

## **An Introduction to Paganism:**

This article is intended to provide a very general introduction to modern Paganism, a small but fast-growing religion within modern Western culture. I've no particular claim to authority on this subject beyond extensive personal involvement in many aspects of the modern Pagan community for over thirty years. I'm a former President of the Pagan Federation and have been its Scottish Interfaith Officer since 1994. While I will be referring to both modern and ancient literary sources, what I have to say derives mainly by personal experience and observation, from shared religious practice, and from very extensive discussions with a fairly large number of other Pagans – running into several hundreds - across Scotland and many other European countries, and to a more limited extent, the USA and Canada.

### **Where does Paganism come from?**

When the word 'Pagan' is mentioned, most people will immediately think of ancient history; of the predominantly polytheistic and pantheistic religions of the pre-Christian, past. Now, of course, there is absolutely no question that Christianity has been by far the most influential religion in the development of European culture over the last two thousand years. Nonetheless, it's worth reflecting on the older Pagan heritage that underlies it.

Most of the days of the week, along with many of the months of the year, are named after Pagan deities. Many Scottish place-names – the Hebrides, Clackmannan, the River Clyde amongst others - enshrine the memory of the old Celtic Gods and Goddesses of this land. A great wealth of Pagan mythology, literature and art has come down to us from the past, particularly but by no means exclusively, from ancient Greece and Rome. What we might term the four foundation stones of Western culture – democracy, philosophy, science and constitutional government under the rule of law – all have their origins in earlier Pagan societies.

Modern Paganism does not survive in continuous descent from ancient Paganism, of course. Between the Theodosian Decrees of the 390's CE, and the conversion of Lithuania in 1387 under pressure from the Northern Crusades, all visible signs of Pagan worship were eradicated from European life. Paganism became a cultural undercurrent, remaining familiar primarily through mythology, folklore, philosophy, literature and art. Given the strength of that numinous Pagan heritage however, and especially given the inexhaustible capacity of Nature to inspire reverence and worship, it is not surprising that Pagan religion - grafted onto the vigorous rootstock of ancient Nature-worship but evolved and adapted to the circumstances of modern life - should have re-

emerged in Scotland and in other Western countries as freedom of belief became more securely established. Professor Ronald Hutton who is probably the most respected academic authority on the subject today, writing on the various links between ancient and modern Paganism, emphasises:

*“(above all) the general love affair of Christian culture with the art and literature of the ancient world.”*

Hutton, article in *The Pomegranate*, 12.2 (2010)

while Professor Michael York notes that:

*“As a religion, Paganism constitutes a relatively new but simultaneously ancient way of seeing the world and the divine (in this case not as two distinct domains but rather as the world-as-the-divine) that contrasts with the established world view that has dominated the more recent years of Western development and the practices that are consequent from that world view.”*

York (2011)

Since the 1950's in particular, Paganism has grown substantially in both numbers and visibility. This may be in part because it's intertwined with strands of two much larger, and more socially significant, movements. One of these is Feminism, with its radical challenge to traditional presumptions of male pre-eminence and authority in both the human and divine realms. The other is the Green Movement with its growing concerns about ecological vulnerability and re-assessment of humanity's relationship with the Earth.

### **How many Pagans are there?**

According to the national Census, there were 5,194 Pagans in Scotland in 2011; a substantial increase on the 1,930 recorded in 2001 when data on religious identity was first collected. During the same decade, the number of Pagans identified in England & Wales increased from 40,332 to 79,216. Pagans therefore form the sixth largest non-Christian faith community in Scotland.

As the Census questions on religious identity are voluntary and some Pagans regard them as intrusive, it's possible that this is an underestimate but whether or not that's the case, Census data provides the most accurate method of assessing Pagan numbers, as Paganism is such a diverse and decentralised religion.

The Scottish Census data from 2001, which also collected data on religion of upbringing, also indicated that the great majority of those identifying as Pagans had come to the religion by themselves rather than through being raised in

Pagan families. Only around 10% gave Paganism as their religion of upbringing. Unfortunately, this question was not included in the 2011 Scottish Census.

### **How do people become Pagans?**

Most Pagans come to identify as such through a process of individual spiritual exploration, rather than because Paganism was the religion of the family they were raised in. For most of us it's been a matter, at some stage in our lives, of simply following our hearts. We notice that we're drawn to woods, and hills, and the quiet stretches of the seashore. We feel a sense of Divine presence in Nature. We feel spiritually moved by the old Pagan myths and by folklore. In time we meet like-minded people and learn that we're not alone. And so gradually come to realise that we're Pagans. The sense is not one of revelation, still less of salvation, but simply of 'coming home'.

### **What do Pagans believe?**

Modern Paganism is a very diverse religion with a correspondingly broad spectrum of beliefs about the nature of the Divine. It does not derive from a single vision, or a single doctrine, setting out the nature and expectations of Deity. Paganism is primarily an experiential religion. There is no definitive Pagan creed. There are no universally authoritative Pagan sacred texts. Pagan literature, whether ancient or contemporary, is illustrative rather than definitive regarding beliefs and attitudes. Understandings of the Divine in modern Paganism largely arise from, and are sustained by, personal experience of the sacred within Nature rather than through the authority of the written word.

Paganism is very much a religion of reverence for life. Nearly all Pagans believe that Nature is sacred and understand divinity – whether perceived as divine beings or in more abstract forms - to be manifest within the living world. This concept of immanent divinity within Nature, within the cosmos, lies at the heart of most modern Pagan theologies. It can also be identified within elements of ancient Paganism. In Ovid's *Fasti* we find the following description of a typical setting within which an older Pagan culture might expect to experience an epiphany:

*“There was a grove, dark with holm-oaks, below the Aventine,  
At sight of which you would say: ‘There’s a god within.  
The centre was grassy, and covered with green moss,  
And a perennial stream of water trickled from the rock.”*

Ovid. *Fasti*. Book III, March 1, Kalends.

This view of divinity as something to be encountered and honoured within the living world is crucial. Most modern Pagans do not believe that the material world is an inferior realm which religion guides us to rise above. We tend to believe that the divine is present within every part of the cosmos, including all living beings, all the relationships between them, and all the processes of life.

Most Pagans understand divinity through both female and male forms, as well as non-gendered ones. We honour Goddesses as well as Gods. Within a wider culture overwhelmingly dominated by patriarchal images of the divine, Goddess-worship is probably the most distinctive characteristic of modern Paganism. To us, it is at least as natural to think of the divine in female as in male terms. More than that, it is true within our experience of epiphany. To Pagans, whether they are men or women, and recognizing that the extent to which deity can be said to have gender in human terms is itself a rather significant question, the experience of connection with the divine is more often than not perceived as that of a female presence. This should not surprise us. Paganism honors life and life is born, not made. This is not to suggest for a moment that Goddesses are equated only with fertility and nurturing, as that is very far from the case, but Pagans tend to believe that the absence of female images of Divinity in Western culture over the past 1500 years has been damaging to the status of women, and thus detrimental to society.

Most Pagans embrace a synergy of polytheistic, pantheistic, and animistic theologies, tending to see each as complementary perspectives through which people try to understand something that is ultimately beyond human understanding, rather than as competing and mutually exclusive doctrinal truths. The Earth is a complex living organism, so we can speak of the Divine as One. But, just as Nature displays great diversity in the forms of life, it seems obvious to us that the Divine takes many different forms, and that there will be great variation in the way that people experience and relate to these. Accordingly, we find it equally meaningful to speak of the Divine as Many. Even where Pagans espouse a monotheistic belief in a single and supreme Mother Goddess, this is usually not a belief that denies the validity of other understandings of the divine, merely one that assimilates them as describing aspects of itself. Though not strictly polytheism, it is not entirely contrary to it either. That does not, of course, make it any less controversial amongst those Pagans who espouse more traditional forms of polytheism!

While Goddess-monotheism has become closely associated with strongly feminist strands in the modern Pagan community since the 1970's, particularly those in the United States, it perhaps remains best expressed in Robert Graves' celebrated translation of an epiphany of Isis Myrionymous – She of Ten Thousand Names - from Apuleius of Madaura's 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE tale of metamorphoses:

*“I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome sea breezes, the lamentable silences of the world below. Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me.”*

(Apuleius, tr. Graves, 1988 ed, p228).

Polytheism, however, is probably the most important theological strand within modern Paganism. This is not only because experience suggests that most modern Pagans are polytheists of one sort or another. It's because in practice, polytheism encompasses many different understandings of the nature of Divinity, many of them grounded in physical realities, as well as a belief in many deities. It thus gives a general framework within which distinct theologies can complement rather than contradict each other. Polytheism, in a broad sense, provides an overarching structure within which other Pagan theologies can be accommodated. In Margot Adler's words:

*“The idea of polytheism is grounded in the view that reality (divine or otherwise) is multiple and diverse.”*

(Adler, DDTW, 1979, p25).

Dr Graham Harvey writes:

*“In polytheism sacredness, value, beauty, spirituality, power and life reside in ordinary, everyday things and events as well as in strange or unusual ones. The divine is manifest more clearly in physical nature than in supernatural ways.”*

(Harvey, LPSE. 169')

He continues:

*“Polytheism is not fundamentally a question of numbers of deities or of their distance from non-divine life. It is rather, a concern with the many and varied relationships between living things.”*

(Harvey, LPSE, 176').

Polytheism enables our diverse human experiences of the nature of the divine to be fully expressed and honored with a minimum of social conflict. It aims for comprehensiveness rather than conformity. It is important to understand that monotheism and polytheism are in conflict only from the perspective of the former. To a monotheist, a polytheist may well seem to hold mistaken beliefs, whereas to a polytheist, a monotheist is simply someone who worships another god.

Believing that Nature is sacred, nearly all Pagans see the natural cycles of birth, growth and death observed in the world around us and in the transitions of our own brief lives, as carrying profoundly spiritual meanings. Human beings are seen as part of Nature, woven into the great web of life along with other animals, trees, plants and everything else that is of this Earth, all of which have spiritual as well as material aspects. The living Earth itself is, to nearly all Pagans, a very visible and tangible manifestation of Divinity.

To most Pagans, everything that lives contains a small spark of the Divine. We do not believe that human beings are set above, or apart, from the rest of this living world. The life in us is, in essence, the same as the life in the animals and plants with whom we share this earth. We are not 'special' to the universe, merely to each other. Every molecule in our bodies once formed part of other living beings and will do so again after we die. Our minds are constantly assimilating information from our environment and our actions constantly influence what happens around us. Within a Pagan world-view everything is connected to, and influenced by, everything else. Everything that is has spirit. Every identity is woven into larger patterns of belonging.

We do not see the physical world and the processes of life as a prison that our spiritual natures should seek to transcend. Most Pagans believe in some form of reincarnation, regarding death as a transition within a continuing process of existence. We do not see life as the preparation for an afterlife in some other realm. To Pagans this living world and the greater cosmos beyond it is very much our true home both physically and spiritually. It is sacred, in and of itself.

To most Pagans, watching leaves unfolding on the trees in springtime, or moonlight shining like silver on the waters of the sea, or the sun rising and setting, or rain hammering down on the land, inspires a much deeper sense of the Divine presence that lies behind everything and within everything, than anything that can be conveyed in words. A saying attributed to Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, that "*Our true purpose is to live in harmony with nature*" still resonates strongly with us.

Most Pagans acknowledge that the ultimate nature of Divine reality is a Mystery. Not something mysterious in the sense that it is reserved for a select few, and kept secret from others; but a Mystery in the more fundamental sense of something that can be known through experience but cannot be directly communicated to others in words.

Paganism is also strongly mythopoetic. Mythopoesis is a word that strictly refers to the creation of myths, but to many Pagans it also describes a process of

deep meditation upon traditional mythology. To Pagans, myths are not merely stories about the past. Myths contain spiritual truths in symbolic form that can connect with us at levels deeper than the conscious mind. Myths do not tell us what is true, they beckon, hint and allude in ways that compel us to consider truth. Myths can be explained, of course – generally in many and sometimes contradictory ways - but the process of explanation robs them of their potency. A myth will always contain much more than the interpretations placed upon it, and these interpretations will always be informed by both the context within which it is being interpreted and the spiritual experience and assumptions of the individuals studying it. A living myth, a myth that still inspires and moves its audience, is never an entirely fixed narrative in the way that a text can be considered a fixed narrative. As it is told, and as it evokes responses in those who engage with it, those responses gradually and subtly become a part of the myth. To some degree at least, myths within modern Paganism are interactive narratives that must be entered into rather than received.

This interaction between myth, belief and divinity within Nature is, of course, nothing new. The historian Robin Lane Fox, referring to ancient Greek religion, tells us that:

*“When people prayed, they expected their gods to come, from the age of Homer to the last Platonists in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. They did not expect to see them so much as to sense their “manifest” presence..... In antiquity, unlike our own age, “appearances” were part of an accepted cultural pattern which was passed down in myth and the experiences of the past, in art, ritual, and the bewitching poetry of Homer.....In the ancient world, as in our own, the evidence suggests that people were most likely to see something when under pressure or at risk, though there is also a visionary current in their moments of peace with the natural world.....”*

(Lane Fox, *Pagans And Christians*, 117-8’).

Although most Pagans define themselves simply as Pagan, there are also a number of different paths or traditions within Paganism. This can present the outsider with a sometimes bewildering array of descriptive terms - Druidry, Wicca and other forms of modern Pagan Witchcraft, and Heathenry - to name only the larger sub-groups.

These Traditions are certainly distinctive. Druidry draws heavily on the Celtic traditions of these islands, Wicca emphasises Goddess-worship and the lunar cycles, while Heathenry is inspired by the pre-Christian Norse, Saxon and Germanic mythos. Each has a strong, distinct, sense of identity, but there are also broad commonalities that connect the various Traditions, there’s a great

deal of cross-fertilisation between them, and it's not uncommon for individual Pagans to belong to more than one Tradition at the same time.

Paradoxically, the very diversity of Pagan understandings of the nature of divinity seems to actively promote community cohesion amongst Pagans. It keeps our attention on what inspires our religious beliefs rather than the forms of words in which we try to describe them. With the limited exception of some Reconstructionist groups, the diverse Traditions which are found within modern Paganism cannot be distinguished from one another on theological grounds for, along with the mass of what are sometimes termed 'generic' Pagans who don't align with a specific Tradition, they all contain varying proportions of much the same range of theologies. Nor is there anything incongruous in individual Pagans explaining their beliefs in terms of different theological models at different times. Deirdre Green writes:

*"If our purpose is to adore the many as manifold expressions of the splendour of the divine – particularly as these impinge on what we value in life as matters of immediate concern – we use the "language" of polytheism. If we wish, on the other hand, to seek the one principle that permeates all, we use the language of either monotheism or monism."*  
(in Harvey, LPSE, 168-9')

Whatever beliefs an individual Pagan may hold about the nature of the divine, there is a fairly strong expectation across the Pagan community that once they have gained some experience of their path, she or he will be able to articulate it in their own terms. It would be going much too far to say that we feel uncomfortable if we agree with each other, but there is certainly a strong sense that the individual has a duty to think everything through for themselves rather than simply accept the words of others. The emphasis is on direct experience, a mistrust of human religious authority, and a deep suspicion of any claim to possess the absolute or revealed, universal truth. Professor Michael York observes that:

*"As a religion, Paganism purposely and deliberately eschews creeds, dogmas and formalised doctrines as contrary to the liberty and freedom of thought of the individual. This liberty/freedom is itself held to be holy and sacred and precisely what connects a person to the inherent divinity of the cosmos."*

York (2011)

Yet this direct and individual experience keeps leading us back to common ground. Common ground that does not need to be defined or protected by authorities, because it has – or rather is - its own authority.

In effect, while theological arguments are not unknown in Paganism and gatherings would be much duller without them, more often than not the various



Pagan theologies are combined to offer a synergy – a combination of distinct approaches in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – to aid our understanding of divinity, rather than acting as a source of discord. This constantly reminds us of the limitations of our own knowledge, and of the importance of constantly evaluating our beliefs in the light of direct experience.

The view of different theologies as offering different means of expression appropriate to different circumstances, rather than incompatible statements of absolute truth, is a striking one. Pagans have never confused unity with uniformity. A strong sense of unity in diversity is one of the core characteristics of modern Paganism. Perhaps to Pagans, theologies do not so much serve to define the true nature of the divine as simply add another dimension, like poetry, myth and ritual, to our attempts to express and explore relationship with it. Offering an approach to religion that simply accepts the diversity of our human experience of the divine as descriptive of the intrinsic diversity of the divine itself.

### **What are Pagan ethics?**

As we are a part of life, so Pagans believe we have a duty to it. Pagan ethics generally emphasise the responsible exercise of personal freedom in trying to live in harmony with others and with Nature. Many Pagans use the phrase *“If it harms none, do what you will”* to sum up this attitude. Despite the apparent simplicity, this is a rather demanding approach. Within a Pagan world view, everything is connected to everything else. Therefore everything we do, or fail to do, has consequences for which we are responsible. Pagan ethics tend to be based not on lists of prohibitions but upon recognition of interdependence and appreciation of consequences. They place strong emphasis on empathy, respect, responsibility and reciprocity. They require us to think through, as far as we are able, the probable consequences of both what we intend, and do not intend, to do, evaluate what best avoids or minimises harm both to others and to ourselves, and act accordingly, taking responsibility for our part.

For most Pagans this does not mean outright pacifism. It allows for self-defence, acting to prevent harm to others, and the requirements of justice. It is however an approach which realistically aims to minimise conflict and nurture peace.

The Golden Rule – treating others as we would wish to be treated ourselves - informs Pagan ethics, just as it does those of all other religions and also those of Humanism. Pagans take a modest pride in the first recorded expression of this almost universal value being attributed to a Pagan philosopher, Pittacus of Mytilene, of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BCE.

Paganism is not homophobic. It does not encourage prejudice against gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people, and values all adult, consensual and loving relationships equally.

While generally liberal in social matters, the emphasis Paganism places on both personal responsibility and respect for others means that many of us have very strong views on anti-social behaviour in general, and on crimes involving sexual violence in particular.

For Pagans, ethics applies to our relationships to all of life rather than to human beings alone. We try to live our lives "*treading gently on the Earth*" as a popular Pagan song puts it. Many Pagans see environmental activism as a religious duty and are heavily involved in a range of Green activities and campaigns. Of course not all Pagans are paragons of social and environmental responsibility but our religion certainly encourages us to make the effort.

### **How do Pagans worship?**

Pagan forms of worship seek to honour the Divine powers and bring the participants into harmony with them, to celebrate the turning of the seasons, and to mark the transitions of human life with appropriate rites of passage. The precise forms vary considerably but ceremonies usually begin with the marking out of sacred space by tracing a symbolic boundary, and the blessing of those within.

This space nearly always takes the form of a circle, which has neither beginning nor end, and within which all stand as equals. At the quarter points, the four directions and their corresponding elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water, will be acknowledged and bid welcome. Ceremonies may involve meditation, chanting, music, prayer, dance, poetry, the pouring of libations and the enactment of symbolic drama, together with the sharing of food and drink.

Although most Pagan homes have small altars or house-shrines, Paganism has no buildings dedicated as places of public worship. Instead Pagans hold their ceremonies in woods, on hilltops, along the seashore, by standing stones, in parks, gardens and in private homes. Most of us believe that religious ceremonies are best conducted out of doors, and that the finest temples are those not built by human hands.

In Paganism, ritual is akin to a language of symbolic communication between the human and the Divine. A language which speaks not to the intellect alone but also to the body, the spirit, the unconscious mind and the emotions. One

which communicates through all our senses, allowing us to experience the sacred as whole human beings within the acts of worship.

## **A Pagan Calendar**

Nearly all Pagans celebrate a cycle of eight seasonal festivals often known as the Wheel of the Year. While the details of ritual observance vary considerably, a fairly common approach would go something like this.

It begins - insofar as a seasonal calendar can have a beginning - with Samhain, on or near the 31st of October. Samhain is our Festival of the Dead. To Pagans, death is not an evil but a necessary part of the cycle of being. Without death, nothing could live. Samhain is a time for quiet introspection, for remembering our dead and acknowledging our own mortality.

From Samhain the wheel turns to the Winter Solstice, or Yule, on 21<sup>st</sup> December. The time when the sun sinks to its' lowest point and begins to grow stronger once more. We celebrate the rebirth of the sun, often by burning a specially chosen log through the long hours of darkness, kindled from the remains of the previous years Yule-fire.

The cycle continues with Imbolc on the 2nd of February, which celebrates the very first signs of the awakening of the Earth from her winter sleep. This is often the coldest time of the year in Scotland, and spring can seem very remote indeed, but if we look for signs we will find them. The first buds will be starting to swell on the trees and the snowdrops will be coming into flower.

Following this we come to the Spring Equinox, around 21st March. The day has now grown to equal the night in length: the equinoxes are the balance points of the year. The earth grows warmer and the land begins to bloom again. Many Pagans plant seeds as symbols of what we hope to achieve in the coming year.

After Spring Equinox we come to Beltane, the Pagan festival that runs from the night of 30th April through the morning of the 1st of May. This is a festival of life at its most exuberant, for Winter has retreated from the land. It is a celebration of sexuality, a time for revelling in the sheer joy of being alive. We leap the Beltane fire, hold contests and games, and dance around the Maypole to celebrate the coming of Summer.

Then the wheel of the year turns to Midsummer, the Summer Solstice, on 21<sup>st</sup> June, when the sun is at its height and the days are at their longest. Here too we are celebrating the abundance of life, but also acknowledging that from now on the sun will gradually wane. That in time, Winter will reassert itself.

After Midsummer comes Lughnasadh, or Lammas, celebrated around the 1st of August. Lughnasadh is the festival of the harvest when we give thanks for all that nourishes body, mind and spirit. In doing so, we acknowledge that just as our lives are sustained by the taking of plant and animal life, so shall we ourselves die and return to the Earth someday, to help sustain the new life that will follow us.

From there we move on to the Autumn Equinox around 21<sup>st</sup> September. Day and night stand once more in equal balance and now it is the powers of warmth and light that begin to retreat before the coming of the dark and cold. We begin to turn inwards, consolidating what the year has brought us and what we have learned from it. Then the wheel is moving on to Samhain once more and the beginning of another year.

### **Tolerance & Diversity in Paganism**

Paganism is not only a very diverse religion. It celebrates that diversity as good in itself. It seems fairly obvious to most modern Pagans that religion is less a matter of absolute truths than of subjective understandings that are appropriate to those who experience them but not necessarily universal. Thus Paganism can happily accommodate the kind of diversity of views that have proven intensely divisive, and even led to bloodshed, in some other faiths. When we look at Nature – as we tend to do rather a lot – we see that a great diversity of plant and animal species makes for healthier, stronger and more beautiful ecosystems. To Pagans a great diversity of beliefs and practices makes for healthier, stronger and more beautiful religion.

Nearly all Pagans are very tolerant of other, life-affirming, religious beliefs, but this tolerance is no resigned acceptance that we must endure other people being wrong. Pagans take it for granted that different people will experience the Divine in different ways, and regard religious pluralism as essential to a healthy society. Diversity of belief, along with critical opinions from non-believers, is good for all of us because it encourages us to think more deeply about what, and why, we believe. We do not think that any religion, our own included, can possibly be right for everybody. We do not believe in any uniquely authoritative revelation or spiritual insight. We do not believe that any person, or group, can truly claim to possess the Ultimate Truth in religious matters. The belief that there can only be one understanding of truth all too easily lends itself to attempts to eliminate everything, and even everyone, perceived as in error.

As a Pagan Roman Senator, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, writing in the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE, rather eloquently expressed it:

*“We gaze up at the same stars, the sky covers us all, the same universe encompasses us. What does it matter what practical system we adopt in our search for the truth? Not by one avenue only can we arrive at so tremendous a secret.”*

Pagans, accordingly, do not proselytise, tending to view the practice as arrogant, ill mannered and disrespectful to the Divine. Not only do we not seek converts, we see little point in people holding religious beliefs at all unless they are rooted in personal experience. It is important to understand that while Paganism has been re-emerging within the Western world for many years now, it is not seeking to supplant, and does not see itself as being in conflict with, other belief systems. It is simply a part, one strand among many, of our multi-faith society.

### **What is the Pagan Federation?**

The Pagan Federation is the largest, and most active, Pagan organisation in existence. It is primarily a European organisation though it also has networks in a growing number of countries in other parts of the world. The Scottish Pagan Federation – a constitutional body with a democratically elected leadership - is an independent national representative body within the Pagan Federation.

The Scottish Pagan Federation represents the interests of the Scottish Pagan community to government, NGO's, civic society, other relevant bodies and the general public. It provides accurate information and advice on modern Paganism on request, facilitates access to Pagan worship, and supports Pagan community activities across Scotland. It is also active in inter-faith dialogue across Scotland and holds membership of both Interfaith Scotland and the Edinburgh Inter Faith Association.

The Scottish Pagan Federation is recognised as the provider of Pagan Chaplaincy by the Scottish National Health Service and, in the very rare cases where it is necessary, by the Scottish Prison Chaplaincy Advisers. It provides Pagan clergy to conduct child-namings, handfastings and funerals, is recognised by the Registrar General for Scotland as an appropriate religious body to nominate Approved Celebrants to conduct religious marriage services under the terms of the 1977 Marriage (Scotland) Act. It is also a Stakeholder in the Equalities & Human Rights Commission, and recognised within the Scottish Government's framework strategy on Religion & Belief.

The Pagan Federation does not speak for all Pagans but can reasonably claim to represent a very broad swathe of what might be termed mainstream Paganism. The Pagan Federation regards membership of any organisation that refuses to support freedom of religion and equality of race, gender and sexual orientation, as incompatible with our aims, objectives and values.

### **How is the Pagan community organised?**

The Pagan community is made up of a polycentric network of inter-related Traditions, organisations, and overlapping local groups, communicating and meeting with each other by a variety of means, including local, national and international gatherings. Paganism has no central authority, and is strongly egalitarian.

Pagan groups tend to be self-organising and generally operate by some form of consensus. Individuals who are respected for their wisdom, integrity and experience tend to be regarded as Elders and serve in the roles of clergy as required.

Pagans strongly uphold equality of the sexes and women play a very prominent role within modern Paganism. Priestesses officiate at virtually all Pagan religious ceremonies and most of the leading figures in our community are women. At present, all of the Scottish Pagan Federation's team of celebrants – those who conduct child-namings, handfastings, legal marriage ceremonies and funerals – are women. Over three quarters of the Scottish Pagan Federation's governing Council are women, and nearly all of its democratically elected leaders over the years have been women.

This does not arise from any prejudice against men within Paganism but there may well be a subconscious bias in favour of women among most Pagans of both sexes, in part because of our traditions of Goddess-worship, and in part to compensate for the fact that the wider society, despite considerable progress over recent decades, still falls far short of sexual equality. The Pagan community is, in fact, predominantly female, with women probably outnumbering men by at least two to one, quite probably more. Paganism does not prescribe different social roles for men and women and expects much the same conduct from both sexes.

### **Some Problems and stereotypes?**

On the whole, Pagans suffer relatively few problems in modern Scotland, certainly fewer than some other minority faiths. Prejudice against Pagans has

diminished considerably over the past few decades and overt religious discrimination is rare nowadays. Pagans enjoy good relations with most of Scotland's other faith groups; the Pagan community is not insular, and nearly all of us are well integrated into the wider society. Pagans put a high value on self-reliance and thus, as we become more numerous and better organised, we grow progressively more effective at countering such dwindling prejudice as exists ourselves.

While Pagans are, and probably always will be, a fairly small minority within Scottish society, prejudice has further weakened as some core Pagan attitudes – sexual equality, environmental responsibility and religious tolerance – are now shared by very large and growing sections of the wider society.

Although much reduced and further diminishing by the year, religious prejudice does remain a problem to some degree and is mainly expressed through negative stereotyping of the community as a whole rather than in attacks on individuals. Of course this may be partly due to individual Pagans being largely invisible. Few of us wear any obvious marks of religious identity, and as we don't proselytise, we have no reason to draw attention to ourselves. Nearly all Pagans are people you'd walk past in the street without looking twice at.

There are a few common misconceptions about Paganism that, although not really harmful, are perhaps worth correcting:

*That "Paganism is a religion of young people":*

While the average age of Pagans is probably less than that found in some other faith communities, Paganism is far from being confined to the young. There are Pagans in their teens, there are Pagan old age pensioners, and there are Pagans of all ages in between. My impression is that most Pagans are probably in their late 30's or early 40's – admittedly, I now have to consider that as 'young'!

Most Pagan parents do not try to raise their children to be Pagans. We tend to the view that commitment to a religion should be an adult choice, best made with adult self knowledge and understanding of life. Most Pagan parents educate their children about many religions and generally concentrate on trying to raise them to be questioning, responsible, tolerant and spiritually aware individuals who'll be capable of making informed choices in such matters when they've grown up. Of course – perhaps inevitably - many children raised in Pagan families do identify strongly as Pagans and continue so in adult life.

*That "Paganism is backward looking":*

Paganism is very much a part of the modern world. We draw inspiration from the past where it is relevant to modern circumstances but do not seek a return to any mythical golden age.

*That “Pagans are hostile to science & technology”:*

Pagans are certainly concerned about the damage some technological developments, and mass industrialisation in particular, has caused to the Earth but are generally positive about science. The grave ecological problems facing our civilisation can only be dealt with through further scientific studies and more appropriate and responsible technologies.

From a Pagan perspective, the more science reveals to us about the complexity and interdependence of this living world, the more sacred it is revealed to be. The roots of modern Western science stretch back to ancient Greek Pagan philosophy, and quite a few modern Pagans are scientists, technologists or engineers.

*That “Pagans are marginal, or social dropouts”:*

A few Pagans may well be, but then other Pagans are doctors, midwives, nurses, teachers, social workers, academics, farmers, police officers, soldiers, and civil servants. I used to be able to proudly state that I'd never met a Pagan venture capitalist but sadly, I now have so we really cannot claim to be better than anyone else. A few Pagans live in communes or nomadically in benders, a few are Pillars of the Establishment, most lead perfectly ordinary lives differing from their neighbours only in religion.

Pagans are a very diverse community whose members are found in all walks of life and drawn from all social classes, all ages, and all levels of education. There is no such thing as a typical Pagan

In closing, I'll quote Dr Graham Harvey one more:

*“Paganism is a religion in which reciprocal relationships between humans and all others with whom we share life on Earth are significant. It is one of the religions of the world in which humans and their mundane deeds, thoughts, desires, intentions and beliefs are important because of the way such things effect and express relationships. Pagans are people who consider the world to be alive, they are listening to a speaking Earth.”*

(Harvey, LPSE, viii')

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