

# Defining Paganism

by Michael York

Paganism is a religious orientation whose historical trajectory has produced an overall misunderstanding that survives into present times. In fact, there appears to be little mutual understanding concerning what paganism is. For some, it is to be equated with nature religion; for others - both practitioners and critics, paganism is a form of atheism. On the other hand, there exists a popular connotation that often equates paganism with satanism. At the same time, even for contemporary Westerners who consider themselves pagan, there is a widespread and detectable unfamiliarity with, if not ancient and classical forms of paganism, at least other contemporary religious expressions that generically conform with what can be delineated as a pagan paradigm of general features and elements. It is the purpose of the present undertaking to elucidate a tentative understanding of paganism vis-a-vis the world's other religious traditions.

To begin, paganism occupies a particular theological niche. It can be placed into comparison with the other major world religions. The reason why this theological niche has not been generally recognized, however, can be largely attributed to the Judeo-Christian global dominance that has caused an hegemonic exclusion in considering paganism among the full range of theological speculation. This exclusion also parallels an apparently 'natural' human tendency that exalts the spiritually transcendent while dismissing the spiritually immanent. Why this last is so - and so ubiquitously or nearly universally - is something upon which we can here only speculate.

Material existence, however, is intimately interconnected with the physical "laws relating to pain and loss." To enjoy physical incarnation and the tangibility of possession subjects each of us to the possibility, probability or even inevitability of suffering and deprivation. Underlying the physical embodiment is the foundational principle of desire with its dynamics of attraction and repulsion. Because of this, there appears to be an innate human propensity to reject the physical in religious terms, i.e., in those terms that involve questions of ultimate meaning and value. We see this in Buddhism's quest for *nirvana*; in Hinduism's search for *moksha* or release; in Christianity's need for atonement from "original sin;" in Islam's picturing of a more perfect form of existence in the heaven of Allah; and even in paganism's own historical shift to gnosticism.

Physical form is ephemeral, and a basic religious impulse is to seek the permanent which is unaffected by change. While on the one hand, we might be able to detect a well-nigh universal behavioral response that we could label as pagan, on the other, in religious aspiration, most people appear to react to the inevitability of *Weltschmerz* and decay and countenance instead the transcendental. The world-denying is a

pervasive refuge for the world-weary. In this light, paganism is a religion of youth and for youth. It appeals to those with energy, optimism and concern with the here-and-now. This of course does not mean that paganism is a religion only for the young. Far from it. But it is a religious sentiment and challenge that appeals to the youthful aspect of the spirit of humanity.

Every religion codifies some kind of relational attitude to the world, to humanity and to what we might loosely refer to as the supernatural or numinal. Each religion develops its unique understanding of what these are, how they are meaningful and valuable, and what their mutual relationships to each other might be. Some religions, quasi-religions and/or religious perspectives take a reductionistic approach to the human, the natural or the supernatural. Some, for instance, devalue the human by excluding certain groups, races or ethnicities and exalting a privileged few. We find this tendency in the Hindu caste system, in Calvinism, among Jehovah's Witnesses, and especially throughout the Identity Movement. The idea of "mud races" as espoused by the World Church of the Creator led earlier this year to heinous acts directed against Asian-Americans, African-Americans and Jews by a 21-year old adherent with the name of Benjamin Smith. From such a perspective, the terms "humanism," "cosmopolitanism," "pluralism," and "multiculturalism" are regarded as "dirty words" representing humanitarian tendencies that are to be fiercely combated.

The idea of conformity to a single human standard in order to be considered worthy is an age-old tendency of many of the world's more traditional religions. The notion of "holy wars" directed against other people has existed at least since the beginning of recorded history. The Roman Catholic Church manages today to still incite parishioners occasionally to shoot abortion providers. The Mormon church has targeted the homosexual community in California in its vehement campaign against same-sex marriage. Shiite priests of hatred in Tehran have launched persecutions of both Baha'i and Zoroastrians. If religion is a key determinant in developing a sense of identity, it has also often been as much the precursor and on-going parochial vehicle for anti-humanitarian myopia.

But religions might not only be reductionist vis-a-vis the human, some also are reductive considering the world itself. In the Gnostic offshoot of classical paganism - whether the non-pagan or merely nominally pagan teachings of Orpheus, Pythagoreus, Plato or Plotinus, or the quasi-Jewish and Christian sects of the first few centuries of the Christian Era (e.g., Marcionism, Manichaeism, or even the much later Catharism of the 12th and 13th centuries), a strict, hierarchical dualism is posited between the world and spirit. Matter becomes the furthest - and lowest - emanation and degrading of the Godhead, the One, the Source, the Good, the Spirit. The body itself becomes regarded as a tomb, the *soma sema* concept, something from which to escape. Physicality and its phenomenal nature - including sensuality - are rejected as valueless impediments to true and emancipating gnosis. Spirit alone is true and real; the corporeal is an imprisonment. It becomes meaningless in and of itself.

Vedantic Hinduism takes this gnostic concept even further and posits the idealistic belief that all material phenomena are illusions of *maya*. Whether Vasistha Advaita, American Transcendentalism or the (New Age) Church Universal and Triumphant, the phenomenal world of nature is a veil which must be penetrated before one reaches spiritual truth behind the masquerade. Buddhism takes a closely similar position. Like Hinduism, the purpose of life is to escape life, to end the cycle of rebirth, to reach *moksha*, *samadhi*, *nirvana*, *satori*. Although Theravada does not deny the reality of matter, it still devalues it for the ineffable ultimate goal of disinterested wisdom and compassion. The common attitude and orientation of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Brahmanic Hinduism, Gnosticism, Transcendentalism, Theosophy and even today's New Age is to achieve emancipation from ignorance and extinction of all attachment. This translates as release from the physical and its concomitant laws of suffering and loss.

A third reductive approach within a religious or quasi-religious framework is one that denies the spiritual itself. In its extreme forms, we have here the philosophical schools of materialism, mechanism, atheism, positivism and secular humanism. A more religious form might be the Satanism taught by Anton La Vey, the atomism of Democritus, or the hylozoistic teachings of the early Ionian philosophers. On the other hand, a quasi-religious, worldly-minded materialism might be understood as Marxism, Epicureanism or Stoicism. In all these schools of thought and/or religious perspectives, the material world is the fundamental, perhaps only, reality. Ethics are determined by conformity to natural law alone. There is no consideration of the numinal or the spiritual as something beyond the parameters of the empirical world. The supernatural is regarded as a fiction and at best a superstition appealing to the ignorant and gullible alone.

These last are often not considered as religions because they have no room for the transcendent sacred. Like scientific materialism, they deny the supernatural. But I want to argue that they are no less religions in the broad sense of the term. They have simply denied the supernatural as the gnostic orientation denies the material. In all cases, there is a position taken on the human, material and numinal domains of ontology. The numinal is simply that realm of cognition that is non-phenomenal. It encompasses the supernatural, the mythic, the miraculous, the mystical, the metaphorical and the imaginal. It is perhaps Baudrillard's "hyperreality," but it is definitely that which cannot be known directly through the senses. The effect of people's reactions to the supernatural, or at least their perceptions of the supernatural, can be objectively studied but not the supernatural itself.

In the "narrow" sense of religion, all religions entertain some concept of the numinal or supernatural as real. In the "wide" sense of religion, all religions take some position - whether pro or con - on the validity of the mystical/magical other. Paganism conforms to both senses: to the wide sense completely, and to the narrow sense mostly. Like the Abrahamic religions, it generally endorses the human, tangible and spiritual modes of possibility without reducing any one of the three to the others. Whereas, however, Christianity and Islam accept and sometimes honor the world as

God's work, they nonetheless share with Judaism an explicit or implicit condemnation of the heretical worldly-mindedness of the *Apikoros*. A puritanical streak runs through the Levantine religions which inevitably suggests a lesser valuing of the temporal world compared with, if not humanity, at least with, divine spirit.

In paganism, the world or nature is itself divine - and as divine as either humanity or the numinal or both. While there may be pagan nature religions which deny or reject the super-sensory as having any kind of ontological reality, a pagan expression which does such is simply a "sect" or "denomination" which has focussed on one cosmological reality by reducing the tripartite range of totality. Such a position would still be pagan though simply not expressive of paganism as a whole - much in the manner that the Hari Krishnas or the Vasistha Advaitas are still Hindu, though they consider, respectively, Krishna or Vishnu as the entire godhead and not merely one deity or avatar among several.

Part of the difficulty in understanding or defining paganism comes with its relationship to the emergent rubric of "nature religion." While there has been some debate on the nature religion list concerning which category, paganism or nature religion, includes the other, even though such world religions as Christianity and Islam might cherish nature as a divine gift, they do not comprise nature religions. Instead, I argue that any religious perspective that honors the natural as the sacred itself made tangible, as immanent holiness, is pagan. My further argument, however, is that nature or the material world is not the whole of the sacred in the full pagan view of things. The human and the preternatural are as divine as is the phenomenal world of nature. In other words, in its full scope, paganism is, or at least embraces, naturism, humanism and animism of some sort.

So in answer to the question how does the contemporary Western pagan recognize that Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, Shinto, Siberian shamanism, Kahuna, Australian aboriginal religion, Amerindianism, the Afro-Atlantic practices of Santeria, Macumba and Voodoo, various tribalisms of sub-Saharan Africa, and so forth are pagan is because they are pagan. They all share in an essential this-worldliness. Earth is sacred, the sacred source or mother of existence. The material is understood as the matrix in which and from which the world, the human and the gods have their being, though not necessarily their end. In each of these religions we have the implicit pantheism, animism and polytheism that Margot Adler recognized as the constituent features of paganism. I would also add humanism and naturism. There is neither the denial of phenomenal reality as we have in Hinduism and Buddhism, nor the exclusion of humanity from godhead as we have in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Consequently, paganism can be understood as both a behavior and a religion. As a behavior it is to be seen in the spontaneous and auto-reflexive quality as well as venerational ritual of cultic expression. The cultic is the passionate, and while all passion may not be cultic, all cult is something which is emotionally intense. The very term itself derives from *cultus*, the Latin past participle of a verb meaning "to till the

earth, to cultivate, to pray or worship." In other words, the origins of pagan cultivation and worship are directly connected with the earth and assisting its growth and produce. Cultic behavior and pagan behavior are in origin one and the same.

But paganism is also a religion, albeit a marginalized and neglected one in the advent of Judeo-Christian-Islamic ascendancy. As a religious generic, however, it can be contrasted theologically with gnosticism. Creation for the gnostic is a descent or fall. Physical life represents a loss of an original state of grace, and the gnostic agenda is to re-trace the ladder of being to the Ultimate Source, the One or the Good. The spatio-temporal world is a linear one in which history ends with the re-gaining of the original state of being. In its salvational plan, gnosticism represents its agenda as a completion of a circle.

But despite its circular agenda, gnosticism is not cyclic. There is a fixed end which is sought. Paganism, by contrast, rejoices in the cyclical round of nature, of birth, death and rebirth, as an open-ended plethora of possibility. There is no point to which to return. Earth is the divine womb of unlimited challenge, discovery and growth. It or she is the divine ground of being, advent and imagination. The tangible presents an unending arena of opportunity. It is to be honored rather than spurned and rejected; cherished as a gift rather than renounced out of horror and disgust. And because the pagan movement is out from the single point rather than back to it, it is multiple and forever varied and different. Rather than aiming for a Hegelian logic of the same or a traditional encounter with a uniform One, paganism champions multiplicity, plurality and polytheism. It allows a full scope to interpretation and invention beyond any confines of dogma, doctrine or judgments of heresy.

In fact, because of its peculiar nature when compared not only to gnosticism but to other world religions, what is most appropriate to paganism is poly- and ad hoc definition. By its very nature, it is more encompassing than any single definition. What distinguishes paganism from most other major and minor world religions is its extreme polymorphism. There is no canon or authority which speaks for paganism as a whole. While there may be some strictly defined forms of paganism within the pagan category as a whole, its overall diffusion and variety exceeds that found within Christianity, Buddhism and even Hinduism. This is because pagan identity is locally determined - by both individuals and communities. It has neither central administration or ecclesiastical council.

But paganism is polymorphic not only in its determination but also in how it perceives the divine. The sacred or spiritual itself can assume many different forms. This multiformity of the divine might be omniform or pantheistic, or it might simply be multiplex and polytheistic. At the same time, the heterogeneousness of divine reality from a pagan perspective may also be understood as subsumed within or as some kind of monistic unity. But even here, this is not necessary for a perspective still to be pagan. In a word, paganism represents a celebration of variety that challenges the very limits of human conception and imagination.

Nevertheless, it would be amiss in a paper on "Defining Paganism" not to offer at least a tentative and pragmatic definition of the subject at hand. To this end, I offer two definitions. The first seeks to allow a definition that can include all forms of paganism - both generic and nominal. The second excludes the nominal forms of paganism such as Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Neo-platonism, Cabalism and even Theosophy. The first definition holds that:

*Paganism is an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by individual or community with the tangible, sentient and/or nonempirical.*

The second definition allows that:

*Paganism is an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by individual or community with the tangible, sentient and nonempirical.*

The only difference between the two definitions, in fact, is in the use of the "and/or" conjunction/disjunction in the first and its replacement with the simple conjunction "and" in the second. In the re-wording, simply nominal forms of paganism are excluded, and paganism becomes understood as an endorsement of relationship between physical and supernatural realities as well as human (and possibly other forms of) consciousness. It may accept the supernatural as only approachable through metaphor (religious icons and symbols), or it may also entertain that the supernatural appears and is accessible through the miraculous. But along with its supernaturalism or proclivity for the nonempirical, its humanism and naturism are equally weighted.

In other words, even if paganism or particular pagan identities may exalt the special or the numinously distinguishable over the whole, or the theistic or even polytheistic over the pantheistic, the divine or sacred is found ubiquitously. Paganism, therefore, allows the divine to manifest in and as the material, whatever else it may be. But paganism eschews any true hierarchy between the temporal and permanent, between the physical and spiritual, or between this-world and the otherworld. In paganism, all realms of being and possibly non-being partake in a dynamic partnership or colloquium that functions between potential equals. We can conclude our understanding of paganism by recognizing that emancipation from parochial and restricting ways of thinking and feeling is the full consequence of the pagan theological position which sacralizes not only the world, the cosmos and humanity itself but also the nonempirical reaches of the imagination.

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