



Pagans and the environment

Rob Martin

Requests for use or re-publication of this article should be made (via Shap if necessary) to the writer, who retains copyright. If re-published in part or full elsewhere, the article's publication in World Religions in Education 2008-9 should be acknowledged.

The transliteration of specialist terms and the opinions expressed in this article are those of the writer, not of the Shap Working Party.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Martin is a self-employed storyteller and trainer in community development and community / voluntary sector management. He is the local co-ordinator for the Pagan Federation Bradford and Halifax area.

About the same time as I was asked to write this article I was invited to a workshop about the use of Rombald's Moor. This whole area of moor-land is exceptional in the number of cup and ring markings. There is also a stone circle, interestingly called the Twelve Apostles, and the Swastika stone at Woodhouse Crag near Ikley. The view from the Twelve Apostles includes the 'golf balls' at the American base at Menwith Hill.

My initial thought is that Paganism is all about the environment, Mother Earth, Earth Goddess, Earth as a living organism, who in partnership with the sun provides for all our needs. Humans and animals as well as all plants have a symbiotic relationship with the earth. Care for the environment by native peoples from North America, Australia and 'the frozen North' is well documented. There is no reason to believe that the people who first inhabited these islands were any different. The proliferation of 'menhirs' (standing stones), stone/earth/wood henges, and other ancient archaeological evidence from Orkney to Stonehenge show that our ancestors had the time, inspiration and ability to create both large and small monuments. How and why these monuments were made may remain a mystery; there is little archaeological evidence and no written documentation. However my personal experience of being in such 'sacred spaces' is of a profound spiritual connection. This connection can also be experienced by people who are not 'pagan' as writer M. Scott Peck makes clear:

The field at Long House Farm was beautiful in its own right, but it took a dolmen to make it a holy spot ... by themselves, little circles of ordinary stones in the ground are not holy ... but put them together and some kind of magic happened for us. (1)

A current environmental issue is at Thornborough, where three interconnected henges are at risk from quarrying by Tarmac. Thornborough Henges form Yorkshire's largest and most ancient Neolithic site. Its importance is recognised by English Heritage, and the heritage group Timewatch has called for urgent action to protect the Neolithic archaeology in the area around the henges. At the time of writing campaigners are sending objections to the North Yorkshire County Council planning office.



Today's Pagans would be unlikely to contemplate building such structures for religious purposes because of the impact on the environment. Similarly, anyone taking hammer and chisel to the rocks on Rombald's Moor would be condemned as a vandal which begs the question, 'How old is a marking when it stops being graffiti?' Can we compare cup and ring marks to initials carved by Victorian lovers or the white paint spray 'God is Love' scrawled on the rocks of Shipley Glen?

To Pagans the Earth is sacred and there are places where the combination of landscape, sun, moon and planets make a strong spiritual connection. Many of these 'sacred spaces' became the sites of Christian cathedrals and churches; others are sites of natural beauty which attract many tourists. This can make it difficult for today's Pagans to carry out their rituals. There has been some condemnation by Pagans of others who use ancient sites for picnics or even ritual without taking due care. When candles are placed directly on the stones, the wax damages the appearance of the stone and is very difficult to remove. Litter is left which can damage wildlife as well as spoil the appearance of a sacred space.

The above issues will be of concern to many people, Pagan or not. I will now give a brief description of two Pagan paths which demonstrate a clear connection with and reliance on nature and concern for protection of the environment: Shamanism and Wicca.

The word 'shaman' comes from the Tungus people of Siberia and is now used to refer to the indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs of a wide range of cultures on every continent including the Pagan traditions of Europe. Running through all shamanic practice is the belief that the shaman is someone who has the ability to enter an altered state of consciousness in order to contact an inner source of knowledge and power, usually described as the spirit world. Shamanism teaches a special relationship with the Earth, a relationship which has generally been lost in the materially-minded West. The shaman teaches that we are part of, not separate from, this world. It is this world that bears and sustains us and is in a sense our mother, giving us what we need and renewing itself. We are all made from the four elements, earth, fire, air and water with the addition of the fifth element, ether (spirit). We are they and they are us. We are created physically from them and carry them throughout our lives. At death we return them to the earth while our spirit goes on to take another form in another place and time. Shamanism teaches that if we listen to our bodies they carry the wisdom of the elements, a wisdom that gives us a love for natural things and recognition of the beauty in blossom and fruit, a sense of rightness and belonging that sweeps over us when we look, listen and sense nature around and within us. The shaman lives and grows with natural wisdom and scorns the senseless violence which through our greed that has been inflicted on the Earth. The sweat lodge is probably the best known ceremony which conveys shamanic wisdom to the rest of us. Dr David Fontana describes his experience:

With the ground under the bare skin, and the searing heat filling the lungs with fire and wringing the last drops of moisture from the body, one is stripped of everything except elemental being ... there is nothing left but the sense of being one with everything, of dissolving separateness... (2)

Wicca is also called the Old Religion; it is a Pagan mystery religion of Goddess and God. Wicca honours the Divine as manifest in nature, the Earth is our spiritual mother, and nature itself is sacred. There are many similarities with Shamanism. The traditional Witch, also known as a 'Wise woman', 'Cunning Man' or 'Hedgewitch' is described by Rae Beth:

... rather like the old-time village wisewoman or wiseman: one who knows and worships the Goddess and her consort the Horned God; one who practises spellcraft for the purposes of healing, and teaches the mysteries. (3)



Witches were persecuted for their belief in a Goddess which was unacceptable in patriarchal cultures, and in European countries witchcraft was pushed underground and over centuries largely forgotten. An essential connection with nature was lost and human exploitation of the Earth increased, until in the 1960s alarm at the extent of the damage was raised by naturalists and Wiccan tradition began to revive:

Worship of a Goddess would have to mean, for example, that the earth, Mother Earth, would once again be held sacred. She could no longer be polluted or exploited for any reason.

... Witchcraft is a system of beliefs and magical practices dedicated to restoring the lost harmony between humanity and the subtle, transrational aspects of life, the mysteries.

... this would also restore the lost harmony between humanity and Mother Earth. (4)

Scott Cunningham advocates an individual approach to Wicca and one which is 'new'. He does not try to reveal ancient secrets but encourages practitioners to conduct ritual in a way that is meaningful to them.

Since we have arrived at the point where one mishap could end our planet as we know it, there has never been a time when Wicca as a nature-reverencing religion has had more to offer. ... Wicca is a joyous religion springing from our kinship with nature. It is a merging with the Goddesses and Gods, the universal energies that created all in existence. It is a personal, positive celebration of life. (5)

Many modern Pagans follow a mixture of ideas and ceremony from many traditions and cultures; Shaman, Wiccan, Celtic and Norse. In general, eight major festivals are held. Each festival is linked to the relationship between the Goddess and the God, Mother and Father Earth (Sun God) and the changing seasons of growth, harvest, death and rebirth:

'Samhain', 31st October, Celtic New Year and festival of the dead. The Goddess as Crone, Wisewoman, and the God as Lord of Shadows guide us through death's realm and the uncertainty of the cold, dark season ahead.

'Winter Solstice', Yule 21st December, the Sun's birthday, daylight lengthens, the God is reborn.

'Imbolc', 2nd February, the awakening of the life force, the first green shoots appear. Goddess as maid and God as youth approach each other. Mother Earth puts forth the first spring flowers. We see the God in the growing light of the sun.

Vernal Equinox, 'Eostre', 21st March, equal day and night and the elements of life are brought into balance. Day will now be longer than night so a new tide of life begins. The Goddess is spring maiden and the God is young, the ardent one. Their union brings all life into new order. Spring flowers appear, beasts and birds prepare to bring forth young.

'Beltane', 1st May, the first day of summer, celebrated with feasting, the "Greenwood marriage" of the Goddess and the Horned God.

'Summer Solstice', 21st June, the sun at its height, the Sun King's complete love with the Queen of Summer. The God's strength goes into the growing crops.

'Lugnasadh', 31st July, summer is on the wane, the sun's strength is dwindling. It is the harvest of the first fruits. The Goddess gives birth to the first fruits of field and orchard, garden and hedgerow. The God is sacrificed to be reborn at Yule.



Autumnal equinox 21st September, again a time of balance as day equals night, and much celebration and giving thanks for the harvest. The Goddess is Lady of Abundance, her union with the God has made all things on Earth.

To return to my original thought, I hope that I have demonstrated that Paganism is inextricably linked to the environment. The cycle of the year, the relationship of Earth, Sun and the other elements of water and air are linked with Spirit, Goddesses and Gods. Pagan rituals which follow this cycle help to concentrate the mind on the present moment. Each festival gives thanks and helps prepare for the future. Caring for the natural world is the Pagan's duty.

Notes

- (1) Peck, M. Scott (1997) *In Search of Stones*, Pocket Books, p 72
- (2) Fontana, David (1992) *The Meditator's Handbook*, Element, p 106
- (3) Beth, Rae (1990) *Hedgewitch a guide to solitary witchcraft*, Robert Hale, p 7
- (4) Beth, Rae (1990) *Hedgewitch a guide to solitary witchcraft*, Robert Hale, pp11, 12
- (5) Cunningham, Scott (2004) *Wicca*, Llewellyn, p xiv

Bibliography

Crowley, Vivianne (2000) *Wicca*, Thorsons
Ellis, Peter Berresford (1994) *The Druids*, Constable
Matthews Caitlin (1990) *The Celtic Spirit*, Hodder & Stoughton
Pagan Dawn, the journal of the Pagan Federation, published by the Pagan Federation