

Nature Religion for Real

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Since my first involvement with Neopagan Witchcraft in the mid-1970s, I have been told that ours is a "religion of Nature." Occasionally people say, erroneously, that we "worship Nature" or ask, as I was asked once during a talk at a Roman Catholic seminary, whether we worship "nature" or "nature's creator," a question that I did my best to slide around, since I did not want to merely set up a counter-theology of "Yahweh in drag."

In fact, contemporary Witches and other Pagans have tossed the term "nature" around for years without seriously examining what it means to them and without examining its history. For we should realize that if we sat down to supper with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello, for example, and over the soup course said that we practiced "nature religion," his understanding of the term would be considerably different -- perhaps something quasi-Masonic -- than it conveys today.

Examining what we mean by "nature" is more than a scholarly exercise for those of us who enjoy the history of ideas. For Wiccan practitioners, for environmental activists, for hunters, gardeners, and other outdoors people (and of course these are not exclusive categories), the definition with nature involves our definition of ourselves.

More importantly, I believe that we as practitioners must clarify our definition of "nature" in order to create a religious tradition that is a true "nature religion" or "earth religion." In order to do so, we must examine first the several positions towards which we tend to move when declaring ourselves to be practicing "earth religion." As a point of clarification, let me say that in this essay, I speak primarily for and to North Americans; being someone with family and friends in both Canada and the United States, that is my frame of reference. But I hope that what I say will be applicable elsewhere. If there is anything to universal principles, it should be.

On the surface, North American Neopagans seem to be stuck between various variations on two approaches to the "earth religion" question, both of which are untenable in the end. The first approach would be merely to transport transatlantic practices to North America. At its worst, that attitude leads towards ethnic exclusivism: "You must be of Scandinavian ancestry to worship Thor." (Or Yoruban to worship Xangó. Or Lithuanian to worship Perkunas). At best, it's merely a poor fit.

The other untenable position to appropriate other people's traditions, to be, as one writer once put it, a member of the "Wannabe Tribe." The tribal people of North America, of course, do not speak with one voice on this matter; they never did. For every Indian who guards the Mysteries, there is another one willing to share them (and another one who has converted to Mormonism anyway). But let us accept the statement of those Indians who say angrily, "You stole everything else and now you want our spirituality too!" I have smoked the sacred pipe when I have been

invited to, but I do not proclaim myself to be a Pipe Carrier. Instead, let us look for a different starting point.

Writing in a recent issue of the West Coast Craft magazine *Reclaiming*, writer Sam Webster offered his own take on these questions. "What we do now draws on a variety of cultures and does not match any culture in the past," he wrote. "Thus we cannot claim to be the inheritors of any single culturally bound religious tradition. We are not Greek, Roman, Celt or whatever."

More significantly, Webster identified modern Neopagans (a term he does not particularly like) as inheritors of the Enlightenment, people brought up within the modern, scientific worldview, and heirs not of land-based religious traditions but of intellectual rebellion: of the occult revival that followed the French Revolution, of the Romantics, of the Theosophists who looked to the East, and of those more modern magicians such as Dion Fortune who insisted that the West had its own magico-religious traditions that were the equal of the East's. Given that mixed heritage, Webster somewhat disingenuously still suggests that he and other practitioners are not "neo" but are simply Pagan: "We have become what our detractors feared us to become."

Webster and others like him speak more in terms of spiritual lineage than of relationships to the land and "earth religion," but as Neopagan writers never get tired of explaining, "Pagan" as a derogatory term appears to derive from Roman army slang for "peasant," hence "civilian," a usage adopted by the Army of Christ. His argument, however, follows a familiar pattern: Does a new religion attempt to assimilate with stronger forms around it? Does it "withdraw" and search for its own "authentic" identity? Or, to borrow some old Marxist revolutionary language, does it "go to the people" in order to learn from them, to inspire them, and to identify with their struggle?

The history of Twentieth Century Pagan revivals demonstrates many varieties of the first two approaches. The first strategy has been attractive because Pagans, like other varieties of homo religiosus, tend to value the old. Witches in particular have been referring to themselves as "the Old Religion" since at least the 1950s; our British co-religionists got a lot of mileage out of their World War II self-identification with embattled Britain -- in other words, ancient ethnic Paganism -- battling the "invader from the East," a dazzling rhetorical conflation of the German Wehrmacht with Christianity!

Seeking a revitalized spiritual path, North American Pagans likewise made an end run around the culture that most of us were raised in and sought Old World, Old Time models. It would take pages and pages to list all of the books and articles written, with greater or lesser degrees of historical care, on what is presented as "Old Religion." One might read *Ancient Ways: Reclaiming the Pagan Tradition*, or *The Arthurian Quest: Living the Legends of Camelot*, or *Celtic Myth & Magick: Harness the Power of the Gods & Goddesses*, or *Glamoury: Magic of the Celtic Green World*, or *Scottish Witchcraft: The History and Magick of the Picts*, or *Northern Magic: Mysteries of the Norse, Germans & English*, or *Ways of the Strega: Italian Witchcraft: Its Legends, Lore & Spells*. And those titles are only from one publisher's catalog (Llewellyn's, for April, 1998).

All of these titles demonstrate one thing: authors, publishers, and Pagan book-buyers all perceive that the real power, magic, knowledge, and "juice" is Over There rather than here in North America. They give up their own power or any chance of having their own "earth religion" in favor of the imported article -- or perhaps more accurately, in favor of a domestic product that is presented as an imported article. (Truth-in-labelling laws are nonexistent when it comes to "Celtic magic.")

If, however, the North American Pagan searches elsewhere for authenticity, his or her gaze is likely to fall upon the "noble savage," the idealized creature dubbed the "Eco-Indian" by the iconoclastic ecofeminist Mary Zeiss Stange, who writes in her book *Woman the Hunter*, "The problem with such idealized representations as ecological gurus, of course, is that they in no way realistically portray original Native American life. The Eco-Indian has been a vehicle for that ambivalence towards wilderness which is as old as the Euro-American cultural imagination."¹ In the "Eco-Indian" we see the cherished notion that the older inhabitants lived in an ecological and spiritual paradise, never made mistakes, and were imbued each and every one of them with an innate wisdom and a talent for speaking philosophically about it.

Setting aside for the moment Stange's phrase "ambivalence towards wilderness," which is important and which I will return to later, I can only agree with her overall point that Eco-Indians are not real Indians, who are as diverse and complex a group of people as anyone. Nevertheless, the Eco-Indian has become a cultural icon, and of course some contemporary Indians are completely capable of exploiting the stereotype both to gain acceptance in the Anglo world and to exert moral influence on their own people.² "After the movie *Dances with Wolves* we've had a lot of people with Sioux blood using that as a springboard to line their own pockets," admitted the prominent Lakota journalist Tim Giago.³

Although the practice has a long history going back at least to the 1600s, anyone from "outside" attempting to participate or learn from Native spirituality will be hammered with with the accusation of "cultural appropriation." Zeiss approvingly quotes theologian Carol Christ, who said, "We can't just take off what we want from Native American culture and assimilate it, which is a typical imperialist posture of Americans," but then adds herself, "The boundaries of human culture, and consciousness, are not so readily demarcated in fact, as they appear in any 'I/Other (Anglo/Indian, human/nonhuman, male/female) scheme. This has led some environmental philosophers to argue for a model of human culture as a 'mosaic of ever -- changing and yet recoverable parts that can be reintegrated into the present.' Such a model would make it possible to recognize affinities with the palaeolithic past, and with modern hunter-gatherer societies as well, in order to 'fashion an old-new way of being.'"⁴

In other words, cultural appropriate is a valid charge, insofar as it means putting on the dress of the Eco-Indian without engaging modern Indians' lives. Yet Stange equally criticizes those who romanticize Indians as noble savages, genetically capable of a relationship with the natural world unknown to Anglos. If you have only lived on on this continent for twenty or five or two or one generation, you only hurt yourself by acting as though it is impossible to establish any sort of relationship with it. What is the point of such high-minded hand-wringing? At its worst it leads only to complete passivity'

Most Neopagan Witches in my experience proudly distance themselves from the charge of "cultural appropriation." In print, in person, and on-line I have encountered numberless variations on the theme of "We have no need to steal the spiritual practices of Native Americans [or for Canadians, the 'First Nations'], for we have our own roots." Modern Pagans are often quick to sign on with the "Culture Police" and denounce members of the "wannabe tribe."

But to my mind there is something hollow about many North Americans' assertions of these Old World roots. They "smell of the lamp," as nineteenth-century critics used to say (with image of whale-oil or kerosene lamps fresh in their minds); in other words, they owe more to scholarship than lived experience.

We must realize, for example, that we do not own a single text written by a Pagan Celt other than very brief inscriptions. No anthropologist ever sat down to interview a Druid; even the Roman historians whose descriptions of the Celtic Gauls are quoted endlessly were not above treating those Gauls as "noble savages," the better to critique perceived lacks in their own society.⁵ Even a great number of the Western European "Pagan survivals" and folk customs frequently referred to owed a lot to antiquarian landlords and nationalistic movements of the past two centuries rather than to any sort of counter-theology. And if an Englishman of the seventeenth century spoke of the "Old Religion," he meant the Catholic Church upheld by the Stuart dynasty.

Likewise, the "Murray hypothesis," the idea of an unbroken secret Pagan practice passed down from pre-Christian times, which passed as gospel in the British Craft and its American offshoots until perhaps the mid-1970s, is in my experience now mostly ignored by the majority of North American Craft elders except as a soul-stirring myth. Most of us accept the fact that the "witches" burned or hung in centuries past were for the most part Christians who went to their deaths with the "Our Father" or the "Hail Mary" on their lips. While some Pagan writers do continue to hint at an unbroken "Goddess tradition," they increasingly craft their language so that it alludes to more than it claims, and in private tend to defend what they have written by saying, in effect, that it is a "noble lie" in Plato's sense.⁶

Now, however, we stand at the threshold of a new century, and for all that the calendar is merely an arbitrary calculation based on a bad guess about the birth year of Jesus of Nazareth, those three zeros that we will soon be writing will have their own enormous mythic power. The new century will be -- is already being -- promoted as a time for new beginnings. So here is my modest suggestion for North American Pagans of all varieties: learn to be truly "North American" Pagans.

Picking pantheons out of comparative religion books or based on one's ancestry or imagined attraction will become more and more unsatisfactory in a changing cultural matrix. At least we are spared the problem recounted to me by several Swedish students at my university, who said that for them to show too much interest at home in the old Norse religion of the Viking Age was to run the risk of being called a white supremacist by their peers. Among European countries, that problem is not unique to Sweden.

The charge of "cultural imperialism" made by Carol Christ and many others keeps most North American Pagans from wholesale adoption of Native religious traditions, although it fails to

address the fact that those self-same traditions have themselves changed over time, and that "adoption" runs more than one direction. And no one "owns" the ideas of drumming, firelight, chanting, trance work, sex magic, meditation, or the symbolism of knife, cup, staff, or anything else.

Instead, let the twenty-first century be the century when we admit that we live in North America, not in Neolithic Europe. We have no Stonehenge. We have nothing to "go back to." So let's make a virtue of that fact and start literally at the ground level. In order to have "nature religion," let's start by understanding nature.

Many modern Pagans idealize prehistoric times, as depicted fictionally in works such as Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear*. One thing we can say about those people is that they knew their landscape well. Yet I meet so many followers of "earth religion" who have no idea of the source of their drinking water, no knowledge of the history of the land where they live, both its human history and its "wild" history, the history of its nonhuman people, so to speak.

Would not there be a connection between the symbolic element of water and the water that we drink? Should not people who give themselves magical names about hawks and wolves and bears at least look one of those animals in the eye outside of a zoo? And how come no one ever has a white-breasted nuthatch (for example) as a power animal. Is it because there is no such bird in a box of Animal Crackers? Have the people who claim those names really connected with the animal in its habitat or are they just projecting their desires for power?

One answer for ourselves might come in questioning what we really know about where we live. Back in 1981, the magazine *CoEvolution Quarterly* (now known as *Whole Earth Review*) published a [quiz](#) on basic bioregional knowledge called "Where You At?"⁷ A "bioregion" is a loose term for a watershed or an ecological zone with common characteristics. Some bioregions are fairly easy to envision, such as the Florida Everglades. Other zones might require subdivision, such as the High Plains/shortgrass prairie or the entire Great Basin.

Almost no one, me included, could answer all the questions on the quiz without some research and thought. But one of the definitive characteristics of modern Pagans is that we are not adverse to the scientific way of knowing. We take it and blend it with the knowledge that we gain in other ways. Thus knowing that my "soil series" is "Larkson stony loam" can enrich and add texture to what I think about when I think about the symbolic element of Earth.

Loren Cruden, one of the clearest writers on "neoshamanism" (using "neo-" here to indicate its cross-cultural nature) writer in her book *The Spirit of Place*: "There is a spirituality indigenous to every land. When you move in harmony with that spirit of place, you are practicing native (not Native) spirituality. . . . Ancestry gives form and continuity to spiritual practices; place gives immediacy and manifestation to power."⁸

You don't have to live on a farm to find the answers; in fact, this knowledge will do more to help a city person to "connect with the Earth," a stated goal in most Pagan spirituality. At least one coven in New York City and one in Seattle have adopted the "Where You At?" quiz in their training programs for prospective initiates.

Some of my co-religionists may object to the collection of such basic scientific data as precipitation or soil series. You cannot find such data at the average metaphysical bookstore. When I took a Foundation for Shamanic Studies "spirits of nature" workshop once, we communed with rocks, but no one ever wondered aloud just what sort of rocks these were or how they came to be where they are. Our only focus was on what the rocks were "telling" us for our personal anthropocentric good. An uncharitable outsider might have said that we were merely "projecting" our wishes onto the rocks.

Rather than trying to be revived ancient Somebodies-or-Other, rather than trying to adapt or adopt Native spirituality (which is itself inconsistent and in a state of flux with many variations), I would rather see my fellow Pagans focus on becoming rooted. I am not proposing some agrarian fantasy of instant peasant-hood here, nor am I ruling out people's needs or desires to move around occasionally. But when we are in a place, let's be in. Let us truly learn from it and learn about it. Let us feel its tides and changes in our lives. I think that someone who knows the flow of water, the songs of birds, and the needs of grasses has a basic store of knowledge that puts flesh on the claim she makes that something is "sacred."

As I have argued elsewhere, North American Neopaganism owes as much or more to the old Boston Transcendentalists than it does to the Western hermetic tradition.⁹ And it was Ralph Waldo Emerson, most notable of Transcendentalist writers, who wrote in the conclusion of *Nature*, "When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superimposition of the strata than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity." I would hate to see Emerson's call for transcendental "unity" manifest itself instead in our common "geography of nowhere," where all the streets look the same, all the lawns are bluegrass, and all sense of place has been obliterated. To be Pagan is to be particular.

So that is my modest proposal. If you would practice "nature religion" or "earth-centered spirituality," learn where you are on the earth and learn the songs of that place, the song of water and the song of wind. Yes, Western science is flawed, but it is our way of knowing, so take what it offers: its taxonomy, its lists, its naming. Start there -- then build a richer spirituality from that point. When you understand something about the relationship of the fire and the forest, the river and the willow grove, or the accidental history of the tumbleweed, then you begin to inhabit where you are; then you are paganus.

Notes

1. Mary Zeiss Stange, *Woman the Hunter* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 100.
2. The "Eco-Indian" as spokesman for the environment has a long and complex history, ranging from the Anglo interpreters who put words in the mouths of such leaders as Tecumseh and Spokane to such modern interpreters of the idealized Indian way as Oren Lyons of the Iroquois Confederacy, not to mention the well-meaning White Protestant who concocted the famous "Chief Seattle" speech in the early 1970s.
3. Quoted in "Phonies Causing Problems for Modern-day Medecine Men," *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, Oct. 30, 1994, p. B9.

4. Stange, pp. 128-129. She is quoting from Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).
5. Examples include historians of the Roman Republic and Empire, such as Posidonius (c.135-c.50 B.C.E.), Strabo (63 B.C.E.-c.21 C.E.), and Diodorus Siculus (fl. 60-30 B.C.E.). Stoics such as Posidonius liked the idea of Druids as sages and philosopher-kings in Plato's mold.
6. Plato, *Republic*, 3.414b. He suggested that the rulers of his ideal society perpetuate the idea that its social structure was ordained by the Gods rather than created by humans, lest both subsequent rulers and citizens be tempted to tamper with it.
7. Originally published in *Co-Evolution Quarterly* 32 (Winter, 1981), the quiz was compiled by Leonard Charles, Jim Dodge, Lynn Milliman, and Victoria Stockley. The original version is also given in *Whatever Happened to Ecology?* by Stephanie Mills (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1989), p. 100.
8. Loren Cruden, *The Spirit of Place* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1995), p.3.
9. Chas S. Clifton, "What Has Alexandria to Do with Boston: Some Sources of Modern Pagan Ethics," in James Lewis, ed., *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 269-276.

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