

CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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This paper, presented as a keynote address to the first ASANAS conference at the Open University in May 2003, is a global, broad-brush view, a galloping personal introduction to a newly-emergent religious movement which expresses an age-old religious outlook. Having been a Pagan for some 30 years and president of the Pagan Federation, the UK's first and major representative body, for two periods totalling 13 years from 1979 to 2002, I hope I can claim to understand what I am describing. I am also quite obviously partisan. Rather than struggling to make sense of a religious system from the outside, as the anthropologist does (even in these postmodern days), on the contrary I am attempting, as all theologians do, to explicate the system from within. It is also impossible to escape one's roots, and my own starting point years ago as an academic philosopher and teacher, with a research background in ancient and mediaeval logic, both at Cambridge and Alberta, has left me with a recurrent urge towards the systematic analysis of ideas. This might seem like hair-splitting to some but I hope it will also offer some kind of framework. In a non-credal religion one cannot draw up a list of approved beliefs and test them against actual practice, but has to deduce the assumed, implicit presuppositions of the religion from the practice itself.

In what follows I outline, no doubt stipulatively, what seem to me to be the tacit assumptions of Pagan religiosity. These are followed by examples of the activities from which my conclusions are drawn.

(1) MISTAKEN IDEAS ABOUT MODERN PAGANISM.

Some common misconceptions arising from colloquial uses of the words "pagan" and "paganism" need to be cleared up first of all.

Paganism not irreligiosity.

Literally meaning of the district or locality (*pagus*), a soldiers' term used contemptuously for civilians, "locals", *pagani* was taken up by the early Christians, the "soldiers of Christ" in the arena, to refer to the followers of the established Roman religion around them. By the time of the establishment of Christianity in the early 4th century, the word was being used more neutrally to refer simply to those who worshipped the presiding deities of their locality, or *pagus* (Chuvin 1990: 17).

In modern European languages the word "pagan" has accordingly been used to refer to the non-Christian cultures of the ancient world, thus e.g. Edgar Wind's 1958 volume *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, as well as colloquially to mean "uncivilised", "primitive", by implication un-Christian where Christianity is seen as a civilising force. The 19th- and 20th-century counterculture however took up the word assertively, understanding *pagus* to mean "countryside", to signify something like "at one with nature" as well as implying a connection with the ancient past. Thus the contemporary use of the word emerged. A thorough examination of these and other developments is given in ch.1 of Hutton (1999).

Modern Pagans generally think of themselves as followers of a Nature religion derived from the religions of ancient Europe. As such, like other religions including Sikhism and Islam, neither of whose names derives from a proper noun, "Paganism" and "Pagan" have an initial capital letter. Thus it is important to recognise that Paganism as understood by modern Pagans is not irreligiosity, although as we shall see it is quite a different kind of religion to the monotheisms like Christianity and Islam, and even to an ascetic path like Buddhism. At present, most commentators argue that the lack of a continuously Pagan population between ancient times and the present means that contemporary Paganism is in no sense the same as ancient Paganism. This however overlooks the identity of the tacit assumptions I list in section 2 below. A definition broad enough to include both modern and ancient practitioners still distinguishes Paganism in a meaningful way from other religions and indicates that the points of contact are more central than the points of difference.

Paganism not devil-worship

The next thing that Paganism is not is devil-worship. This description derives from early Church polemics in which the deities of classical religion were anathematised as devils, and from the myth of diabolical witchcraft in the early modern era. Devil-worship is a Christian heresy, the worship of a spirit of evil – Satan, Iblis, Ahriman etc. - who figures in Christian and some other mythologies. Paganism however is a religion which like Hinduism, Shinto, Judaism or Taoism is totally independent of Christianity and does not share the latter's cosmology. Although some Christians, Zoroastrians etc. may argue that the deities of other religions are *de facto* or archetypally devils, this is not how they are conceptualised by the practitioners of the religions in question, e.g. the Pagans of the classical as of the modern world. In particular, contemporary Pagans do not recognise, much less worship, a spirit of evil *qua* spirit of evil, as the (imaginary) early modern diabolical witches were accused of doing.

Pagans not necessarily uncivilised

As already observed, "Pagan" as a religious title does not mean "uncivilised", although it includes folk religion and the practices of non-urban tribal peoples. Like Hinduism, Western Paganism runs the gamut of religious activity from simple folk celebrations to elaborate public rituals and detailed philosophical speculation. Most present-day Pagans however seek, like the ancient Stoics, to live intelligently in accordance with Nature.

Paganism not necessarily occult

Finally, Paganism is not identical with "the occult", nor is it identical with Wicca. Many Pagan practices are not occult and many occult practices are not Pagan. The "occult" (literally "hidden") as a corpus of secret or mysterious spiritual practices and beliefs is the complementary residue of any normative cosmology. Whatever is not accepted by the norm is, if practised at all, hidden. Thus the contents of "the occult" are derivative from the contents of the norm: if no Pagan activities are accepted by the norm (as say in the 6th-century Roman empire) then the whole of Paganism will be occult; otherwise at most parts of it will be, e.g. the Mysteries, which are not

explicable to everyday consciousness. In today's world much Pagan practice is public: ceremonies including marriages, child-namings, burials and holy day rituals are openly celebrated in public places, as of course was the norm in the ancient world. Furthermore, many parts of contemporary "occult" teaching are not Pagan at all: (Jewish) Cabbalah for instance, or the Enochian magic of Dr John Dee. The occult is not a religion: its techniques, drawn from many religions, are available to followers and non-followers of those religions alike as a kind of magical technology. As for the Mysteries, which are by definition occult, like Hinduism, Shinto and Tibetan Buddhism, Paganism is hospitable to these hidden powers of the Otherworld. But also like these religions it goes far beyond them and incorporates them in a much broader religious framework which essentially revolves around public ceremonies.

Not all Paganism is Wicca

As far as Wicca, or modern religious witchcraft, is concerned, American and European usage differ. Many North American Pagans, though by no means all (see e.g. Rabinovitch & Lewis 2003, s.v. *Neo-Paganism*), still speak as if Wicca and Paganism are identical, following the theories of the Egyptologist Margaret Murray (now conclusively discredited: see Cohn 1975 and overviews in Jones and Pennick 1995: 204ff., Hutton 1999: 132 & ref.s) which saw the victims of the early modern witch hunt as the surviving practitioners of pre-Christian European native religion. There is a broad kind of New Age Paganism which derives from published versions of Wicca, and feminist Paganism too has adopted the witch as a central symbol of female power. By contrast, in its homeland, the United Kingdom, Wicca is generally understood in accordance with contemporary historical research as a modern mystical path within Paganism, for which see almost any general introduction to the latter, e.g. Jennings 2002, Harvey & Hardman 1996.

Like late Neoplatonism or modern Tantra or Cabbalah, Wicca centrally incorporates magical practices and so is probably the most challenging and controversial denomination of modern Paganism. Magical practice is discussed in section 3 below.

(2) THE NATURE OF CONTEMPORARY PAGAN RELIGION.

At present in dealing with outside agencies such as hospital and prison chaplaincies, interfaith groups, custodians of public places and the media, it is useful to speak in terms of **one Pagan religion with many denominations**. In organisational terms far fewer resources are consumed by Pagans working together and it is thought that the commonalities of the Pagan outlook (see below) are greater than the differences between the various paths. **Druidry, Wicca**, the worship of **Isis and Osiris**, **Asatrú** (Norse religion), **shamanic** practices and many more traditions are currently seen as "paths" or denominations of Paganism. The similarity here is to such differing paths as Shaivism, Bhakti yoga and Tantrism as denominations within Hinduism, or Greek and Roman Orthodoxy, Roman and Anglo Catholicism, Coptic Christianity and the various Protestantisms within Christianity. The alternative is to see Druidry, Wicca etc. as separate religions within a generic Paganism, in the same way as Judaism, Christianity and Islam are seen as separate

religions within Abrahamic monotheism. Currently there is no practical benefit to be gained from the latter and, among polytheists, the distinctions of outlook and practice between the various denominations do not seem remotely fundamental enough to justify it.

To look at what holds the modern Pagan denominations together a working definition may be given as follows:

A resurgence of indigenous religion, that of Europe in particular but including other traditions worldwide, among members of the dominant post-Enlightenment culture of the West.

There is a sense of **rootedness** in the land and its history, of making the past a secure springboard for the future, which is almost, for the layperson, a definition of indigenous religion which has grown out of folk, tribal or vernacular practices. Paganism can be seen as having three essential characteristics. It is:

Nature-venerating
Polytheistic (if theistic at all)
 and **Recognisant of female divinity.**

Nature-veneration

Nature is not seen as “fallen” or as the prison of the free spirit, but as a **theophany**, a manifestation of the Divine presence in all the latter’s contradictions. In the same way, **art, pleasure and beauty** are not diversions from the spiritual path but sacred expressions of the divine. This is not aesthetic tyranny: pain and ugliness are also honoured as part of the inscrutable mystery at the heart of things, which is one of the features that distinguishes Paganism from New Age thought. While recognising the inevitability of disaster and disease in the order of the world, Pagans aim to live skilfully so as to minimise personal contact with such ills and to mitigate their effects when they occur, but any attempt to deny the dark side of life altogether is generally seen as childish and denigrated as “fluffy bunny Paganism”.

The “**spirit of place**”, the *genius loci*, is honoured by Pagans ancient and modern. This may be a personified guardian such as Athena the goddess of Athens, or Coventina, goddess of the spring at Carrawburgh on Hadrian’s Wall. The elder Cato’s all-purpose prayer to an unknown deity, asking its blessing on the agricultural use of virgin land (*de agri cultura* 139) is echoed in appropriate adaptation by many a Pagan today when moving into a new house or taking over a garden or allotment. Such groundedness in particular places, recalling the *pagi* of old, is another feature that distinguishes Paganism from the more global and portable practices of New Age spirituality.

Earth itself is usually venerated by modern Pagans, generally as a goddess, and ecological awareness is strong. The **cycle of the natural year**, with its different emphasis brought about by different seasons, is seen by most Pagans as a model of spiritual growth and renewal, repeating its general form in perpetuity but never reproducing exact particulars again. The loss and decay of winter, necessary precursors to the growth of spring, are seen as analogous to loss and decay in

human life and communities: once more a realistic acknowledgement of the suffering that is inevitable in human experience.

Polytheism: the theology of diversity.

The many deities of Paganism are a recognition of the diversity of Nature. Some Pagans see the deities as a large invisible community like the human community. Others see all the goddesses as one Great Goddess and the gods as one Great God, recalling the bipolar universe of Chinese Taoism or that of Isian religion in Hellenistic times. Yet others see the many potential divinities as manifestations of one Divine Source, a monistic rather than a monotheistic supreme totality, and others simply venerate the Life Force in a pantheistic or animistic way. What Pagans do not say is that there is only one true deity and all others are evil impostors or frauds. Whether or not the many deities are seen as identical with one supreme totality, they are still recognised as divine in themselves. This tends to lead to a **pluralistic, multicultural, tolerant** outlook. As the Roman senator Symmachus wrote in about 384 CE (*Relatio* 3), “Each person has his own customs, his own rituals; the divine mind has allocated different rites to guard different cities”. Right-hemisphere ideals of **synergy** and **synchronicity** are sometimes invoked, like the left-hemisphere ancient ideals of the due mean and of justice, to harmonise conflicting interests within the polytheistic universe. Unsurprisingly, many Pagans to my knowledge are trained in counselling, therapy or mediation as means of expressing the ideal of unity in diversity in a practical way.

Goddess-recognisant

Given that the whole manifest world is generally seen as divine by Pagans, it is difficult to imagine a Pagan denomination that does not recognise goddesses. Although devotion say to Odin or to Mithras offers exclusive allegiance to one male god, it does not deny the reality of other gods and goddesses in monotheistic fashion, and all the traditional pantheons contain goddesses. Wiccan-derived bipolar Pagan religion takes a Great Goddess and a Great God as the twin poles of the cosmos, equal and opposite, creating the world between them and containing all other goddesses and gods within them. Modern feminist Paganism, like Apuleius’ cult of Isis in the second century CE (*Meta*. XVII), sees the Great Goddess as “the single manifestation of all the gods and goddesses that are”, and thus it is that goddesses and priestesses, of at least equal status to gods and priests, are a tremendous model of empowerment for present-day Western women, **as women** rather than simply as gender-neutral humans. In the modern world, a religion with goddesses makes it clear by contrast how easy it is for men to assume that only they are made in the image of divinity. Although this did not seem to be so in the ancient world, or in those parts of the modern world (e.g. Japan) whose established religions recognise goddesses but where women have a lower status than men, the role of priestess in service to a goddess has attracted a strong feminist following in modern Paganism. By contrast, according to a newspaper cutting at the time the (then) Bishop of London stated in 1987 that religions with goddesses were “degenerate”.

Embeddedness of Pagan tradition

However it is not entirely accurate to say that Paganism is a New Age religion. A thorough examination of the differences has been given by Joanne Pearson (Pearson *et al.* 1998, ch.4), stressing particularly the non-millenarian and the community-building aspects of the movement, and other commentators, e.g. Rabinovitch & Lewis 2002, s.v. *Nature Religion* and *Neo-Paganism and the New Age*, have added further nuances. In this section I want briefly to indicate the emphasis on **continuity and (perceived or actual) tradition** which marks Paganism in Europe, by contrast with the American outlook which is often that of a set of consciously adopted principles based on reasoning and conviction (again, see Rabinovitch and Lewis, s.v. *Neo-Pagan*). These differences argue for severely restricting the scope of the influential analysis of Catherine Albanese (Albanese 1990), which sees the nature religion (sc. Paganism) of Americans of European descent as a religion of conviction drawing on New England transcendentalism, but only that of Native Americans as deriving from an actual tradition. In Europe by contrast (see my full argument for this in Pearson *et al.* 1998, as well as Jones & Pennick 1995) the new Pagans are themselves the inheritors of the ancient tradition. Outside Europe, revivalist groups, particularly Northern Tradition/Odinist/Asatru and Hellenic, are indeed drawing on written and customary tradition, again contrary to Albanese, but lack the embeddedness in the landscape which European groups can also draw on. The latter is particularly visible in eastern Europe, where post-Communist Pagan groups, like their 19th-century predecessors, focus on sacred sites and a less distant memory of “official” Pagan religion than their Western co-religionists.

Although the new Paganism is thus in many ways revolutionary, enabled like New Age thought by modernist individualism and rational experiment, much of its content is by definition pre-modern. In Europe, by contrast with America and other European-settled countries abroad, the native tradition forms a continuous understated background to everyday life. **Place names, sites and buildings** recall Pagan religion, e.g. Wednesbury is named after Woden, Lyons after Lugh, burial mounds dating from Neolithic to Viking times dot the landscape; there are the remains of temples, mostly in the Mediterranean world, and of holy wells in northern Europe, some with a history of a Pagan guardian deity, some with an existing folk spirit, and others now dedicated to Christian saints. In English, the days of the week are named after the Saxon deities, and in German and Scandinavian languages names such as “Gudrun” (good rune) and “Thorolf” (Thor’s wolf) go straight back to the Pagan past. During the Renaissance, images of Pagan deities began to replace those of Christian saints as emblems of places and activities: Neptune for fountains, Pan in gardens, Mercury for commerce and Minerva for arts and crafts.

Ceremonies have persisted and been rededicated. We still eat nuts at the midwinter Christmas festival, but no longer as part of Saturn’s festival at the same season. In Lithuania, people foretell the future on New Year’s Eve by dropping hot wax into cold water and interpreting the resulting shapes, but they no longer invoke the god Potrimpus to guide them. Carols, i.e. dances and songs, were inveighed against by medieval bishops but eventually seasonal songs on Christian themes were incorporated into Church ritual. Other ceremonies, of the sort that in Pagan societies are dedicated to a deity, continue, including “processions bearing gifts” (Burkert 1985:101-2) such as the showing of the “May dolly” by girls to householders on 1st May in Cambridgeshire, supposedly bringing luck to the viewers in exchange

for some small coins, a ceremony which continued until it was stopped by the police in 1960 under the vagrancy laws.

The vast amount of **literature** which has survived from Pagan times in the Classical world gives us a direct insight into some of the practices and thought-patterns of our Pagan past. Thus remains of and glimpses into indigenous Pagan tradition are continually to hand in Europe, and part of reasserting the Pagan tradition in the present day is bringing to awareness and reinterpreting practices and symbols that already exist in the background of modern life.

(3) CONTEMPORARY PAGANISM IN ACTION

I now want to take advantage of the last 2 years most recently fronting the Pagan Federation to give some anecdotal examples of what members of Pagan groups actually do. All of these examples are based on my own experience or on other people's verbal or written first-hand reports. Some of the settings are Druid groves, some Wiccan covens, some Northern Tradition hearths, but most are simply groups of Pagans, inheritors of the European tradition, refashioning it in an appropriate form for the present day.

Connection with land and history.

The **spirit of place** and of the history of each place is honoured by rituals on appropriate dates. On 11th August 1991 the town of Maldon in Essex commemorated the Viking raid on that date 1,000 years previously, at which the Anglo-Saxon ealdorman Bryhtnoth had been slain and which led to England's first payment of Viking protection money, or Danegeld. At the battle site on the seashore, surrounded by hundreds of locals and visitors going about their own business, I took part in a celebration of the Einherjar ritual, the festival of heroes, held by members of the Odinic Rite (f. 1973), one of the Northern Tradition organisations in the UK. Einherjar is a modern ritual, and by celebrating it we honoured the dead of both sides, some of whose descendants are among the present inhabitants, and the virtues of loyalty and bravery, as well as marking the site of a tragic event which was a turning point in English history.

On a lighter note, Pagans are often among those who take part in **folk rituals** such as mumming plays, Morris dancing, and local ceremonies such as that of the Cutty Wren, celebrated on Boxing Day (26th December) each year on its traditional site in what is now the London conurbation of Croydon. A few of these rituals have Pagan origins; most do not; but they are arguably similar to documented Pagan rituals such as the satyr dances, Daphnephoria, Eiresione procession and others recorded by ancient authors, and are being reclaimed for Paganism by their practitioners. Sometimes a collection is taken for a Pagan-friendly cause: woodland conservation, an animal sanctuary or a hospice, as a way for Pagans to contribute directly to the community.

The *East Anglian Daily Times* of 20th September 2002 carried news of a local Pagan group's attempt to hold a rededication ceremony at the newly-discovered temple site of the Romano-British god **Camulos** in Colchester. The local council had given permission for the ceremony to go ahead on the site, which was public land, but the

police had blocked it at the last moment on public safety grounds. Perhaps the best-known example of a site which sees regular public ceremonies is Stonehenge, at which the Ancient Druid Order held its midsummer rituals from 1901 to 1985 and which is now used by various Druid and other Pagan orders by arrangement with the landowners.

In the early 1990s the Cambridge Pagan Fellowship spent an afternoon clearing debris from the Red Well, a local spring whose water, naturally stained red with iron oxide, would make it a natural site of Pagan veneration in the way described from the ancient world by Robin Lane Fox (1986: 41). They were delighted to discover that the local conservation volunteers adopted it for conservation within twelve months of their action. A Pagan Federation newsletter in 2003 described a Manchester Pagan as rededicating a “cloutie tree”, a tree festooned with “clouts”, votive rags and ribbons, tied onto it. The cloutie tree can be seen in many religious settings, from the Pagan ancient world through Islam and Christianity to modern secularism, but this tree was being set aside for specifically Pagan use.

Pagans take a great interest in academic research into the **landscape and history**: the Pagan Federation local newsletters are full of notices announcing guest lectures by professional archaeologists and historians describing current knowledge about local sites. Guided outings, often with picnics and celebrations of the sort described from the 4th century by Libanius (Oration 30, *pro templis*: 17-19) are also arranged; but certain sites are also seen as foci of meditative or mystical communion with the gods or with the ancestors. With the Ancient Druid Order at midsummer 1985 I took part in a midnight pilgrimage to a set of barrows in the Stonehenge landscape, there to meditate silently on “the spirit of the Druid succession”. Naturally it was known that these barrows were not erected by Druids, but as a focus of ancestral symbolism (and responsibility for the future) they were impressive. In this and other traditions individuals report powerful transformative experiences undergone at particular points in the landscape, usually ancient sites, including caves, springs and mountaintops.

Pagans are passionately concerned about the future of their landscape as well. Many individuals are involved in **conservation work and arboriculture**, and one prominent British Pagan earns his living as a landscape architect. Once a year, on the Sunday nearest to April 21st (the Roman Parilia, the spring purification of the flocks and herds), Pagan Federation local groups take part in **Earth Day**, a morning of practical work digging, pruning, clearing litter or carrying out some other ecological activity on public land, arranged with the local authority, and follow this by an earth healing ceremony in the afternoon. The festival was inaugurated, as Earth Healing Day, by an American group, possibly the Council of Themis, in the early 1970s, and was incorporated by the Pagan Federation into its normal calendar of activities on 2nd February 1989.

The sacrality of everyday activities

The Pagan deities are **immanent** in the material world, as well as existing in the abstract world of thought and the underlying laws of being beyond that. Current Pagan discourse shows relatively little interest in metaphysics but a great deal in the small ceremonies which consecrate turning points in the calendar or in an

individual's lifetime, and in the deities who oversee or personify everyday activities. It may be significant that many such ceremonies, blessed by the Church, disappeared at the Reformation, and it is in the Protestant countries that the new Paganism has had the strongest appeal, if the distribution of Pagan Federation overseas members and enquirers is any guide. Among contemporary Pagans there is relatively little sense of the fear or even religious awe which underlies superstition; a customary activity such as turning over the money in one's pocket at the sight of the new moon is done deliberately, as a recognition of the moon's symbolic rulership of increase and decrease and of the coins made in its image.

The eight **festivals** of the modern Pagan year, put together it seems by Gerald Gardener or his Wiccan coven in the 1950s (Hutton 1999: 248) form a recognised framework of celebration, even though particular traditions, such as Asatrú or the cult of Isis, may prioritise their own calendar. The four solstices and equinoxes, plus the cross-quarter days known from Irish tradition as Beltane (1st May), Lughnassadh (2nd August), Samhain (31st October) and Imbolc (2nd February) result in what an atheist friend admiringly referred to as "a party every six weeks", each with a seasonal theme. Joy and celebration are key to these. The festivals are marked not only by group or private rituals but informally, by special food and drink, particular flowers, trees, scents and colours. At Beltane the fresh branches of hawthorn (May) are brought into the house or set up outside the door; at Samhain one Pagan Federation member reported bringing a pumpkin cake to work for her colleagues to eat at their tea break; the winter solstice may sometimes see even vegetarians ceremonially eating free-range pork, and so on. Such everyday activities draw the individual into unconscious alignment with the symbolism of the seasons and harmonise them with the pattern of life, death and rebirth which these are seen as representing.

Many Pagans have small **domestic shrines**, in a millennia-old tradition. These do not usually commemorate family members or household deities in ancient fashion, or even any deities as such, since contemporary Pagans in particular are not necessarily theistic. Symbols of the life force may be there: flowers, boughs, horns and antlers, pine cones, lunar emblems, unusually shaped stones or pieces of wood. There may be deities of Nature or fertility: the modern Horned God, a Great Mother image patterned on Palaeolithic figurines, classical deities such as Pan, Venus, Artemis, or the tutelary deity of the shrine's owner. There may be a local deity or symbol, linking the shrine with its *pagus*, but indoor shrines are, in my experience, usually set up for personal devotions rather than to guard the household. In the garden, the emphasis changes. A statue of Pan, an unhewn boundary stone at the gate, lanterns in the trees and antlers or at least a horseshoe above the door: these mark the invisible guardians of the Pagan household. For several years running some friends of mine held an annual party to wassail their apple trees. Fireworks were set off, cider was poured on the trees, traditional wassail songs were sung, over the years both new tunes and new verses were written, and the evening ended with a hearty feast. Here both the season and the site were celebrated, and beauty, bounty and enjoyment were expressed in the ceremony.

Creativity, magic, enchantment, openness to the Otherworld.

An openness to invisible beings and to non-causal and non-rational occurrences is typical of most if not all societies except the modern West. Established, recognised religions within the West occupy an anomalous place within the embedding rationalistic worldview. In this respect Paganism is in exactly the same position as any other religion. As have other religions, some Pagans have made their peace with the rationalist consensus by asserting the existence of a real, parallel spiritual universe; others by calling on the transpersonal psychology of Jung, Assagioli and others with its vocabulary of the “collective unconscious”, “synchronicity”, the “higher/greater Self” and so on as psychological equivalents to the realist vocabulary of spiritual language. Others, like some Buddhists, say more radically that there is no independent unseen world and that spiritual terminology and practice are merely useful or even necessary means of satisfying the needs of our human psychological structure.

One main difference between Paganism and the better-established religions however is that, in common with other indigenous traditions, Paganism does not restrict contact with what is called the Otherworld (the divine world) to specialist religious practitioners. As in ancient Greece (Herodotus 1.132) any Pagan can perform a religious ritual. Another is that, because of the sacrality of everyday activities, Pagans will invoke Otherworld powers more actively and perhaps more frequently than practitioners of other religions. Small apotropaic phrases like “Bless you!”, “may he rest in peace” and even “Holy Mother of Christ!” are routine in non-Pagan circles, and belief in the power of Christian curses uttered by laypersons seems to have been widespread until universal education arrived in the 20th century. Pagans will nevertheless add to such invocations more active, “magical” techniques of gaining Otherworld help. (For the ancient world, an assessment of the classification of ceremonial acts from “pure” religion to “pure” magic can be found in Mary Beard *et al.* 1998, i: 154-6, 215-27.) In the modern world, the importance of Wicca, a specifically magical path, in late 20th century Paganism has led to sustained efforts to explain and justify magic in modern scientific terms, using concepts such as synchronicity (Jung), telepathy (Sheldrake), the implicate order (Böhm), and synergy. In traditional societies there are customary and legal restraints on how this perceived knowledge and power can be used. In the modern world, the number of people practising these skills is small, and perhaps more importantly their efficacy is not believed in by outsiders. This situation can be expected to change in one or both respects if Paganism becomes a more central part of the religious establishment.

The distinction between active and passive spirituality breaks down when omens too are considered. As well as reading those sent spontaneously by the gods, Pagans usually believe that the Otherworld will always answer a genuine request for information, and so the techniques of trance, “scrying” in a reflective surface, interpreting symbolic systems such as Tarot cards and astrology and asking for dreams or visions to answer a question are commonplace. “Working with” the resulting images through the Jungian method of active imagination may be seen either as a psychological method of resolving the personal impact of these images or as a magical method of changing the external significance of the omen. Pagans, especially Witches, cheerfully do both, and so it is that in the modern world the Pagan current has attracted visionary, creative individuals, with a certain countercultural aura and a celebration of the creative powers of the human mind.

Will this artistic, libertarian outlook last, with the increasing size and organisation of the Pagan movement? It seems unlikely, and yet art and spirituality are easy bedfellows, and it may be that the movement will enrich both. The new Druidic groups in particular, with their three grades of Bards, Ovates (seers) and Druids, both value and teach artistic creativity and spiritual inspiration, mediated by the divine breath or “Awen”.

Group visionary techniques such as the North American sweat lodge (and reclaiming the Nordic sauna) are practised, and individual visionary experience of the sort described by any handbook on mysticism may be sought, either by individuals working alone or in the closed initiatory groups. Models of spiritual training and development exist within the various initiatory orders, and individuals are free to follow their own path. Formal spiritual practices link Paganism with the New Age and with more familiar disciplines such as Tibetan Buddhism or the Eastern Orthodox Jesus Prayer, and so they need not be expanded on further here. However one need not be a spiritual explorer in order to be a Pagan. Creativity and the openness to inspiration are celebrated in the lack of any dogma within Paganism both ancient and modern. The gods may speak at any moment, and the individual spirit, whether intellectual or artistic, may come upon insights that have not been recognised previously. Paganism is essentially practical and experiential, with a set of techniques for contacting the Otherworld and a sound commonsense approach to interpreting messages from the latter.

Finally, at the routine, non-flamboyant or even New Age end of this magical spectrum, comes the interest of many Pagans in holistic bodymind techniques such as yoga, t'ai chi, the martial arts, herbal medicine, wholefood diet and nature cure.

The overall shape of Pagan religion.

In several ways, then, Paganism both ancient and modern is distinct from conventional religion in the modern world. It is **not a set of beliefs** but a way of relating to the divine world, an attitude to spiritual practice, which presupposes the existence of a spiritual realm but is also anchored by a respect for tradition and good common sense. It is **not an orthodoxy** but a tolerant, pluralistic heterodoxy (or at times, entirely by accident, a homodoxy), infinitely expansible, pluralistic, and hospitable to innovation. It is **not a set of dogmas** but the sharing, testing and discussion of experience; and it is **not a flight** to the spiritual Otherworld but a willingness to live fully in this world and enable divinity to manifest more bountifully within it.

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