

(UNIT 8) Neo-Paganism and the Environment

As one of the fastest growing religious orientations in the UK and beyond, Neo-Paganism (also called 'Contemporary Paganism' or, simply, 'Paganism') has received considerable attention from the academic community in recent years. While notable for its diversity – 'Neo-Paganism' does not refer to a homogenous entity but is rather an umbrella term for an array of denominations or 'paths' that includes Wicca, Druidry, Heathenry and Shamanism, among others – Pagan spirituality is united around, and rooted in, a deep reverence for nature, with animism or pantheism often a core belief (the religious perspective of modern Pagans is routinely described as 'earth-centred'). It is unsurprising, therefore, that much of the scholarly interest in Neo-Paganism has been in relation to ecology. This unit continues that interest, exploring the various ways in which this fundamentally 'green' (or 'dark green') religion can contribute to contemporary discussion of environmental issues.

Essential Reading

The reading for this unit begins with Graham Harvey's article for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* ('**Paganism – Contemporary**' – PDF file on Moodle) and Manon Hedenborg-White's essay for the book *Controversial New Religions* ('**Contemporary Paganism**' – link on Moodle). Together, these constitute a useful overview of what may be an unfamiliar religious tradition, detailing the historical development of Neo-Paganism and outlining its chief characteristics. Another helpful preliminary reading is the article by Michael Nelson on '**Pagan Environmental Ethics**' (PDF file on Moodle), again for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. In this entry, Nelson explains how the ethical commitments of Pagans (i.e. to the environment) should be understood as proceeding from a sense of social community inclusive of both human and 'other-than-human' persons.

A more detailed look at the relationship between Paganism and ecology is provided in chapter 8 of Harvey's seminal work *Contemporary Paganism: Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists* (PDF file on Moodle). Here, Harvey attempts to discern not only the roots of Paganism's 'green' spirituality but also its contribution to contemporary discussion of environmental concerns. While aware of an inclination amongst some Pagans to denigrate the material world as merely masking the divine reality – Harvey refers to this as the 'Gnostic temptation' – his conclusions concerning the ecological legacy of Paganism are expectedly and overwhelmingly positive. In celebrating Earth as Home, and in encouraging human beings to listen to the many voices of Earth, Paganism, argues Harvey, has something valuable to bring to ecological debate, laying down a 'radical challenge to the consumerism and individualism of contemporary culture'.

The 'essential reading' for this unit concludes with Emma Restall Orr's contribution to *Pagan Visions for a Sustainable Future*, a collection of essays by leading Pagan thinkers and activists (while only one of the essays has been selected here, the book as a whole is extremely useful for learning about Pagan attitudes and approaches to the environment). In her essay, '**The**

Ethics of Paganism: The Value and Power of Sacred Relationship' (PDF file on Moodle), Orr (aka Bobcat) identifies 'sustainable relationship' as the basis of Pagan ethics and juxtaposes this with ethical codes derived from the 'revealed word' of a supreme deity. Since Pagan ethics are grounded in sustainable relationship (i.e. the respectful interaction between human beings and the natural world), they can, she says, be the ones to 'inspire and guide humanity into the future'.

Suggested Further Reading

The ecological wisdom of Paganism has been the theme of a great number of books published in recent years, a result of both the rise of non-traditional religion and the pressing need for humanity to reconfigure its relationship to the natural world. While it would be impractical to list all of these here, of particular note are books by Emma Restall Orr (***Living with Honour: A Pagan Ethics***), Starhawk (***The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature***), John Michael Greer (***Mystery Teachings from the Living Earth: An Introduction to Spiritual Ecology***), and Jason Kirkey (***The Salmon in the Spring: The Ecology of Celtic Spirituality***), all of which can be read in Google Books (albeit in restricted view).

It would also be remiss not to mention here Bron F. Taylor's important 2010 publication, ***Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*** (available on the Moodle page as a PDF file). While Taylor casts his net a bit more widely than contemporary Paganism – as Taylor himself explains in the afterword, the phenomena of which he writes includes, but is not limited to, Paganism as it is commonly understood – his study of the origins, features and implications of what he calls 'dark green religion' is a must-read for anyone interested in this particular area.

Questions to Consider

- 1) What would you say are the primary features or emphases of contemporary Paganism (i.e. in terms of belief and practice)? What do you make of Bron Taylor's characterization of Paganism as 'dark green' (and of his distinction between 'green' and 'dark green' religion generally – see p. 10 in *Dark Green Religion*)?
- 2) To what extent do you agree with Harvey that, in celebrating Earth as Home, and in viewing Earth as a living community, Paganism lays down a 'radical challenge to the consumerism and individualism of contemporary culture'?
- 3) For what reasons could it be argued, as Halstead does (see under 'Additional Resources' on the Moodle Page), that 'much of the transformative potential of Neo-Paganism remains, as yet, unrealized'? Are the ethical commitments of Pagans fully realizable in practice?
- 4) In what ways can this fundamentally 'green' (or 'dark green') religion contribute to contemporary discussion of environmental issues?