

On Pagan Activism

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Prologue

In honor of an old friend who joked, in the early 90s, that he would listen to Rush Limbaugh “just to keep his mind sharp,” every once in a while, I go to cnn.com just to see what the corporate media are talking about. Much to my surprise, several years ago a story circulated in the mass media saying that paganism is the fastest-growing religion in the United States. If that’s true, then a lot of people are looking for information about paganism. You go to the “New Age” section at Borders, and you learn that if you are pagan, there are 8 solar holidays each year, on the equinoxes and solstices and the midpoints between them, and that there are 13 moon cycles in each year. You learn about altars, and ritual tools, and meditation, and invocation, and raising energy, and magic, and spellwork. If you’re a woman, you might infer from these books that you need long, flowing robes and must do your magic on the beach at moonrise. But almost none of them—there are a few exceptions, but almost none of them—talk about politics.

So I started looking into this. I was trained in philosophy, so I spend a lot of time in the abstract world of theory. But I turned my attention to history. And what I found has convinced me that, in today’s world, to be pagan is in a broad sense to be an activist, in both a historical and a metaphysical sense. So today I want to talk about how I think pagans *are* activists, from both a historical and metaphysical perspective.

Panel Discussion Talk: *The Spiritual Warrior*

Though I do consider myself to be very much a spiritual person, I've always had trouble applying the word "warrior" to myself as a political being. For the most part, I'm a pacifist, and there certainly hasn't been a war in my lifetime that I can get behind (at least with my current mindset—though I remember being a 16 year old Republican larva growing up in Ohio, cheering the US planes that had just bombed Libya with a blind, righteous indignation). There are two concepts, however, that interest me greatly when it comes to the intersection of spirituality and politics in my life. The first is *pagan*. The second is *activist*. I submit that there is a very close relationship between these two concepts, these descriptions, these identifications; to a large extent these two words mean almost the same thing in our present world. For most of my life as a pagan, I have focused on the metaphysical and theological aspects of paganism; only recently have I begun to appreciate the vital importance of the history of the pagans over the past 500 years. There are reports that say that the fastest-growing religion in the US currently is paganism or Wicca; if this is true, then it is especially important that we know our history. I want to take a quick look at the relationship between these two concepts—of paganism and activism—from both a historical and a metaphysical perspective.

The word "pagan," at its etymological core, is Latin for "redneck." Most sources will tell you that its most literal expression in English is "country-dweller," which means more than just one who lives in the country. It also involves "dwelling," which is a certain way-of-being, an attentiveness-to and attunement-with one's natural environment; the meaning is much deeper than just where your crib happens to be located. There is a connection between one's daily existence and the location; the land, with all its rhythms and cycles, becomes a sacred place within which to dwell. This attachment to and attunement with the land and its natural rhythms is one of the primary characteristics of a pagan. Note that this type of existence becomes somewhat abstracted in modern urban dwelling. The "pagans," or the "rednecks," underwent a process of marginalization, demonization, and persecution all-too familiar to anyone who studies history from a bottom-up perspective.

Historically, this achieved its most dramatic and tragic apex in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, after the Middle Ages:

In this "century of geniuses"—Bacon, Kepler, Galileo, Shakespeare, Pascal, Descartes—a century that saw the triumph of the Copernican Revolution, the birth of modern science, and the development of philosophical and scientific rationalism, witchcraft became one of the favorite subjects

of debate for the European intellectual elites. Judges, lawyers, statesmen, philosophers, scientists, theologians all became preoccupied with the “problem,” wrote pamphlets and demonologies, agreed that this was the most nefarious crime, and called for its punishment (Federici 168).

The Witch hunts. Wholesale slaughter of entire populations, mostly women, put to horrible deaths and suffering. Why? What was behind the witch hunts? Why was it so important for the Establishment power structures to cultivate a deep, cultural, and popular fear of the witch—much like the “terrorist” of today? At the same time that the prevailing worldview was turning to those core values we hold so dear today—the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, the Reformation, and the rise of capitalism—there were also some of the most brutal examples of oppression and genocide ever witnessed, a fact that remains the paradox of our age.

I think there are 3 ways of thinking about this period in history that help us understand this paradox, all of which involve a shift from one way of thinking to another, and resulted in the marginalization (to say the least) of the pagans within the power structures that were formed at this period in history, the same power structures that many of us resist today. Each of these shifts in thinking also represent a step away from the pagan worldview.

First is the rise of mechanistic thinking (as opposed to organic thinking) that science gave us. Mechanistic thinking, in essence, is the mode of scientific analysis that says in order to understand a big problem, you split it up into smaller and smaller problems until you can understand those. You can't understand, for instance, a human body until you understand arms, legs, eyes, ears, sexual organs, etc. And you can't understand what an arm is until you understand skin, muscle, tendons, ligaments, and bones. This mode of thinking is incredibly useful, as evidenced by the extraordinary scientific “progress” since the 17th century. One drawback to this mode of thinking is that often the scientific thinker tends to lose sight of the organic whole; magic, wonder, and the interconnectedness of all things become marginalized.

The second shift in thinking is about land ownership, in the rise of capitalism through the Enclosure movements. This shift is closely related to mechanistic thinking and the notion of private property (as opposed to the commons). Before the Enclosures, most of the land was *one* in the form of a commons; that is to say, no one would or could prevent people from using the land for their subsistence. But at the rise of capitalism in the 16th and 17th century, the notion of land ownership changed such that the land owner could now control access to the owned lands, preventing people from subsisting on those lands. For the first time, we saw the notion of privatization and profit over

people. At the dawn of capitalism, the process of what the Marxists call “primitive accumulation” forced the people from those lands, thus “enclosing them from the common”:

Most people can find in their genealogy or in their own lives some point where their ancestors or they themselves were forced from lands and social relations that provided subsistence without having to sell either one’s products or one self, i.e., they suffered Enclosure. Without these moments of force, money would have remained a marginal aspect of human history. These moments were mostly of brutal violence, sometimes quick (with bombs, cannon, musket, or whip), sometimes slower (with famine, deepening penury, plague), which led to the terrorized flight from the land, from the burnt-out village, from the street full of starving or plague-ridden bodies, to slave ships, to reservations, to factories, to plantations. This flight ended with “producers becoming more dependent on exchange” since they had no other way to survive but by either selling their products or selling themselves or being sold (Caffentzis).

So after the common lands had suffered enclosure—and eventually all the lands did, today virtually the entire surface of the earth is private property and is enclosed from the common—the people, the pagans who had been subsisting on that land, were forced to look elsewhere for subsistence.

Which brings us to the third interrelated phenomenon: that of urbanization and wageslavery. The newly-displaced pagans had nowhere to go, so they went to the cities to sell their labor for subsistence. No longer were the pagans country dwellers, instead of living among the bounty of nature, they were forced into a monied economy to sell their time and attention in order to survive. Note that these transitions were imposed by force, and coincided with the witch hunts. The very fabric of society, of community, of family, and even of self was shifting fundamentally, and these shifts in cultural ideals were accompanied by force and torture. As Silvia Federici recently wrote, “it was in the torture chambers and on the stakes upon which the witches perished that the bourgeois ideals of womanhood and domesticity were forged” (Federici 186).

In addition, the witch hunts were one of the first examples of a globalized assertion of power greater than the nation-state, as they occurred all over Europe in a time of great national division and antipathy:

“both Catholic and Protestant nations, at war against each other in every other respect, joined arms and shared arguments to persecute witches. Thus, it is no exaggeration to claim that the witch-hunt was the first unifying terrain in the politics of the new European nation-states, the first

example, after the schism brought about by the Reformation, of a European unification. For, crossing all boundaries, the witch-hunt spread from France and Italy to Germany, Switzerland, England, Scotland, and Sweden” (Federici 169).

All of these are directly relevant to a modern pagan. Together, these shifts in thinking, along with the accompanying violence and oppression justified by the new thinking, banished the pagans from their sacred lands, and forced them to be at the short end of a power-over relationship. Since the witch hunts, to be pagan is, by definition, to be political, and more precisely, to be an activist in the sense that we have resisted—and must continue to resist—the centuries-old history of genocide, oppression, torture, displacement, enclosure, slavery, and coercion that has been imposed by force. As pagans, this history is an essential component of our facticity, of our givenness in the world. How we as pagans respond to this facticity is an essential component of our present identity as pagans.

Which brings us to the metaphysical aspect of paganism and activism. Trying to articulate a coherent pagan metaphysical system is a bit like trying to herd cats—most modern neopagans are highly individualistic in their belief systems. But, I think it is fair to assert that the overwhelming majority of pagans embrace some form of magic—which has been described as “the art of directing change in accordance with will”—at work in their lives. This definition sounds a lot like activism: the activist does not like some aspect of the status quo, and works to direct change in accordance with their will to change that status quo. In this broad sense, activism *is* magic. And any pagan who pays attention to both history and current events will understand that the machinations of Empire in the modern world are contrary to our core values as pagans: the Earth is penetrated and raped at faster and faster rates, yet oil prices keep rising; people are slaughtered indiscriminately as low-intensity warfare flares up all over the globe; profit and greed rule the day; most of us in the west live our lives divorced from experience with nature, unattuned to her cycles and rhythms; unprecedented weather patterns rage across the planet, causing untold destruction. And the list goes on.

As pagans, we will find allies all over the globe in the multitude who also find both history and current events unacceptable, who resist globalization, expansion of Empire, injustice, and oppression. Today, quite a few people within this multitude, especially in America, wallow in despair and hopelessness, that despite the ideals of pacifism, equality, freedom, environmentalism, community, and justice, that these ideals are simply incompatible with reality. It’s just not how the system works in a “post-9/11 world.” These people do not believe that

creating a new reality—doing magic—is possible. As pagans, we know differently, and it behooves us to lead the way in this area, to show the multitude not only is it possible to create a new reality, but that together, the multitude has more than enough power-from-within to overthrow the power-over of Empire. So mote it be.

Notes

George Caffentzis, “The Power of Money: Debt and Enclosure,” *The Commoner*, N.7. Spring/Summer 2003, p. 2.

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004).