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Paganism, Magic, and the Control Of Nature

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Goats' Heads Or Gaia?

"The unstated assumption.... is that spiritual connection with the natural world in itself constitutes a rejection of scientific methodology. The assumption is absolutely false; the two are in no way mutually exclusive." 1 Bill Willers

"Is Paganism the type of religion where I'll be expected to participate in strange rituals while wearing a goat's head on a chain round neck?" asked Shaaron, my cautious friend. "No, no," I assured her, eager to assist her in her search, "Paganism is a feminist, nature-revering, spiritual path, totally compatible with scientific analysis and rational thought."

"Nature-revering" certainly is the aspect which attracted me. Doreen Valiente's description of the Old Religion: "There was an instinctive understanding that people, collectively and individually could not stand apart from their environment. They were an intrinsic part of it."2 Echoed the same message as supporters of the deep ecology movement, conservation biologists, wilderness defenders. At last, a spiritual expression of my fundamental beliefs!

Paganism seemed to embrace ritual and rationality, combine mysticism and science, join ecological wonder to environmental action. Its celebration of natural cycles was enticing. That pagan history also offered a sharp correction to patriarchal and reductionist interpretation of humanity's narrative was an un-expected bonus.

Then, why, after years as a practicing pagan, widely read in the literature, creator of numerous private rituals, participant in public festivals, proud celebrant of the Goddess, do I fear that paganism has the potential to misunderstand and exploit the very nature it promises to cherish and protect? Two factors stand out: magic and control.

Working Magic

It is incumbent upon witches, whose religion and Craft stem from the inner depths, to be truly the Wise People and show that Wicca satisfies the intellect as well. They have to demonstrate that their faith accords with reality and therefore does not contain the seeds of self-destruction 3 J. & S.Farrar

"Magic" to many of us signifies marvel and wonder. Webster's definition, however, which agrees with that of most Pagans, is; "The use of charms or spells believed to have supernatural power over natural forces." In our society "magic" also connotes manipulation of powers not totally understood by the observer, and includes everything from the faith healer to the sleight-of-hand magician. The implication is that it involves trickery and deception.

Do most Pagans actually believe in magic? Evidently they do. From Sausalito to Shropshire pagan publications are replete with instructions as to the exact ingredients for spells and charms. "Correctly" prepared and used, they will result in a desired event. Not that it's easy! Many an aspiring Pagan has reviewed the list of items necessary and remembered a more urgent appointment.

Because magic relies on symbolism and repudiates science, it alienates many who, by their interest in the natural world, would be drawn to paganism. Naturalists or biologists, when solemnly assured that yellow flowers draw in the sun's energy, whereas lavender flowers attract that of the moon; don't assume that Pagans are privy to esoteric knowledge. No, they conclude that Pagans are ignorant of elementary botany, and paganism isn't worth further investigation.

Statements that natural objects have innate qualities affecting human endeavors would cause a raised eyebrow, even if "authorities" agreed: which they don't. Does artemesia prevent burglaries? Or, will it ward off car trouble? Depends on the oracle. Birds in one's home, advises one author, improve the memory. Common celery, notes another, increases psychic powers. Turtles disperse mists, a banana plant will direct prosperity your way, chameleons ward off disease,(and enhance sexual appetite!).

Then, there are rocks! From agate to zircon rocks are touted as offering protection from almost all malevolent forces. When I read these pretentious promises, I'm reminded of Dennis, a California pagan who's also a geologist and environmental activist. "Why", he demands, " would anyone professing to love Mother Earth tear Her body apart to wrench out rocks?" As for communicating by crystals, "Why not use A. T. & T?" Dennis wonders. "It's cheaper. And, it's much more reliable!"

Dennis is a rarity; a dedicated pagan who maintains a healthy, public skepticism about magic. Pagan rituals and pagan knowledge should, surely, reinforce each other. Instead, emphasis on spells and charms annoys those unwilling to set aside their scientific knowledge and critical faculties. The infuriating insistence on confusing symbol with reality, botanical and pharmaceutical properties with socially desired events drives away many who would come to celebrate rites of passage and lunar cycles. Those who persevere, stay, silent and scornful, mute, lest a correction of botanical error be interpreted as lack of devotion to the Goddess.

"What's wrong with symbols?" you ask, "They elicit emotion, exemplify shared

beliefs, unite a community.” True. The pentacle, to a pagan, is as evocative as the flag to a patriot, or the cross to a Christian. But mistaking the symbol for the living creature is objectionable.

Consider snakes: symbols to ancient Goddess-worshippers of femininity, wisdom and mystery; perverted by Christians to emblems of duplicity and death. We must be mindful of that history; it illustrates not only the significance of symbols but their susceptibility to manipulation. But, whether revered or reviled, a living serpent is only a snake, an omen of neither good nor ill, just a creature existing in its own niche unaware of the image humans project upon it.

Barbara Walker, an erudite pagan writer, notes:

The real aim of crystal mysticisms the same as any fantasy, whether it be playful or serious: to retreat from a troublesome reality into a world of pure symbol. However difficult, uncontrollable or indifferent the external universe may seem, symbolism is manipulatable and so provides at least the illusion of comfort.⁵

Unfortunately for the natural world, paganism’s reluctance to distinguish between symbols and living creatures is not just playful fantasy; it perpetuates the utilitarian view of nature. Expecting natural objects to fulfill human desires leads to disregard for maintaining nature in all its complexity. Many pagans, in fact, have no experience of wild nature: in their hearts they fear and mistrust it, describe it as ”untidy”. Such demands are contrary to advice from thoughtful pagan authors Janet and Stewart Farrar, who advocate ”... taking an active and informed interest in environmental issues; respecting and understanding the true needs of other species, and of the plant kingdom, and constantly enriching your relationship to them....” ⁶

One marvels at the presumption which assumes that the tattered remnants of nature would consent to be used for human purposes in ”magical” experiments. How can an ecological spirituality recommend appropriating nature as a resource? If it does, how does that paganism differ from monotheistic religions trumpeting their dominion over nature? These, I believe, are moral and ethical questions to which pagans should give serious consideration.

When I read of magic being pagan’s ”work”, I cringe. Altering events and the environment has been the ”work” of too many generations of politicians, prelates and engineers. Shouldn’t we try to discover the pattern Gaia is weaving before presuming to interfere? Humans have done great harm to the physical world. Perhaps we should attune ourselves to the Earth before attempting to intervene in the ethereal.

Science: A Pagan Heritage?

"In its encounter with Nature, science invariably elicits a sense of reverence and awe." C. Sagan 7

The *Demon Haunted World*, Carl Sagan's final book, is a polemic against the astonishing prevalence of ignorance and superstition in our technological society. Examples abound. Three hundred years after van Leeuwenhoek identified bacteria some alternative counsellors teach that illness is something one chooses. Rheumatoid arthritis is not a debilitating disease whose cause is yet unknown. No, it's self-inflicted suffering. Sagan believed that only instructing very young children in scientific method and practice could eradicate such nonsense. He was probably right. Yet science has its limitations. Sagan was a brilliant astronomer to whom the Cosmos was an unending source of inspiration and information. He communicated that wonder, to the public. But, like most scientists, he was trained to disbelieve whatever he could not experience, measure, quantify and replicate.

Once I knew a man who did not believe in the space program. When challenged to explain pictures of men walking on the moon, Frank replied it was all special effects, filmed in Hollywood. Space exploration, he insisted, was a monumental hoax perpetrated on a gullible public. I wish Frank had met Carl Sagan.

For centuries science and religion have glared suspiciously across a gulf, each insisting the other was evil. Yet, in a world transformed by science religion persists. In an era of ecological disaster can an ecological spirituality synthesize science and myth? Can they be complementary?

Paganism is wary of science for good reason. Science has been the enemy of emotion, intuition and ritual. Scientists wrested power from traditional healers. Francis Bacon and his followers reduced Nature to isolated mechanisms functioning by rote. Inquisitors who burned witches spoke of forcing them to reveal their secrets in the same detached phrases Bacon employed to describe Nature.

Scientists, remembering religious repression, fear a religious revival of any sort. If the religion is one of doctrine and dogma, of self appointed authorities claiming direct revelation from external deities, then they are right. Unfortunately, this is the role magic seems to fill in current paganism.

Spirituality need not be irrational. Loretta Orion in "Never Again The Burning Times" portrays the roots of Western magic as "... an attempt to understand the self, the world, and the divine."⁸

Admitting science to paganism would reclaim our heritage. The ancients whose paths we follow were the scientists of their time. They were sophisticated observers, calculating celestial rotations with a precision not matched for a thousand years. Hunters recognized every nuance of their prey's passage. Gatherers

understood plants in seed and flower.

Goddesses brought their people writing, mathematics, agriculture, pottery and music. Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Isis, combined emotion with logic. Science may have become perverted, but it is a disservice to paganism to pretend that intelligent observation and rational thought are inimical to a spiritual way.

The gulf seems to be shrinking. Chaos theory transforms concepts of cause and effect. Complementary medicine is slowly accepted. Conservation biologists are passionate advocates for the ecosystems they study.

Some daring scientists question the limits of scientific method. Physicist Fritjof Capra notes that "Psychic phenomena .. manifest themselves in full strength only outside the framework of analytical thought and diminish progressively as their observation and analysis become more scientific." He wonders if a science can evolve "... that is not based exclusively on measurement; an understanding of reality that included quality and experience and yet can be called scientific?"⁹

Control: Letting Go

"Religions ... represent man's attempt to adjust himself intellectually and emotionally to the universe." J.B.S. Haldane 10

With respect to the great British biologist, I submit that religions represent human attempts to solicit divine aid in adjusting the universe to us, an enterprise in which we have proven remarkably successful.

The prevalence of magic in paganism points up the deeply ingrained, possibly hard-wired, human tendency toward control. From earliest times hominids attempted to anticipate, avert, alleviate or propitiate natural forces. Otherwise, small and unarmoured, they wouldn't have survived in a toothy, predacious, unpredictable world. They remembered the dry years, poor crops, lack of game, which determined their precarious existence. Celebrations of harvest or hunt may have included, as cave paintings suggest, requests to the local deities for assured sustenance.

It's not surprising that people yearned for control when science was in its infancy, nature appeared inexplicable and implacable. But, we live in a technological era. Communication is instantaneous. Probes have gone into deep space; our TV screens display the other side of Jupiter, the brooding rings of Saturn. However, modern humans may have less ability to direct their lives than those ancient cave dwellers. Despite democratic elections voters know they don't control politicians. Individuals do not determine their economic future, (transnational corporations do that), the well-being of their families, (diminishing health care and increasing pollution are not under their management), cannot

direct the disposition of their taxes nor decide if their nation will go to war.

In less technological cultures each person contributed to the community; today we are all expendable, redundant, easily replaced by machines. We are, moreover, mostly estranged from our natural surroundings, alienated from our extended families, adrift in hostile or indifferent societies. For thoughtful critics of the dominant paradigm the estrangement is magnified. The danger today is not from the external environment but from our own species. It is not nature we must control but ourselves. As paleontologist Donald Johanson observes,

The whole human career is the story of a species never relenting in its effort to pull itself free, by the sheer force of intellect, from the natural constraints that bind all other species to their biological fates. The idea of a special human destiny has never been true - now it is no longer adaptive either. Under these circumstances, any effort to get the truth out about who we really are and where we fit into the rhythms of the earth seems to me passionately worthwhile. 11

Wily nature continues to out-wit us. Whether it be fire-storms in California canyons which should never be housing estates, floods and landslides caused by deforestation, or microbes mutating gaily in response to antibiotics, nature, eventually, has the last word. Clearly it's time for a new strategy.

Perhaps every religion has its era. World wide populations are actively revolting against hierarchical institutions. The old myths of greed and growth are giving way, though they struggle mightily. There is an urgent need for rituals confirming and guiding this vast social change. Paganism has an unparalleled opportunity to evolve spiritual ceremonies compatible with ecological knowledge; to create anew a sense of sacredness to set against destruction. The message of humanist materialism is hollow. People yearn for something greater.

Everything She Touches Changes

"We stand at an important crossroads in human comprehension of the divine." C. Matthews 12

In this utilitarian society even preservation of habitat and species are justified on economic or practical grounds. Grizzlies make marvellous tourist attractions. Plants in the Amazon heartland hold untapped medicinal potential. "What's in it for humans?" is the cry. Understandably, environmentalists use whatever weapons are available. But, ego-centered humanism is the problem. Nothing will change until that changes.

Can we be converted to ecocentrists? Perhaps. Religions of fear were imposed upon people increasingly separated from their surroundings. Paradise shifted from mountains and groves to a distant place in the sky. It's hard to market what people hold sacred. Paganism can contribute the missing half of justification to save nature: mysticism, reverence, empathy, all move us in ways that bar graphs and statistics never can.

Analysts from Jung to Pinkola Estes have remarked on the depths to which humans are motivated by myth, and basic inner truths expressed through ritual. Communities are built and united by sharing ceremonies. Paganism also promises reconciliation with the "dark" side we fear in nature and ourselves. Kali, Hecate, Pele, all embody change, death, decay. Many nature lovers love the deer, but loathe the wolf. In Paganism, as in the deep ecology movement, or conservation biology, the message is that all parts belong, though individuals are transient. (Sort of a spiritually sustainable dynamic equilibrium.) Science and reverence may indeed be symbiotic.

During the past twenty-five years the paramount influence on paganism was the flourishing feminist movement. Consequently paganism today is Goddess-oriented, pluralistic, egalitarian and public. Those same twenty-five years saw the rise of environmental activism. Many environmentalists are coming to paganism searching for rituals of celebration and consolation. They are as skeptical of reductionist science as any pagan. They are accustomed to ferreting out truth, evaluating data, maintaining an unpopular position despite threats and ridicule. They are suspicious of dogma and self-appointed authorities. Most of their work involves exposing damage done by humans to nature then trying to ameliorate it. They spend their lives asking what they can do for nature, not what nature can do for them. A religion teaching that all life is sacred is a strong magnet to them. But, rituals using nature for human whims provoke outrage that the wild world is demeaned. These activists will be a force affecting the course of paganism.

In "Drawing Down The Moon" Margot Adler referred to the increase in pagan numbers concurrent with the rise of the ecology movement. Paganism, if it reconsiders magic, may be the faith of the future. " ... Wicca and its covens," write Stewart and Janet Ferrar, "exist in a real and changing world. What we are suggesting is that witches should persistently expand their consciousness of that world and their role in it - and remember always that the function of a tradition is to provide nourishing roots, not to impose blinkers or shackles." 13

Both religion and science claim infallibility yet have proven not merely fallible but harmful. Religion has stifled inquiry, persecuted unbelievers, insisted human control of the natural world is divinely ordained. Science has brought destruction, pollution, nuclear horror and accelerated decimation of nature. Both are rent with schism. Religious sects insist only strict adherence to specific doctrine ensures salvation. Supposedly informed, objective scientists can be found testifying both for and against corporations and governments. Little wonder people

feel betrayed, mistrustful and angry and are determined to wrest control from these authorities.

Animistic goddess religions succumbed under the onslaughts of patriarchy, monotheism and science. The world urgently needs eco-centered, not ego-centered, religions, blending reverence for nature with knowledge of its complexity. Paganism, if it treats magic as an expression of wonder and not a means of control, could be one of these religions.

Notes

- 1 Bill Willers, "The Trouble With Cronin," *Wild Earth*, Vol. 6, #4, p.61.
- 2 Doreen Valiente and Evan Jones, *Witchcraft, A Tradition Renewed*, Phoenix Publishing Co. 1990, p.24.
- 3 Janet & Stewart Farrar, *The Witches' Way*, Phoenix Publishing Co. 1988, p.106.
- 5 Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects*, Harper & Row, pub.1988, p.501.
- 6 Janet and Stewart Farrar, *Ibid.* p.269.
- 7 Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, Ballantine Books, pub.1997, p.29.
- 8 Loretta Orion, *Never Again* *The Burning Times*, Waveland Press, 1995, p.80.
- 9 Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point*, Bantam Books, pub.1988, p.375 .
- 10 J.B.S. Haldane, *The Inequality Of Man*, Penguin Books, pub. 1937, p.218.
- 11 Donald Johanson & James Shreeve, *Lucy's Child*, William Morrow & Co., pub.1989, p.290.
- 12 Caitlin Matthews, *The Elements of the Goddess*, Element Books, 1989. p.20 .
- 13 Janet and Stewart Farrar, *Ibid.* p.280.

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