

# Ecocentric Paganism

When we are in the process of growing into maturity, we appreciate and love our parents but simultaneously often tend to take them for granted. But as our mothers and fathers come to grow old and we recognize that their lives do not last forever, our concern, respect and deeper treasuring of our parents grows accordingly. Likewise for humanity as a whole: there is a steadily increasing awareness of the fragility and impending decline of our Mother Earth. At perhaps the spiritual forefront of this developing consciousness concerning our dying planet, the re-emergence of Paganism as a consciously renewed religiosity is a natural and seemingly inevitable response. While there is no universal definition of 'Paganism', three of its paradigmatic features are (York, 2016: 23, 221):

- 1 a veneration of nature;
- 2 a this-worldly emphasis;
- 3 a corporeo-spiritual understanding of divinity.

Other hallmarks of Paganism include a recognition of enchantment and the value of pleasure, deific pluralism, and a sobering, non-anthropocentric humanistic ethos; however, it is the three central foci that together are paramount, and form a Pagan ecocentric understanding. The environmental peril of our planet may be seen as a major impetus behind the emerging questioning of traditional mainstream religions and a noticeable desire either to reject institutional spirituality completely or to relocate a spiritual dynamic that – as in Paganism – comprehends the sacred as immediate, tangible and all-pervasive; embracing both the inner and outer, the self and the other.

Paganism is in a way dualistic – not in a Cartesian sense, but in its celebration of both the natural and the co-natural; that is, both the dimension of empirical observation and measurement, and the dimension of ontological metaphor and numinous magical experience. For many Pagans – contemporary, traditional and/or indigenous – both of these dimensions play important roles in contributing to a world that is to be revered as alive, healthy and complete. As Patrick Curry puts it, “We too are natural beings sprung from the Earth” (Curry, 2017). In fact, as humans, we are literally ‘Earth-lings’ or ‘children of the Earth’ – *human* and *humus* being cognate words derived from the Indo-European root *\*dhghem*, ‘earth’ (Watkins, 1992: 2101). Paganism’s conception of Mother Earth may be compared to Aldo Leopold’s understanding of it – as a community of interdependent parts that include “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (Leopold, 1970: 239).

With no central institutional authority to legitimize membership or identity, a Pagan in the West is currently considered to be anyone who declares herself or himself to be one. Consequently, there is a vast range of differentiation amongst Pagans – with views ranging from the Platonic and/or neo-Platonic valuing of the transcendental while denying the material (akin to the Hindu assertion that all empirical reality is *māyā* or illusion) to the secular or ‘Dark Green Religion’ rejection of any supernaturalism (corresponding perhaps to the atheist position of someone like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens). But between these two extremes, most forms of Paganism embrace a fully pantheistic

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spirituality that reveres the all of everything as divinely sacred and worthy of mindful cognizance. Pagan application of this reverence occurs both locally and globally. The resultant emphasis on one's immediate environment *and* the world as a whole aims for a unifying cosmopolitan planetary village – what we might call a 'naturpolis'. A true *naturpolis* would be one in which the natural world is valued for its own sake, and no longer treated as some unlimited 'resource' for human exploitation, and in which humanity is not seen as exceptional and 'outside' nature, but as an integral and responsible part of the whole interdependent web of nature. Though there are exceptions (as there are to virtually any universal claim), Pagans do not seek some salvational escape from

physicality; rather, they endeavour to incorporate the wonder of enchantment in the restoration and future maintenance of the natural balance of nature, accompanied by a mature appreciation of the here-and-now of life. ■

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