

An Introduction to Neo-Paganism for Non-Pagans

About Me

My name is Ceallaigh MacCath-Moran, but I write under the name C.S. MacCath, and the title of my talk this evening is *An Introduction to Neo-Paganism for Non-Pagans*. I'd first like to thank Kristen Mills, the Celtic Studies Department and the Religious Studies Department for offering me the opportunity to speak this evening. You've been most kind. By way of academic credentials, I hold a Bachelor of Celtic Studies from the University of Toronto and a Master of English from the University of Maine. I'm a writer of fiction, non-fiction and poetry who has also been Pagan for roughly twenty-six years, and my writing often contains Pagan themes. In terms of credentials from within the Pagan community, I'm a Druid-grade member of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), which means that I'm progressing through the final coursework in the Order's educational program (I'll also be called a Druid-grade member when I've completed it). I'll talk a bit about clergy training and credentialing in the Neo-Pagan movement later in the lecture.

About This Lecture

Whenever I deliver a lecture (and most of them lately have been for writers and fans of science fiction and fantasy), I provide a resource page on my web site that contains any book recommendations I make and the URLs for any web sites I mention. The resource page for this lecture is located at **csmaccath.com/itnp**. In the next week, I'll also be uploading my notes along with a recording of the lecture under a creative commons license. You're welcome to download these for your reference and use.

This lecture introduces Neo-Paganism for non-Pagans, so I'll be discussing elements of Pagan and Neo-Pagan history, denominations, beliefs, practices and contemporary issues. Because of time constraints, this is not a comprehensive introduction, and it should be noted that another lecturer might choose to highlight different elements of the Neo-Pagan movement. Finally, though the term 'Pagan' rightly refers to historical belief systems and 'Neo-Pagan' refers to their modern reconstruction and revival, 'Pagan' is a blanket term for most of us, so it's possible that I'll slip and use it that way in the lecture.

History

Pre-Christian Beliefs and Practices

Pre-Christian beliefs and practices of various cultures around the world are a part of Neo-Pagan history, though these are fragmented depending upon the culture in question and the amount of information available about it. This means that historical Greek, Roman, Northern and Western European and even Mesoamerican beliefs and practices are a part of Neo-Paganism, depending upon the practitioner, though it should be noted that not every Neo-Pagan adopts historical Pagan practices into her religious landscape.

In addition, it should be noted that these historical beliefs and practices are not universally adopted by Neo-Pagans when they are known. Common examples of unadopted beliefs and practices include those

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that are violent and/or sacrificial, though I'll talk a little more about sacrifice later in the lecture.

Finally, when these practices are adopted, it is often with an attitude of reclaiming something lost. Many Neo-Pagans are conscious of the coerced conversion to Christianity their historical counterparts often endured and believe they are reconstructing and reviving important ways of understanding the world, both for themselves and for future generations of practitioners.

Romantic and Victorian Roots of Neo-Paganism

This lecture does not afford the time I would otherwise like to take exploring the Paganism of Romantic and Victorian poets and thinkers and Pagan themes in their work (and indeed I would have to refresh my own knowledge of these to give the topic proper treatment), but I think it might be useful to look at a few instances of Paganism in these periods.

Ronald Hutton proposes that Wordsworth was too conventional a person to fully embrace Paganism but asserts that he reluctantly admits early Paganism had enchanted the landscape in ways Christianity could not¹, especially in his poem 'The World Is Too Much With Us: Late And Soon':

*THE world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
The Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.--Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn; 10
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.*

Shelley was more enthusiastic about his admiration of early Paganism. In a letter to Thomas J. Hogg he wrote:

"I am glad that you do not neglect the rites of the true religion. Your letter awoke my sleeping devotions, and the same evening I ascended alone the high mountain behind my house, and suspended a garland, and raised a small turf-altar to the mountain-walking Pan."²

The poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, who rose to prominence after the height of the Romantic period, both actively criticized Christianity and allied himself with the Goddess in his 'Hymn to Prosperine'. He writes:

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- 1 Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999,. E-book. Page 22
 - 2 Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999,. E-book. Page 24

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*Wilt thou yet take all, Galilean ? but these thou shalt not take,
The laurel, the palms and the paeon, the breasts of the nymphs in the brake;
Breasts more soft than a dove's, that tremble with tenderer breath;
And all the wings of the Loves, and all the joy before death;
All the feet of the hours that sound as a single lyre,
Dropped and deep in the flowers, with strings that flicker like fire.
More than these wilt thou give, things fairer than all these things ?
Nay, for a little we live, and life hath mutable wings.
A little while and we die; shall life not thrive as it may?
For no man under the sky lives twice, outliving his day.
And grief is a grievous thing, and a man hath enough of his tears:
Why should he labour, and bring fresh grief to blacken his years ?
Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath;
We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death...*

And later in the poem:

*But I turn to her still, having seen she shall surely abide in the end;
Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend.
O daughter of earth, of my mother, her crown and blossom of birth,
I am also, I also, thy brother; I go as I came unto earth.
In the night where thine eyes are as moons are in heaven, the night where thou art,
Where the silence is more than all tunes, where sleep overflows from the heart,
Where the poppies are sweet as the rose in our world, and the red rose is white,
And the wind falls faint as it blows with the fume of the flowers of the night,
And the murmur of spirits that sleep in the shadow of Gods from afar
Grows dim in thine ears and deep as the deep dim soul of a star,
In the sweet low light of thy face, under heavens untrod by the sun,
Let my soul with their souls find place, and forget what is done and undone.*

These are only a few examples of many and only one facet of a multifaceted and fascinating topic. However, they do illustrate a Pagan sensibility in Romantic and Victorian literature and thought that found its way from Shelley to Swinburne to Aleister Crowley, Dion Fortune and Gerald Gardner³, all prominent figures in the Neo-Pagan movement. For a more thorough treatment of this topic, I would refer you to *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, by Ronald Hutton.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (of which W.B. Yeats was a member), the Ordo Templi Orientis (of which Aleister Crowley was a member) and the Ancient Druid Order (from which the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids later split) formed some of the more important foundations of Neo-Paganism in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries. These organizations were (and those

3 Hutton, Ronald. *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999. E-book. Page 26

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that remain still are) fraternal and esoteric, focusing on meditation, knowledge and theurgy as paths to spiritual development.

In the 1960's and 1970's, The Fellowship of Isis, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids and other, similar organizations followed in their footsteps. As you might expect, these reflected the spirit of the times, lending a more experimental philosophy of spiritual development to the Neo-Pagan movement. Circle Sanctuary was founded in 1974 as a place of retreat for Neo-Pagans and has since become an important resource for the movement both spiritually and politically. Of note, the Lady Liberty League, an advocacy branch of the sanctuary, was instrumental in the authorization of the pentacle for use on US military gravestones and other memorial markers in 2007. The Reclaiming branch of Neo-Paganism (where 'Reclaiming' is a proper noun) was founded in 1979 by Starhawk and Diane Baker upon the synthesis of Neo-Pagan spirituality and sociopolitical and ecological activism. I recently had the opportunity to attend a spiritual activism retreat at the Tatamagouche Centre with Starhawk, who provided attendees with a useful and empowering synthesis of earth-based spirituality and tools for activists.

From the 1980's onward, many more Neo-Pagan organizations have risen, remained resilient or disbanded. Some of the more influential among these are (and this list is by no means exhaustive):

- The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans: Founded in 1985 as part of the Unitarian Universalist Church and remains active therein.
- Ár nDraíocht Féin - A Druid Fellowship, Inc.: Founded in 1983 by the late Isaac Bonewitz, its focus is Reconstructionist Druidry and other Indo-European religious practices.
- The Sacred Well Congregation: A Universalist, independent, non-evangelical Wiccan church with strong ties to and advocacy of Neo-Pagan members of the military.
- Cherry Hill Seminary: A provider of education and practical training in leadership, ministry, and personal growth in Pagan and Nature-Based spiritualities, seeking accreditation as an academic institution in the United States.

So while Neo-Paganism certainly has roots in the fragmented beliefs and practices of early cultures around the world, it also owes some loyalty to Romantic and Victorian poets and thinkers who viewed early Paganism as an antidote to everything from the industrial revolution to dogmatic Christianity. Their inheritors were late Nineteenth and early Twentieth-century mystics, whose fraternal and theurgical approach to spiritual development were carried forward by the expanding Neo-Pagan movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which informed the plethora of organizations that rose, and continue to rise, in their wake.

Definitions and Denominations

There are a number of terms in Neo-Paganism that might best be understood in the context of their use by Neo-Pagans. So I'll be introducing you to terms while I introduce you to some of the more prevalent denominations in the movement. Please note that these are only a few among many, many denominations both established and emerging. That said, Neo-Paganism is extraordinarily difficult to

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define because it is both syncretic and diverse. When I was introduced to the movement in the mid-1980s, it was far less so, but there were fewer practitioners then, as well. So Neo-Paganism has grown wide as it has gained adherents.

Wicca

Wicca is modern witchcraft, which might or might not contain a religious component. When it does, it is usually duotheistic, honouring both a Goddess and a God in one or more of their many aspects (i.e. any Goddess or God figure among the global pantheon of Goddesses and Gods). Wicca is theurgical and celebrates eight holy days called the Eight Great Sabbats, which correspond with the cycles of the seasons; the solstices and equinoxes along with Samhain (November 1st), Imbolc (February 1st), Beltane (May 1st) and Lughnasa (August 1st). Wiccans may either be eclectic or they may be initiates of a Wiccan tradition or mystery school. They may practice solitary or in groups called covens. Wicca has as its core tenet a couplet attributed to Doreen Valiente: "Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfil, An it harm none do what ye will."

Reconstructionism and Revivalism

Reconstructionists are animistic polytheists or pan-polytheists drawn to one of any number of historical Pagan cultures (i.e. Gaelic, Greek, Northern European, Roman) and who endeavour through research to uncover and implement whatever of their beliefs and practices seem appropriate for modern practitioners. However, the amount of historical information available is greater for some Pagan cultures and less for others, so there is a variable amount of gnosis and invention in Reconstructionist traditions, though it's usually referred to as 'unverified personal gnosis' or UPG and frowned upon. I would like to note here that these reconstructed practices do include animal sacrifice in a few cases, where the practice has historical precedent and the animal in question is a food animal who is slaughtered and prepared for a ritual feast. Again, I'll talk more about the issue of sacrifice in a bit.

Revivalists are also animistic polytheists or pan-polytheists drawn to one of any number of historical Pagan cultures and do endeavour to uncover and implement whatever of their beliefs and practices seem appropriate for modern practitioners. However, they are far more comfortable with gnosis and invention and actively integrate their historical researches and their unverified personal gnosis. I've not heard of any instance of animal sacrifice among Revivalists, and indeed I would not expect to.

Both Reconstructionists and Revivalists endeavour to celebrate whatever holy days belonged to the historical Pagan cultures they favour.

Goddess Spirituality

Goddess spirituality is usually monotheistic and replaces the concept of a Holy Father with a Great Mother. Individual Goddesses from various pantheons are viewed as aspects of the Great Mother. Goddess Spirituality has ancient roots in matriarchal cultures and modern roots in early feminism. It appeals primarily to women, though there are men who are Goddess worshippers. Of interest in Goddess Spirituality are Dianic Wiccans, who combine Goddess spirituality and Wicca into practices designed for women only. Most practitioners of Goddess spirituality celebrate the Eight Great Sabbats.

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Neo-Druidry

John Michael Greer, who is a prominent modern Druid, a prolific writer and a blogger, a scholar of economic history and a peak oil theorist explains Druidry brilliantly in his now out-of print book *Druidry: A Green Way of Wisdom*. He writes:

What does it mean to be a Druid today? Above all else, Druidry means following a spiritual path rooted in the green Earth. It means participating in a living Western spiritual tradition drawn from many sources, including surviving legacies from Celtic wisdom teachings, but embracing the contributions of many peoples and times. It means learning from archaic traditions, from three centuries of modern Druid scholarship, and from the always changing lessons of the living Earth itself. It means embracing an experiential approach to religious questions, one that abandons rigid belief systems in favour of inner development and individual contact with the realms of nature and spirit.

So Druidry is a Revivalist mystery school and not a religious tradition, though it comfortably pairs with other religious perspectives such as Neo-Paganism and Christianity. In fact, while researching this portion of the talk, I found a beautiful poem by RoMa Johnson on the OBOD web site that speaks to the connections modern Christian Druids are making between their faith and their mystery tradition. She writes:

*What if
Jesus and Merlin were to meet
At twilight
In the garden, in the grove,
One looking forward to the Skull of Golgatha,
One looking back on the Sacred Head of Bran?*

*What would they say to one another,
These men, these Gods,
Who live in time beyond their lives -
One forward, one retrograde?*

*“Let this Cup pass from me...” says the one.
“May the earth open and swallow me,
May the sky fall upon me,
May the sea rise and cover me,
May fires consume me...” says the other.*

*“Take this cup and drink from it...” says the one.
“This is the Cauldron of Inspiration and Wisdom...” says the other.
“Do this in remembrance...” says the one.
“I know the Cup
From which the wave has overflowed.
I know the end of the dawn...” answers the other.*

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*What if they do meet
There in the grove, in the garden,
Two avatars -
One about to ascend,
One about to descend -
Each serving the Chalice in his way?*

*What if Merlin's Afallen and Jesus' Rood are the same Tree?
One rides it to his destiny,
One sits beneath to prophesy.*

*What could they give to one another
These prophets circling in their Time-long orbits?
Could Merlin say: "The seed is planted, the tree will grow
There is a thorn in Avalon that bears fruit in thy name."
Would Jesus reply wistfully: "Kiss Nimue for me.
Tell her I love her beauty and her power."*

External and Internal Self-Definition

Because Neo-Paganism is so syncretic and diverse, and because in most cases it values gnosis and invention, it can be difficult even for its adherents to describe their own pathworking succinctly. Some years ago, the Morning Star Coven explored this idea in a parody that is probably a lot funnier to me than it will be to you. It's sung to the tune of 'I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy', and the first two verses go like this:

*I'm a Wiccan, shaman, druid,
I am New Age through and through,
Decked in crystals from my head to toe,
With feathers and pyramids too.
My spirit guide is from Atlantis,
He's a Zen Aztec guru.
Come and spend the weekend with us;
For twelve hundred dollars
You'll be a Wiccan shaman too.*

*I'm an Elvis-Loki-Viking
I channel Ashley Montague.
In a former life I was a gypsy clerk,
Bullfighter and troubadour too.
I know five Illuminati;
They're a strange and motley crew.
There's a priest from ancient China.
He lives in my basement.
He is an Elvis-Viking too.*

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As funny as it is, it does illustrate the comfort Neo-Pagans have with experimentation and the concurrent difficulty they have in describing the spirituality that results from it. For instance, I might tell a person outside the Neo-Pagan community that I am Pagan or Buddhist, depending upon my estimation of her comfort level with Neo-Paganism. When asked by hospital intake nurses what my faith is, I've been known to reply "How long do you have?" And if I know the questioner is Neo-Pagan, I would likely say that I am a Gnostic Heathen Druid with a Buddhist practice.

It should be noted that my way of answering this question isn't terribly off the mark for other Neo-Pagans. If they'll answer outsiders at all (and some won't, for various reasons I'll explore in a moment), that answer tends to be vague, while insiders will almost always be answered with a more detailed explanation of faith and practice. This sort of external and internal language arises from the wariness many Pagans have of outsiders and the lack of understanding those outsiders often have of the terms we use to define ourselves.

In brief, Neo-Paganism is a new spirituality founded on the fragments of old spiritualities. Some traditions are religious, while others are not. However, all of them employ some level of gnosis and invention, even those that prefer to minimize it. That said, I believe that gnosis and invention are critical to the health of any religion or spiritual movement. As societies and individuals modernize, globalize, etc., the ways they relate to themselves and to others change, so why shouldn't their relationships with the divine change as well? Neo-Paganism offers an open environment for this sort of invention, and I think it's one of the movement's great strengths.

An Obligatory Discussion of Satanism

When I was coming up in Neo-Paganism in the 80s, many Evangelical Christians were conflating the movement with Satanism, and this caused a great deal of difficulty for my fellow practitioners; from family misunderstandings to job discrimination to the removal of children from their homes. This doesn't happen as much anymore, but for the sake of my fellow Neo-Pagans, I'm offering the following brief but obligatory discussion of Satanism.

Many Neo-Pagans, myself included, will tell you that Satan is a Christian deity, since He features in the Christian pantheon of Gods, Angels and Demons. Therefore, in order to be a Satanist in the popularized sense of the term, one must first be anchored in Christianity. Neo-Pagans are not, so those people who are anchored in Christianity and engaging in these practices (of which there are precious few, in my experience) are a Christian phenomenon.

Anton LaVey, who authored the Satanic Bible and founded the Church of Satan, was an occultist who advocated radical, non-theistic individualism in the style of Friedrich Nietzsche and Ayn Rand and not a believer in the person of the Christian Satan. Rather, Satan was and remains a model of human behaviour in that the Church of Satan believes individuals should seek their own self-interest above all things and conduct themselves as active and adversarial questioners of the world around them. Perhaps most importantly, LaVey-style Satanists are atheists and do not believe in any God above the self, so they are neither Christian nor Neo-Pagan.

Finally, Classical representations of Satan as a being with hooves and horns are co-opted from

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representations of non-Christian Gods of the hunt, the underworld or sexuality, such as Cernunnos. Many contemporary Neo-Pagans celebrate the aspects of life and human nature these Gods embody, but their celebration ends with the perversion of those representations into an evil.

It has been my experience that there remains an impulse among some Evangelical Christians to persist in the belief that anything Neo-Pagan is evil even in the face of explanations such as the one I have just provided. I understand this impulse and where it comes from; I spent the formative years of my life a Jehovah's Witness. It has also been my experience that where an accusation of evil is absent (usually because the accuser is both Christian and is on friendly terms with a Neo-Pagan), there is an impulse to believe that Neo-Pagans are well-meaning but deluded and need to find the right church. I would respectfully propose that both of these perspectives are inaccurate and unhelpful.

Challenge Ideologies and Practices

There are many dualities inherent to the Neo-Pagan movement; masculine and feminine, light and darkness, above-world and underworld, and so on. However, the duality of good and evil is almost never paired with these, such that (masculine = light = above-world = good) and (feminine = darkness = underworld = evil). With that in mind, there are ideologies and practices found in the movement that some might find challenging and indeed are meant to challenge. I'm going to discuss a couple of these now, but of course this list should not be viewed as exhaustive.

Deities

Some Neo-Pagans have as their patrons challenging Gods and Goddesses such as Kali, Loki, the Morrighan and others like them, whose mythologies teach destruction, trickery and warfare. However, their modern devotees usually do not gravitate to them in order to emulate their mythological behaviours. Rather, it has been my experience that dark Gods teach their devotees to interrogate dark aspects of life and consciousness. In short, they teach understanding of the shadow self. We live in tough times, and some Neo-Pagans believe we need tough Gods to help us navigate them. I don't disagree with that assessment.

Example

An acquaintance of mine is a devotee of Hecate who is studying to become a mortician. For those of you who might not be acquainted with Her, Hecate is a Goddess of crossroads and passages, among other things like witchcraft and sorcery. My acquaintance believes her association with this challenge Goddess is helping her learn how to help others understand one of the two most universal crossings in the human experience.

Animal Sacrifice

As previously mentioned, there are a few sub-sects of Neo-Paganism that practice animal sacrifice, all of them Reconstructionist. Their argument is that the practice is a part of the historical Paganism they flavor and, therefore, deserves inclusion in Neo-Pagan Reconstructionism. The animals sacrificed are food animals, usually pigs, and the meat is cooked and shared in a ritual feast.

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I take issue with this practice on several points, but I would rather not present my argument against animal sacrifice as part of a talk meant to be informative. So I'm going to refer you to the resource page and an essay commissioned from me for *Witches & Pagans* magazine some years ago, which was later killed pre-publication because of space constraints. The title of the essay is *Blood Rites: The Case Against Animal Sacrifice*, and you can download it in PDF format.

There are other challenge ideologies and practices I don't have the time to share with you now. I find some of them compelling and others problematic, and your judgement of them would certainly be as distinctive to you as mine is to me. That said, I would again stress that I believe gnosis and invention are critical to the health of any religion or spiritual movement. We don't have to agree with all of what emerges from that process, and indeed we have the right to oppose those things we disagree with, but the process itself is an important one.

Contemporary Issues

I'd like to discuss some contemporary issues in Neo-Paganism now, to give you a sense of the challenges we're facing as a community.

Internal vs. External Legitimacy

I spoke awhile ago about internal and external language in the Neo-Pagan community, and now I'd like to expand on that a bit by discussing internal vs. external legitimacy of the clergy. Our ways of training Neo-Pagan clergy are still not often recognized outside the community, and in these cases we're presented with a few problems. First, our clergy people don't have the authority to marry, serve in hospital chaplaincy, etc. when they aren't recognized by a governmental body like a province or state. Also, the work they do to become clergy can't be transferred from one academic institution to another, so they can't pursue new avenues of study with it. Finally, though it's certainly true that clergy people rarely come to the profession out of a desire for wealth, our clergy people usually don't have the financial support of a religious institution and almost never make enough money to support themselves. Cherry Hill Seminary is working hard on this issue by seeking academic accreditation in the US, and I earnestly hope they succeed, because it would mean that Neo-Pagans called to the clergy could study in an environment sympathetic to their spirituality and become degreed professionals.

Example

Having said this, I'd like to provide an example of success in communication between the Neo-Pagan community and an external organization as it relates to chaplaincy. A close friend of mine is a Commander in the US Navy who served a tour of duty in Iraq with the US Army Corps of Engineers. She's also a Third Degree Wiccan Priestess in the Georgian tradition. A Wiccan Third Degree confers the right to teach and lead group rituals, so once she was sponsored by the Georgian tradition and presented her paperwork to the US military, she was recognized by military clergy as a distinctive faith group leader and able to lead other military Neo-Pagans in weekly study and ceremony. She was also able to intercede on behalf of deployed Neo-Pagan soldiers in crises of many different kinds, who would likely not have been as well served by a chaplain not of their faith.

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However, not every Pagan group is so well organized and neither is every secular organization, so it isn't always possible to translate authority from inside to outside the movement.

Humanitarian Functions of the Church and Paganism

Dovetailing on this issue, Neo-Paganism still struggles with some of the more humanitarian functions mainstream churches serve for their individual congregations; helping the poor, interceding during crises such as house-fires, deaths in the family and the like, providing sanctuaries and gathering places during political upheaval and environmental catastrophe, etc.

I think this is a serious area of need for Neo-Pagan communities, and while I *am* seeing individual priests and priestesses in prison ministries, hospital chaplaincy and the aforementioned distinctive faith group leadership, I think Neo-Pagans need to strive toward creating the same humanitarian spaces for their communities that churches do.

The Continuing Need for Secrecy

Another problem Neo-Pagans face is the ongoing need for secrecy about our spirituality. Neo-Paganism is still not well-understood or well-accepted by mainstream, Western society, so many Neo-Pagans prefer to keep their spirituality private because they fear situational discrimination.

Example

My military friend is concerned about moving home after retirement to the small, Northwestern community where her in-laws live and openly practising her faith there, since her husband's family might suffer negative social repercussions as a result.

Example

An acquaintance of mine is both a rising Celtic scholar and a Neo-Pagan who has discussed with me the necessity of keeping his faith quiet in the academic community for fear of professional repercussions.

Beyond these reasons for secrecy, Neo-Paganism is sometimes made a spectacle of or publicly mocked, so many Neo-Pagans choose not to share the details of their spirituality outside their communities of faith because they don't want for their spiritual practices to be desecralized by hyper-inquisitive or negative outsiders.

Example

The media often seeks out 'real Witches' for Halloween human interest stories, and I've also seen the media seek out 'real Heathens' for human interest stories about Heathenry and racism. In fact, in my twenty-six years of practice, I've encountered few objective, non-sensational representations of Neo-Paganism by the media, and because of this many Neo-Pagans just don't talk to the press.

Finally, I would say that many, if not most Neo-Pagans don't feel entirely safe with outsiders for many

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reasons, so that leads to some level of secrecy, and the individualistic, experimental nature of Neo-Paganism only adds to that impulse. So I wouldn't expect Neo-Pagans to ever be entirely open *with* outsiders about their spirituality, even though I *am* seeing quite a bit of positive movement toward acceptance of Neo-Paganism *by* outsiders.

Conflation of Neo-Paganisms with Racism

Another challenge Neo-Pagans face is the conflation of Neo-Paganisms with racism. Northern and Western European Pagan histories are especially attractive to racially-aware groups, and in conversations with Kristen Mills, I've learned that the European academy has some level of concern about people professing to be Pagan or Neo-Pagan with interests in early Northern and Western European studies for this very reason.

To counter this problem, Northern European Neo-Pagans (who often call themselves Heathens) have created and sustained an online Heathens Against Hate (HAH) movement that began with a web site which has since gone offline and continued on a new web site and Facebook page with over a thousand 'Likes'. I've offered support to the web site and written a short article about the HAH movement, which is linked from the resource page.

Similarly, the Celts Against Oppression, Racism and Neo-Nazism (CAORANN) movement focuses on the separation of Celtic and Gaelic pan-polytheism from racism and also has a Facebook page. All of these web sites and Facebook pages are linked from the resource page for this lecture as well.

Having interacted substantially with Northern and Western European Neo-Pagans and with Heathens, it is my considered opinion that:

- If a person tells you that she is a Northern European or Celtic Neo-Pagan (and the Pagan/Neo-Pagan self-identification is key here), it's unlikely that she is a practitioner of Northern or Western European Paganism for racially-motivated reasons.
- While there are more racially-aware persons self-identifying as Heathen and indeed Heathenry has a more complex relationship with racist attitudes, it's important to observe the person and her faith in context to understand whether or not her interest in Northern and Western European cosmology is racially-motivated, especially since we're such a diverse community.
- In fact, even the Southern Poverty Law Center has a qualifier on its web page of racist symbols. It reads: *"Although white supremacists and other extremists commonly use the Celtic cross and the runic alphabet, these symbols are also frequently used by non-racists. Many non-racist neo-Pagans, for instance, have runic tattoos but have no relation to racist groups or beliefs."*

Cultural Appropriation

The issue of cultural appropriation in Neo-Paganisms is large and worthy of its own lecture, but I'd like to touch on a few key issues here. I'll begin with a quote from the blog I write for BBI Publications:

To be sure, not every culture - and indeed not every Gaelic or Celtic culture - has the same price of entry. For instance, I'm given to understand that while it's certainly possible to learn

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Gaidhlig in Scotland, it's more difficult to integrate into Gaidhlig-speaking communities there than it is here. Beyond this narrow example are the many Gaeilge (Irish), Gaelg (Manx), Cymraeg (Welsh), Brezhoneg (Breton) and Kernewek (Cornish) communities whose members have shared languages, cultures and histories and whose intrinsic sense of themselves is defined by these things. If they are to survive, then their decisions about who is 'inside' and who is 'outside' must be held inviolate.

This can be problematic for those of us who come to Gaelic and Celtic culture by way of their pre-Christian cosmologies. In seeking the spirituality of the early Western Europeans, we necessarily reach behind their contemporary counterparts to gather what fragments remain of their Pagan histories. There we find little separation between the sacred and the secular, which is true of many early lifeways. This integrative approach to spirituality can provide much-needed nourishment to those of us who seek the union of our sacred and secular selves, but in piecing together the fragments of Pagan history we find gaps, often large ones. Since a whole lifeway can't be reconstructed with so many pieces missing, we fill the gaps with elements of contemporary Gaelic and Celtic culture, gnosis, psychological imprints left over from mainstream religion and even wish-fulfilment. What results is Celtic Paganism, a thing apart from contemporary Gaelic and Celtic culture even though they all share the same roots.

...This issue isn't entirely a matter of cultural appropriation with its dichotomies of indigenous and colonial, oppressed and oppressor. If the price of entry to a given community is variable, then the narrative that describes that transaction must also be variable. Beyond that, Celtic Paganism should have the right to define itself as a community on its own terms, just as every other group has. At the same time, we must acknowledge that our efforts at self-definition have a direct impact on people whose ancestors preserved the fragments of Pagan history we cherish. More importantly, Gaelic and Celtic language and culture did not die with the pre-Christian, Celtic Pagans. They evolved, and modern Gaels and Celts are their inheritors at a time when these precious intellectual artifacts are threatened with extinction.

So it's clear that cultural appropriation in Neo-Paganism is an extraordinarily complex topic. Here is one side of the issue:

For many pre-Christian peoples, there was little distinction between culture and religion. Together, they represented a cohesive lifeway. Because of this, it's understandable that especially Neo-Pagan Reconstructionist and Revivalist traditions would value this approach to spiritual development. Further, many modern peoples also value a blend of culture and religion. The many cultural faces of Catholicism come readily to mind here. So there is a precedent for this sort of blending.

Beyond that, some aspects of contemporary Neo-Pagan spirituality have their roots in pre-Christian cosmology and so are not appropriated when they are viewed in that context.

Example

Brigid was a goddess before she was a saint. It could even be said that early Christianity appropriated her away from early Paganism as it appropriated so many deities and practices in order to facilitate conversion.

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Example

The idea of the feminine divine in Ireland. You can see motifs of the feminine divine in early Bardic poetry, in Aisling poetry after the fall of the earls and in Yeats' Kathleen Ni Houlihan. To my eye, it was no wonder the Abbey Theatre rioted. Yeats played upon one of the most ancient ideas in Irish consciousness, a pre-Christian construct that a Celtic Reconstructionist or Revivalist Neo-Pagan would identify as a piece of early Paganism worthy of adding to her spiritual toolkit.

Further, Neo-Pagans gather wisdom from many living cultural and religious traditions, and the peoples who bear these traditions have the right to negotiate separately with the individual Neo-Pagans who engage them. So there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem, which means that once again a dualistic right-or-wrong philosophy isn't going to be of much help here.

And if gnosis and invention are healthy for spiritual development, as I believe they are, can they not be healthy for secular development as well? In other words, is it possible for Neo-Pagans to make valuable contributions to the living cultures from which they gather wisdom?

Finally, this isn't a matter of the misuse of aboriginal symbology in a sports team mascot. Rather it involves the way a group of people intersect with the divine. How do we tell a person that her method of spiritual development has to change because it offends tradition-bearers in a living culture? And again, who but the tradition-bearers themselves have the right to engage that conversation?

Here is another side of the issue:

Most of the cultures and religions from which Neo-Pagans gather wisdom are already threatened in some way or another by colonizing peoples and ideologies. Celtic and Gaelic languages and cultures certainly are. It's already difficult for them to preserve and propagate what remains of their authentic lifeways without having to contend with the re-emergence of their ancient spiritualities, appropriated or not.

Further, gnosis and invention might have a place in personal spiritual development, but fragile cultures will necessarily have a more difficult time absorbing and integrating new ideologies (if indeed they choose to do so at all, which is their right) while struggling to maintain their extant identities. Equally important is the fact that these cultures are not required to share their cultural wealth or acknowledge the perspectives of outsiders as authentic.

Another problem is that many Neo-Pagans, and especially people new to the movement, don't have an understanding of the histories and cultures that inform their spiritualities. Much of this has to do with the wide variety of books available about Neo-Paganism, most of them instructional and many of those derivative of books that are themselves derivative of other books. In a movement that values gnosis and invention, this can be helpful, but it can also be harmful because reliable source materials are often watered-down in successive publications until they are unrecognizable.

Worse, many Neo-Pagans who ought to know better simply don't care, paint a cultural veneer over invented spirituality and propagate it as authentic.

Example

When I was an undergraduate student of Celtic, I had occasion to speak with the spiritual leader of a

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Celtic Neo-Pagan group who told me that she didn't feel she had to learn a Celtic language in order to practice Neo-Pagan Celtic spirituality. She professed no interest in it at all and indeed very little interest in authentic Celtic or Gaelic culture. I was appalled.

Example

More recently, I read a blog entry by a Neo-Pagan musician who asserted that Oran Mòr referred to the ancient Celtic song of creation, singing the world into existence in perpetuity. Having had the privilege of hearing tradition bearers here sing big songs, I commented with what I knew and tried to correct the misunderstanding. Still, the error was present and propagated by a member of the Neo-Pagan community many people admire.

So on the one hand, there are people in a religious movement with varying degrees of understanding and interest in the source languages and cultures from which they gather wisdom. Many are well-meaning, others are uninformed, still others are apathetic. However, because their purpose is religious and not secular, it's more difficult to tell them that their spiritual development must be curtailed because there are errors of appropriation in its cultural components.

On the other hand, there are the fragile languages and cultures of people who have the first and only right to determine what is authentic about their lifeways and who may participate in them. Full stop.

I don't have an answer to this problem, and I empathize with both positions equally. In a perfect world, I would want for Neo-Pagans to have more respect for and make a greater effort toward the authentic languages and cultures they engage, and I would want for the tradition-bearers of these fragile languages and cultures to become more inclusive where it is possible for them to be so. In the meantime, I'm asking the question myself, and I'm presenting it to you.

Suggested Reading

For those of you interested in reading further in Neo-Paganism, I recommend the following and have linked to them on the resource page:

- *The Spiral Dance*, by Starhawk (of the Reclaiming tradition)
- *Drawing Down the Moon*, by Margot Adler
- *A Witch's Bible*, by Janet and Steward Farrar
- *Essential Asatru*, by Diana Paxson
- For Druidry, anything Written by Philip Carr-Gomm (the Chosen Chief of OBOD) or John Michael Greer (the Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America)
- Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies (peer-reviewed)

If you're interested in exploring Neo-Paganism and find yourself drawn to a particular culture's pre-Christian practices, I would urge you to read the source material and literature available for that culture before engaging any modern Neo-Pagan writer's work so that you have a better chance of distinguishing history and literature from gnosis and invention.

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Conclusion: Why Neo-Paganism?

Neo-Paganism offers reconnection with earth-based, animistic spiritualities at a time when many people feel disconnected from the natural world and with ancestral wisdom. It provides opportunities for reintegration through engagement with the land, sea and sky as divine, with the ways ancient cultures engaged these ideas and with their own innate spiritual wisdom. This reverence can only be healthful at a time when we as denizens of the Earth have been taught to relate to it, to each other and to non-human species in non-sacred or even exploitative ways. This is certainly part of the appeal of Neo-Paganism for me. Neo-Paganism also lacks dogma and prescribed or prohibited behaviours, so it appeals to people who have been classically underserved by mainstream religion for various reasons. Neo-Paganism encourages spiritual gnosis and invention, so people who seek a more individual relationship with the sacred are able to approach it in a fresh and relevant spirit of exploration. Finally, since Neo-Pagan spirituality isn't tied to dogma or prescribed and prohibited behaviours, individuals are able to cultivate a spiritual life while remaining authentic to themselves in ways that might not be acceptable to mainstream religion.

The Charge of the Goddess

I'd like to leave you with a bit of wisdom from my community of faith, an excerpt from the Charge of the Goddess, written by Doreen Valiente and now widely cited in the Neo-Pagan community. This is the second half of the charge, adapted for the Reclaiming tradition by Starhawk:

Hear the words of the Star Goddess, the dust of Whose feet are the hosts of Heaven, whose body encircles the universe:

I Who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters,

I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me.

For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe.

From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return.

Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold, all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals.

Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you.

And you who seek to know Me, know that the seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.

For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am That which is attained at the end of desire.

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Are there any questions?