

## BRIGID TO BELTANE

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I don't need to tell you. We live in a time of cultural tension where people are divided about what values should lead us forward. It's so true, it's a waste of a sentence. My apology. I owe you all five seconds of life back.

Ours are times reminiscent of the ancient Chinese curse. "May you live in interesting times." Truth is, every year begins an interesting moment. Every year begins a new version of the curse of interesting times. The truth is, it's always confusing times.

I think it is better to think that the world's values systems are always shaky, and shifting. Between us as citizens, and even within our families. Change and tension are the norm. It's always confusing. Always two or more sides. However, today we put the different world views of MSNBC and Fox aside, to find the odd comfort we might find in looking at the long-held tension between the religions of civilization, and that of the old times, the country, the woods.

Let's begin by replacing our present slice to time's red-capped Trump supporter and knitted pink hat feminist, with a conflict set back in time. Imagine a third century Roman city dweller looking over his shoulder at an old wise herbal healer, while spitting dismissively on the ground as he mutters "Pagani."

Pagani, the root of the word Pagan, was not initially, as we think of it today, a religious distinction. It really was a cultural label, a slur. It began as an old-world equivalent of an urban person calling someone a hillbilly or hick. But city people looking down on country folk was only the beginning of who would be disdained as a "Pagan." Few words are as nuanced and or loaded. Pagan is at the same time a great and awe-full word.

And what began as a slur, designed to create distance, between city and country folk, grew in scope to be the word chosen to mean all of the "primitive" religious people outside the Judeo-Christian, monotheistic worldview. So, religiously speaking, Paganism is an odd word. One not unlike the word, "love" or "God" that is asked to cover and symbolize too much to truly be particularly meaningful. A word not unlike "queer" which can be both a scandal and a badge of honor.

Paganism grew as a label, as a slur to cover those who to various degrees participate in the indigenous Earth-based and tribal-rooted practices and world views of their ancestors. Enough so, that it is not inaccurate to suggest that all the local religious traditions that were in place when we lived in tribes are pagan.

What is troublesome is that the word came to describe not only people who are culturally or religiously different than the Western Christians who were uttering it, but in the terribly persistent habit of "othering" people who were different as primitive, lost, and in need of both redemption and a little civilizing.

It is clear to all of us that the Roman soldier, dismissing the local country healer woman, who would no doubt be later slurred as a witch, was hardly embodying the love and acceptance of the Roman Empire's newly adopted Messiah. That we all get.

But, even if the dismissive soldier in our little imaginary second century scene was not very "Christian" he did get something important right. He did, in his arrogant high-minded way, get right that the faith of the Empire would carry the next generation of religious belief. And that it would be a good long generation. One of course we are promised is without end. He did as it turns out, with his dismissive tone, predict that the repeating cycle of rituals dedicated to the seasonal weather shifts,

and the patterns of daily life, would be replaced in the collective consciousness with a religion dedicated to a new form of time and history.

Among other things, our arrogant ambassador of city life, our "heavy" bearer of the ideas held by the third century powerful urban elite, got that chronological time was slowly coming to supplant a year of circular seasons. Our jerky Roman got that we had invented a history that was more chronological, and linear, more human than seasonal and biological. And that that story would win. Essentially he was on to the fact that we had invented History.

Our Roman would get right that TIME would, moving forward in HISTORY, be measured more by famous events, and by chronological marks set on a calendar, than determined by the sun. Our imaginary soldier was in his little gesture (tone and spit) saying in an unconscious way that religion was now going to be much more about human relationships, rules, moral codes, and quietly be guided by the idea of us as above the natural world.

Our soldier was unknowingly right that the sensual physical world was going to for the next two millennia be a second-class citizen to an invisible un-earthly spirit. And in this imagined up-street conflict of ours, his disdain could also be seen as foreshadowing of how and why Paganism would go ever more underground.

What this Roman could almost certainly not have foreseen was all of what would go missing when these traditions were squelched. And, it took until just about fifty years ago, before we would come to see that.

When you celebrate Paganism, you are tapping back into the religious concerns of people who lived life before electricity, the formal scientific process, or indoor heating. A time when the sun going down meant less light, less food, and more cold, and to a time when questions about how and when the food would grow, and how the animals were doing really was a spiritual matter. Paganisms roots were born at a time when prayers and rituals designed to control the impact of the sun on us returned.

Interestingly, concerns that we have over the last few millennia come to see as too earthy, and too primitive for our creaturely concerns, have returned, and in an interesting way. Now our concerns are not that the sun will not return, but that it will have too big an impact and we will be too warm.

I encourage you to embrace that irony.

However, even if many of the pagans from antiquity would have been from pre-literate cultures and would likely identify more with tribes than nations, and were religiously driven more by seasonal and climate and weather concerns than we are, for anybody concerned about the runaway impact of human behavior on the planet, that is changing, and because it is, Paganism is not only the classic old-time religion, of pre-history, it is also perhaps the most contemporary religion too.

Hardly anyone, and I mean that almost literally, hardly anyone in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century living in a contemporary society, particularly in America, would have thought themselves a Pagan, or Wiccan, or Druid, or a Shaman. But, quite literally over the last fifty years the past has come alive. Your great grandparents very, very, very likely did not call themselves Pagans, but you, or your grandkids might.

It should be said that what is being reclaimed is not the whole cloth of those traditions, but more specifically the rituals that re-center us to a more gender-balanced, more nature-focused spirituality. Old voices that viewed divinity as immanent, built into nature and humanity are back in vogue. That playful bumper sticker that states "Give me that old Time Religion." Expressing that desire to capture what is lost.

To make things even more confusing, and this is important, is that as these traditions I spoke of are being reclaimed from the history dust bins, they are simultaneously also being re-organized, and essentially synthesized by modern Pagans into something resembling one digestible set of traditions. So with Paganism the past is all at the same time being discovered and reinterpreted.

### How Modern Paganism Was Born

The real change in Paganism's reputation and practice was kick-started in the early twentieth century by the publication of a few academic works.

In the 1920s, Margaret Murray (a woman) who was in a scholarly sense an Egyptologist, published two books titled The Witch Cult in Western Europe and The God of the Witches. She somewhat inaccurately proposed that there had always been an underground organized Pagan cult. It was one of the thousands of religious ideas that were not true, but influential.

And in the 1950s Gerald Gardner did one of two things, he either brought forth into print, and the public eye, the hidden practices of witch covens, or he brought forth into print, and the public eye, in greatly exaggerated numbers the hidden practices of a very few witch covens.

Probably the latter.

We might pause for a minute to think about both how cool and ironic is it that modern Paganism is reborn in part from the acts of a few pseudo-religious scholars who imagined up things that were not true, into something that became true.

Let's pause for a minute.

Although it was brought to light by academics, Wicca specifically and Paganism in general that began to blossom in the 1960s, mostly because of an increase in political and cultural dissent, feminism, and environmental awareness, created a reaction to stale worship like, well, like this right here, where a male leader instructs.

For those who feel alienated from traditional organized religion and its power over earth and women model, Paganism works. In just a half century Paganism has gone from a group of lampooned superstitious faith traditions and practices to a meaningful way to express your spiritual yearnings.

Paganism was in a way falsely "rediscovered" in the 30s, was reinterpreted in the 50s and, when combined with feminism and people calling for a return to the earth in the late 70s books like Starhawk's The Spiral Dance and Margot Adler's Drawing Down the Moon strengthened the reach of these ideas, and clarified Wicca's practice and terms.

How wild is it, that as fast as any faith is growing, Islam and Mormonism, to be specific, the return to the use of animal spirits as guides is today quietly being spread via the internet. I love it. It makes me want to tap on the glass of the television when I see Mike Pense and remind him that the Goddess works in mysterious ways too.

Paganism, as said, is in an interesting theological place, because it is born out of the fast-moving modern sensibility about what we as humans need, and working with icons and images that range from antiquity to the middle-ages. And that is fascinating.

Pagans theologically honor one or more of the following combinations—they honor the power of the elements air, water, and fire, and earth, which was something the ancient Greeks picked up on and held. And/or they frequently honor the powers of the North, South, East, and West lands as with the Native Americans; the powers of a paired God and Goddess as in Wicca; and a pantheon of images like that of the Romans, Norse, and East Indian traditions.

Pagans got range. Range because all in a couple generations they are returning to lift up a buffet of images and rituals, and icons, that we largely lost the real history of. Obviously once you start to list all that "Pagan's" believe it is clear to see that there really is no singular voice or theme. And, in terms of appearance, when one thinks Pagan they can accurately imagine a feathered warrior on the plains, or a dark robed Druid priestess, or a brightly colored Shinto Priest.

In terms of habits and beliefs, the journey of what might fall under paganism could be as broad as to include the use of Tarot Cards, Astrology, the I Ching. And it would not be too great a stretch to say that there are essentially pagan images in Harry Potter, Star Trek, and even The Lord of The Rings.

In terms of personality, today most modern Pagans are open-minded, smart, and skeptical of the West's traditional paradigms around medicine, theology, and reality.

Ok, Time to clean house a little.

Of all the Pagan options that have and are being revealed and brought forward, it is not surprisingly the ones from Europe which are most translated into today. No doubt part of Paganism's appeal in our technological age is to a less deconstructed, and yet oddly simpler, but more magical time. Because their stories are both less historical, and because their stories have been squashed, Paganism has few broadly identifiable heroes, few broadly well-known texts, and is only now stepping forward into the debates of modern times.

Not at all unlike woman's voices.

Having its origins at a time before Gnostic and Platonic ideas conspired with Christianity's Jewish roots to make the body and earth, "flesh," bad, Paganism helps us see Christianity's underlying philosophical metaphysical link with Gnostic and Platonic distinctions between body and spirit, matter, and form.

Let's return to our imaginary scene on the rural road in Italy, where the urban Roman dismisses the rural folk. As I said, his disdain foreshadowed that the religious practices of those rural folk would grow out of touch with the industrialization the West would eventually go on.

But, what they could not see, that we are coming to now see, is that the journey that "the new faith" would go on would in the West so deeply be associated with and be shaped by cultures that were patriarchal, industrial, and oppressive that it would feel corrupt to many.

Nobody on that rural road in Italy could have seen that almost two millennia later.

Perhaps what I find most impressive about Paganism, and why I see it as a cousin in the same journey as Unitarian Universalism is on, is that Paganism has been essential for taking the back-story of our earthly lives and putting it front-page. There is no denying that Paganism had an insight into the interconnection of things long before ecology-minded folks did, and for that it has to be called prophetic.

The idea that people might validate our life as physical creatures is from a Judeo-Christian perspective that adopted that a spirit above body, flesh, and matter are corrupt is a radical one, a scary one, one to be squelched.

To me Pagans' great service is their rejection of the dualism of mind good, body bad, that the West inherited from the Gnostics, Zoroastrians, and Platonic traditions and passed on down through the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet, with its obvious strength of being earthy and experiential it must also be said that it has the real limitation of not being very systematic or scientifically current.

Paganism's images that return us to an appropriate relationship to the earth do not always do so in a way that is mindful of our new understanding of the vastness of space. We certainly now more than ever need a spirituality that roots us to the earth, as our only home.

But like all icons and rituals, the Pagan traditions we inherit largely link us to tribal people of the mid Northern European latitudes, to people from three thousand to five hundred years ago. And because this is the well it draws from Paganism despite doing the important wonderful job redeeming the gender balance of the divine, still draws upon animistic images, that many moderns, myself included, find archaic and parochial.

The fact that Pagans in the southern hemisphere who want to practice the holidays must often find substitute animals and flip the calendar of rituals is an almost funny example of how historic and geographically specific Paganism's roots are.

In short Paganism redeems us from a thousand or more years of hating matter and our sensual selves, but it does not any more than Christianity take us beyond our understanding of the universe from centuries past.

But I don't want to close that way. I want to close in a moment of silence, not unlike the way protestors have in many forms put tape across their mouths, and say a little prayer, that what happens next is a religious future that is as cooperative, integrated, as respectful, and as loving, as we as a species are capable of.

**Amen**

