

8

ECOLOGY

Paganism is a spirituality in which the world (as planet and as community of living beings) and the body are central and celebrated. It is fundamentally "Green" in its philosophy, taking seriously the understanding that "everything that lives is holy".¹ Some Pagans are disappointed, (to put it politely, that some of their co-religionists are only mildly motivated by these ecological foundations to engage more radically with the threatened world.

At their seasonal festivals Pagans regularly renew their relationships and deepen their intimacy with the world. They are confronted not with the demands and claims of a "spiritual" after-life or deity, but with the significance of everyday life on Earth. Birth, growth, sexuality, fecundity, creativity, death, decay, vitality, beginnings, endings, joy, sadness and other mundane, everyday, ordinary affairs are found to be meaningful and sacred. It would be misleading to see these "themes", or a "quest for meaning", as the prime focus of the festivals. They are certainly significant, but Pagans celebrate the festivals with the much simpler understanding that they are honouring the seasons and the land. Pagan calendar celebrations are about time and space: this time—the present, now—and this space, here. They encourage and inculcate an awareness of being "at home" here and now in the mundane and therefore sacred Earth. The festivals teach ecology.²

Meditation and bulldozers

Paganism has Green roots and encourages a diversity of ecological actions, none necessarily better than another. Some Pagans meditate for the good of the planet, some use the "energy" raised in ritual drama to benefit rain forests, some spike threatened trees, some lie in front of bulldozers. The following three sections look at different ecological expressions: meditation, membership of "Green" groups, and specifically Pagan ecology.

Meditation and symbolic action. Some Pagans meditate for the benefit of the whole planet. In the comfort of their own homes they meditatively radiate thoughts or feelings of peace and well-being to the

planetary being, (Mother)³ Earth. Some join together in guided visualisations, imaginatively seeing the Earth healthy and flourishing and then "send" these visions to affect the outer world. Some such people would have considerable reservations about participating in anything more public or political. Some may belittle this quietist meditation, but it should be understood that the people involved are acting in part on the principle that everything is connected—an intimacy common both to esoteric traditions⁴ and to chaos theory. What happens in the privacy of one person's mind is connected to every other part of this radically interconnected universe. A change in understanding or motivation is already a change in the web of all things. Since this web and this universe are full of life, the change is one of relationships. So, what begins as "thinking nice thoughts" begins to *affect* world-views and *effect* changes in lifestyle. "The personal is political"—so the slogan asserts—and using ecologically "friendly" washing-up liquid, biodegradable hygiene products, recycled paper and locally produced food and goods begins to affect wider economic and political realities. Supermarkets stock "Green" products, governments take note of voters' wishes.

Based on the same principle of the interconnectedness of all things, some Pagans go beyond meditations to symbolic action. If they cannot actually stand between a rainforest tree and a lumberjack, and they do not feel able to picket a business using rainforest timber, they can do something symbolic. They might plant a seed of the next apple they eat in the hope that not only will it grow, but that a rainforest seed will grow too. The action combines imagination, intention and a first step in the direction of a reforested planet—all significant aspects of a Pagan understanding of magic.⁵

Membership of "Green" groups. Many Pagans are members of Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and other groups that aim to preserve, protect and encourage the health of wildlife, or to protest its destruction. Involvement in these groups ranges from paying the subscription (a form of symbolic action?) to fund-raising and participating in marches and protests. No information is easily available on the religious affiliation of those Greenpeace members, for example, who put themselves between whales and whalers, but it would not be surprising if some of them at least named themselves Pagan.

³ The linking of "nature" and women is of ambiguous value and can disempower. See Griffin 1984 and Bonds 1992. Also see Le Guin 1992: 161-3.

⁴ Faivre and Needleman 1992.

⁵ See chapter 6.

¹ Blake 1793: plate 27 and 1795: 2.366. In Keynes 1972: 160,289.

² If theology is "talk about God", ecology is "talk about home".

There are Pagans involved in groups whose primary interest is in the native mixed woodland of Britain, or in the wildernesses of North America. Groups such as the British Trust for Nature Conservation and the Woodland Trust are attractive to many Pagans—which is not to say that these organisations or their motives are Pagan. Journalists are often interested in finding a “Green Party at prayer” among Pagans, but there are as many people of other spiritual traditions, or none, among such groups. If it is easy for Pagans to integrate their spirituality with their Green action, this does not mean that other people do not manage to do so—or that all Pagans actually do so. Almost all the religions and philosophies of the world seem to be vying with each other to be seen as ecologically sound or “Green”. The spirit of the age is itself Green: green is the only colour in which to teach, preach, sell, electioneer, report, write or condemn. “It doesn’t matter what religion or worldview you chose, just so long as it’s Green”, might be the advice of a latter-day, if somewhat New Age, Henry Ford.⁶

Pagan ecologists. Besides the above groups, there are more specifically Pagan ones with similar interests. There are Craft, Druid and Heathen groups devoted to the planting of trees or groves. Circle Sanctuary in Wisconsin, USA, is among the increasing number of Pagan owned or run areas of land being administered for the good of all inhabitants and visitors (human and other-than-human). There are Pagan animal-rights groups. Some Pagans attempt to live self-sufficiently and sustainably by organic farming, small-holding or the use of allotments and barter.⁷

At the other end of the pole—the same pole of Pagan ecology, not some dualistic opposite—from the quietist meditators are groups such as Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front. “Such groups believe in direct non-violent action to prevent the destruction of the planet.”⁸ Earth First!, for example, damages machinery used for tree-felling, earth-moving and road-building; it inserts spikes into tree trunks to damage chainsaws, and blockades companies that use rain-forest timber.⁹ Not all Pagans support such eco-vandalism,¹⁰ although most agree broadly with its motivations.¹¹ Reclaiming and Dragon Environmental Network members have been in the front-line of protests against the destruction of complex ecological environments and central to carnival-style protests against globalisation.

⁶ Even if the original phrase is apocryphal.

⁷ Harvey 1996.

⁸ Ash 1992: 3. Also see Taylor 1994, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; and Oliver 1992.

⁹ Foreman 1987.

¹⁰ E.g. the editor of *Deasil Dance* felt it necessary to “disclaim” the previously cited article by Ash.

¹¹ They might be disturbed by Churchill’s critique (or exposé?) of the “eco-fascism” of some American Earth First! leaders; see Churchill 1992: 195–7, 209.

These are some of the manifestations of Pagan ecology. No Pagan organisation demands of its members any particular action expressive of its ecological concerns. Indeed, many groups encourage their members to find their own level of ecological activity: the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids encourages “Personal Environmental Responsibility” without codifying how this is to be expressed. It encourages action by, for example, participating in the planting of indigenous trees and by providing recycling bins at its summer camps.

A later section looks beneath the ecological actions in which Pagans are involved to attempt to discern the roots of Pagan ecology, and asks about Paganism’s contribution to environmental thought and practice. However, that it preceded by a closer look at an explicitly Pagan ecology.

Somatic ecology

Adrian Harris, a founding member of Dragon Environmental Network, argues eloquently for a Somatic (embodied) approach to ecological action and knowledge.¹² That people “know” through their bodies is obvious, common sense, to many people: we “know” because we see, smell, taste, touch, hear things. We “know” people most intimately in “good sex”. Religions tend to offer experience, perhaps moulded by belief, as the final authority: people “know” their religion is “true” because their experiences confirm its veracity. The problem is that almost every belief is “provable” in this way—experiences seem to confirm everything! Nonetheless, experience and sensual knowledge are vitally important. This is not negated, but only made difficult, by the fact that this sort of knowledge is not valued as highly as “rational” intellectual knowledge.

What is it that bodily knowledge and experience teach people about ecology? Harris links such profound “knowing” as that experienced in “good sex” with that experienced in “good ritual” and especially in ecological-ritual:

In our rituals we reconnect with ourselves, healing the rift between body and mind through ecstatic dance, chanting and the drama of ritualised myth. We lose our ego-centred selves and achieve that somatic knowing of the unity of everything. It is in these moments of spiritual ecstasy that we know the wisdom of the body.¹³

Pagan ecological protest against road-builders draws “courage and inspiration” from the practice of this somatic knowledge. The Dongas—anti-road protesters whose experience united them into a

¹² Harris 1996.

¹³ Harris 1996: 153. Also see LaChapelle 1989.

tribe at Twyford Down, with its then threatened, now destroyed, ancient earthworks which gave them their name—and Dragon engage in colourful drama and celebration, not just angry opposition and vandalism. They live in threatened trees, sleep on threatened ground, build relationships with the “spirit” of threatened places, often perceived as a dragon. Some of these places are not ancient woodlands, hills and water meadows but urban environments. Shamanism, combined with ritual magic, gives a “grounded strength” empowering campaigners.

Many of these continuing experiments with ways to protect specific locations (and the Earth as a whole), protest their pollution or desecration, and celebrate their diverse but interconnected life, derive from continuing involvement with cultural, ancestral, sacred locations such as Stonehenge. They have also inherited many of their approaches, members and interests from the peace camps, especially Greenham Common. The festival movement which began in the 1970s and the peace camps combined all the features now seen in Pagan eco-dramas (a more inclusive term than “protest”): joyful celebration, music (including “shamanic” drumming), ritual, anger and sorrow at opposition. The Secular Order of Druids combines both long-term involvement with Stonehenge campaigns, eco-protest (e.g. against intensive quarrying in Somerset) and encouragement of the spreading (counter-) cultural movement of Raves and road-protests. They established a Bardic Chair competitive performance event at Bath in the context of the Solsbury Hill¹⁴ action, and created a “Rave Bard” during a large inner-city Rave in Coventry. Festivals, peace camps, raves and road-protests also meet similar responses from the authorities: heavy police presence, razor-wire barriers, and particularly the drafting and enforcing of laws designed to curtail such events (the Public Order Act and the Criminal Justice Act). Most important for this discussion, however, such events have rooted Pagan ecological action in particular places, particular problems, particular relationships. Pagans participate in acts of neighbourliness rather than in (New Age) mystical, salvational “pseudo-connectedness” with some numinous, nebulous “All”.¹⁵

Although Adrian Harris stresses the experience of knowing the unity of all things, his examples show that this does not negate the honouring of particular places, diverse experiences and pluralism in knowledge. On Twyford Down, Solsbury Hill and Jesmond Dene the trees did not fall without being heard and the ground was not dug up without being mourned. Protection of London’s last remaining ancient woodland, Oxleas Wood, continues—successfully so far. Pagans continue to plant

¹⁴ Made famous by Peter Gabriel.

¹⁵ See Cheney 1989a and 1989b.

trees and remove tyres from ponds. They continue to experiment with ways of “recognising Gaia from within”, experiencing “communion between ourselves and the living world that encompasses us”.¹⁶ Ecstasy in ritual may reveal the interconnected unity of Gaia, but bodily experience also teaches that the “all” is made up of “many”, each part of which can be hurt or healed. Individuals join groups like the Dongas and Dragon and begin to find themselves forming new relationships with themselves, with places and with other people. Somatic ecology does not overwhelm the individual and submerge them in some greater unity, but builds relationships between those who celebrate life. This might be why Pagans frequently use trees as logos for their groups or newsletters, rather than the ubiquitous but “ambiguous modern icon” of the Earth seen from outside by astronauts and satellites.¹⁷

Ecological roots

The following sections note four roots of Pagan ecology: the endangered Earth; Blake and Gaia; understandings of deity; and shamanism.

The Endangered Earth. Western religion at its best teaches that human people are stewards of the Earth. This is a “light Green” ecology, the “conservation” of the great landowner’s gamekeeper looking after grouse and their habitats so that the “great and good” can shoot their prey for which they might pray their gratitude. For anything more than these Green tints we must look to secular scientists like Darwin. Their careful look at the world has enabled us to refuse the human-centred and even the God-centred vision of the world. Humanity is not the “pinnacle and goal of creation” but one part of an elaborate and evolving community of living beings, a web of life, an ecosystem. The continuing work of ecologists and other such scientific observers of the planet shows that humanity is part of the community of life (or “nature” rather than some putatively separate realm called “culture”), though such *observation* can obscure participation.¹⁸ It is this secular activity and not religious responses to the world that has *enabled* both popular concern about the ecological crisis and the articulation of that concern. Religions might, however, motivate people to *do* something beyond being concerned. To do so it must be more than an opiate which allows people to believe that concern or attitude is sufficient.¹⁹

¹⁶ Abram 1985.

¹⁷ Sachs 1994.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, which warns that observation of the planet reinforces managerial models.

¹⁹ Cp. Bordo 1992.

Paganism encourages people to develop their spirituality according to their experiences, intuitions, desires, dislikes and thoughts. (Christianity often insists on the opposite: experience and moods must be brought in line with authoritatively revealed and taught "truth".) People seeing the Earth in danger recognised Paganism as a spiritual ground to stand on, and have brought that deep ecological concern with them. Perhaps the linking of the name Pagan with honouring the Earth was all that was required for the initial attraction at least. Paganism has not had to tell people to change their attitudes towards ecological concerns. It has encouraged them to explore and express their concern because ecology is of the essence of Paganism as a spirituality of participation in the world. Its celebration of seasons and phenomena such as sunrises and the lunar cycle have suggested hope to many people. Paganism seems to them a chance to explore different ways of relating to the environment which might lead to a healthier relationship or balance between humanity and other living beings. Some people are satisfied with expressing ecology in scientific research projects or in political protest. Others require a spiritual underpinning to their involvement. Discovering in Paganism a celebration of the world, they recognise a way of exploring a spiritual context for ecology. Pagans are "at home" in an endangered Earth and are trying to find ways (all ways, any ways) to put things right for all life. In other words, there is an elective affinity between Paganism and ecology. The "spiritual world" of Paganism is the same as the physical world. More helpfully than perhaps it intended, the Ordnance Survey has mapped sacred places and revealed the lineaments of the Goddess. As the sacred is polluted and the Goddess is sick, Pagans are impelled to try to do something about their actual locations and the condition of the Earth.

Blake and Gaia. Paganism has heard the widespread desire for a Green Spirituality and answered, in the words of William Blake, "Everything that lives is holy". It has enabled the celebration of the experience of being participants in the world or Gaia as opposed to being divinely appointed caretakers at best or tyrants at worst. This experience and celebration are closer to the heart of Paganism than the worship of a divinity, however immanent. The living world/Gaia is an inclusive community embracing divinities, seasons, weather, animals, birds, insects, fish, the human body, flu viruses and "everything that lives".

Perhaps to understand "everything that lives" we need to learn from children. To many children, perhaps all of them before they are taught otherwise, the world is profoundly alive. Trees speak, rocks move, there are giants beneath the hills and the clouds have faces. Asked "when did you become a Pagan", many people assert that they have "always been Pagan but did not always know it". Some mean that at some point they discovered that "Pagan" was the word for their feeling

that everything is alive, which they had forgotten since childhood. Their adult vision of the world gains impetus from the Gaia hypothesis, ecology, anthropology,²⁰ feminism, eco-feminism, fiction and non-fiction writers and many other sources.²¹ Its strongest root is, however, their own experience of the aliveness of all that surrounds them. Their world view is one in which everything that lives deserves honour and rights not normally given to other-than-human life.

That "everything that lives is holy" does not mean that the world is a rose without thorns. The Earth is a dangerous place to live, as full of death as it is of life.²² It is of course human to search for a meaning in the seemingly senseless violence and pain. Perhaps in these "negative" or "shadow" things we encounter the Earth as it really is: disinterested and indifferent to humanity and the petty clinging on to individual life. Perhaps. Certainly the community of life is larger than human, and includes concerns and interests inimical to ours. Paganism somehow acknowledges that here too is holiness.

Theology, thealogy, theoilogy. The third root of Pagan ecology is its beliefs about divinity.²³ Since Pagans most often refer to either Goddess or to Goddesses and Gods, this deity-talk could be labelled *thealogy* or *theoilogy*: the feminine singular and the plural of theology. However, the worship of divinity, of whatever gender or number, is not the primary experience or practice of Paganism. Celebration of the world is more central, especially as it is experienced in bodies and specific places. These are precisely the locations in which divinity is manifest and met with. Pagan deity-talk tends to use the language of either pantheism (deity underlying and manifest in the world) or polytheism (many deities, themselves as closely and as distantly related to the original cause of existence as humans, hedgehogs and any other living being), or to combine the two.

Deities are not "out there" waiting for prayers and praise. They are within physical matter, reinforcing but not revealing the importance of ecology and of the body. If the Earth is threatened, it is "our home", "our mother", life-giver and life-taker that is threatened and all life, including ourselves, is threatened with her. A living being who enfolds the lives of "all that live" in her life is being assaulted. To permit this rape and blasphemy to continue is to invalidate the celebration of seasonal festivals and the choice of the self-designation "Pagan", "one who loves the Earth".

²⁰ For an example of anthropological writing about ecology see Milton 1993, including Luhrmann 1993.

²¹ See chapter 11.

²² Dillard 1976.

²³ More fully discussed in chapter 11.

Many people are attracted to Paganism by an ecological vision or desire. The deities, in sending them back to Earth(ly) life, reinforce ecology. There is nothing unique or singular about the deities: there cannot be singularities in the cosmos—single things are one step from extinction—and Pagan deities are part of the cosmos. Some Pagans are attracted to Paganism by its polytheism. They too find that honouring deities leads swiftly to the celebration of the Earth.

Those attracted by the immanent Goddess of the Craft and of Goddess Spirituality also find that this embeds them immediately into relationship with all that lives. Starhawk eloquently describes the “three core principles of Goddess religion”: “immanence, interconnection, and community”. For example,

Immanence calls us to live our spirituality here in the world, to take action to preserve the life of the earth, to live with integrity and responsibility... Interconnection demands from us compassion, the ability to feel with others so strongly that our passion for justice is itself aroused... Community includes not only people but also the animals, plants, soil, air and water and energy systems that support our lives. Community is personal...²⁴

Pagans invented theology,²⁵ but did not practise it in the same way that Christians do.²⁶ Whether in mythological poetry or philosophical prose, theology to Greek and Roman Pagans was part of an account of the nature of the universe. Pagan theology is a part of Pagan ecology and the “natural” is more important than the “supernatural” or spiritual.

Shamanism: eating and being eaten. In addition to Blake’s phrase “Everything that lives is holy”, shamanism²⁷ depends on the animist understanding that “everything that exists, lives”. Gordon MacLellan claims that one significant role for the shaman in Western society is that of “Patterneer—one who helps people listen to/relate to the world around them”.²⁸ He also explores the implications of life in a living world—a world in which people must eat living beings.

Wiccans assert that the phrase “An it harm none, do as you will” adequately summarises their ethics. The statement encourages development of a mature Pagan understanding of the world and of the individual’s place within it. “Will” encapsulates this understanding and suggests effective thinking based on correct knowledge. Initiated Wiccans are therefore encouraged to make changes in the world according to their best understanding of the ways things are... as long

²⁴ Starhawk 1989: 10–11.

²⁵ Jones 1996.

²⁶ See, for example, Deane-Drummond’s 1992 critique of Moltmann’s use of ecological language in his theological writings.

²⁷ See chapter 7.

²⁸ MacLellan 1996. He skilfully fulfils this role himself.

as “it harm none”. “None” here is frequently discussed in the context of other human affairs and rarely in relation to other-than-humans. In other words, this is not really an ecological ethic, more a rule about the practice of magic²⁹ and perhaps a social ethic. It would, in fact, be hard to “harm none” unless perhaps one became a Jain ascetic.³⁰

Shamanism and many indigenous cultures are more realistic, recognising that in order to live it is necessary to take life. A Maori writer, speaking from within his people’s tradition, defines religious action as “doing violence with impunity”.³¹ It is absolutely wrong to take life but it is also wrong to leave your guests unsheltered and unfed. So you must go into the forest and cut down a living tree to make a shelter, you must dig up a tuber to make food. These violent acts deserve a response and a recognition. That they are necessary does not negate or mitigate their violence. So the tradition or religion provides ways of enabling the “doing violence with impunity”. Western Pagans cannot simply adopt Maori ways but can see this phrase as encapsulating, for example, their traditions of asking permission before cutting holly and ivy for midwinter decorations and making offerings afterwards.³² They can consider ways to approach what they eat in the knowledge that life has been taken, perhaps given, and the way this affects relationships with “all that lives”. In everyday life human people eat those other-than-human people with whom they share life. Paganism is truly ecological in that it is grounded in the ordinary and in earthy matters of what is eaten and the relationships affected by the transformation of living things—cows or carrots, trout or tomatoes, pheasants or plums—into “food”.

Shades of green

Paganism does not come ready-made with an ecological dogma or an environmentalist agenda. Nothing is finalised, everything is being worked out in encounters between people and environment. If Pagan ecology is moulded by seasonal festivals, it is fired in the more difficult meeting between Pagans and those who build, control and use roads, power-stations, weapons, mines, agribusinesses and so on. In looking (not always systematically or deliberately) for ways to understand and express human relationships with the Earth, Pagans draw on other Green agendas, approaches and thoughts.

Deep Ecology is attractive to many Pagans. It encourages deep thinking about human interrelationships with the rest of the community

²⁹ See chapter 6.

³⁰ See Dundas 1992.

³¹ Tawhai 1988: 859.

³² Patterson 2005: 38–40.

of life and provides a necessary critique of dominant ideologies of the West that permit—perhaps demand—the mastery and exploitation of the world. However, its critique is often flawed by both a dualistic alienation from the rest of life and “a heavily masculine presence”.³³ Humanity remains dominant over the other beings because they are exhorted to see the Self as enlarged beyond the physical reality of the body, its spatiality or embodiment,³⁴ and encompassing everything. Threatened rain-forests are no longer either “It” to be exploited or “Thou” to be related to, but are revealed as actually being “Me”. While an appeal to self-interest will certainly encourage many people to use more energy-efficient light bulbs, this is an inadequate response to the problems the Earth faces because of human activity.

Many Pagans would recognise, and have to some degree anticipated, the value of Plumwood’s suggestion that

a different and improved basis for environmental politics and philosophy might be constructed by taking better account of the ethics and politics of mutuality as developed by a number of feminist thinkers.³⁵

While many Pagans do talk about “connecting with” and “tuning in” to something in the wider world, this radio language better represents the New Age. Talk of “harmony with nature” is an improvement but might again suggest the merging of the individual’s lived reality with some greater, more real reality. Such a loss of identity is disrespectful both of the individual’s own bodily self and of the multiplicity of those with whom they relate. The word “mutuality”, however, brings us firmly within the realm of relationships³⁶ and ordinary experience and is thus more fundamentally Pagan.

Paganism is concerned with expressing, encouraging and developing intimacy between human people and all other-than-human people. It values all these people as “beings in their own right” with their rights, relationships, responsibilities, significance, agency, autonomy and meaning.³⁷ While many Pagans do consider that all things are manifestation of deity, often of “the Goddess”,³⁸ this usually goes beyond the valuing of things only as manifestations of deeper spiritual realities to a more polytheistic celebration of the multiplicity of living things. Paganism, especially in its most feminist-influenced branches, encourages intimacy with oneself, with other human people and with other-than-human persons.

³³ Plumwood 1993: 2. Also see Cheney 1989b, Bonds 1992; Le Guin 1992: 161-3; Kohák 2000.

³⁴ Jung 1988.

³⁵ Plumwood 1993: 2.

³⁶ Grey 1991.

³⁷ See Plumwood 1993: 128. Also see Kohák 1993, and 1991, 1994, 2000.

³⁸ Long 1994.

While rejecting the dualistic separation of “spirit” from “matter”, the Pagan stress on the countryside as a location for significant encounters with the community of life and with “the sacred” could be decried as “mere Romanticism”. It is, however, a more positive experience and vision. Many Pagans do regularly and easily celebrate seasonal festivals in their urban environment; the city too is part of the world, but the countryside is a place of greater bio-diversity. There are more types of living being, more life, “out there” in the woods, moors, rivers and hills of the countryside. There may be no wildwood, no wilderness, few remaining areas of ancient woodland left in Britain, and American wildernesses and rain-forests may be threatened by clear cutting, river damming and tourism. But even in city parks or working woods (perhaps this does not include plantation forests) it is possible to encounter a less human-centred, more varied manifestation of the profligate abundance of life.³⁹ Life survives in the margins: motorway verges, bits of hedge, wood, marsh or pond ignored by industrial agriculture and road-builders. In these margins it is possible to “speak with” and “listen to” trees and hedgehogs, flowers and trout, robins and snakes. It is possible also to listen to oneself. Erazim Kohák argues that a philosopher and a tree can converse, neither exchanging information nor “decorating a putative harsh reality with poetic gingerbread” but communicating respect and exploring a

manner of speaking which would be true to the task of sustainable dwelling at peace for humans and the world alike, a manner of speaking that would be true in the non-descriptive sense of being good.⁴⁰

Perhaps the trees have taught philosophers what they have been teaching Pagans and children for many years: the virtue of respect and the pleasure of intimacy. Many Pagans, however, assert that trees are willing, and able in some way, to communicate things that they would otherwise be unaware of, and therefore the “speaking with” and the “hearing” may also pursue information. Sadly, children are soon removed from tutelage of trees by adults—perhaps because of a deeply suppressed and feared knowledge that

we are not bounded objects in orbit around each other, but we create ourselves in relationships with each other. We are the outcome of the intersections of our conflicts and cooperations and the influences we exert on each other.⁴¹

What would happen if children continued to have significant relationships with trees and hills, rocks and ponds?

³⁹ Dillard 1976.

⁴⁰ Kohák 1993: 386.

⁴¹ McKay 1993: 287—quoting Linda Gordon.

Pagans, who already celebrate the gendered, embodied character of human-nature, can become open to experiences which enable them to celebrate the diversities of life. They can perhaps do this more easily than some other religionists. Not only "mystical experiences", which are themselves intimately related to gender and physical reality,⁴² but also ordinary, everyday experiences empower such celebrations which are integral to polytheistic and feminist-influenced Paganism.

The Earth's ecological problems are not abstract and distant philosophical problems. Nor are they only economic or technological problems. They are not to be left either to politicians, scientists or even philosophers. Just as such problems are largely caused by everyday life (the cars we drive, the trucks which deliver our foods, the forests destroyed to make way for our fields, etc.) so the responses must involve everyday life. They are problems of relationships.

Gnostic temptation

As has already been noted, no description of Paganism will be entirely applicable to all Pagans. Although almost all Pagans talk about the honouring of the world, which would seem to demand the valuing of matter, some adopt the language or ideology of Gnosticism which sees the body as imprisoning the "soul" or "spirit".⁴³

At Pagan events it is not unknown to be invited to follow a guided visualisation in which the body, "human condition" or "human conditioning" can be stripped away leaving the "spirit" free. Numinous experiences are sometimes thought to be glimpses of what "reality" is "really" like when the accidents of bodily nature are stripped away. There are (uncommon) occasions when the Goddess of Wicca leads to such a stress on the unity of "the All" that the physical world begins to look merely apparent. Although Paganism is rarely centred on deity, it can occasionally suggest that the Earth is only important as a mask (revealing and hiding) the divine reality behind it.

The Gnostic temptation is the attempt to transcend the physical world, to experience unity with the ultimate and original "spiritual" creative forces or being. As Paganism gained a large amount of its ritual structure (e.g. the quartered circle, initiations, magical techniques) from the hermetic, esoteric tradition, it is not surprising that some Pagans do or say things which denigrate matter. In recent years such "mystical" states have been inaccurately labelled shamanic, and the techniques of soul-journeying have been hijacked in a quest for moments of "transcendence" intimating personal immortality. Perhaps this Gnostic temptation expresses a form of schizophrenia in which the

⁴² Raphael 1994.

⁴³ Also see Jayran 1996.

celebration of the world and life is assented to while disembodiedness is sought. Counter to these ritual occasions in which Gnosticism intrudes into Pagan celebrations, the following section says something about Pagan lifestyles which thrive in the mundane realities of matter.

Hedgehogs, vegans, hunters and prairies

Ordinary human living threatens ordinary other-than-human living. Sometimes it does this intentionally, e.g. fox hunting, meat production, whaling, pest-control, leather production, badger baiting, vivisection. Equally often it does so unintentionally and just by the way. Our cars frequently run over hedgehogs, for example. I do not intend to give "meaning" to this unnecessary slaughter but it can help us to understand the relationship between ecological thinking, animist Paganism and neighbourly living. Other Pagans express their ecological vision equally powerfully by hunting animals for food.

If drivers stop their cars to move a hedgehog from the middle of a road, this is not because the hedgehog was praying for salvation. Nor would the rescued hedgehog go on to develop a religion praising and thanking that human or all humankind. It would simply carry on with its ordinary life. This is much the same approach as an animist Pagan might take to those other-than-human people which, tradition teaches, are more powerful than humans, i.e. deities and the Faerie. It might be encouraging to know that such beings share a Pagan's delight in certain places and times. Their presence at festive occasions is sometimes invited but is not necessary or central to the celebration of that festival. Usually humans get on with their lives, hedgehogs get on with theirs, deities with theirs. Sometimes paths cross and this can be dangerous. This is not necessarily because humanity is thought ill of, though that might be understandable, and only sometimes because, so tradition teaches, the Faerie do things which are harmful. What "They"⁴⁴ consider to be entertaining is, for humans, as dangerous as our relaxing drive in the country is dangerous to hedgehogs. Awareness of these dangers can enable people to adjust our lives to be less dangerous. They can become more ecological by enhancing the diversity of life. However, it will never be possible to live without taking life, doing violence to those with whom this planet home is shared.

Not all Pagans are vegetarian, let alone vegan. A few consider that hunting for food is more ecologically justifiable and more expressive of relationships with other-than-human people than buying pre-packaged food in supermarkets. The prairie-sized mono-cultural fields of grain now dominating agricultural industry are ecologically

⁴⁴ It is traditional to avoid naming such people too often—various circumlocutions are available.

worthless, and worse when they depend on chemicals to destroy the diversity of life that evolution encourages. Hunters are able to draw on traditions in which the hunted is addressed and asked to give up its life, receiving honour for doing so. Pagan hunters might consider that the current imbalances between species require "culling" of "vermin" for the benefit of other life. It is arguable, however, that such language is not a "good" way to express honour of living beings.⁴⁵

If "everything that exists lives" and "everything that lives is holy", eating becomes a problem. What is eaten has been killed. Even vegans eat things that were once alive, once participated in more or less complex relationships with their neighbours, had rights, meaning and value. In the contemporary world it is perhaps not possible to go into a supermarket and address a can of beans in a way that expresses the recognition of the violence done and the need to do violence, or the mutuality, relatedness and neighbourliness of our shared lives. Some other means—perhaps ceremonial, perhaps mystical—must be found to address this problem. What remains clear, however, is that choices of lifestyle affect "all our relations" and express views of the world. Paganism does not impose a particular diet or any other lifestyle, but it does encourage people to consider their impact on the environment. Ecology is not just a matter of the activities of chemical companies, oil refiners, road builders, nuclear power generators, quarriers and agriculturalists. It is about what people do at home and at work. Conversely, it is not just a matter of private and personal action: picking up litter beside a power station, a chemical factory, a quarry or a motorway is as valuable as putting an elastoplast on a severed arm. Ecology demands concerted public action and active changes in society of benefit to the Earth.

Listening neighbourliness

We did not choose to be neighbours with those "others" with whom we share our planet home. Yet here we are, surrounded by many neighbours, only some of them human. If other religionists are passing through this place on the way to some more spiritual afterlife (heaven, nirvana, enlightenment), Pagans are discovering that they are "at home". They therefore agree with their more secular neighbours that something must be done to halt the devastation and to increase the diversity of life. This needs to be done, not on behalf of some deity or because it will benefit each individual's "deep green" Self, but primarily as an act of neighbourliness.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Kohák 1993. Meanwhile, one reader of an early form of this chapter suggested: "The vermin most in need of culling is *Homo Sapiens*."

⁴⁶ Finn 1992.

Paganism discourages the phallic view that humanity is dominant on Earth and therefore entitled to exploit its resources. It does not permit the equally phallic though potentially less damaging view that humans are stewards of God's Earth, caring for it while ruling over or managing it. Paganism is not a phallic quest for a place in the world. Some Pagans do celebrate a more uterine view, chanting:

The Earth is our Mother, we will take care of her.
The Earth is our Mother, she will take care of us.

On the other hand, Paganism encourages people to go beyond the return to a womb for comfort and nourishment. It certainly refuses to give a rebirth which is in any way discontinuous with embodied, gendered, temporal and spatial reality. Paganism is not a uterine rebirth into connected harmony with the cosmos.⁴⁷

Paganism has a more ecological view. This is the clitoral affirmation of life in its physicality, its ordinariness, its diversity and its excess.⁴⁸ This *celebration* of being at home in our bodies and in the world is Paganism's greatest contribution to ecological debates today. The Earth is humanity's only home and the only home of our many neighbours whom we must learn to respect and live peacefully alongside. To do so, Pagans can find their closest companions among ecofeminists who also link celebration with committed ecological action.⁴⁹

A common metaphor for religions is that of a path, a journey from an imperfect "here" to a perfect "there". Paganism does demand changes in human relationships with the community of life and expects people to act on what they learn from listening to the world's many voices. But the journey metaphor has its limits. This is, first, because, as Nelle Morton says,

Maybe "journey" is not so much a journey ahead, or a journey into space, but a journey into presence. The farthest place on earth is the journey into the presence of the nearest person to you.⁵⁰

Secondly, it is because Earth is already "Home"; there is nowhere else to go. Paganism is less a path than a sitting among the trees. There is a journey to get to the woods, of course, but this is not the primary activity of Pagans. Paganism is about the respectful living of ordinary lives "here and now". Among the trees Pagans are a listening people because the Earth speaks. Pagan deities too are not "*telling* us to be, and what to be"⁵¹ but "hearing to speech",⁵² listening until all people—

⁴⁷ Again see Cheney 1989b: especially 307–12.

⁴⁸ Spivak 1987: 82. Also see Bell 1992: 199.

⁴⁹ See Caldecott and Leland 1983; Griffin 1984; Plant 1989; Plaskow and Christ 1989, 2003; Diamond and Orenstein 1990; Plumwood 1993. Also see Dickens 1992.

⁵⁰ Morton 1985 and Keller 1988.

⁵¹ Keller 1988: 63.

human and other-than-human—have found their voice to say what is wrong, what is needed, what is hoped for.⁵² Such listening typically begins in the seasonal festivals in which Pagans learn to hear—and see, smell, taste, touch and celebrate—the Earth. It is in response to the ecological needs of the planet that Paganism and Pagans are tested: will all the fine words about respect lead to more participation in real action on behalf of “all our relations”, or will there be a retreat into the fantasy that right attitude or intention is sufficient? It is also in relation to the environment that Paganism will have most impact on the rest of society. At this point it offers its most radical challenge to the consumerism and individualism of contemporary culture. There are those who would like it to be part of the mainstream and resent the tree-dwelling Pagan eco-warriors, but the counter-cultural flow in Paganism is its lifeblood.

9

EARTH MYSTERIES

The world which Pagans inhabit is at once the same as and different from the one inhabited by other people. This is true also of other religionists, whose worlds are different again from the world of Pagans. Religions typically assert the existence of two worlds: a world of ordinary perception and daily life and a spiritual world entered by special means at special times and in special places, and especially after death. This chapter says more about the Otherworld(s) of Pagan traditions, and notes that the spiritual world of other religions is also not just a single place with or without connections to the everyday world. It explores another sense in which Pagans inhabit a world which is different although it appears to be the same as “this world”, the ordinary world inhabited by most people.

Pagans are at home in Earth, in the world of daily life, of eating, drinking, making love, conversing, working, playing and suffering. They do these things much as others do them and are not distinguishable from the rest of the human population by age, gender, class, occupation or preferred entertainment. Only some are distinguishable some of the time by what they wear. During ceremonies they might dress differently, or even undress, and they might wear jewellery identifiable to others as Pagan, Wiccan, Heathen, Druidic, magickal and so on. Otherwise they disappear within the mass of humanity living unexceptional lives. However, unlike many other religionists, Pagans are spiritually at home in Earth too. They are not looking for a means of escaping the material world or bodily life and gaining spiritual enlightenment or salvation. For Pagans there is no heaven or nirvana; thus the world which they inhabit is the one inhabited by other religious people, but with the first major difference being that they celebrate this world for itself and not only as a testing ground or preparation for somewhere better. Daily life, employment and leisure do not necessarily distract from spiritual, sacred concerns—the two things are part and parcel of each other. This is not to say that all Pagans enjoy their work or that they are fulfilled in their leisure. It is only to assert that Paganism finds “sacredness” inextricably linked with what others might consider “profanity”.

A second, related difference between the world as seen by Pagans and by many other people is that Pagans consider the Earth to be alive. For most of them the distinction between “animate” and “inanimate” is not entirely certain. For others it is irrelevant or false. Not only do humans, animals, birds, fish and insects have life, but so too do trees,

⁵² Morton 1985: 54.

⁵³ Compare Le Guin 1992: 161-3.