

Pagan Spirituality and Politics

Written by Michael York

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MICHAEL YORK, APR 2 2019

To make a brief list of political concerns, those that first come to my mind are the rise of regressive populism, the continuance of pervasive racism, the extreme political correctness of 'safe-space' needs that curtail freedom of speech, the TERF (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist)-FBW (female-born and still a woman) impasse, the Guaido manipulations and sanctions by the United States in Venezuela patently in its desire for control of oil, the right-wing extremist shift and domination in Brazil, the longing for a wall between Mexico and the United States, the snubbing of the Paris Climate Accord, the Brexit fiasco in Britain, the cancellation of the nuclear agreement with Iran, the total deterioration of Yemen, and the endless Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the least, what I personally enumerate gives the reader an idea of my own political position. I consider myself a liberal libertarian or a libertarian liberal; my left-leaning orientation should be obvious. Of the issues I have enumerated, however, the one I wish at present to concentrate on is that concerning the environment.

Spiritually speaking, I am pagan. As a religious orientation, this means that one holds to 'a this-worldly emphasis, a corporeal understanding of the spiritual, a stress on nature and the natural, an appreciation of deity as multiple and gender differentiated, humanistic valuing and an approach to the sacred as pleasurable and to pleasure as sacred' (York 2016, 4f.). Of course within contemporary pagan identity, there is much variation let alone disagreement, but the key consideration is personal exegesis, and within the latitude of freedom and self-determination, the emphases I have given suggest a common denominator if not for paganism more broadly, then in contrast to those pagans who subscribe to a more gnostic and/or Neo-platonic bent, for what might be identified as tellurism or telluric paganism (York 2019, 194f.).

And it is within this telluric or pagan perspective that I wish to address the world's ecological situation. Because of its understanding of nature as pre-eminently sacred, environmentalism is perhaps the thing that contemporary pagans have most in common. There is indeed a notable employment of both ritual and magic within the paganism of today, but even though these may be directed more toward pure worship, they are often designed toward fostering conservational protection, and frequently they are combined in promoting the well-being of a vulnerable area being threatened by urban invasion or industrial transformation. In the United Kingdom, the Dragon Environmental Network was established in 1990 to employ 'eco-magic' in the prevention of tree-felling, the construction of roadways through primeval forests and the like. Foremost among its activities was the campaign to save Oxleas Wood (Taylor 2005). As Adrian Harris expresses it, the Dragon Environmental Network employs 'magic and ritual to stop environmental destruction and channel positive energy to those who protect the land' (Harris 2015).

The Oxleas Wood campaign was seminal for Dragon. It was the first time in which the network transformed an ecological conception into an environmental activism.

At first we kept our Spiritual and magical work a secret from the campaigners who had been fighting for years to save the wood, but once we had earned their respect through good practical campaign work, we became more open (Dragon Network, n.d.a.)

A related protest movement involved the M3 motorway extension cutting through Twyford Down near Winchester. This area was included among the Top Ten sites of spiritual places in a 2003 poll conducted by the BBC. The Down is criss-crossed by a network of ancient pathways known as *dongas*. In the early 1990s, a protest group opposing

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the road construction took the name of the 'Donga Tribe' as an expression of its political and spiritual beliefs. The Donga protestors built tree houses to delay the work. The tribe considered themselves to be warriors against the bulldozer and the digger and was joined additionally by Earth First and Road Alert. The effort, although gaining notoriety and perhaps a governmental re-think in future road-building policy, was unsuccessful (BBC 2004).

Further involvements by Dragon have been the M11 Link Road Campaign that included the Battle of George Green confrontation, the Newbury 'roads versus people' campaign, the Lyminge Forest Campaign, and the successful Camp Bling opposition to the F5 road scheme that would have tarmacked over the burial site of a Saxon King. The Dragon Network has also participated in the 5th World Trade Organisation Ministerial held in Cancun, Mexico, and it worked with the Freedom Network in the latter's campaign against the Criminal Justice Act.

The Battle of George Green which culminated in December 1993 centred on a 250-year-old chestnut tree in the local green of Wanstead. The tree became known as 'The Tree'. Sit-in protests and various occupation techniques were employed in the efforts to stop the tree being cut down.

The battle can be seen as a loss for the environmental groups involved, but much as the loss of the Euston Arch mobilised the heritage lobby to fight harder afterwards, the loss of the chestnut tree fired up the environmental lobby in the same way. Later protest actions against motorways, and today's mass campaigns against fracking are a direct legacy of that tree (IanVisit 2013).

At present, Dragon is not actively involved with any further campaigns, but it is opposed to GM crops, mass fluoridation of the water supply, and the abuse involved with greyhound racing.

The main point of these anti-road project protests by the Dragon Network in particular is that its overall principles conform to those of pagan spirituality more broadly. These are accepting that the earth is sacred, employment of a decentralised network comprising a web of people working together on local, national and international issues, the combination of practical environmental work with eco-magic in order to focus the vision for change, non-violent direct action, and openness to anyone who shares Dragon's principles and aims. Its aims are (1) to increase a general awareness of the earth's sacredness, (2) the involvement of pagans in conservation work, (3) involvement in environmental campaigns, (4) the development of eco-magic as magical and spiritual action for the environment (Dragon Network, n.d.b.).

Paganism is not a world-rejecting spirituality. Instead it very much *affirms* the physical reality of the world and earthly concerns. The protections of the planet that emerge as the socio-political from this spirituality in particular proceed from understanding the environmental issue as a special instance of hegemonic vice.

The disrespect of the natural, the attitude that approaches it as little more than a grab-bag resource for the taking, ranks today among the central dangers to our own survival as a species. Global warming through the uncontrolled emission of carbon dioxide is just one of the consequences of this unchecked legacy which intersects perhaps the very heart of what it means to be pagan in today's world (York 2016, 323).

The ethical position of Gaian awareness is diametrically opposed to a non-morality based profit motive that appears to be the most important *raison d'être* behind a purely competitive form of corporate capitalism. Like most people in the Western world if not also beyond, pagans too recognise and accept the technological achievements and benefits that industrialisation has achieved for society. What the pagan deplores, however, is the consequent distance between humanity and the natural world that is increasingly the result of urban lifestyles and consumeristic isolation. The inability of the nation-state to curtail industrial waste and toxic pollution exacerbates further the threat to the unique and sacred balance between the terrestrial sharing of the planet by the human and the implicit care and respect due to Mother Nature.

As David Tillman understands for the maintenance of a sustainable diversity that appreciates the needs not only of ourselves and society but future generations as well, what is required is an ethic that

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is ultimately as incorporated into culture and as long lasting as a constitutional bill of rights or as religious commandments. The Earth will retain its most striking feature, its biodiversity, only if humans have the prescience to do so (Tillman 2000, 211).

With its own understanding of pluralism, paganism fully endorses biodiversity. The diminishment and loss of the planet's biotic life, perhaps a further parallel to the decline of polytheism in favour of monotheism, will aggravate both the human and interdependent biological communities, and the anthropocene era that began with the Industrial Revolution will likely result with radical climate change as well as earth's sixth mass extinction (Pievani 2014). Obviously, paganism does not have all the answers, but a pagan or telluric does understand the interrelation between biological and socio-cultural well-being. Humanity's present 'anthropofascism' that is leading to rampant over-population and the annihilation of other species is the result of our 'obliviousness, indifference or malice' Bron Taylor (personal communication [6.3.14]). By and large, paganism – and especially through such groups as Dragon, Dongas and countless other eco-activist efforts (e.g., Ekomagic, The Pulse of Gaia, Majikal Activism, Selena Fox's Ecomagic, etc.) that combine spiritual exercise and pragmatic action – is the very orientation that 'flourishes in a symbiotic union between the corporeal and the sacred operating mutually as a feedback looping process in which the participating individual agents select and express freely – or at least as freely as humanly and humanely possible – their personal preferences and values' (York 2016, 340). With paganism, the preference and value is almost invariably geo-centric.

Nevertheless, within paganism, and thanks to its all-accepting diversity, there are to be found different strains of thought and approach. The gnostic variety sees the earth and the physical as products of some pre-existing transcendental consciousness. It is to be witnessed in such schools of thought as Neoplatonism, Orphic Gnosticism and, more contemporarily, New Thought and New Age. But despite the ethereal bias that perceives in terms of hierarchical 'purity', earthly detachment and meditation of sensory deprivation, both New Age and gnostic forms of paganism have increasingly expressed environmental concerns and the imperative of maintaining the ecological sustainability of the planet. Foremost in promoting the development of this awareness have been the efforts of Satish Kumar, the Schumacher College and the Resurgence Trust.

More central to geo-centrism and the understanding that consciousness does not pre-date the corporeal but is an emergent from the physical are both telluric and secular forms of paganism. The less 'enchanted' orientations of paganism are to be found in Bron Taylor's articulation of 'dark green' religion (Taylor 2010), Graham Harvey's 'new' personhood animism (Harvey 2005), John Halstead's 'Pagan Community Statement on the Environment' (Halstead, n.d.) and Mark Green's Atheopaganism. The secular pagan intention follows in the tradition of such naturalists as John Muir (1838-1914), Henry Thoreau (1817-1862), Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), Rachel Carson (1907-1964), Arne Næss (1912-2009) and Gary Snyder (b. 1930), but the telluric attitude when it comes to the sacredness of the earth and environmental imperatives that result from that sacredness endorses these naturalists equally.

The difference between secular paganism and telluric paganism may be discerned through the verbal developments of the word *telluric* – itself descending from the Latin name of the earth mother or Greek Gaia, namely, Tellus.

In English, the word refers to the soil and to the earth as a planet. Its connotations are more strictly terrestrial. However, the French equivalent, *tellurique*, carries in addition the concept referring to a mysterious vibration that emanates upward from the earth. The proverbial illustration of this last is when horses rear up in a forest and refuse to cross a particular spot. The sacredness of the well and spring would constitute further examples of *tellurique/telluric* mystical emanation (York, forthcoming).

The expanded sense of 'telluric' as represented by telluric paganism includes not only the geo-physical but also the numinous. It should be noted that paganism has adopted the word *numinous* from Rudolf Otto's understanding of it as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1958, 72-6). Otto, however, takes the numinous solely as the transcendental, the 'wholly other'. He has Yahweh/Allah chiefly in mind. Within paganism, however, this designation has been re-interpreted as 'an awe-invoking sense of the co-presence of divinity' (York 2011, 12; see further York *apud* Gunzburg, forthcoming). It is comparable to what James Swan describes as the *plenum* that bubbles up from the ground at a place like Delphi. Swan allows that 'not all places are alike; some places have more power and

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presence than others' (Swan 1993, 1). This *plenum*, virtually a substance in itself, is what Robert Corrington refers to as 'semiotic plenitude' (Corrington 1994, vii; see further York 2019, 166).

This numinous *plenum* or semiotic plenitude comprehends what most pagans understand as magic and specifically the magic that is worked and directed toward the environmental sustainability of the earth, that is, eco-magic. Whether this last might be put to use in the furtherance of the *Accord de Paris* or The Paris Agreement of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) rests for pagans primarily on a faith belief and the possibility of *ex post facto* empirical confirmation. The UN accord has been designed to engineer the mitigation of greenhouse-gas-emission and to begin in 2020. Although far from the full solution that is needed, this common global cause agreed upon by the world's nations is at least an important start. However, the subsequent announcement by President Donald Trump that the United States would be withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement has been a severe setback. Spirituality, whether pagan or that of other ecologically-minded religiosities, and populist/competitive politics have an obstacle-strewn and difficult road ahead.

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Professor Michael York is a UK-based American Religious Studies scholar who specialises in the study of pre-Christian European religion and its relation to contemporary Paganism. In 2003, he published *Pagan Theology*, in which he put forward the idea that the ancient pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religions of Eurasia, indigenous religions from across the globe, and contemporary Pagan faiths could all be constituted as forms of paganism. His publications include *The Emerging Network* (1995), *The Divine versus the Asurian: An Interpretation of Indo-European Cult and Myth* (1995), *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (2003) and *Pagan Ethics: Paganism as a World Religion* (2016).