

The Attraction of Modern Paganism

Our ancestors worshipped an array of nature spirits and deities before the advent of Christianity. The shaman (to use a generic term) was the intermediary between spirit beings and people. Fictitious beings such as fairies, pixies and elves were also part of this picture. The more advanced ancient civilizations developed complex belief systems involving pantheons and priesthoods. It all falls under the broad heading of 'religion' – pagan religion. (A good background source is Ken Dowden's 'European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages', 2000.)

Pagan beliefs have not completely vanished from Western culture. The Easter bunny, the mistletoe as a harbinger of future romantic love, and aspects of the Arthurian legends (the sword in the stone and the druids, for instance) have withstood the ravages of time to become part of our cultural heritage.

Most of us do not consciously think of these as relics of European paganism. But some people in our midst take all this quaint stuff deadly seriously to the point of professing belief in the chimeras our distant past throws up. They even call themselves 'pagans' despite the pejorative connotations of the term in common usage – paganism has long had bad press, including films such as the 1973 box-office success 'The Wicker Man' (a play on the word 'wicca') with sterling performances by Edward Woodward and Christopher Lee but apparently intent on portraying pagan religion as an orgy of barbarity and licentiousness.

Some commentators have applied the label 'neo-pagan' to the modern phenomenon. However, many self-professing pagans object to this term because of its alleged association with Nazism,

particularly within the SS – Heinrich Himmler harbored eccentric views harking back to Germany's pre-Christian past which he supposedly infused into SS ideology. What I will do in this article is use 'Pagan' (capital 'P') when referring to organized modern paganism.

Paganism is well established in a number of European countries including Sweden, the Netherlands and Britain, where the Home Office recognized it as a *bona fide* religion in 1971; one of the practical implications of that official recognition is that prisoners can ask to be visited by Pagan chaplains. As well as having a website, the British Pagan Federation produces the quarterly 'Pagan Dawn' – one edition for each season beginning with spring, identified using ancient Celtic names. I subscribed to this journal for several years and took part in some of the lively discussion that arose in the 'Letters' section.

My personal association with European paganism actually arises from my first name, which is of ancient Caucasian origin and is an allusion to the bear as a totem animal – given my generous BMI and the beard, that seems rather appropriate!

At a more intellectual level, what I am interested in is what makes the 21st century Western Pagan tick. There appears to be a dearth of scholarly interest in the matter, although the past decades have seen a lot of attention being paid to the 'New Age' phenomenon which overlaps with Paganism but should not be confused with it.

Some social scientists seem to be taking note – see, for instance, Irving Hexham's 'Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth' in the Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology Vol. 36 No. 3 1999. I have formed my own impressions from Pagan source materials and come up with the following themes:

A Romanticized View Of Our Pre-Christian Past

There are shades of Garden of Eden mythology in Pagan writings when alluding to our distant past. Everything was honky-dory in those halcyon days of yore when paganism ruled the roost until outsiders came and screwed it all up. Perhaps Goscinny and Uderzo, the creators of the 'Asterix and Obelix' comic books, have something to answer for in this regard – look at all those happy, healthy, well-nourished folk in the idyllic Gaul village that those awful Romans are trying to subdue. (Not a hope while the Druid can still brew his magic potion, of course... remember, the one Obelix fell into as a baby?)

First it was the Romans bringing dreaded modernity; then later it was Christians who really put the boot in (as they see it). Hankering for a return to a mythical 'perfect day' past appears to be something many Pagans share with at least some Christians!

Hostility Towards Christianity

To claim that Pagans are contemptuous of Christianity is an understatement. They rightly point to the persecution of pagans by Christendom throughout the Middle Ages and well into the 17th century. To the Christian establishment, paganism was a tool of Satan. The widely recognized elk's head with horns as a symbol of Satanism actually arose from an ancient European fertility ritual involving a guy prancing around in that head attire.

The hysteria surrounding the witch-hunts was largely attributable to the belief that witches – in practice, usually local 'wise women' who practiced 'the craft' inherited from traditional paganism – were the Devil's fifth columnists. The early Protestants were of much the same view and dealt with

the perceived threat in much the same barbaric manner.

The most appalling atrocities were committed against innocent people because of the association the Christian authorities made between paganism and Satanism. Today's Pagans have neither forgiven nor forgotten the main perpetrators (as they see it) responsible for that dark period in European history.

The 'Spiritual Dimension' That Paganism Provides

Pagans on the whole display a cynical attitude towards the modern materialistic lifestyle. They seek a spiritual dimension to existence but unequivocally reject the one that Christianity offers. For them, Paganism fills the vacuum. It moreover does so by returning them to their ethnocultural roots, giving them a sense of belonging that the ostensibly universal belief systems, particularly Christianity, do not.

The 'roots movement' aspect of Paganism is a sensitive one. I recall a vibrant discussion in the pages of 'Pagan Dawn' about 20 years ago concerning the ethnic aspect of pagan beliefs. Some commentators were aghast at the suggestion that there is any 'racial' aspect to Paganism, but I interpreted this as a kneejerk reaction to the prospect of being called 'racist', which is what one has to anticipate these days when to self-identify as a member of a European ethnic group is likely to be willfully misinterpreted.

However, it is impossible to remove ethnicity from the pagan equation. Only Greek Pagans worship Zeus, and only Irish Pagans acknowledge the existence of leprechauns. Having said that, classical pagan beliefs are mostly local or regional rather than national. A Cornwallian Pagan and a Highlands Scottish Pagan share few pagan traditions or beliefs.

The special status of women in paganism

This aspect of paganism past and present would merit several doctoral theses in its own right. The somewhat idealized Pagan reconstruction of pre-history presents an 'equal but different' gender scenario in which women formed a religious society that ran parallel to men's, with its own hierarchy and rituals. Women in Paganism are considered to be endowed with extraordinary spiritual powers which are manifested through certain aspects of wicca ('the craft').

A lot of women who belong to the Pagan movement call themselves 'white witches' or just plain 'witch' – a term of respect in Pagan society. Many female Pagans worship goddesses – some reverentially speak of 'The Goddess'. There's plenty of room in Paganism for feminism, albeit with its own distinctive spin.

Paganism As Environmentalism

Paganism is replete with nature spirits that animate the natural world. The notion of sacredness is extended to living entities such as trees and geological features such as mountains. Harmony with Nature is a recurring theme in Pagan literature. Many Pagans are passionate about the natural environment, particularly those parts of it that remain relatively unspoiled. Pagans stand shoulder to shoulder with environmental activists in protecting such sites from exploitation.

Despite some of the trimmings that make Paganism appear more of a lark than a serious spiritual movement, it deserves to be taken seriously. Akin to many adherents of mainstream religion, *bona fide* Pagans are profoundly concerned about the direction our societies have taken – and have come up with

countermeasures drawn from their own European religious past.

—

This [article](#) has been republished from MercatorNet under a Creative Commons license.

Dear Readers,

Big Tech is suppressing our reach, refusing to let us advertise and squelching our ability to serve up a steady diet of truth and ideas. Help us fight back by [becoming a member](#) for just \$5 a month and then join the discussion on Parler [@CharlemagneInstitute](#)!

Image Credit:

Wikimedia Commons-Lenka Kovárová, CC BY-SA 3.0