

Pagan Deism: Three Views

by Margarian Bridger and Stephen Hergest

Most discussions of the variety of Wiccan beliefs start by assuming that there are two basic positions: either one believes literally in personal, named deities ('deist', in the common parlance), or one does not ('non-deist'). The more we talk to non-deist Witches, the more we believe that this is an oversimplification. We'd like to suggest a new model, using not two but three endpoints, to which we have assigned primary colours for convenient reference.

Red:

The first of these endpoints is the orthodox deist position: the gods are personal, named, individual entities, with whom one can communicate almost as one would with human beings. They may or may not be humanlike. They exist in a way ('level', 'plane', or 'dimension') that is far beyond human comprehension, but their existence is objectively verifiable.

Blue:

Deity exists. It is the Ultimate Sacred / Great Mystery / Source. It is so great, so subtle, so all-encompassing, that we cannot hope to comprehend more than a tiny fraction of it. Being ourselves human, we relate best to things that are humanlike, and so we have 'the gods': humanlike metaphors or masks which we place upon the faceless Face of the Ultimate, so that through them we can perceive and relate to a little of It.

Yellow:

The gods exist only as constructs within the human mind and imagination. They are Truths - valid ways of making sense out of human thought and experience, personifications of abstracts that might otherwise be too slippery for the human mind to grasp - but they are not Facts; they have no objectively verifiable existence. Like other abstracts (e.g. Freedom, Democracy, Love, Truth) they enrich our lives and are worth believing in, but it is naive to think that they have any objectively verifiable existence. It doesn't matter that the gods aren't factual; they're true, and that's what's important.

Introducing the Triangle

Now, let's arrange these endpoints in the shape of a triangle, with Red at the top, and Blue and Yellow at the left and right of the base. Many people's beliefs don't fall precisely on one of these endpoints, but somewhere along one of the edges, or even in the middle. A person's beliefs may change from moment to moment, or may remain fixed for years.

Eco-feminist Witches, to whom the Earth is the living body of the Goddess, mostly cluster along the Green edge, between Blue and Yellow; those who believe in transcendent deity are along the Purple edge from Red to Blue.

Those who relate to the gods in a very personal way, but are agnostic about Their nature, are probably the Orange edge. Most Jungians cluster near the Yellow point; pantheists are mostly Blue or Green. A totally agnostic Witch is an earthy shade of mud-brown; an atheistic one must be on the Yellow tip.

Yet even this is an oversimplification. Two Witches who cluster very closely on this triangle might have very different beliefs about reincarnation, or about the nature of magic; two who are widely separated on the triangle might have identical beliefs on these topics. For most of them, additional axes in another dimension would be needed; some would require entirely independent complex maps.

Nevertheless, let's take the triangle as a working model for the moment. This triangle is about conscious beliefs, those which we can analyse and put into words.

But Wicca is, first and foremost, a mystery religion. The more deeply we participate in the Mysteries, the less relevant distinctions of belief and interpretation become. We can represent this by drawing a pyramid upon the triangular base we have established. When we debate the differences in our beliefs, we are operating near the base of the pyramid. The more we simply let ourselves experience the Mysteries, and suspend our interpretation of them, the more nearly we approach the apex. The triangular cross-section becomes smaller, the different beliefs draw closer together. At the apex, they merge into a single point - and it is this point, this rare moment of total immersion in the Mysteries, that all religions have in common.

This suggests a further geometric model. That peak that transcends belief systems becomes the centre of a sphere. Our original triangle may be mapped onto its surface, together with the maps of the beliefs of other religions. More likely, it's a hypersphere, as every religion has common boundaries and areas of overlap with many others. Beyond the sphere lies the void of non-religion. But how can we define this? Not as atheism; for atheism is itself a type of religion. Not as agnosticism; even agnostics can find a place for themselves within the sphere. Perhaps we can best define this as nihilism, or perhaps religious apathy.

From this macrocosmic view, let's now return to the original triangle. What does it mean for us, individually? Most of the time, a Wiccan's personal beliefs about the nature of deity are almost invisible. Wiccans whose beliefs plot onto the triangle at very different places can work the same magic, share the same rituals and language, and practice the Craft side by side without ever noticing that what is literal fact for one is metaphorical truth for another. A Red may be more reluctant than a Blue or Yellow to mix pantheons, or to speak of the various horned gods as if they were interchangeable. A Yellow may spend less energy than those of other colours on

explicit worship, and more on explorations of human psychology. Yet such patterns become apparent, if at all, only over many months or years.

It's easy for most of us to slip into the assumption that most of our friends and coveners believe as we do. The discovery that they don't can lead to feelings of betrayal and loss of trust. This can degenerate into name-calling, the Yellows being labelled 'not real Witches' and retaliating with such epithets as 'superstitious' and 'dogmatic'.

Unless we wish to discard our focus on mystery and experience, and instead become a religion of creed and dogma, we can't afford such battles. However, it is also unwise to bury our heads in the sand and pretend to a non-existent homogeneity of belief. We must accept that all of us, in our various colours of belief, are Witches together. In order that we may be better able to serve as priestesses and priests, we need to explore and understand one another's beliefs.

What is the source of the different perceptions of deity?

It's not a difference in experience; three different Witches might have very similar encounters with deity, but interpret them differently according to the colour of their beliefs. Neither is it purely a difference of personality types; if it were, the same individual would never move from one belief to another over time, without showing signs of major personality change. If there is any consistent distinguishing factor, perhaps it is a difference in needs.

Truth

The primary need of the Yellow Wiccan is the need for truth. Perhaps this person is naturally sceptical, or perhaps at some time they've suffered serious disillusionment. Either way, this person cannot believe without doubting, and cannot reconcile belief with doubt. The images and experiences of the Craft are as treasured by this type as by any other, but to them, a belief that cannot be questioned is vulnerable. A twig that cannot be bent can only be broken. The gods, to the Yellow Wiccan, are symbol and metaphor, and the religious journey is the quest for self-knowledge. Through meditation, through myth and myth-making, and perhaps through direct conversations with that higher and deeper, but to them, still human, awareness which expresses itself as 'the voice of the god/dess', ritual becomes for the Yellow a tool for enriching human life and awareness, and for participating now fully in the world and its needs. Jungian psychology and its language may figure prominently in their rites, and the gods may at various times be perceived as specific aspects, as archetypes, or as an undifferentiated whole. Whether they cling to the time-tested value of traditional ritual forms, or create entirely new material, their task is to design ritual that works.

Faith

Faith is the primary need of the Red Wiccan. To them, the gods simply are. Whether the Red is naturally trusting, or whether they have repeatedly tested their perceptions of the gods and concluded that they have objective reality, they believe the many gods are facts of the universe, impossible to question or doubt without doubting one's own version of reality. Belief is not a question, it is the cornerstone from which all else of religion springs. How can one practice the Craft without such beliefs, they ask, except as a hypocrite? It simply wouldn't make sense. For the Red Wiccan, ritual is about interaction with the real, living Gods. Whether by seeking to re-create the ancient forms of Their worship, or by getting to know Them personally and devising new forms that will satisfy Them, everything focuses around one or more of the individual Gods. Sometimes They must be propitiated, at other times They seek to share only our laughter and celebration. Often They have advice to offer, or mysteries to share. But always, the focus is upon invocation of, and service to, the individual and personal Gods.

Belonging

The Blue Wiccan is, perhaps, the mystic of the Craft. This person's primary need is to belong. Only in a whole and holistic universe, where all things are part of one great Pattern, can one be sure that one's own existence has meaning and purpose. The deity of such a universe must necessarily be whole and singular; it is only because of our own limited perceptions that we can only experience it by dividing it into many aspects and many forms. The purpose of religion is to explore, and more actively participate in, the pattern which is the sum of these many parts. A Blue Wiccan's favourite rituals, therefore, are those which advance our understanding of the Mysteries, and which let us participate more consciously in the monthly and annual cycles. Blues will likely favour magic which reshapes the patterns of the universe to their needs, or which helps them become more aware of those patterns in order to act more effectively as a part of them. Meditation, celebration, and cyclical or patterned activities appear often in this person's rites, as do efforts, both pragmatic and symbolic, to reshape the wholeness of the pattern where it is broken.

Understanding

Whatever our individual beliefs might be, all of us need to have faith, to belong, and to know truth. All of us have the capacity, therefore, to understand the needs and attitudes of our fellow Wiccans whose beliefs might differ from our own. And that is just as well, as we are all part of the same religion. With mutual understanding, perhaps we can work together to help the Craft grow in directions which will serve the needs of us all, and of the gods, whatever we might each perceive them to be.

originally published in *The Pomegranate* #1 (February, 1997), pp. 37-42.
updated: January 19, 2000; © 1996, 2000, by Margarian Bridger and Stephen Hergest