



The Origins of Modern Paganism

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The origins of modern Paganism lie in the nineteenth century, and in a shift of attitudes and languages regarding ancient paganism at that time. There were two traditional attitudes to it, which were reinforced under the Victorians and have continued ever since, while two new kinds appeared in that period. They all also carry on to the present, and one of them produced modern Paganism.

One of the two traditional attitudes summed up paganism as a religion of savagery and ignorance, characterized by the sacrifice of humans and animals, prostration before idols, and fear, superstition, and brutality. It was embedded in Christianity, in the invectives of Old Testament prophets and of Church Fathers against the older religions. It was however given a new lease of life in the nineteenth century, when Europeans encountered traditional peoples elsewhere in the world on a grand scale during the great expansion of European commercial and imperial power which took place at that time. Eastern and tribal religions were alike portrayed as backward and pernicious and in need of suppression by Christian civilization. These images were then back projected into the European past, to provide an impression of prehistoric Europe as a place of superstition and brutality equivalent to that of which traditional peoples in the present were accused. By 1900 it was well established that prehistoric religion must have been made up of gloom and gore, from which Europeans had subsequently progressed. However, there was a sense that it might still lurk below the surface of civilization, as a vampire-like force that might rise again should the power of reason and education falter.

The second attitude held that paganism was a religion which had produced magnificent art, literature and philosophy and had been deficient only to Christianity, in its ethics and component of divine revelation. This referred to a different pagan world to that of the first attitude, being the great civilizations of Greece and Rome. The Olympian goddesses and gods in particular were beloved and familiar figures for writers, painters and sculptors, and the middle and upper classes were educated in the Greek and Latin classics. It was argued that Greek and Roman paganism had prepared the world for the Christian revelation, which had perfected religion with a creed of charity, personal salvation and moral responsibility. Most commentators agreed that this paganism had been lovely, but also limited and corruptible. It could be enjoyed aesthetically but had to be tightly patrolled by Christian faith and morality. Christianity was seen as the bond of the social order, and it was feared that if its vigilance failed and paganism returned, then modern society would crumble just as the ancient world had done, before a new barbarism.

Both those attitudes were traditional and conservative, but the nineteenth century also produced two others which were much more radical. One was to treat paganism as one remnant of a single great world spiritual system based on divine revelation, of which all the main historic religions contained traces. This sprang from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project of reuniting all the wisdom of the world to understand it, and discover the divine plan for it, better. The project was given widespread currency from the 1870s by Helena Blavatsky, a truly international figure as a Russian émigré versed in Hinduism and Buddhism and able to use the language of science and evolution. Her doctrine became known as Theosophy and had a big impact in popularizing the concepts of reincarnation and of esoteric Christianity in the Western world. It respected paganism, but only while diluting it beyond recognition with ideas taken from other religions.

There was however a fourth attitude, also novel: that paganism had been a religion of joy, liberation, and affirmation of life, connected to the natural world and human creativity. It also tended specially to admire the

Greeks and Romans, but it demolished all the constraints on that admiration. It began in late eighteenth-century Germany, where intellectuals called for a return to ancient Greek models in order to renew modern culture. The Greeks were viewed as natural, creative, and free, and modernity as artificial, hidebound and restricted. This attitude spoke to the longing for an organic unity between people, culture and nature which was one hallmark of the emerging Romantic Movement. That movement spread to Britain, where the first generation of poets associated with it, such as Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and Shelley, took up its lament for a lost pagan fairyland presided over by happy and serene deities, in which the whole landscape was invested with divinity. By the 1870s 'pagan' had also become a shorthand in English letters for rather naughty personal liberation. In the rest of the century this language grew more aggressive, as writers called for a pagan revival to free modern humanity from puritanism, repression and the ugliness and unhealthiness of industrialized and urbanized living. It could be both a call to uninhibited sensual pleasure and to a humanitarian, ecologically sound, philosophy. The harsh realities of World War One killed off an appetite for the more shallow and escapist aspects of these views, but the deeper call for a reunion with nature and a recognition of the value of worldly beauty and pleasure remained through the twentieth century. By the middle of that century, it had brought about an actual revival of paganism itself.

Why did this happen in England first? The Germans led the way, but then turned to using native pagan images as part of a national revival, based on militarism and race, rather than as a counterculture. French intellectuals regarded the countryside not as a sanctified natural world but as a stronghold of peasant conservatism and Catholicism. They flirted with Satanism instead of paganism. England however possessed the most precociously urbanized and industrialized society in Europe, producing a fervent reverence for nature, and its native pagan mythology – the Anglo-Saxon – was weak. It was therefore able to draw on the pagan mythologies of Greece, Rome, and the Celtic and Scandinavian peoples, at will, to create a dynamic composite, amenable to the whole Western world.

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References and Further Reading.

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