

The Neo-Pagan Goddess

Katy Jennison gives a brief introduction to the place of the Goddess in contemporary Paganism.

One factor propelling the growth of contemporary Paganism is dissatisfaction with the almost-exclusive maleness of the deities of mainstream religions. The many branches of neo-Paganism all offer at least one Goddess, usually but not always accompanied by at least one God. This is a very brief and necessarily incomplete overview.

Sofia readers will understand that to any individual Pagan 'the Goddess' may be a personification, a metaphor, a symbol, an archetype, or an independent supernatural entity, or all of these at different times. Some Pagans are polytheists; some visualise a Divine pair, a Goddess and a God, with many different names. In some traditions 'all the gods are one God and all the goddesses are one Goddess': all the different deities are aspects of a single Deity. And some (particularly numerous in the USA) are exclusively Goddess-worshipping and do not acknowledge any male deity. *Sofia* readers will also appreciate that not all the diverse branches of this neo-Pagan tree live together in perfect amity and mutual respect.

The image of a Goddess has run through Western European culture, from the Renaissance to the Romantic poets. Gardnerian Wicca, which has a co-equal Goddess and God, was introduced in England by Gerald Gardner in *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), and spearheaded both the public awareness and the spread of contemporary Paganism. Gardner's personification of the Goddess echoes that of Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* (1948), which in turn draws upon the Romantic poets and upon twentieth-century archaeo-

logical discoveries (see Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon* (1999), chapter 2).

This Goddess, in Wicca and its derivatives, is frequently perceived as a Triple Goddess, and combines some of the imagined characteristics of a Goddess of the Moon, sometimes called Diana, with those of a great Earth Mother and with the Crone, who may be called Hecate. Wicca has spread within Britain, north America, and Europe, and as it has

developed and been adapted by many people, including Alex Sanders (1926-1988) in Britain and Raymond Buckland, Starhawk and others in the USA, adherents have found different names for their Goddess, sometimes from antiquity, sometimes using names of local deities, sometimes simply calling her 'the Lady' or 'the Goddess'. She is



Rainbow over Glastonbury Tor

invoked by the priestess during Wiccan ceremonies in a rite called 'Drawing down the Moon'.

Originally stemming from Wicca but developing independently since the 1970s is the strand of Paganism often called Goddess spirituality. At one end of its range are groups which give primacy to the Goddess but also acknowledge a male deity, and welcome men as well as women as both members and priests. At the opposite end are Dianic groups, which do not recognise any male deity, insist upon exclusive, female-only covens, and follow a separatist-feminist philosophy: the best known is the Susan B. Anthony coven, founded by the Hungarian-American Zsuzsanna Budapest, who in 2012 courted controversy by excluding trans women from her coven. This is a riposte to male-dominated religion taken to its logical extreme, but it mirrors controversies over

women and trans-gender priests within the Christian church, and separation of the sexes in other religions. In Britain, the prime mover of a gentler version of the Goddess movement was Asphodel Long (1921-2005), with her book *In a Chariot Drawn by Lions: the Search for the Female in Deity* (1992).

Neo-Pagan illustrations of the Goddess have a regrettable tendency towards youthful, willowy, long-haired women with serene expressions in flowing robes in a sunlit or moonlit glade, accompanied by friendly animals. Less often, she is a serene Mother-figure: Pagan artists usually avoid anything too reminiscent of the Christian mother-and-child image. And occasionally she is an elegant white-haired Crone, with an equally serene expression and an air of cosmic wisdom, and perhaps an owl.

People tend to visualise their deities in the image of their ideal selves, or perhaps their ideal mothers or sisters or their ideal lovers or wives. The Goddess, for many Pagans, symbolises qualities which are perceived as lacking in most monotheistic male deities, such as overt sexuality, physical beauty, and kindness and joyfulness as opposed to severity and retribution. Other Pagans see a danger in attributing only sweetness and light to one's deities, and acknowledge other aspects such as implacability and destruction.

Today, while there are still many initiatory Wiccan groups following the original blueprints of Gardner, Sanders or Buckland, there are also many self-generated groups which incorporate some aspects of Wicca along with practices derived from other spiritual paths or created spontaneously, and there are very many solitary practitioners who do the same. And while Wicca and its many derivatives make up a significant part of Paganism today, contemporary Pagan Druidry is also important, especially in Britain, and draws on Celtic traditions and Celtic deities. Heathen or Asatru groups, in Britain and in Western Europe, follow Norse deities. There are Hellenic reconstructionists who honour the ancient Greek Gods, and there are many followers of shamanistic and magical traditions with their own approaches to deity.

Thus the Goddess has nearly as many names and aspects as there are neo-Pagans who follow her. She is being restored to the centre of contemporary religious practice, affirming and empowering women: a balance is being redressed.

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The Freedom to be Tomorrow what we are not Today – becoming Free Spirits and Archaeologists of Morning

This was the title of Andrew Brown's talk at the SOF Annual conference. He sent this Abstract with a link to his complete script on his blogsite.

In my talk I ask whether 'Religion – Where Next?' (the conference theme) was the right question and that perhaps a better one might be 'Religion – Where Right Now?' I begin by suggesting that, rather than overcoming our past religion/s in a strong fashion (replacing it/them with new strong religious ideas and practices), we might do better to employ Gianni Vattimo's 'weak thought' (*il pensiero debole*), which uses more subtle and creative ways consciously to surpass, twist, and reinterpret our inherited religion/s. I then turn to who is to do this kind of 'weak thinking' and argue that the primary task we face is not to create any kind of new religion but to create and form new, liberal religious subjects. I suggest that one way this task can be achieved is by combining the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's therapeutic idea of how a 'free-spirit' is made with the poet Charles Olson's self-description as 'Archaeologist of Morning'. When combined I suggest that they might help free some men and women to be more fully alive, awake and present in this world than they might otherwise be and so become people 'without a position', ever open to what Henry David Thoreau calls the 'newer testament – the Gospel according to this moment'.

<http://andrewjbrown.blogspot.co.uk/2016/07/the-freedom-to-be-tomorrow-what-we-are.html>