

## **Two Currents of Contemporary Paganism**

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Presented at *The American Academy of Religion* in 2006.

### **Abstract**

Debate continues about how to define Paganism, but it is generally agreed that it is a 'nature religion'. Unsurprisingly, Pagans are widely supposed to be environmentally active, and the *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World* goes so far as to say, "Paganism is an ecological faith tradition, a nature-centric spirituality that seeks to break down hierarchies." (Partridge, (ed.), 2002; 326).

However, most ethnographic research shows that in practice, Pagans are not especially ecological, and only a minority of eclectic 'Eco-Pagans' are involved in direct action (Adler, 1986, pp. 399-415). Smith Obler concluded that although Pagans' language and beliefs speak of a love for nature, their behaviour is no more environmental than anyone else's (2004), and Adler found that "quite a few" Pagans were actually against environmental activism (1986; 400).

We focus on this apparent paradox at the heart of the movement: If Paganism is a 'nature religion', why are so few practitioners environmentalists? The obvious answer is that belief does not always translate into practice, but we offer a more useful hypothesis based on existing research and recent ethnographic work.

We make sense of this apparent inconsistency by tracing the genealogy of Paganism, which reveals diverse currents of influence. While Contemporary Paganism originated from esoteric magical traditions, we trace how an 'earth-based' Paganism emerged from folk Romanticism and the Free Festival movement. These currents are not isolated but nevertheless carry distinct ideological characteristics and attract different socio-political groups. Although our argument focuses on UK Paganism, the fundamental cross-cultural influences between the US and the UK mean that our analysis is relevant to both countries.

### **'Esoteric' and the 'earth-based' Paganism**

[Welch]

Contemporary Paganism, as outlined by umbrella organisations such as the Pagan Federation and in many scholarly and popular sources, can be understood to draw upon a long and complex history: magic from the Western Occult Tradition, ritual from folklore and Freemasonry, Elementals from the ancient Greeks, and deities from a wide variety of places and periods. Further, it draws heavily on Romanticism - the typical and popular image of the Goddess stands as testimony here, often imaged as young, slim and lovely - a Greco-Romanesque vision of beauty despite Her triple aspect. Nature, too, is often heavily romanticised, an issue that largely informs this paper.

However, with such an eclectic and exotic background, it is unsurprising that Paganism increasingly falls into two currents - the esoteric and the earth-based. There is much writing concerning the esoteric aspect of Wicca with personal growth a potent theme; Doug Ezzy has recently published on this very topic, and as Heather O'Dell has noted in Harvey & Clifton (2004), most contemporary Witches are solitaires, drawing heavily on the ever-expanding range of Wiccan DIY guides. Many Druid authors similarly promote personal growth over environmental ethics.

Emma Restall Orr, the voice of the British Druid Order, wrote an article in 2003 that appears on the environment section of the Druid Network website. The article states that "[t]he psychological aspect of Paganism is a profoundly important part [of Druidry]. The quest for self-development, self-awareness and growth is an integral part of most people's spiritual or religious practice,

allowing us a way of finding meaning, value and confidence." The word environment is barely mentioned and mostly features as an aspect of philosophical Paganism.

Given that a lack of environmentalist engagement in Paganism has already been noted, why are we presenting this paper? With the considerable number of Pagan books in high street stores, the increasing number of taught courses, both online and through personal teachers, and the increase in personal Paganism over any form of communal activity (Hutton, 2006), the distinction between esoteric and earth-based pagans is becoming ever more apparent.

Having looked at the various popular DIY Pagan books such as Silver Ravenwolf's *Solitary Witch* (2004) and the writings of Emma Restall Orr, renowned author and spokesperson for the British Druid Order, as well as online courses - from 'Control your life with Wicca and paganism' from [wiccacourse.co.uk](http://wiccacourse.co.uk) and 'OBOD's Druid training course' - it is clear that in these solitary forms of study, environmentalism is at best marginalised. However, is the same true of group-taught courses?

Last year, two pagans local to me, Donna and Melody, known as Amethyst Tygermoon and Romany Rivers, established Moonriver Wicca, a three-year training course for those interested in Paganism. They differentiate between Witchcraft - the magic craft of Witches who "bend reality to their will through the use of nature, elements and magick" - and Wicca, the following of "a spiritual belief system that honours the Wheel of the year... both the masculine and feminine divine", as well as holding to the importance of rites of passage ceremonies. The extent to which this generalised understanding of Wicca differs from generalised Paganism is unclear, although other Pagan pathways are hardly mentioned in the course. The course has recruited for two years and currently has 15 members, 4 of which are in their second year of study. The charge is £200 annually plus the cost of additional books, tools and other magical materials.

There are several issues with Moonriver beyond effectively fitting much Pagan practice under the label of Wicca. Most notably, the course leaders run a bookshop and holistic centre called The Gaia Tree, a much-used source of information for locals. Further, they use a selection of alternative practitioners to aid their instruction - such as past-life regression therapists who locate 'Spirit helpers' for initiates and Transcendental Meditation masters who give Moonriver students the tools to attune to the energy of Gaia.

The bookshop is of concern because the range of stock is minimal, and Silver Ravenwolf's novels and DIY guides are in abundance. Titania Hardy is similarly well represented, whereas Ronald Hutton's and Graham Harvey's academic writings are not only notable by their absence, but the Moonriver founders had yet to hear of the authors! When questioned about inspirational and informative works and authors, although Gerald Gardner was acknowledged, it was with reluctance as he 'gave bad press' and 'plagiarised anyway', whilst Doreen Valiente was just a 'grand high poohbar'. This form of Wicca was to be avoided whilst *The Celestine Prophecy* and Scott Cunningham's books were to be applauded and, as such, informed their choice of stock.

Beyond these criticisms, however, is the marginalisation of environmentalism in their course. Whilst obviously esoteric in essence due to Moonriver's emphasis on magic, they claim "a strong emphasis on practical paganism" - practical here being doing nature-based magic, not doing anything nature-based in the environmental sense, beyond an annual group litter pick.

The BBC's Pagan message board recently ran an environmentalist thread. Although there were only 37 postings by around 28 different Pagans, the overall understanding was 'passing the buck' by electing Pagan counsellors to work on green issues or that Paganism as a religion has nothing to do with environmentalism. I will share some quotes that exemplify this position:

- "what on earth has a person's religious leanings to do with (environmentalism)?"
- "Green issues have nothing to do with religion."
- "me and the environment have never had a happy relationship, as long as it's on the other side of the glass and I can view it from a distance then I'm fine."
- "the more I talk to eco-pagans the more I get peeved off with them harping on about the environment".

Whilst certainly not a comprehensive study into Pagan ecological ethics, it would appear that twenty years after Adler, quite a few pagans are still not environmentalists in their outlook despite proclaiming a nature-based spirituality.

[Harris]

While the roots of British Wicca remain firmly in the esoteric tradition, a transformation occurred when Wicca reached the US, for it was here that Wicca found ecology. Historian Ronald Hutton, who emphasises the right-wing leanings of British Traditional Wicca, dramatically states that:

"Pagan witchcraft travelled from Britain to the United States as a branch of radical Conservatism; it returned as a branch of radical Socialism". (Hutton 1999; 361).

The Eco-feminist Witch Starhawk was fundamental to this sea change, and her 1979 book *The Spiral Dance* has helped shape what has become known as Eco-Paganism. Starhawk's influence in the UK was already apparent in the 1980s, notably in *Awakening the Dragon*, a booklet by Rich Westwood and John Walbridge that represents the earliest statement of UK Eco-Paganism (circa 1989). The booklet encourages Pagans to be more ecological, suggesting that "a Pagan has loft insulation and double glazing." More significantly, it encourages Pagans to apply magic and ritual to political ends.

Although Starhawk has had a more prominent influence, the US Earth First! movement is also important. Dave Foreman, who founded Earth First! in 1980, perceives 'monkey wrenching' or 'ecotage' as a form of earth worship, and Bron Taylor (2001) asserts that the 'radical environmental' movement in the US "can aptly be labelled 'Pagan environmentalism'".

It is significant, then, that when Earth First! appeared on the UK protest scene in 1991 it was at Twyford Down, the site which spawned the Eco-Pagan Donga Tribe. The Tribe began when two young travellers set up a protest camp on the Down, which was threatened with destruction by a new motorway. Donga Tribe Eco-Paganism was earthy and practical, concerned with making herbal remedies and weaving protection spells against security guards' attacks. They had no formal training, and Donga rituals were often spontaneous and unstructured with a wild Dionysian edge.

However, not all counter-cultural influences come from the US. When ancient folk traditions were overlaid with Romanticism, a current emerged that would later inspire the UK Free Festival movement and the new travellers.

The anarchic Free Festivals combined 1960's style musical concerts with elements of Medieval carnival and the Gypsy horse fairs. During the 1970s, hundreds of New Travellers spent their summers driving between festivals in convoys of live-in vehicles. These New Travellers rejected the settled lifestyle of mainstream society and engaged instead with discourses of nomadism and carnival. As you have just heard, the Eco-Pagan Donga Tribe emerged from this current of folk Romanticism that continues to enrich the movement.

Although mainstream Druidry emerged from the esoteric current, alternative versions grew out of the traveller community and the Free Festivals, notably The Loyal Arthurian Warband and The Secular Order of Druids. Both orders are currently engaged in environmental activism.

We can now explain what Eco-Pagan and academic Andy Letcher describes as the apparent "inconsistencies within modern Paganism" (Letcher, 2000). Letcher's path has been via 'alternative' Druidry, so we might expect him to be drawn to activism. However, we would hardly expect Pagans of the esoteric current to be radical environmentalists.

Margo Adler's ethnographic research illuminates this dichotomy. Perhaps one of her most insightful respondents was Penny Novack, a leader of Philadelphia's Pagan Way for many years. Novack found a "great difference" between those she calls "Pagans" and those she labelled "occultists". Pagans are "essentially anarchists", while those she describes as "occultists" are concerned with hierarchy and "can't really plug in to the earth". (Adler 1986:402).

My own ethnographic research supports this analysis. During a UK protest camp visit earlier this year, I noted how many 'alternative Druids' were involved (field notes, February 2006). This was unsurprising, as a member of the Warband Druid order had established the camp. However, the absence of other Pagan traditions – most obviously witches, the largest Pagan group in the UK - remains striking. Striking, but perhaps not surprising: Ronald Hutton notes that none of the many witches he researched had ever joined a protest camp (Hutton, 1999, p. 405).

Neo-Shaman Gordon MacLellan disapproves of the magical establishment criticising Eco-Pagans because they are "untrained" (MacLellan, 1995, p. 145). The feeling is often mutual, and many Eco-Pagans distrust mainstream Paganism, which is seen as hierarchical, rule-bound, and remote from their own spirituality, which is grounded in a life close to the land (Letcher, 2000).

Rowe of the Donga Tribe refused the name 'Pagan' but felt it was close to what she felt:

"I don't like to worship an idol. I worship the land because I live on it and I can feel the energy from that. I don't like structures and rules."  
(Berens, 1994).

An understanding of the Pagan currents we propose here explains these findings. However, what initially attracts Eco-Pagans to the current of earth-based folk Romanticism and a typical Wiccan to the esoteric? Our answer remains a hypothesis but one increasingly supported by ethnographic work.

### **Intuitive and Cultural Pagans**

In a recent interview with an Eco-Pagan 'alternative' Druid, my respondent, whom I shall call John, expressed his opinion that there are two kinds of believers:

"People of the book...the learned people...and...the other type of believers, who are the intuitive type. They will follow the heart rather than the head" (Harris, field notes, May 2006)

The spirituality of many eco-activists is grounded in an intuitive "sense of connectedness" (Plows, 1998, p. 168), and they become involved in Paganism in a quite organic way. Activist 'Busker' Paul explains how this can happen:

"Some take a lot of interest in Pagan rituals and ceremonies while some people become tuned in without even realising it... You just do what comes naturally".

(Berens, 1994:33).

Kate, one of the protesters at the UK Newbury campaign of 1996, is a good example:

"What we have is our love for the land, for this place and for our own particular tree...I'm probably a Pagan although I know very little about it." (Headon, 1996, p. 39)

One of the activists at the Camp Bling protest site in Essex describes her spiritual understanding as coming from 'Mother Nature'. It arises spontaneously from sitting in a field or on the beach, just "feeling". She does not "put names to stuff" and, like Rowe, resists adopting the name 'Pagan'. (Harris, 2006; 143).

Two spiritual approaches typify those drawn to earth-based Paganism and the contrasting esoteric current. Those John called 'learned' Pagans we might describe as 'cultural Pagans'. They tend to be urban, widely read, and unlikely to be engaged in activism. This clarifies Smith-Obler's finding (2004) that for many Pagans, love for nature was expressed in language and belief, but not action because theirs is a cultural nature religion drawing from the esoteric current. For others, the activists drawn by the current of folk Romanticism into an earth-based Paganism, nature spirituality is intuitive and demands practical engagement.

## **Conclusion**

[Both authors]

We are not proposing a dichotomy between two distinct groups, as some Pagans may not comfortably fit into any classification. However, typically, esoteric Pagans learn their practice through formal training or books. Their organisation tends towards hierarchical structures, and ritual practice tends towards formal and non-ecstatic practices. They are typically found in more traditional Druid and Wiccan groups that draw on the esoteric current.

Earth-based Pagans typically develop their spontaneous and intuitive practice through "social osmosis and personal intuition" (Berman, 1981, p. 71) <sup>1</sup>. Compared to esoteric pagans, earth-based pagans' rituals are unstructured, ecstatic, and focused on community and celebration. Earth-based Pagans dislike organisation, and some resist identifying as 'Pagan'. They are drawn to the current of folk Romanticism and are common in alternative Druidry and Eco-Paganism.

This analysis explains what Adler describes as the "deep split between Pagans" over ecological commitment (Adler, 1986, p. 400). Embracing this conclusion would prevent the kind of "internally divisive" misunderstandings exemplified by Lecher's suggestion that Neo-Paganism's lack of environmental activism means it "can be labelled as a 'virtual religion'" (Letcher, 2000). Here lies the key to understanding the central split running through contemporary Paganism. Paganism originated from occult practices, which were strongly influenced by hierarchical and patriarchal ideas from the Enlightenment and Platonism.

As a result, a fundamental split appeared in the movement between the 'old school' Paganism that emerged from the Western Occult Tradition (exemplified by Traditional British Wicca) and the emerging Feminist Paganism, exemplified by those practising an eclectic Women's Spirituality.

Whether Traditional Wicca- and mainstream Paganism in general - can transition from the older "esoteric occult tradition" (Crowley, 1998, p. 179) from which it was born to an exoteric

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<sup>1</sup> Berman's quote originally refers to the mode of understanding used by Ancient Greek artisans and was criticised by Socrates.

environmental movement remains to be seen. At the moment, this seems to be more a stated intention than a manifest reality.

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