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PAGANISM: A FAITH FOR OUR TIME

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A man and woman approach a gentle ridge. They crest it, stride down the other side, round an anvil-shaped rock surmounted by an ancient fir. Facing them is a high, semi-circular rock face, seeping water through verdant moss and umber lichen. In a niche at its foot, the woman arranges flowers and a feather. Gently, the man places a deer antler beside them. They lean against the enduring stone of their sacred place and listen to the Equinox breeze ebb and flow amid the branches.

It is December 21st, Solstice. In a gaily-decorated home twenty-eight women have gathered with candles, altar offerings, gifts and food. In a circle, the women feed each other with bread, saying, "May you never hunger", then pass round a chalice of water: "May you never thirst." In the darkness of the longest night, each shields her candle and reflects on the light to come, the promise of new life beneath the snow.

Tall and graceful, a woman leads dancers out onto a beach. Ornaments on her flowing costume chime in rhythm to her music and singing as she follows the receding tide in the steps of the spiral dance. The women dancing behind her accompany themselves with drums as they tread the intricate pattern symbolizing the spiral of life.

A small number of women assemble one evening. Each, settling into the group, speaks of her day, gently eases into meditation. One reads aloud the history of the Goddess appropriate to the occasion. One woman rises to cast the circle. Others invoke the four directions, elemental symbols: Earth on which humans live, air by which they breathe, fire which warms them, water permeating their bodies. During the ceremony the women read their own poetry, perform a ritual they've written, sing of earth's beauty and its pain.

On a balmy summer afternoon a papier-mache Venus of Willendorf is surrounded by flowers. A circle of women are assembled to honour their friend at a major change in her life. She is greeted by each woman, thanked for her many years of work and blessed for her new life just beginning. Dancing, singing, and exhilarated conversation continue far into the evening.

Virginia, a friend and beloved mentor has died. Following the official church service there is a private farewell. Her daughter plays softly on her guitar, some of Virginia's favourite classical airs. People share their memories of Virginia; her warmth, her inquiring mind, her courageous example. A rose bush and a peach tree are planted as green and growing tributes to her life and the lives of those she influenced.

Who Are These Pagans

These ceremonies aren't taking place in ancient Crete, nor even modern Berkeley! They happen in the towns, cities, woods and fields of staid British Columbia.

Who participates? Environmental activists, union leaders, merchants, gardeners, court workers, accountants, artists, advocates for the poor, foresters, police, computer programmers, geologists. They are of all ages and ethnic origins.

They are seekers; intelligent, well-read, widely experienced advocates for social and ecological justice. They are pagans.

The pagan movement has flourished during the past twenty years, concomitant with The Deep Ecology Movement and eco-feminism. It has been bolstered by archaeological and linguistic research revealing the extent of ancient Goddess-revering civilizations. Today numerous publications reflect the ever-growing pagan community, and large annual gatherings are held across North America.

The pagan path is as varied and complex as pagans themselves. Among more traditional Wiccans a high priestess and high priest guide fixed routines and appointed tasks. Feminist pagans tend towards equality, flexibility and individual creativity. Some groups are devoted to specific gods; the Norse or the Goddess Diana. Some groups include both women and men; others are of one gender only.

However varied their components and rituals all pagans observe general themes.

All pagan groups, no matter how diverse their membership and rites, follow a religion of and for the Earth. All observe the cycles of the seasons, equinoxes and solstices, waxing and waning of the moon, flourishing of plants and animals, harvest, and decline, chill of winter.

Historians Monica Sjoo, Barbara Walker, Merlin Stone and Antonia Fraser, archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, psychoanalyst Jean Bolen, scientist Ruth Bleier and socialist theoretician Evelyn Reed have given both impetus and respectability to pagan spirituality. Their work challenges the biological assumption of male superiority and verifies the existence of ancient Goddess-worshipping societies in which both women and nature were honoured.

Those proud, egalitarian societies venerated Nature and their deities reflect it. Most Goddesses, in addition to other attributes, represented some aspect of Nature, as did the Gods, their consorts, lovers and sons. Pan was God of the woodland beasts, Cernunos, Horned God of the forest, Thor, God of thunder. Vegetation gods symbolized death and resurrection.

Rediscovery of the Goddess has greatly enlarged the pagan community. Rather

than await initiation into the traditional reclusive Craft, those who identify with the Goddess are founding their own egalitarian circles which are both more public and more 'political'.

Cycles

Pagan practices are gloriously diverse, but all emphasize our reliance on Gaia's bounty, acceptance of natural constraints, living joyously within cycles of birth, maturity, death and regeneration.

They seek neither to transcend nor control nature, convinced that divinity is innate in all life. Early pagans, doubting that deities could be confined in buildings, declared rivers, hills, lakes, and groves holy. Modern pagans, convinced nature is sacred, feel obliged to defend it.

Pagans do not subsume their souls in some cosmic whole, but remain avowedly individual yet strongly connected to one another and the natural surroundings they respect and celebrate. Guilt, sin, and jealous, omnipotent deities play no part in pagan ethics. Pagans are moral agents, accepting responsibility, foisting no blame on outside sources either benign or malevolent.

The Celtic Renaissance has profoundly influenced the pagan revival. To pagans, as to Celts, life's cycles are endless. They have no creation myths, no blissful after-life free of earth. In pagan spirituality there is no trace of a beginning, no vestige of an end; though change is constant. Pagans do not alter attitudes and behaviour in hope of an eternal life hereafter; dependant upon the whim of an unseen, outside force for reward or punishment. Their focus is on this earth. Now.

Analyst Carl Jung stated that genuine spirituality is an integral part of the human psyche. Pagan ceremonies are woven into daily life. An altar is no object within a special building, untouchable by the common worshippers. Pagan altars can be found on kitchen tables and desks, decorated with such sacred objects as leaves, shells, stones and statues.

Pagans accept no ecclesiastical authority, though they do recognize wise teachers. They do not pay to be members of a group, in fact they discourage teaching pagan ways for pay.

There is no intercession at pagan circles; no priestly intermediary expresses reverence on behalf of the members unless it be one chosen from among them. Pagan spirituality is no "arms-length" religion.

"Harm none" is the guide to pagan ethics. Other species, and entire eco-systems are included in their caring circle. Pagans do not claim 'dominion over Earth'. Far from it. They feel part of a long chain of human reverence for nature,

stretching back ten thousand years. Their spirituality connects them not only with Earth but with their ancestors.

They are, for this reason, immune to the ‘wannabe’ syndrome. Pagans respect but do not envy North American First Nation’s spiritual practices, and have no desire to appropriate them, finding their own ceremonies sufficiently fulfilling. As pagans point out, we are *all* descended from people who cherished the earth.

Reclaiming The Goddess

”Thou are Goddess”, murmurs the celebrant at Imbolc, gazing at her reflection in a mirror.

For millennia images of deity have been male; women have not been reflected in their society’s sacred likenesses. Perhaps only a man from an ethnic minority could comprehend the consequent feeling of being invisible, never discernable in cultural mirrors.

The few women accepted in patriarchal belief systems exist in very subordinate roles. In general woman is portrayed as evil temptress, the one through whom sin and death entered paradise. In what is likely a vestige of the eras when women were priestesses of the Nature deities, women are accused of being like nature; wild, unruly, unpredictable, in need of control.

It is both sad and infuriating when women, especially women in the ecology movement, are unctuously urged to turn for spiritual solace to the very religions which, for centuries, enslaved and oppressed them, denounced their sexuality and denied their intellect. It would be truly masochistic for women who heard that message to worship its initiator!

However genial the masks of some modern patriarchal religious sects, pagans see behind them the flames of the burning times, the monstrous witch killings of the Middle Ages. ”But that was long ago,” one may protest, ”in an unenlightened age.” Hardly. The witch burnings occurred during the Scientific Revolution: Bacon’s descriptions of nature as requiring control are couched in the same phrases that the inquisitors used of their pagan victims.

Two years ago, when a self-proclaimed Wiccan attempted to run for the B.C. Legislature, the cry from some Fraser Valley Christians was ”Burn the witch!” Pagans believe each person is entitled to walk an individual spiritual path; would that other religions were as tolerant!

Many who extol the patriarchal religions never acknowledge either their destruction of pagan cultures or the centuries of Goddess worship. They seem totally unaware that many ‘modern’ religious holidays and holy places usurp pagan predecessors. One might speculate on whether such lack of recognition betoken-

s simple ignorance of previous religions or callous disregard of the injuries their own professed religion inflicted upon them.

The rise of the Goddess means much more than re-sacralizing the feminine and reclaiming history. It represents a balancing swing of the pendulum; from a technical, reductionist paradigm to one that is intuitive, and connected. Negative religions, armoured with prohibitions and punishments give way to a religion of joy and pleasure.

Most importantly, it changes the focus of religious expression. To ancient pagans, the Earth was the centre of the universe. "With acceptance of Copernicus' assertion that Earth was simply a planet among others, revolving around the sun," writes Ginette Paris, "religious focus changed to the sky." (p. 176)¹

Current religions are focused 'out there'. Their Gods observe from a heaven; to which worthy humans are transported upon death. *This* world, so blue-green and lovely is merely a 'temptation', a 'temporary resting place', a 'resource for our needs'! One who perceives the beauty of Earth as a snare and an illusion can scarcely be motivated to cherish and protect it.

Who is the Goddess inspiring change? She is not one but many: beneficent Demeter, sensual Aphrodite, learned Sophia, loving Freya, wild huntress Artemis, benevolent Ameratsu, dark Kali, compassionate Tara of Tibet, feline Bast, Cerridwen, Keeper of the cauldron of change. She is ancient: Danu, Mother of the Celts, Isis, Sovereign of the elements, Yemaya, Holy Mother of the West African Sea, Pacamama of the Andes, who pre-dates the Incas, triune Hecate, Spider Woman weaving the threads of Native American fate. She is Gaia.

"From the moment an ancient myth is reborn and is charged with new significance, it begins to evolve again...", observes Ginette Paris. (p. 5)² Paganism revels in its ancient roots but does not pretend to replicate older practices. The Earth-centred, Goddess-revering spirituality now evolving is appropriate for our time.

"All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals" avows the Star Goddess. Pagan attitudes towards sex and child-bearing are far more appropriate for an overpopulated, resource-depleted world than those of most patriarchal religions. Pagans give Aphrodite her due; sex should be pleasure for both partners, not solely a means of begetting children. What a contrast to patriarchal religions which insist that child-birth, in pain, is just and fitting retribution for women who indulge in sex, that the only purpose of such indulgence is bearing children, sons, preferably, and that abortion is sin.

Unlike most modern religions, paganism does not seek to deny the senses, mortify the flesh, transcend mortal desire and pleasure. Pagans are not at the mercy of their libidos, but they do not pretend that they don't exist or that a supreme being will punish them for feeling natural emotions.

Nor do they attempt to repudiate the dark side, change, death, decay, but, through ritual and meditation, learn to place their brief human lives within the great cycles of nature; to accept and welcome each change for the lessons to be learned, relinquishing gracefully what has gone before.

Rituals - Turning the Wheel

The pagan world is rich in ritual. Artistic, poetic, sensual ceremonies mark seasonal changes and individual rites of passage. One cannot over-emphasize the yearning for such rituals and the healing part they play. Yet modern society allows few; graduation, marriage, a funeral service...that's all! Perhaps the persistence of age-old pagan ceremonies such as Easter, Hallowe'en and Christmas signify the deep need to harmonize our lives with natural cycles.

Michael Soule has said, we will not be persuaded to change by intellect and logic alone. Gap analysis will not save biodiversity. Humans are moved by emotion. Mirth, sensuality, grief, reverence, are as integral to the human psyche as deductive reasoning. Pagan rituals express them, strengthen the ties to Earth and one another.

One wonders why this thriving spirituality, so attuned to the very nature we seek to understand and relate to, is scarcely recognized let alone espoused by conservationists and eco-philosophers. Could it be that the fastest growing pagan communities are among women, who, traditionally, are neither philosophers nor scientists? Is it fear that spiritual considerations will divert participants from action? The reverse is true; rituals comfort and revitalize. Might it be the "woo woo" taboo of the humanists? The curt response from one upon hearing about the Goddess was "We don't need Jahveh in drag!" Having proclaimed his ignorance about the Goddess, who considerably pre-dates Jahveh, (it would be more accurate to speak of the Great Mother in trousers), he contemptuously dismissed any pagan ceremonies and disparaged those who desire 'graven images'. Humanists seem fearful that acknowledging the sacred will lead directly to slaving superstition.

The intellect and activities of those who seek the Goddess would dispose one to the opposite conclusion; that spirituality complements rather than contradicts other aspects of their lives.

Paganism today is a polytheistic religion in which masculine as well as feminine archetypes are honoured; each provides its unique strength and insight. Pagans have not the slightest intention of replacing an authoritarian male god with a dictatorial matriarch, not even a benign one!

A multiplicity of well-written and thoroughly researched articles in pagan journals reflect this rich, diverse, vibrant culture. From history to herbal lore,

paganism offers a kaleidoscope of illuminating experiences and intellectual stimulation.

Summary

Pagans hold the natural world to be complete and venerable in and of itself, regardless of its utility to humans. Rather than attempt to control nature, escape from it, or even use it as a means to personal enlightenment, pagans seek to understand it, live within its boundaries. This is no uninformed superstition, but a logical spiritual expression for feminists, conservation biologists, and environmental activists, who all yearn for an equitable life on a healthy Earth.

Paganism balances male and female, redresses centuries of oppression by restoring women to positions of power, reflecting the feminine as sacred. It strives for harmony, recognizing that intellect and action can be emphasized to the detriment of contemplation, meditation, celebration.

Paganism has blossomed during recent ecological catastrophes. Coincidence? Or a strong indication that it is time for an Earth-directed religion; one whose deities, like those of old, rise no higher than the tallest mountains, who are visible in fog and mist, whose voices are thunder and rippling stream. A religion holding nothing more sacred than the rocks and trees of Gaia.

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