacred, divinity is immanent, and time is experienced as a series of interconnected cycles. These insights help showcase how Paganism and witchcraft conceptualize reality, the divine, and human experience with the world.

The final section applies the four evaluative criteria developed in section three to the central themes of contemporary Paganism and witchcraft. It demonstrates that these traditions offer valuable insights, particularly through their sacralization of nature and their capacity to evoke a sense of wonder. Although their cultural specificity and decentralized structure may limit their accessibility as a broadly applicable ecological narrative, they nevertheless offer a compelling reimagining of nature's sacredness, particularly one that contributes to a richer, more meaningful way of articulating the human–nature relationship.

Beyond its academic significance, this inquiry holds social relevance. Contemporary Pagan and Witchcraft movements are growing[18] and increasingly shaping how individuals and communities engage with ecological issues. By examining their ontologies, scholars can expand the concept of religious narrative and explore alternative ways of reimagining the human-nature relationship.

Ultimately, I argue that the emphasis on interconnectedness and the immanence of nature within Paganism and witchcraft positions these traditions as promising contributors to the formation of a new ecological conscious narrative. At the same time, core elements such as animism and polytheism, which are central to many Pagan and witchcraft practices, may encounter resistance within broader religious and cultural contexts, particularly because they diverge from dominant monotheistic and scientific worldviews.

This thesis does not claim that Pagan and witchcraft traditions provide the only viable ontological framework for an ecologically conscious narrative. Rather, it demonstrates that these traditions contain conceptual elements that can foster a renewed understanding of the human–nature relationship. These elements may serve as starting points for telling a new story about humanity's place within the natural world.

2. Reclaiming the Old, Reimagining the New: Paganism and Witchcraft

To begin with, as Davies emphasizes, 'it is crucial to stress right from the start that until the 20th century people did not call themselves pagans to describe the religion they practiced.'[19]. The term "Pagan" as we use it today is therefore a relatively modern construct. Rather than representing a direct continuation of ancient polytheistic religions, contemporary Paganism consists of revivals, reconstruction, and creative reimaginings. This modern reinterpretation raises the longstanding question of whether Paganism qualifies as a religion. The answer to this debate hinges largely on how one defines "religion" and the context in which the question is asked.

Michael York argues that Paganism should be recognized as a religion[20]. One clear advantage of this classification is that it grants the tradition legitimacy and places it on equal footing with established religions, such as Judaism and Islam, affirming its capacity to offer meaningful worldviews. However, this label also introduces a tension: associating Paganism

[18] Michael F. Strmiska, "1. Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives," in: *Modern Pagnaism in World Cultures*. Michael Strmiska (eds.), (CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 1-2, 41-46.
[19] Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction,* (Oxford, Oxon, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011) 16.
[20] Micheal York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003) 1.

with the term "religion" links it to institutionalized and hierarchical faiths like Christianity. Let this be a kind of structure many Pagans deliberately reject[21]. For some, this association stands in contrast to the decentralized, fluid, and experiential nature of contemporary Pagan practice.

Nonetheless, for the purpose of this thesis, I will follow York's broader definition of religion as 'a shared apprehension of the world, humanity, and the supernatural and their interrelation.'[22]. Within this framework, Paganism qualifies as a religion, as it offers its own interpretations of these dimensions. That said, this definitional debate lies beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, the next section turn to the historical evolution of the term "pagan" itself.

The word "pagan" was first used by early Christians to describe people in the countryside who followed old polytheistic religions, as opposed to those who had converted to Christianity in the cities. It was never a name people used for themselves, but rather an insult that suggested ignorance, superstition, or false beliefs. As Christianity spread across Europe, many local, nature-based, and polytheistic traditions were pushed aside or absorbed.[23] Similarly, witchcraft became associated with evil and heresy, particularly during the European witch hunts between the 15th and 18th centuries. During this time, thousands, mostly women, were killed for supposedly doing harmful magic or making pacts with the devil.[24] How, then, did Paganism, once a derogatory term, become redefined and reclaimed in modern contexts?

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, romantic and scholarly interest in pre-Christian tradition began to rise. As Davies remarks, there was "a lot of talk" about Paganism during this period, although it was typically regarded as 'a memory, survival, or abstract idea.'[25]. It was not until the 20th century that individuals began to consciously identify as Pagans, a shift symbolically marked by the capitalization of the "P." Modern Paganism began to take shape as a distinct religious movement in the mid-20th century, most notably through Wicca, which emerged through the work of Gerald Gardner in the 1940s and 50s.[26]

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[21] Michael F. Strmiska, "1. Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives," 7.
[22] Micheal York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 1.
[23] Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction,* 43.
[24] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 20-26.
[25] Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction,* 117.
[26] Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction,* 107-108.

Contemporary Paganism, often referred to as Neo-Paganism[27], encompasses diverse traditions including Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry, Goddess Spirituality, and many more, each with its mythologies, deities, and ritual forms. Some traditions, like Romuva in Lithuania[28] or Ukrainian Native Faith[29], root themselves in specific ethnic and cultural heritages. Others take a more eclectic or cosmopolitan approach, drawing inspiration from multiple sources based on personal resonance.

Throughout this discussion, the terms Paganism and witchcraft may appear interchangeable; however, it is important to clarify the distinction before examining their underlying ontologies and cosmologies. Paganism is typically understood as a religious or spiritual framework, whereas witchcraft is more accurately described as a practice or orientation. Witchcraft is notoriously difficult to define, particularly those unfamiliar with its symbolic or cultural context. As Gaskill observes, 'Definitions of witchcraft vary, but dictionaries don't really explain why; we have to dig deeper into actual experience. It may be that witchcraft's many forms resist pithy description because they existed primarily as sensations and images, retained unconsciously or subvocally'[30].

Historically, acts considered deviant or "heathen" were often branded as witchcraft. The accusation carried religious, moral, and political implications, particularly in a Christianized worldview that equated deviation from orthodoxy with consorting with the devil. One example is the case of Elizabeth Mortlock, a healer in post-Reformation England who used Catholic prayers in her remedies[31]. Her reading them in English, "the vulgar tongue," made her healing abilities devilish. Though she and her patients believed she was doing good, the Church considered her spiritually deviant and labeled her a witch.

As Gaskill further notes, 'its ontological status is volatile, the picture kaleidoscopic.'[32] Witchcraft often appears to mediate between opposites: life and death, natural and supernatural, good and evil. It is a symbolic structure through which people historically have interpreted the mysteries and transformations of life. The figure of the witch symbolizes the tensions and oppositions that individuals must navigate to make sense of the human

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[27] Most practitioners as explained by York in his work *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a world religion* prefer to identify as "Pagan", while other adopt the term "Neo-Pagan" to indicate the movement as a new religion and to distinguish from the pre-Christian denotes of the term "Paganism". However, most practitioners prefer the term "Pagan" which is the one I will be using throughout the thesis.

[28] Michael Strimska, and Vilius Dudzila, "7. Romuva: Lithuanian Paganism in Lithuania and America," in: *Modern Pagnaism in World Cultures*. Michael Strmiska (eds.), (CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 241.

[29] Adrian Ivakhiv, "The Revival of UIkrianian Native Faith," in: *Modern Pagnaism in World Cultures*. Michael Strmiska (eds.), (CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 209.

[30] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, 27.

[31] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, 27-29.

[32] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, 11.

experience.[33] In this sense, witchcraft can be understood both as a set of practices and as a worldview. One that, particularly in recent decades, has become closely intertwined with contemporary Paganism.

In this section, I examined the historical development of Paganism and witchcraft, arguing that Paganism can be understood as a religion, while witchcraft is more accurately described as a practice or orientation that resists fixed definition. I now turn to the third section, which outlines the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis in the remainder of this thesis.

3. The Four Criteria for an Ecological Conscious Narrative

As discussed in the introduction, the Anthropocene calls for a new worldview, particularly one that is conveyed through a narrative possessing mythical functions. Even in this single sentence, there is much to unpack. What does it mean for a narrative to serve a mythical function? And what key chapters must this so-called "ecological conscious narrative" contain to effectively reshape our understanding of the relationship between humans and nature?

To begin exploring these questions, what is the context in which the idea of a "religious narrative" operates as discussed by Conty and Sideris? This concept does not refer to familiar religious stories, such as the account of Moses parting the Red Sea for the Israelites, or the Hindu tale of *Kurma Avatar*, in which gods and demons collaborate to obtain the nectar of immortality. While these are indeed religious narratives, they are not necessarily what is meant in the context of environmentalism. Rather, the term denotes the idea that, instead of relying *solely* on science to articulate a story about the human relationship with nature, the field of religion might offer valuable insights for crafting such a narrative. There are criteria to this idea that will be addressed later, but for now, let us consider why myth and storytelling are vital to the formation of worldviews and the construction of reality.

3.1 Myth-making and Reality

Kevin Schilbrack, in his work *Myth and Metaphysics*, argues that myths should not be dismissed as symbolic fictions or mere literary embellishments. Instead, they should be recognized as expressions of metaphysical models that frame reality and guide human action[34]. When Schilbrack writes that "myths provide models," he means that 'they provide

[33] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, 112.
[34] Kevin Schilbrack, "Myth and Metaphysics," in: in *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*. ed. Schilbrack, Kevin. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002) 3-4.

metaphoric images through which one comes to understand diverse aspects of the world'[35]. Myths, in his view, provide guidance for making sense of fundamental human experiences such as death, suffering, and obligation.

Schilbrack builds his argument on Clifford Geertz's conception of myth as functioning simultaneously as a model *of* reality as well as a model *for* reality[36]. That is, myths both reflect an existing perception of the world and help shape a new reality in turn. This interplay between being influenced by the world and showing alternative realities illustrates the power of myth to operate on both descriptive and prescriptive levels.

The idea that myths express metaphysical models can also be found in Geertz's definition of religion. According to him, religion provides an "ethos to a worldview". The metaphysical dimension of religion 'objectivizes moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the imposed conditions of life implicit in a world with a particular structure, as mere common sense given the unalterable shape of reality.'[37]. In this sense, metaphysics is not an abstract notion but a core component of how religion helps to frame human values and perceptions.

This connection between religion, myth, and metaphysics is why Schilbrack insists that myths be regarded as more than just stories. As he puts it, 'to interpret a myth metaphysically is to say that the myth provides a cognitive framework for understanding reality as such.'[38] From this perspective, myths are supported with metaphysical properties that align with the very definition of religion as proposed by Geertz. Understanding the connection between myth, narrative, and religion helps explain why it is valuable to explore a new ecologically conscious narrative that reimagines the relationship between humans and nature through a religious lens.

The authors of the article *Climate Change and Religion as Global Phenomena* also emphasize the importance of religion in environmental discourse, arguing that it plays a vital role in dismantling the entrenched nature–culture divide characteristic of Western Modernity. They identify four key reasons for this: (1) religions shape the worldviews of believers, which can inspire climate activism; (2) many individuals respond to the moral authority embedded in religious teachings; (3) religious institutions possess both economic means and organizational infrastructure; and (4) religion has the capacity to foster social cohesion and

[35] Kevin Schilbrack, "Myth and Metaphysics," 4.
[36] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (NewYork: Basic Books, 1973) 93-94, 95, 123.
[37] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.
[38] Kevin Schilbrack, "Myth and Metaphysics," 4.

mobilize collective action[39]. This article concisely outlines what it means for religion to offer a meaningful response to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. While the authors primarily focus on existing religious worldviews and their cosmologies, their analysis also highlights why a *narrative* with religious or mythic characteristics may now be more important than ever. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that thinkers such as Callicott, Conty, and Sideris have chosen to argue for narratives grounded in religious traditions. In doing so, they are participating in the creation of a new mythos, particularly one that might be capable of shifting our view on nature.

3.2 Key Features

Having clarified the role of myths in shaping reality and reimagining the human-nature relationship, I now turn to a more focused examination of what scholars mean by a "new narrative for the Anthropocene". The following section outlines the key criteria that this new ecologically conscious narrative must at least account for. Whether the existing literature is correct in its assumptions about what such a narrative should include is not the focus here. Instead, by drawing from the works of Callicott, Conty, and Sideris, I will identify the main elements they highlight and construct a framework that can be applied in the fifth section of this thesis. The central question at hand is: what must this narrative, at a minimum, account for?

The first requirement is that the narrative must function across diverse cultures. As Callicott writes, 'while we inhabit many cultural worlds – the Confucian world, the Dreamtime world, the Christian world – we also inhabit one ecologically seamless biosphere, one planet, washed by one ocean, enveloped in one atmosphere. We are many and also one.'[40] In other words, this narrative must be adaptable to multiple cultural contexts while also resonating with a shared human experience. This does not imply the existence of a single, universal truth, but rather acknowledges that our shared existence on one planet creates common interests that transcend cultural boundaries.

Conty makes a similar point in her critique of Western assumptions about the world. She challenges the notion of a singular, objective worldview by asserting that 'there is one

[39] Robin Globus Veldman, Andrew Szasz, and Randolph Haluza-Delay. "Climate Change and Religion as Global Phenomena." In: *How the World's Religions Are Responding to Climate Change: Social Scientific Investigations*, edited by Robin Globus Veldman, Andrew Szasz, and Randolph Haluza-DeLay, (New York: Routledge 2014a) 309.

[40] J. Baird Calicott, "Myth and Environmental Philosophy," in*: Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*. ed. Schilbrack, Kevin. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002) 172.

earth, inhabited by multiple worlds, only some of them human.'[41] Both Callicott and Conty critique the dominance of Western modern thought and its legacy of assuming a single, universal worldview. As Callicott puts it, 'for a mythic grand narrative to be genuinely grand, it must be relatively comprehensive; it must take into account the full range of relevant human experience.'[42] It seems, then, that an ecologically conscious narrative must speak to the human experience, engage with the natural world as an integral part of Earth's system, and be capable of resonating across diverse cultural contexts. In short, the first criterion is that the narrative must reflect a diversity of lived human experiences and encompass not only the human world but also the natural world.

Second, the narrative must not contradict the foundational principles of science. While Sideris is critical of attempts to craft an *eco-myth* rooted solely in science, this does not imply that science should be excluded from the narrative. On the contrary, science should be positioned alongside the narrative as a source of knowledge about the world. Sideris investigates, in her chapter *A Comprehensive Naturalized Ethic,* how we can take nature seriously and whether we should follow an ethic directly derived from evolutionary and ecological considerations[43]. She argues that a comprehensive naturalized ethic should draw on elements of Darwinian natural science as well as theological orientations'[44]. She does this by considering Leopold's work, which has described a form of *land ethic*.

Land ethic 'aims at maintaining the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community,'[45] without attempting to conform this community to specifically human moral sensibilities. The notion of interdependence in land ethics aligns with both Darwinian and theocentric perspectives, though for different reasons. From a Darwinian standpoint, interconnections in nature are shaped through intricate webs of competition and struggle; processes that often entail death for individual organisms. Likewise, theo-ecologians acknowledge that natural processes do not always lead to beneficial or desirable outcomes, nor 'can conflicts between individuals and communities be fully harmonized'[46]. Even theo-ecologists reject the notion that nature is purely good or intrinsically balanced, showing that the relationship between humans and the natural world is one of love and chaos. Both standpoints consider the interconnection between humans and nature, but relate it differently

[41] Arianne Conty, "Introduction: One Earth, Many Worlds," 8.
[42] J. Baird Calicott, "Myth and Environmental Philosophy," 167.
[43] Lisa Sideris, "Chapter 6: A Compehensive Naturalized Ethic," in: *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection: Suffering and Responsibility.* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003) 217.
[44] Lisa Sideris, "Chapter 6: A Compehensive Naturalized Ethic," 261.
[45] Lisa Sideris, "Chapter 6: A Compehensive Naturalized Ethic," 228.
[46] Lisa Sideris, "Chapter 6: A Compehensive Naturalized Ethic," 228.

to humanity itself. Given these two approaches, Sideris argues that an alternative approach to environmental issues should include a balance between acknowledging scientific knowledge and an approach of love towards nature by considering a broader set of values (for instance, a nonanthropocentric understanding of nature)[47].

Similarly, Callicott argues that a meaningful narrative cannot ignore scientific realities such as quasars, black holes, and the fossil record[48]. Light-years and geological epochs have dramatically expanded our spatial and temporal horizons. Any mythic grand narrative that disregards such insights 'simply leaves too much out to qualify as grand.'[49] Thus, it is clear that the second criterion states that the narrative must align with, or at least not contradict, key scientific principles.

Third, the narrative must have a sense of *wonder* about nature. But what, exactly, is wonder? Sideris examines in her chapter *Seeking What is Good in Wonder* how contemporary scientific and environmental discourse often reduces the concept of wonder to a few narrow meanings[50]. She outlines three dominant interpretations of wonder: (1) as a response to ignorance, (2) as a catalyst for puzzle-solving, what she terms "serial wonder"[51], and (3) as admiration for what is already known, particularly within scientific contexts[52]. These interpretations, she argues, isolate wonder from its broader historical and philosophical context.

Wonder has the ability to both transfix and transport us. It is described as a childlike capacity rooted in sensory and emotional engagement, and on the other hand, it is defined as a scientific virtue, vital for discovery. Wonder belongs equally to the 'wide-eyed child in the woods and the wild-eyed scientist in the lab'[53]. Within scientific contexts, wonder often becomes 'directed at the sheer accumulation of knowledge'[54], marveling over what has already been explained. Think about the wonder when the colorless solution of starch and the brown solution of iodine create a deep blue-black color upon contact. This wonder is "felt" when one can explain the phenomenon. Wonder in science tends to celebrate the mastery of

[47] Lisa Sideris, "Chapter 6: A Compehensive Naturalized Ethic," 261.
[48] J. Baird Calicott, "Myth and Environmental Philosophy," 167.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Lisa H. Sideris, "Seeking What is Good in Wonder," in *Consecrating Science : Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017) 15-16.
[51] Lisa H. Sideris, "Seeking What is Good in Wonder," 16.
[52] Lisa H. Sideris, "Making Sense of Wonder," in *Consecrating Science : Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017) 170.
[53] Lisa H. Sideris, "Seeking What is Good in Wonder," 14.
[54] Lisa H. Sideris, "Making Sense of Wonder," 170.

nature, characterized by admiration or pride in humanity's ability to solve, explain, and control.

According to Sideris, genuine wonder is not merely a fleeting response to the unknown or a reward for acquiring knowledge; rather, it is an enduring, contemplative stance characterized by humility, openness, and receptivity[55]. True wonder is about decentering the self, particularly expressed as a willingness to be "taken up" by something greater or other, rather than an attempt to control or master it. Genuine wonder fosters humility and a deeper sense of connection to the more-than-human world.[56] Properly understood, wonder has the potential to transform how humans engage with the world, not through the notion of mastery but through reverence and attentiveness. It seems that wonder accompanied by awe can provide a way to regard the world from a different perspective, to see nature with 'animacy, magic, and moral significance'[57]. Wonder should move us from the protection of the self and towards the openness and vulnerability to others. Given this attitudinal property of wonder, it provides the third criterion in which the narrative must invoke genuine wonder about the natural world.

Fourth and lastly, the narrative must have spiritual significance. Callicott explains that the dominant story of Western Modernity has created deep divisions and has stripped nature of its value and meaning. He argues that nature is reduced to a 'valueless, meaningless plenum of space, time, and qualityless corpuscles'[58], which makes it "spiritually depauperate". While the modern view might have a certain beauty to those who admire logical and mathematical precision, it lacks richness and depth when seen through a more emotional or sensory lens. As Callicott argues, spiritually and aesthetically, it falls short.

Callicott argues that the new approach to nature should offer spiritual meaning. But what does this entail? An ecologically conscious narrative should not only address rational or scientific concerns, but also evoke emotional and spiritual depth. Spiritual depth provides a dimension that imbues nature with significance beyond utility or knowledge.

Spiritual significance can emerge in various ways. In any religious traditions, for example, spiritual meaning is grounded in belief in a higher power or in the promise of an afterlife. Such frameworks encourage attentiveness to "the subtle aspects of existence," a mode of perception that reveals a profound sense of interconnectedness.[59]

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[55] Lisa H. Sideris, "Making Sense of Wonder," 198.
[56] Lisa H. Sideris, "Seeking What is Good in Wonder," 22-25.
[57] Lisa H. Sideris, "Making Sense of Wonder," 198.
[58] J. Baird Calicott, "Myth and Environmental Philosophy," 168.
[59] Charlene Spretnak, "Green Spirituality," *Resurgence* 124 (1987a) 24.

Importantly, Callicott also suggests that science itself can be a source of spiritual significance. He refers to Leopold as an example, noting that many have assumed Leopold must have adhered to a formal religion because his land ethic expresses such a deep sense of reverence.[60] Yet Leopold's spiritual sensibility did not arise from organized religion, but from his ecological understanding of the world, particularly through the lens of evolutionary and ecological science. His reverence for life and the natural world emerged directly from his scientific insights, revealing nature as deeply interconnected and inherently meaningful.[61] This example shows two key points: first, that science can contribute to spiritual meaning, and second, that such meaning depends on an attitudinal shift, mainly seeing the world through a genuine sense of wonder, as discussed by Sideris. Taken together, these insights shape the fourth and final criterion, that an ecological conscious narrative must be capable of providing spiritual significance, allowing nature to be experienced as meaningful, sacred, and of intrinsic value.

4. Three Pillars of Paganism and Witchcraft

Having outlined four key criteria that an ecologically conscious narrative should fulfill, the following section examines three central themes that recur throughout contemporary Pagan and Witchcraft traditions in the West. The aim is to explore how Pagan ontologies and cosmologies interpret the nature of reality, the divine, and the cycles of life. Emphasizing myth, ritual, and community, Paganism presents a spiritual worldview grounded in embodied practice and direct engagement with the natural world. To structure this discussion, I begin with the theme of nature and animism, then turn to conceptions of divinity, and finally address the cyclical structure of time and the role of myth in Pagan thought.

4.1 Nature and Animism

The first thing that is noticeable in Pagan traditions is the view on nature not as separate from the sacred, but as its very embodiment. Nature is sacred: the Earth, the seasons, and the body are not only valued, they are worshipped. This understanding is also central to witchcraft. As Starhawk writes, 'Witchcraft takes its teachings from nature, and reads inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the flight of birds, the slow growth of trees, and the cycles of the seasons'[62]. In this view, nature serves as a source of spiritual knowledge. This

[60] J. Baird Calicott, "Myth and Environmental Philosophy," 168.
[61] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949) 109.
[62] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 39.

stands in sharp contrast to the dualistic worldview of Western Modernity, which tends to escape or transcend material reality[63].

The sacredness attributed to nature gives rise to an animistic worldview. Animism is defined as 'the attribution of a living soul to inanimate objects and natural phenomena'[64]. When combined with the principle of immanence, this worldview leads to the belief that 'Pagans view all of Nature as alive and imbued with spiritual energy'[65]. In this perspective, nature is not limited to the human realm but is seen as a web of diverse beings that include humans, deities, spirits, and other more-than-human entities.

Rather than envisioning a hierarchical universe governed by a singular creator, Pagan cosmologies present a cosmos of interwoven agencies, where all beings participate in the ongoing shaping of reality. As York writes, 'Paganism suggests an interactive relationship among the different poles of reality: in one sense, the world, humanity, and the supernatural'[66]. This relationship is not one of domination or separation but of mutual influence and co-dependence, particularly a dynamic in which nature, the gods, and humanity can each affect and be affected by one another.

One ritual expression of the animistic worldview is seen in the celebration of natural cycles. Rituals are commonly held outdoors, using materials like fire, water, stones, and plants. These are not seen as symbolic tools, but as participants in the sacred process. For example, growing crops can itself be understood as a sacred act, particularly an expression of reciprocity with the living land[67]. As Lewis notes, 'the Earth is respected as the Goddess's principal embodiment'[68], meaning that engaging with nature, tending it, and celebrating it, is also a way of connecting with the divine. From this perspective, nature is neither fallen nor to be transcended. It is real, valuable, and worthy of care. Thus, paganism puts great emphasis on the care of nature, as humans are deeply interconnected with it.

4.2 Divinity

Another central feature of Pagan cosmology is its relation to divinity. One of the defining features of Paganism is its refusal to be boxed into universal definitions or strict dogmas.

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[63] Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 159.
[64] J.A. Simpson, and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) 478.
[65] Dennis D. Carpenter, "Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview," 53.
[66] Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 158.
[67] Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 70.
[68] James R. Lewis, *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft,* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996) 10.

Instead, Paganism is marked by what York describes as “polymorphism”, meaning that ‘no canon or authority speaks exclusively for paganism’[69]. There is no central dogma that binds all Pagans to a single interpretation, nor is there a centralized authority to enforce particular ideas. There is no collective group or council that determines the rules or beliefs for all pagans all over the world. The same can be said about how Pagans perceive their divinity. Pagan deities are many and multiform: gods and goddesses may be understood as personifications of natural forces or archetypes of human experience.[70] How the central principles and divinity are shaped is locally determined. For instance, a practitioner might feel a strong connection to Brigid, the Irish goddess of poetry and healing[71], while another may honor Diana, the Roman goddess of nature, childbirth, and hunters[72]. This means that Paganism allows a form of creativity and local adaptation where local myths and stories are used to determine the local pagan's identity.

The pluralism extends beyond just the forms of gods. As mentioned in the latter section, it is also how Pagans understand the structure of reality itself. Where gods, humans, ancestors, and nature all influence each other in ongoing reciprocal ways. The divine is thus not separated from the world, but thoroughly immanent within it. This is an ontological distinction between Paganism and Abrahamic religions, where the latter tends to view the divine as transcendent and the world as fallen or profane. The notion of immanence is especially central in feminist and Goddess-centered Paganism. As Starhawk puts it, ‘The Goddess is immanent in all things, manifest in each of us, in the Earth, in the cycles of birth and death’[73]. The Goddess is not a distant ruler, but the life force itself: she is the world. Thus, Paganism presents divinity not as separate or singular, but as multiple, embodied, and woven into the world.

4.3 Cyclical Structure of Time

Unlike linear Judeo-Christian eschatologies, Pagan cosmologies are predominantly cyclical. What I mean by that is that time is not experienced in progress towards a final judgement, but in rhythms, such as solstices, equinoxes, and agricultural cycles. These structures are exemplified in the Wheel of the Year, a ritual calendar used by many practicing Pagans and

[69] Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 157-158.
[70] Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 158.
[71] Michael Strmiska, “Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives,” 39, 64.
[72] Sabina Magliocco, “Italian American Stregheria and Wicca: Ethnic Ambivalence in American Neopaganism” in: *Modern Pagnaism in World Cultures*. Michael Strmiska (eds.), (CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005) 56.
[73] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 23.

witches. It maps the seasonal festivals, each of which corresponds to significant changes in the Earth's cycles.

This cyclical idea of time is reflected in their broader metaphysical commitment of repetition. Birth, death, and rebirth are not separate events but aspects of a single ongoing process. These cycles are envisioned in the Triple Goddess: The Maiden, The Mother, and The Crone. The Crone, for instance, governs death, but not as an enemy but as a form of transformation. As Starhawk writes, 'The Crone teach us to let go, to honor endings, to value the darkness that precedes new birth'[74]. Since Paganism holds that cycles continue and there is a codependency between beings, the Crone does not necessarily represent bodily death, as one could also have to let go of certain events in life to make room for new developments.

The cyclical view of time is not only found in divinity but also in how pagans approach myth and ancestry. Unlike other religious traditions with a fixed scripture or creation myth, Paganism allows for mythic plurality[75]. Myths are often adapted from Celtic, Norse, Greek, or other traditions, and are treated not as literal history, but as symbolic maps for understanding human experience[76]. The cyclical structure also informs rituals surrounding ancestry. Gaskill observes in his study of historical and modern witchcraft, rituals surrounding death often emphasize the continuity with the ancestors and the dead. They are not seen as gone, but as present in another form of being. At Samhain, for instance, practitioners communicate with the dead not in fear but in reverence, celebrating their presence as part of the ongoing life of the community.[77] Thus, Paganism emphasizes the sacred rhythm of life and sees time as a cycle where every end is a new beginning.

5. Reimagining the Human-Nature Relationship

Now that the values and worldviews of Pagan and witchcraft traditions have been clarified, I will examine whether these traditions can meet the four criteria outlined in section three of this thesis. To briefly recall, these criteria suggest that an ecologically conscious narrative should: (1) include diverse lived cultures and take the natural world into account; (2) be coherent with, or at least not contradict, scientific understanding; (3) invoke a sense of wonder; and (4) hold spiritual significance. Drawing on the ontological and cosmological features of modern Paganism and witchcraft, I will assess to what extent these traditions fulfill these conditions. My argument is that, in light of these criteria, certain Pagan

[74] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 162.
[75] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 6-8.
[76] Michael Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives," 9–10.
[77] Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchcraft: A Very Short Introduction*, 113-114.

perspectives, such as the sacredness of nature and the notion of interconnectedness, could potentially contribute to a broader ecologically conscious narrative. However, the animistic and polytheistic aspects of these traditions may prove more challenging to integrate. Nevertheless, my analysis shows that Paganism and witchcraft can offer new insights for reimagining the human–nature relationship, providing a meaningful counter-narrative to the dualistic framework of Western Modernity.

5.1 One Earth, (too) Many Cultures

Paganism and witchcraft undeniably place the natural world at the center of their worldviews. However, they also present challenges when it comes to the adaptability across diverse cultural contexts. The first criterion consists of two components: the narrative must both engage meaningfully with the natural world and remain inclusive of cultural diversity. In what follows, I will first address the role of the natural world before turning to the question of cultural diversity.

Paganism and witchcraft regard nature as sacred, immanent, and integral to the spiritual structure of the world. In his ethnographic and theological work, Dennis Carpenter illustrates how core themes within Paganism are symbolically rooted in the natural world. outlines how central spiritual themes within Paganism are symbolically tied to nature. Drawing on both published sources and a decade of participant observation (including eight years at Circle Sanctuary, a Wiccan church and Pagan educational center) Carpenter emphasizes that 'perceptions of the Earth and all of Nature as alive and interconnected constitute a fundamental tenet of Paganism that fosters a sense of compassion and an obligation to save the environment.'[78]. In this worldview, nature is not a passive backdrop to human activity but a living, sacred presence at the heart of spiritual life. This reverence is expressed through ritual practices, animistic ontologies, and symbolic engagement with natural elements. While specific beliefs and rituals may vary across Pagan traditions, the underlying belief that nature is alive remains a consistent theme.

This perspective offers a valuable contribution to environmental ethics. As Carpenter notes, Paganism encourages 'the re-enchantment of Nature.'[79], countering the disenchantment often attributed to the legacy of Western Modernity. This view is echoed by biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who critiques mechanistic science for stripping the world of meaning.

[78] Dennis D. Carpenter, "Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview," 55.
[79] Dennis D. Carpenter, "Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview," 65.

Headvocates for a spiritually renewed understanding of the cosmos, writing: 'We can begin to develop a richer understanding of human nature, shaped by tradition and collective memory; linked to the Earth and the heavens, related to all forms of life; and consciously open to the creative power expressed in all evolution. We are reborn into a living world.'[80]. For Sheldrake, as for many Pagans, moving beyond a reductive worldview opens the possibility for a renewed ethical and meaningful relationship with the environment.

Rountree similarly observes that Paganism fosters an "animist ontology of kinship," where the relationship between humans and other-than-human beings forms the foundation of its religious worldview[81] In this framework, ethical action arises not from abstract principles but from a deep sense of relationality. Recognizing the immanence and interconnectedness of all life brings about environmental care, not just a moral aim, but a sacred act. In this respect, Paganism and witchcraft clearly fulfill the first component, in that they do account for the natural world and engage meaningfully with it.

The second component of the first criterion presents a more complex challenge. While Paganism embraces diversity through its plurality of myths, symbols, and rituals, these are often shaped by regional, cultural or individual contexts. Rather than a single narrative or scripture, Paganism offers a web of localized and reinterpreted stories. This fluidity supports internal diversity, but it does not necessarily translate into broad cultural adaptability.

Callicott directly addresses this, arguing that the grand narrative must be expressed 'in the grammars of local cultures.'[82] By "grammars," he refers to the symbolic languages and practices embedded in specific communities. While Paganism's polytheism and mythic flexibility may seem to encourage such cultural specificity, the question remains whether this form of religion can truly resonate across a global spectrum of beliefs, particularly for those who are secular, non-religious, or aligned with non-Western traditions.

Here, the risk of Western universalism emerges. The idea of a single, universally applicable narrative reflects the same impulse that the critics of modernity want to challenge. As Conty notes, 'It may be difficult for many Westerners to accept an ontology of many worlds, trained as they are in centuries of scientific and philosophic justifications of one universal world, reachable by means of transcendent reason.'[83] An ecologically conscious narrative must therefore resist the temptation to impose a singular worldview. Instead, it

[80] Rupert Sheldrake, The Rebirth of Nature: The Greening of Science and God, (London: Century, 1990) 198-199.
[81] Kathryn Rountree,"Neo-Paganism, Animism, and Kinship with Nature," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27, 2: (2012) 306-307.
[82] J. Baird Calicott, "Myth and Environmental Philosophy," 158.
[83] Arianne Conty, "Introduction: One Earth, Many Worlds," 8.

should offer a set of adaptable themes, such as the immanence of nature, that can be expressed in culturally pluralistic ways.

In this regard, Paganism demonstrates narrative flexibility. It is inherently polymorphic: it does not prescribe one definitive mythology or cosmology, but encourages local reinterpretation and experimentation. This openness is a strength, yet it also introduces the risk of fragmentation. Without shared symbolic anchors, the narrative may lack the coherence needed to inspire collective ethical action. As York suggests, Paganism can function as a flexible "map," but one where authority lies primarily with the individual.[84] The absence of centralized authority makes room for personal freedom, but translating this into an ecologically conscious narrative may limit the narrative's capacity to inspire a broader audience.

In short, Paganism and witchcraft offer a model for reimagining the human-nature relationship. They fulfill the first criterion partly by centering nature as sacred, immanent, and alive. However, their capacity to accommodate diverse cultural contexts is less assured. While their polymorphism holds promise, it must be balanced with enough adaptability to contribute to a meaningful ecological conscious narrative.

5.2 Alignment with Science

Building on the first pointer, I now turn to the second: the requirement that the narrative must be compatible with, or at least not contradict, scientific understanding. This criterion implies that to initiate a new ecological conscious ethics, the narrative should not undermine the foundational principles of science. Section four of this thesis did not address the role of science within Paganism and witchcraft, as religion and science are often seen as engaging with different dimensions of human understanding. As is frequently noted, science seeks to explain the world through 'testable relationships of cause and effect in the material world'[85], while religion offers untestable frameworks of meaning rooted in spiritual or supernatural contexts[86]. Yet, despite these differences, both aim to help humans make sense of the universe and navigate their place within it.

At first glance, this distinction might appear to disqualify Paganism and witchcraft from serving as a viable ecological conscious narrative, simply because it falls within the domain of religion and engages with metaphor, symbolism ,and the supernatural. From a

[84] Micheal York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, 2-4.
[85] James R. Lewis, *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft,* 161-162.
[86] Ibid.

Western modernist perspective, which maintains a sharp division between empirical knowledge and spiritual understanding, such religious frameworks may seem incompatible with scientific reasoning. However, drawing such a conclusion reinforces the very dichotomy that this thesis seeks to challenge. The more relevant question is not whether Paganism is scientific, but whether it can coexist with scientific reasoning without undermining its core principles.

A common critique is that key features of Paganism, such as animism and polytheism, appear to conflict with scientific modes of thought. For instance, explaining illness as the result of angering a forest deity would be implausible within a scientific framework. While this may seem like a reductive example, it highlights a real concern: can mythic or supernatural elements be reconciled with the standards of science?

This critique, however, often stems from a misunderstanding of Pagan ontology. The belief in gods, goddesses, or nature spirits is not usually intended as a literal explanation of physical phenomena. Rather, it functions as symbolic language, a way of expressing emotional and ethical truths about the world. Paganism, in this sense, does not compete with science as a theory of causation, but instead operates within a different register of meaning: one that complements rather than contradicts scientific understanding.

Yvonne Aburrow's study *Do Pagans See Their Beliefs as Compatible with Science?* provides useful insight into how contemporary Pagans perceive the relationship between their spiritual worldview and scientific knowledge. Her survey data reveals that a significant majority of Pagans accept key scientific theories such as the Big Bang theory and evolution. Specifically, 66% of respondents affirmed the scientific explanation for the origin of the universe, while only 7% outright rejected it[87]. This indicates a strong willingness among Pagans to engage with, rather than resist, scientific understanding.

Moreover, many Pagans interpret myth not as literal cosmology, but as metaphorical expression. One respondent, for example, described creation myths as "a metaphor for physical processes such as the Big Bang,"[88] a view echoed by 47% of those surveyed[89]. As discussed in section 4.3, this aligns with Paganism's broader conception of myth: not as a rival to science, but as a complementary way of making sense of human experience and the natural world.

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[87] Yvonne Aburrow, *Do Pagans See Their Beliefs as Compatible with Science?,* (MA diss., Bath Spa University, 2008), 33-34.
[88] Yvonne Aburrow, *Do Pagans See Their Beliefs as Compatible with Science?*, 45.
[89] Yvonne Aburrow, *Do Pagans See Their Beliefs as Compatible with Science?*, 44.

This perspective is affirmed by Graham in *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth*, where he writes that 'Pagans do not entertain dogmas that assert a divine first cause of the cosmos.'[90]. Even when a transcendent deity is acknowledged, Harvey notes that such belief 'does not dissent from scientific narratives which claim to explain the origins of time and space.'[91] Pagan ontology, grounded in immanence and relationality, does not reject science but situates it within a broader framework.

Aburrow concludes her study by describing Pagan worldviews as a "personal bricolage of meaning," in which science is not seen as a threat[92], but as a "sparring partner". Myth and ritual are not meant to explain the mechanics of the cosmos, but to cultivate wonder and belonging within it.

It becomes clear, then, that Paganism does not contradict science but operates alongside it, offering a different perspective that enriches our understanding of the world. This evaluative criterion is satisfied when we recognize that Paganism and witchcraft do not challenge scientific explanation but complement it by highlighting relational and emotional dimensions. While the language and imagery of Pagan cosmology may differ from scientific accounts, the divergence is one of emphasis, not contradiction. Science may describe how the universe came into being; Pagan myth narrates how we experience and relate to it. A story of a goddess birthing the cosmos may not offer a literal account of astrophysical processes, but it can inspire awe and reaffirm the sacredness of life on Earth.

In short, Paganism meets the second criterion when science and religion are understood not as oppositional but as dialogical. Their compatibility lies not in shared content, but in their shared effort to make meaning of the same world. Paganism and witchcraft thus provide the much-needed emotional dimension both Conty and Sideris argue for in their works.

5.3 A Wondrous Spiritual World

Having examined the first two criteria, this final section turns to the third and fourth: that an ecologically conscious narrative must evoke genuine wonder and offer spiritual significance. These elements are closely intertwined; sincere wonder often gives rise to spiritual insight, while spiritual worldviews can emerge from the experience of awe. In this way, wonder can serve as a bridge between everyday experience and a deeper sense of meaning.

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[90] Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth*, (New York: New York University Press, 1997) 145.
[91] Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 145.
[92] Yvonne Aburrow, *Do Pagans See Their Beliefs as Compatible with Science?,* 63.

Evaluating these criteria can be challenging, as they involve personal, often ineffable experiences that resist empirical analysis. However, by examining how Pagan and witchcraft traditions frame wonder and immanence, I can assess whether these worldviews support the kind of ecological narrative this thesis envisions.

Modern Paganism and witchcraft place wonder and spiritual depth at the heart of their practice. As Robert C. Fuller argues, wonder is not a fleeting emotion but a generative force that opens individuals to metaphysical insights and transformative experiences. It encourages a deeper engagement with the world and fosters a mature spiritual sensibility without requiring dogmatic belief.[93] In this light, mythic storytelling functions not only as a religious expression but also as a vehicle for sacralizing nature and affirming its mystery.

Fuller writes, 'Wonder excites our ontological imagination in ways that enhance our capacity to seek deeper patterns in the universe'[94]. In Pagan cosmology, spiritual meaning is not external to the world but inherent within it. The sacred and the mundane are not separated; they are interwoven. Through ritual engagement with solstices, harvests, and elemental forces, practitioners cultivate reverence for the Earth as a living presence. Wonder is not accidental, on the contrary, it is intentionally evoked and sustained.

Starhawk captures this orientation when she writes, 'Life is valued in Witchcraft, and it is approached with an attitude of joy and wonder, as well as a sense of humor'[95]. She describes wonder as 'the basic attitude that Witchcraft takes to the world.'[96]. This ethos is exemplified in her myth of Creation, in which the universe is not commanded into existence but born through a joyous act of self-love by the Goddess.[97] In this story, creation is rooted in contemplation and desire, emphasizing awe not despite the complexity of the world, but because of it. Starhawk's description embeds joy, reverence, and love into the very fabric of existence.

This view is echoed by Charlene Spretnak, who defines spirituality as 'the focusing of human awareness on the subtle aspects of existence, a practice that reveals to us profound interconnectedness'[98]. For her, spirituality involves a 'sense of the sacred – our human perception of the larger reality, ultimate mystery, or creativity in the universe'[99]. These

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[93] Rober C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 1-4.
[94] Rober C. Fuller, *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality*, 2.
[95] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 50.
[96] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 61.
[97] Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess,* 62-64.
[98] Charlene Spretnak, "Green Spirituality," 24.
[99] Charlene Spretnak, *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age,* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 2.

definitions align closely with Pagan and witchcraft perspectives, in which the sacred is not abstracted or transcendent but tangible through lived engagement with the natural world.

Wonder in these traditions is deeply embedded in how the Earth itself is regarded as sacred. When something is seen as sacred, it is treated with care and not taken for granted. By locating divinity within the world rather than beyond it, Pagan en witchcraft traditions encourage practitioners to view all life forms as significant and worthy of respect. This is reflected in the popularity of Gaianism among contemporary Pagans. Inspired by James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which proposes that the Earth functions as a self-regulating organism, many Pagans have embraced Gaia as a spiritual model.[100] While Lovelock himself resisted animistic interpretations, Pagans often equate Gaia with the living Earth, seeing her as a source of awe, reverence, and devotion. As Conty notes, 'Many Gaians thus understand the Earth as eliciting wonder and devotion, and equate the living Earth with the Greek earth goddess Gaia.'[101]

From this analysis, it seems that Pagan and witchcraft traditions not only evoke wonder but also offer spiritual significance. Wonder in this context is not directed at isolated phenomena, but at the relational totality of life, approached with joy, care, and reverence. The sacred is not beyond the world, it is revealed through it.

In short, Paganism and witchcraft fulfill the third and fourth criteria outlined in this thesis. They invite practitioners to the Earth as alive and meaningful, and to cultivate critical insight through their engagement with the natural world. In doing so, these traditions offer a compelling model for an ecological conscious narrative, one that holds the potential to re-enchant nature and deepen our ethical relationship with it.

6. Conclusion

This thesis began with the question: *To what extent can the ontologies and cosmologies of contemporary Western Paganism and witchcraft serve as an ecological consciousness narrative for the Anthropocene, when evaluated against the criteria of cultural plurality, scientific compatibility, wonder, and spiritual significance?* Better understood as whether contemporary Western Paganism and witchcraft can function as an ecological consciousness narrative, one specifically capable of addressing the problems of the Anthropocene and reimaging the human-nature relationship. To approach this question, I have developed a

[100] Arianne Conty, "Chapter Four: Neopaganism and the Grounding of the Sacred," *Grounding God : Religious Responses to the Anthropocene*. SUNY Series on Religion and the Environment / Harold Coward, Editor. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023) 90-92.
[101] Arianne Conty, "Chapter Four: Neopaganism and the Grounding of the Sacred," 90.

conceptual framework based on four criteria: cultural plurality, compatibility with science, the capacity to invoke wonder, and the condition of spiritual significance. Applying this framework to three key ontological and cosmological pillars within Paganism and witchcraft, particularly their view on nature, divinity, and time, provided promising insights, but also some challenges.

The analysis revealed that Paganism and witchcraft largely satisfy the criteria as discussed in section three of this thesis. They offer a sacralized vision of nature, demonstrate compatibility with scientific reasoning, intentionally evoke wonder, and offer a spiritually significant worldview. Their sacralization of nature, emphasis on immanence, and cyclical understanding of time challenge the dominant dualism of Western Modernity. Essentially, they offer a model of relationality in which care for the more-than-human world is not imposed by doctrine, but emerges from a sense of kinship.

However, the ability of these traditions to function as broadly effective ecological narratives remains contingent and uneven. While Paganism's polymorphism allows for internal flexibility and localized meaning-making, it also provides a risk for fragmentation. Their strong reliance on myth and ritual can inspire many deep personal transformations, but will fail to resonate with those who do not already share a spiritual or animistic orientation. Something that is regarded as very powerful for practitioners, but could appear as foreign to outsiders.

Moreover, Pagan cosmologies remain culturally embedded. Often drawing on Eurocentric mythologies, these traditions may not be easily translatable across different cultural contexts. This raises the risk of a new form of universalism, where Western alternatives to modernity are assumed to be globally relevant without sufficient attention to local "grammars" of meaning, as Callicott and Conty caution against.

In this sense, Paganism and witchcraft may not offer *the* ecological conscious narrative, but provide an interesting model. The aim of this thesis has not been to argue that these traditions single-handedly replace modern frameworks, but to show that they contribute valuable elements for re-enchanting the natural world and telling a new story about the human-nature relationship. By resisting domination and viewing the Earth as sacred, they provide ontologies that can inspire new ways of being in, and with, the Earth at a moment when modernity's mechanistic worldview is proving inadequate. Future research might examine the ethical and political implications of adopting such narratives and explore how they could reshape the human–nature relationship in practice.

In short, Paganism and Witchcraft do not offer a single unified narrative, instead, their strength lies in offering an alternative view of perception. Demonstrating that meaning, value, and divinity can be located within the world rather than beyond it. My analysis should therefore be read as part of a broader effort to re-imagine the human–nature relationship for the Anthropocene.

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