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Pagan Environmental Ethics

When it comes to actions directed at the preservation and defense of the environment Pagans are often on the front lines. Pagans frequently take leading roles in campaigns to stop what they perceive to be ecologically unsound forestry practices, unnecessary road-building projects, or the desecration of significant environmental landmarks; they actively engage in projects to restore prairies, wetlands, and forests; and many readily embrace renewable energy and support public transportation. At the same time, however, some Pagans also engage in actions not considered to be environmentally friendly: they drive fossil fuel-burning automobiles to their spiritual gatherings, they heat their homes with non-renewable energy, they use natural resources provided through environmentally malignant methods. So, how are we to make sense of the idea of a Pagan environmental ethic?

Given that ethical commitments are not always fully realizable in practice; ethics cannot necessarily be glimpsed via an accounting of the actions of individuals or groups. Since ethics and actions are not the same thing, we must, then, look elsewhere to uncover Pagan environmental ethics.

Our sense of ethical inclusiveness is a direct function of our sense of social inclusiveness. Our sense of society is part of that which makes up our worldview. We extend direct moral standing and moral consideration to those whom we deem to be part of our social community. The intensity of this ethical commitment corresponds directly to the closeness of this social commitment. Hence, all things being equal, our commitments to human children wins out over our commitment to a goat's kids, and our commitment to our own children wins out over our commitment to someone else's. So, if we can uncover the sense and extent of community expressed by the Pagan worldview then we can more clearly perceive their ethical commitments and their environmental ethics.

In general, even though there are various Pagan traditions, there is a single theme that unifies them: the worship or profound honoring of, and respect for, nature. Surveys by Margot Adler (1986: 415, 445), for example, suggest that environmental concern was one of the most fundamental issues for Pagans, as well as one of the most important catalysts for people entering the religion. Likewise, religion scholar Graham Harvey asserts that “what attracts most people to Paganism now is the stress on honouring Nature” (1997: 43).

Pagans often perceive of themselves as animists, believing that everything in nature – and even perhaps nature itself – possesses an indwelling spirit. Their love

of nature and all life, is a natural extension of this animistic catalyst. According to Starhawk, this "love for life in all its forms is the basic ethic of Witchcraft" (1979: 11). More specifically though, that worshipful, even reverential, attitude toward nature prompts a metaphysic of inclusiveness and community, a metaphysic that portrays the human and the nonhuman as unified and conceptually indistinguishable in many ways. There is ample evidence to suggest that Pagans perceive of the nonhuman world as worthy of "personhood," in the full moral sense. Pagans, for instance, often speak of individual animals and plants and environmental wholes as "other-than-human persons." They also refer to environmental entities as "friends" and "neighbors" with whom they share the world. Consequently, actions undertaken involving this other-than-human world assume a friendship or neighborly metaphysic and ethic. This inclusive social and ethical community can be seen, for example in The Wiccan Rede: "And it harm none, do as you will." The Rede resonates ecologically because it calls generally for liberty and freedom, and because it asserts a broad principle of non-harm. More importantly, however, is that the condemnation of harm is applicable to the other-than-human world as well as to the human: "none" also includes the other-than-human. However, a closer and more demanding familial or kinship relationship and social community often emerges as well. This relationship is clearly voiced by the High Priestess of Circle Sanctuary, Selena Fox, when she asserts, "I am Pagan. I am a part of the whole of Nature. The Rocks, the Animals, the Plants, the Elements, and Stars are my relatives. . . I am part of this large family of Nature" (2001: 110-11, emphasis is mine, but the capitalization of the other-than-human elements is Fox's). Harvey also points out that the Pagan "world view is one in which everything that lives deserves honour and rights not normally given to other-than-human life," and that Pagans insist on "treating all things as alive and in some way *kin* to humanity" (1997: 133, 90).

Such a rendition of Pagan environmental ethics is not wholly uncontested. Catherine Albanese, for example, suggests that, for all of its "radical and cosmic environmentalism," Paganism – and other nature-oriented religions as well – is "intensely pragmatic" (1990: 183). In this sense, one might skeptically view the magical worldview and subsequent rituals of Pagans as engaged in or masking a manipulative relationship with nature. Of course, instrumental valuation can certainly exist alongside intrinsic, and manipulation of and benefit derived from is not the same as a mastery relationship. However, this contestation of Pagan environmental ethics certainly exists and merits mention.

Within the realm of formal philosophical discussions of environmental ethics, this Pagan social community/ethical community relationship, arguably resonates most closely with the Land Ethic of Aldo Leopold. Leopold's

theory also prompts ethical obligation on the basis of a shared community. Pagan environmental ethical sensibilities find kinship with the various traditions of American Indians who also express a social and ethical kinship with nature as demonstrated in their myths, legends, and rituals. Both are discussed at length in the work of environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott.

As a result, for Pagans the sacred rests in daily life, the domestic, this world. Paganism is not other-worldly; Earth and this body are not merely some shoddy way station on the way to transcendental salvation. Humans are full and equal members of this Earth, not resentful of a forced and lesser – but fortunately temporary – inhabitation of this body and this world. The Pagan sense of time, and the celebrations that are based upon it, center on the here and now – planting and harvesting – those things most immediately connected to daily life, life imbued with the sacred, the magical, and the intrinsically valuable and significant. Harvey (1997) nicely captures this fundamental sentiment: "Paganism is a religion at home on Earth."

Given, then, that, in general, our sense of an ethical community and commitment is coextensive with our sense of a social community, and given that Pagans possess a sense of social community inclusive of all of nature, it is evident that they also possess a broadly comprehensive environmental ethic. Pagans, therefore, attribute intrinsic value (i.e., value in addition to instrumental, or use, value) to nonhuman entities, natural processes, and environmental collectives. Their environmental ethic is intentionally holistic, encompassing, and ecocentric.

Because of their commitment to this life, this world, this Earth, and because of their sense of being fully part and parcel of nature, Pagans attempt to radiate respect for life. They deliberately, carefully, and with great humility inhabit the land. They celebrate life and its multifaceted flourishing. Their actions, then, generally reflect this inclusive worldview and powerful ethical commitment.

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Further Reading

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See also: Bioregionalism; Bioregionalism and the North American Bioregional Congress; Callicott, J. Baird; Druids and Druidry; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Environmental Ethics; Heathenry - Ásatrú; Hundredth Monkey; Leopold, Aldo; Odinism; Pagan Festivals (both); Paganism and Technology; Paganism - Contemporary; Radical Environmentalism; Reclaiming; Religious Studies and Environmental Concern; Snyder, Gary; Starhawk; Wicca.