



First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

PAGANISM AND THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB

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Introduction

If you're like me, the seventh principle of our faith is the one that I remember best: "We covenant with one another to affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part". When asked by an outsider what Unitarians believe in, most often, this trips off the tongue without a second thought. But what exactly does it mean for us today? I was particularly seized by this question as I watched the TV pictures last year of the oil gushing out of the earth and onto the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. If I am part of the interdependent web, then somehow I am connected to this crisis. I felt the pain of watching this wound to the earth and helpless to do anything about it.

If we really affirm and promote the interdependent web, then I believe there are ethical imperatives that go with it. Just what those ethical imperatives are is not entirely clear. Must I give up my car? Can I never fly again to see the wonders of the world? Is the carbon-offset program enough to take away my environmental guilt?

How do you interpret your link to the interdependent web? Do you feel the ethical imperative? Have you found peace with your relationship to the earth, or are you, like me, anxious and confused?ⁱ

Paganism Before Monotheism

Now, might a deeper investigation of Paganism and the concept of earth-based spirituality offer some insight into our predicament? Might it provide an alternative to the Christian story and the harmful effects of the patriarchal god?

For me, a new perspective emerged when I decided I needed to read the Bible (which I had never done). I started with the five books of the Old Testament called the Torah. At the same time, I also found biblical scholar Elyse Goldstein's book on the Torah called *Revisions*.ⁱ In it, she describes how the people living in the land of Canaan 4000 years ago worshipped the earth as sacred, especially springs, caves, groves of trees, rocks and standing stones. They had a pantheon of gods and goddesses, sacred animals and rituals reflecting the changing of the seasons. Before the arrival of the Hebrews, Canaan was a pagan society with an earth-centred spiritual tradition.

The Bible tells the story of the Hebrews, led by Moses out of the land of Egypt, who invaded the land of Canaan, bringing with them their new, monotheistic god. He (definitely not a She) lived up in heaven, outside of nature, ruled from above and offered "dominion over the earth and all living things". Later, many Christian children, brought up in Sunday school, lived with the image of the old man with the long white beard looking down on earth from among the clouds.

As Canaan was slowly conquered by the Hebrews, some people adopted the new religion but many did not. Over and over, the Torah describes the effort of the Hebrews to stamp out the "idolatry" of this earth-centred spirituality. Here is Deuteronomy on the obligations of the Hebrews to destroy pagan shrines:

"You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to

dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods and thus blot out their name from their places.” (Deuteronomy 12: 2-4.)

I was surprised when I read the Old Testament how much time and energy was spent by the writers in urging the Hebrews to destroy the religious symbols of the land they sought to conquer. Surely the pagan traditions must have been very attractive, or else why such vehement efforts to suppress them? I found this question to be very challenging. Why was monotheism so opposed to the sacred nature of the earth?

Paganism Continues throughout History

Besides Canaan, many other civilizations including the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Buddhists and Hindus have included pantheistic traditions, with many gods and goddesses related to nature. While the Hebrews finally replaced the Pagan worship in Canaan, with the worship of Yahweh, many people, particularly rural peasants, far from the proselytizing clergy of the cities, clung to the old ways, in spite of every effort to abolish the idea that the earth is sacred and should be honoured, not exploited.

The arrival of Christianity was to continue the struggle to stamp out the worship of gods and goddesses, pagan rituals related to the changing of the seasons and the identification of sacred places. The recent movie, *Agora* shows the Christian madness that demanded conversion or death.

Jews, Christians and Muslims, who are known as the “people of the Book” (Torah, Bible, Koran), together blackened the name of paganism. The word itself is from the Latin *pagani*, which means country-dweller. Before monotheism, people living close to the land found sacred sites in groves of trees, fairy rings, animals such as cows, or goats, sacred to a god or goddess.

Many feminist historians believe that the burning of the witches in the Middle Ages was related to the practice of the Old Religion as paganism came to be known. Knowledge of the healing power of herbs, accepting the sacred powers of nature and the worship of deities immanent in nature flew in the face of Christian orthodoxy.

Throughout the history of the development of religion in Western Europe and the Middle East, evidence of the refusal to abandon earth-centred spirituality persists. For example, Have you ever noticed the tree on the top of a building under construction? That tree provides security for the workers and ensures protection by the tree spirits. We also reflect pagan worship at Hallowe'en or with the Easter bunny or the Maypole.

When I was a girl I went to camp every summer. On Sunday mornings, we trekked up to the top of a steep hill where there was a grove of birch trees. At the entrance to this sanctuary was a plaque with this poem:

“Enter the temple beautiful,
the house not made with hands.
Rain-washed and green,
Wind-swept and clean,
Beneath the blue it stands.
And no cathedral anywhere
Seemeth so holy or so fair.
For it is blest and giveth rest
To those who enter here.”

Climbing that hill to worship in a grove of birch trees was definitely a pagan ritual though I didn't know it at the time.

Modern Paganism or Neopaganism

The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans or CUUPS describes the efforts to downplay the Old Religion as “those folks out there in the sticks who still do all that old-fashioned stuff.” Modern Pagan theologies reflect back on this history and seek an awareness of nature with its cycles of the seasons, as well as the cycles of the human life. The CUUPS brochure describes modern Paganism as “a great tapestry with many strands originating in many distinct religious traditions.” Some Pagans explore their ethnic roots and discover the indigenous practices of their ancestors. Others incorporate indigenous practices from a wide variety of today's tribal cultures. Gods and goddesses from the Old Religion are invoked by some; belief in an afterlife is posited by others. But common to many is the tie to nature and to the belief that deity is immanent in everything; that revelation is experienced in nature instead of written in scriptures.

Now I am not suggesting that we return to ancient pagan practices to find our way to an earth-centred spirituality. This sermon is not about ritual although for some people, the creation of ritual is important.

I'm suggesting that we need to consider the larger picture – the concept of paganism as a pathway to developing a new perspective on our relationship to the earth as sacred.

What Paganism Might Have to Offer us

The Canadian author, Naomi Klein, in an article for The Guardian, wrote a moving description of the tragedy of the oil spill. Entitled The Gulf Oil Spill, A Hole in the World, she says that the spill was more than an engineering accident or a broken machine. “It is a violent wound in a living organism; it is a part of us.”ⁱⁱ (www.guardian.co.uk/2010/jun/19/naomi Klein)

In the Journal of Liberal Religious Paganism, (Vol.2, March 2003 at www.cuups.org) the Reverend David Bumbaugh notes

“As a denomination, we have lost the ability to speak of that which is sacred, holy, of ultimate importance to us. We don't have a “language of reverence” for an earth-centred spiritual tradition.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Bumbaugh suggests that we might construct a theology from our experience of interdependence. I was moved by this idea of a “language of reverence for an earth-centred spirituality.”

The American writer Starhawk says “When nature is empty of spirit, forests and trees become merely timber.” So we must begin to “see the world, the earth and our lives as sacred.”^{iv} (Starhawk: Dreaming the Dark, p.11) Watching the oil gushing out of the earth after the oil spill was a desecration.

Jeremy Rifkin in a recent book, The Empathic Civilization, speaks of our need to develop “biospheric consciousness” – that is, awareness of “the narrow band of 40 miles from the ocean floor to outer space”.^v This biosphere that sustains all human life is truly an interdependent web. Rifkin is hopeful that our new Communications Revolution, which ties together people around the globe through the Internet, offers hope for the development of a new kind of consciousness. We will be able to empathize with others whose aspirations for a good life mirror our own. We will begin to see more clearly how we are all in “earth's lifeboat” and that what one group of people do affects us all. That the biosphere belongs to us all.

So our part in the interdependent web is not just a feel-good affirmation of a nature-based ethic. We have responsibilities to act.

A poem by Edward Everett Hale expresses our need to act:

I am only one,
 But still I am one.
 I cannot do everything,
 But still I can do something.
 And because I cannot do everything,
 I will not refuse to do
 The something that I can do.

I will continue to turn off my lights, reduce, reuse and recycle, stay informed about global warming and cross my fingers.

I will also honour the giant maple tree outside my window, the cool water of the lake in summer and the mysterious majesty of the mountains.

What might call you to an earth-based spirituality? What might your “language of reverence” be?

I offer for your consideration a closer examination of the practice of Paganism. I believe it provides an alternative to the Christian story and the harmful effects of the patriarchal god. Through an understanding of the historical trajectory of paganism perhaps, we can find a pathway to the “language of reverence” so badly needed if our earth is to continue to sustain us.

(Endnotes)

i Goldstein, Elyse, *Revisions, Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens*. Toronto and Woodstock Vt, 1998.

ii Naomi Klein at www.guardian.co.uk/2010/jun/19/Naomi

iii Reverend David Bumbaugh in *Journal of Liberal Religious Paganism*, volume 2, March 2003, at www.cuups.org

iv Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark, Magic, Sex and Politics*. Beacon Press, 1982

v Rifkin, Jeremy, *The Empathic Civilization. The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Tarcher/Penguin, January, 2010.

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