

Paganism:

A Religion for the
21st Century

by
Sharddaramon

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A Religion for the 21st Century

Prelude

“The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.” ~ Einstein



Tuesday morning. The handsome looking middle-aged couple I see come into this coffee shop every time I am in it are here again. They exchange some giggles and some comments about the current political climate and then proceed to head to the counter to order their usual caffeinated drinks. As they get in line, they pass by a host of people on their laptops who are usually checking their e-mail. I am one of those people at a laptop tapping away at a small table. They do not know my name but they wave cheerfully because that's what people who are regulars at a particular coffee shop do. This time, however, in the hopes of starting an interesting conversation, they ask me what it is that I am working on so diligently.

I am often a little reluctant to discuss my writing with people I do not know. When someone asks me what I am doing, I feel compelled to be honest in my answer to them but I also tend to be coy. I usually just tell them I am writing. Some push on and ask what it is I am writing. When I say I am writing about religion sometimes people suddenly become alarmed. They assume I am writing about one particular religion because, in our culture, the word religion is often linked specifically to Christianity and they are afraid that, if they continue to talk to me, I will eventually try to convert them. It is at that point that they will kindly excuse themselves and move away.

If I say I am writing about spirituality, some will feel less threatened and may continue to ask me more questions. When I say I am writing about Paganism then an even more alarming look may subtly cross their face. They may move along quickly for fear that I

may vex them with some evil curse. On even more rare occasions, I will run into a fellow Pagan who will ask about some more specifics concerning my writing and we might even have a short discussion. This, however, is usually not the case. To avoid all the hassle and confusion I usually just tell people I am checking my email.

Sometimes, though, there comes along a person who is simply curious and wants to learn more. This person often just wants to know some basic information about Paganism. She or he may find that contemporary culture and the traditional religions seem to be in conflict. Because of this, that person may be open to new spiritual possibilities and ideas. Often, this person is not content with just getting by every day and searches for deep meaning and a purpose to life that has not been found in the teaching of the religion of his or her birth. He or she may be quite independent in thinking and living and is concerned with how we treat one another. It is for this person that I was inspired to write this book. In it are the answers to the most common questions people have about Paganism: what is it, is it really a religion, is it relevant to our lives, and what does it mean to be one?



Introduction

*“Born again? No, I am not. Excuse me for getting it right the first time.” ~
Dennis Miller*

My Goals For This Book



Modern Paganism is spreading throughout the world and has been listed as one of the fastest growing modern religious movements yet it also one of the most misunderstood. It is my hope that books like this one will help dispel some of the confusion about this movement. I do this not just because I think my religion is the only right one and that I think everyone else should believe as I do - not at all. I do not believe that any one religion is the only correct one for all of humankind but I do think that the challenges and troubles of our world and our times require a new way of thinking and a new way of acting toward each other, toward ourselves, and toward the planet upon which we live. The way to make changes for the better, however, is to first make a change in our attitudes and in how we view the world. One of the ways to do this is through a religious perspective and I believe that modern Paganism offers a perspective that is right for our current times and conditions.

This book is for different people. There may be some who are interested in Paganism as a personal religion but who are unsure or unclear about it. There may be others who are not interested in becoming Pagan but want to know more about Pagan theories about life and living. There may be those who have some misconceptions about Paganism and who want to understand the truth and there may be those who are simply curious about the role of Paganism in the landscape of modern religious movements. Each person should be able to find something here to satisfy their needs.

This book is not an introduction to Paganism. There are already several great texts available for that purpose. My goals for this text are somewhat different than those usually reserved for

introductory books. I wish to examine the role of Paganism within the context of modern religious and social needs and conditions. Specifically, I have three goals for this work: 1) to demonstrate that modern Paganism is a truly a religion, 2) to dispel some of the fears and misconceptions about the tenets and practices of Paganism, and (3) to demonstrate that modern Paganism is a religion that is suited and needed for the conditions and challenges of our lives in the 21st century.

Use of the Term Pagan

Throughout this book I will be discussing a modern religious movement that I identify by using the word Paganism. Unfortunately, this word is fraught with difficulties. First of all, the word pagan (small letter "p") has been traditionally used to refer to any number of different religious traditions considered pre-Christian or, sometimes, non-Christian. Starting in the middle of the 20th Century, a religious movement began to emerge whose adherents looked back to some of these pre-Christian Earth-based and nature based practices for inspiration. They called themselves Wiccans, Witches, Druids, Shamans, Asatru, and many other names but many recognized that they shared some similar convictions. The umbrella term Pagan was used when referring to any of these or similar movements. In reality, no one knows for sure what many of the ancient pagans believed or practiced since few things were written down and much of what was recorded was systematically destroyed or eradicated. Though modern Pagans may look back in time for inspiration, what they have developed is really a new religious movement. As Isaac Bonewits has pointed out, the true term for all these modern movements is Neopaganism. The prefix "neo" means recent or new but often refers to some tradition in the past. I prefer to use the simpler term Paganism (with a capital P) to refer to these new movements.

Misconceptions

Before we begin to look at Paganism as a serious and important religion for our times, let us first be clear on what Paganism is not. Paganism is often quickly dismissed when it comes up in conversations

partially because of the connotations historically attached to the word and partially because so little is understood of this new movement. So many images have been created and passed on depicting Pagans as evil, self-centered, and immoral that it is often difficult to ask people to be open minded when discussing Paganism as a serious movement. When conversation is struck, some people often look for confirmations of their pre-determined opinions. Let us take one example. Some Pagans are polytheistic (some are also monotheistic and some are atheistic). There is a prevailing attitude that religious history has proceeded from polytheism to monotheism because such a progression demonstrates a maturity in human theological development. In a curious contradiction, some religious authorities who deny the concept of evolution consider the move from polytheism to monotheism to be our natural theological evolution. Pagans, then, are seen as regressive and ignorant of the obvious superiority of monotheism. If we were to follow this logic, however, we would have to accept atheism as the next and greater religious perspective. In reality, there is nothing (other than personal faith) that proves that one view is more correct than another.

Another reason that Paganism is dismissed is because it is seen by some as a spirituality only for social misfits. It is true that some Pagans like to wear all dark clothing, play Dungeons and Dragons late into the night, and wear pentagrams the size of hubcaps (and there is nothing wrong with any of that) but these folks do not represent the vast majority of Pagans. There are Pagans everywhere; they live in every state and every city. There are Pagans in many countries throughout the world and they work in a variety of places. There are Pagan lawyers, doctors, professors, teachers, and professionals in all areas of work and there are Pagans who fix cars and run stores and restaurants. In my favorite local coffee shop where I often go to write, one of the servers is openly Pagan. In other words, there are Pagans in every type of living, working, and social situation.

A third reason that Pagans are often dismissed is because people believe that they mean to be harmful. They point to the common and incorrect traditional view of Pagans as devil worshippers who practice various forms of sacrifice and spew hateful incantations. Though there are some who honor Satan as a deity of chaos and transformation (and there is a great deal of debate by

Pagans as to whether those people should be considered Pagans) none that I know of worship a concept of evil known as the devil. Instead, many Pagans vow to "harm none" and focus their energies on healing the earth and the beings who live there.

In short, Paganism is a modern theological movement whose adherents, like those of any major religion, are normal every day people from all walks of life. But, is Paganism really a religion like Christianity or Islam or is it a passing fad like the hula hoop? It turns out that such a simple question is really quite difficult to answer.

