

# An It Harm None: high-choice ethics

“I am a bold and Pagan soul, a'rattling through this land  
I judge the world by my own lights and I come by my own hand  
And if you ask me how I learned to live so recklessly  
My skin, my bones, my heretic heart are my authority”\*

The most important religious question is also the most basic: what does it mean to live by this? How might I bring my whole life into accord with my understanding of Deity and with the values that are expressed in the myths, symbols and rituals of my religion? These questions are inherent in the very word "religion." "Religion," "ligament," and "link" are all derived from the Latin root, *ligere*, which means "to connect."

So religion, re-linking, is a pattern of activity that restores a connection. What connection? Several, actually, but the most important is the connection between us and our Gods. Or, if you prefer to say it another way, between the Sacred, the Otherworld, the Dreaming, and our most everyday, ordinary behavior in the world of form.

Our rituals may be thoroughly enjoyable, even useful, but they just ain't religion unless the values they express permeate, empower and guide every part of our lives. That goes for anybody, of any religion, although the specific teachings vary widely.

How might that work for us? We are the Pagans, the free-spirited folk who dance wildly beneath the Moon. We are goats, not sheep, and glad of it. We resist all constraint. We are by our nature allergic to rulers and rules. We sing out in our pride:

"I once was found but now am lost, away from the faithful fold  
The ones who preach that holiness is to do what you are told  
Though law and scripture, priest and prayer have all instructed me  
My skin, my bones, my heretic heart are my authority!"\*

We won't submit to a dress code, or dietary laws, or detailed ordinances for the observance of our festivals. These frustrating trivia, meaningless in themselves, serve some religious communities well as boundary maintainers and as constant reminders of the presence of the Sacred in their lives. However, those who use them risk deluding themselves that superficialities like headgear make them not just different from their neighbors, but somehow holier or better. We have our own ways of accomplishing the same purposes, free from such baseless and perilous judgements.

Pagans also have no "orthodox" rulings on the tragically real and complex life issues that everyone occasionally confronts -- issues around sexuality, marriage, military service or its avoidance, assisted suicide... . The decisions we make at those critical junctures will deeply affect our lives and the lives of others. Mistakes can cause great harm. Paganism offers us no simplistic answers to ease our tough choices.

The only law that truly binds Pagans is the law that binds all, the law of cause and effect. This is "law" in the same sense as the law of gravity -- descriptive, not prescriptive. Descriptive law is inevitable; it literally cannot be evaded, because what it describes is real. Every action we take necessarily effects the whole system. As we are part of that system, every action we take eventually comes back to us, but in unpredictable and sometimes unrecognizable ways, and often amplified. This is the basis for traditional teachings about threefold return.

Never confuse radical freedom with moral indifference. Our religion sanctions neither laxity nor callousness. Freedom demands far more of us than the most stringent set of commandments ever could. It demands introspection, discernment and decision. All who know that what goes around will surely come around, understand from this that unmitigated selfishness is never a virtue and "do what you will" can never be the whole of the law.

When I, as a priestess, am asked for counsel on important life decisions, I don't interpret an elaborate body of law or issue reasoned and authoritative decisions. People cannot -- and I believe should not -- cede their personal responsibility to me or to the Tradition. Instead, my proper role is to make sure that the inquirer has explored all possible options and their probable outcomes in full depth, considered many perspectives, reflected on those [values](#) our religion celebrates, and made a conscientious decision guided by both reason and compassion.

Although we know we can never have perfect knowledge of any situation, we must make choices, always in the daunting certainty that we will experience the outcomes of our actions, good or ill. The law of cause and effect condones nothing and condemns nothing; it just operates, impartial and implacable as Nature Herself.

Our elders remind us that they were once bluntly taught that we have no firm moral rules. Instead of devout obedience, the Pagan weighed out what was involved in any situation, and what might be the probable outcomes, then acted -- or chose not to act -- in the full expectation that she would "bide the issue." Today, we have borrowed a more exotic term: *karma*. As we use it, it means precisely the same thing.

There are two main misconceptions about karma floating around our community. One is that somewhere there is a judge -- more commonly some sort of committee of judges called the "Lords of Karma." They sit around some cosmic conference table in the Otherworld, evaluating our conduct and assigning appropriate rewards and punishments. We trust their perfect knowledge and perfect fairness. Well, no, the Gods do not so micro-manage the world of form.

Another is that karma is some sort of moral bank account that is under our direct control. So we can choose to do things that will bring us "good karma" or "bad karma" or "burn up bad karma" or even - get this! - "get around karma." Sorry, no.

The interactional system just within the human community alone is far too complicated for any of that. Then add several additional layers of complexity for our interactions with non-human realms -- seen and Unseen. Like the weather, it's ultimately neither predictable nor controllable.

All this would be horribly unjust if the Gods were intentionally leaving us without guidance, playing cruel guessing games to entrap us in karma. At moments of crisis, we may feel that way, confused and isolated. This is not just untrue, it's impossible. We are inseparable from the web of life and from our Gods.

The pernicious illusion of isolation is a certainly a trap, but it's one we create for ourselves and can loosen by our own efforts. Pagan religion, which lays down no rules, gives us instead many methods for re-linking, for re-learning to hear the still, small voice of the Sacred that sings within all things.

That same complex web of connection, cause, and effect that confronts us with karmic return also offers us sure guidance. Happily, those who care, who pay attention, who open themselves to the living Whole, will also find there a deep, clear sense of how our actions feel to others. Some call this "empathy," which in the original German literally means "feeling in" (*emfuehlung*).

Small tangent: at one point, we in Proteus Coven became unsatisfied with the simplistic explanations Pagan tradition offered us for the problem of evil. We were piously told that things like winter, illness,

aging and death are simply those parts of the Greater Cycle that humans don't like, the destruction that makes room for renewal, Mother Nature's harsh housekeeping. We were advised that most of our suffering came from unreal expectations and from resisting the inevitable. So we worked towards understanding, acceptance, and serenity.

That's fine as far as it goes, but incomplete, for not all that we call evil is natural and inevitable. The explanation does not account for harm that comes from human greed and malice. So we started looking for more answers. We called this our "evil project," and even hosted a few "evil workshops," at Pagan gatherings, where people were invited to share their ideas about this evil question.

After some exploration, our Triton (now our High Priest) came up with the insight that satisfied us. He described evil as a rip in the fabric of empathy. We can only act with indifference towards the needs and feelings of others if they don't seem to matter to us. When we are in a state of empathy, wholehearted and open awareness of our essential connection, then we know -- experientially, not just theoretically -- that our actions must inevitably come back on us. We cannot then cause harm without experiencing it ourselves.

Empathy, caring, is the first guide and teacher, the primary source, freely available to all who open themselves. It's absolutely necessary, but not by itself sufficient. Insight often comes in dreamlike flashes, wordless emotional states, metaphors. What's more, none of us is a perfectly clear channel. We all have habits, scars, desires that might distort the insights we receive.

We need to sort through it, test the leadings we receive for clarity and feasibility, make decisions based on both insight and all other information we may have. For help with all this, we can turn to those we love and trust. Other perspectives, other perceptions, someone to hear us out and give us useful feedback -- these things are of tremendous value. There are also some good books and articles available, springboards for introspection and group discussion. (A few are listed below.)

We also have what is available to all who sincerely seek it: conscious contact with Deity, filtered and focused by human wisdom and gathered in our cumulative heritage of poem and story, symbol and rite. This heritage contains and presents the collected experience and collective values of our faith group. It helps us to make sense of present situations and newfound insights. It is our context.

This also carries a danger. The recorded insights of past generations can be used as a barricade against the living voice of Spirit. We have seen other communities come to believe that all possible wisdom is already gathered within the covers of their Book. Stagnation soon follows and corruption is not very far behind. Fundamentalism can thus afflict any religion. Most suffer periodic flareups, but few completely succumb. Instead, we need to work at keeping our traditions open, alive and relevant.

We must continue to listen, separately and together, for the ever-flowing song. Be assured that it still sings for us, here and now. Our predecessors did not have any unique access to Deity. We are all equally children of the Gods. The window of inspiration never closes to the sincere seeker, nor does our need for ongoing Sacred contact ever cease. We need to constantly develop, refine, and apply Traditional wisdom to new circumstances. Growing knowledge of how things work in the world opens up opportunities previously unimagined to do good -- or ill.

The whole notion of taking counsel together regarding ethical issues frightens some Pagans. We are the free-spirited folk who resist all constraint. We pride ourselves on our temperamental allergy to rules and rulers. And, yes, there is always some risk that community consultation might devolve into rule-making and enforced conformity. We've seen that around us as well.

Advice need not degenerate into petty regulation, let alone rigid commandment. To some extent, this is an issue of trust. We trust each other to share perceptions and insights without attempt to enforce our viewpoints. We trust ourselves to confront whoever seems to be stepping over that line. And we can

also trust our heritage for a core ethic that warns and wards us against pressures to conform for the sake of conformity, either from authoritarian elders or from groupthink.

Every religion seems to have a core ethical statement, a summing up of their special insights, a "golden rule." Ours is the [Rede](#) :

### **an it harm none, do what you will**

In those eight syllables, the paradox we've been exploring is resolved. We are proud Pagan heretics, submitting to no artificial laws, accepting no other direction but that of our own loving hearts.

“So while I breathe this glorious air, an outlaw I'll remain  
My body will not be subdued and I will not be tamed  
And if I cannot shout it loud, I'll sing it secretly  
My skin, my bones, my heretic heart are my authority!”\*

## **Resources**

Here are some articles and books that you may want to read, and to discuss with others, as you formulate your own ideas about ethical conduct in the light of Pagan religious values and the Rede:

### [Wood, Robin](#)

*When, Why ... If*

Dearborn, MI: Livingtree, 1996

Clear, sensible advice, written from a Wiccan perspective and lightened by engaging humor. Highly recommended.

Starhawk

*Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics*

Boston: Beacon, 1982

Chapter Three "The Ethics of Magic" pp. 33-44.

Explores how the theology of immanence can lead to some new perspectives on ethics.

Gilligan, Carol

*In a Different Voice*

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982

Describes the process of ethical development of boys and girls in our culture. Because of different upbringing, girls initially develop an ethic based on affiliation and caring, while boys develop an ethic of rules, justice and fairness. This closely parallels the two phrases of the Rede. Gilligan suggests that a mature individual of either gender will discover the other perspective and bring the two into balance by about their mid-twenties.

Johnson, Oliver A.

*Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers*

NY: CBS College Publishing, 1984 (reissued 1998)

This anthology is divided into sections representing major historical periods, so the reader can learn how ethical thinking developed in European culture. Interestingly, Johnson

includes a second table of contents that does not follow the order in which the articles are printed, but instead arranges them by types of theories. This doubles the usefulness of the book.

Ruggiero, Vincent Ryan  
*Thinking Critically about Ethical Issues, 4th Edition*  
Mountain Valley: Mayfield, 1997

Sommers, Christina Hoff  
*Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life: Introductory Readings in Ethics*  
San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985 (reissued 1996)

anthology organized by topics

Sommers, Christina Hoff  
*Right and Wrong: Basic Readings in Ethics*  
San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986 (reissued 1997)

deeper exploration of four major schools of thought: Kantianism, Utilitarianism, Ethical Relativism and Egoism.

by [Judy Harrow](#) , HPs, Proteus Coven  
updated: March 8, 2000; © 2000, by Judy Harrow

\*Song lyrics are from "Heretic Heart" by Catherine Madsen