Reinventing Religion: the Neo-Pagan Experience


"Neo-Paganism": I usually leave off the "neo-", and I see that although my spell-checker is quite happy with simple Paganism it doesn't like neo-Paganism: it offers to correct it to hooliganism, republicanism or Anglicanism ...!

First, I need to make clear that because Pagans are continually re-inventing their own versions of Paganism, nothing I say should be taken as applying to all Pagans everywhere. Neo-Paganism is simply a useful umbrella term which these days covers Wiccans, witches, Druids, Thelemites, and shamanic practitioners, but also all the others -- probably the majority of Pagans these days -- who are not aligned to a specific recognised path, and/or who take parts from more than one path and create their own syncretised way.

And secondly, one very important thing to bear in mind is that we're not talking about beliefs here. It's necessary to stress that, for most neo-Pagans, practice is very much more important than belief. The American writer Fritz Muntean characterises the initiatory forms of Wicca, one of the neo-Paganisms, as orthopraxy, not as orthodoxy. And since to most neo-Pagans their religion, or their Pagan way of life, is not about belief but about practice, the bouquet of different flowers which we're creating from different fields is not a bouquet of beliefs but of practices. The general approach is summed up in the words of the American Pagan, Storm:

"Nine words th'eclectic Rede attest:  
Steal what works; fix what's broke; fake the rest."

The key here is whether a practice works; and whether it works for me, not necessarily whether it works for anyone else, let alone for everyone else. Pagans quite specifically reject the idea that there's any one size which fits all. And that's a generalisation, which I said I wouldn't make: but I've never met a Pagan of whom that particular generalisation wasn't true.

To go back to the beginning of this particular re-invention, about fifty years ago: Margaret Murray (1863-1963) originally published The Witch-Cult in Western Europe in 1921, claiming that the people persecuted in the long-running series of witch-trials in Europe had been practitioners of a surviving neolithic cult which worshipped a Horned God, and that pockets of this cult still survived today. This was almost immediately attacked by scholars in the field, but their rebuttal was then largely ignored; so her thesis was accepted by a large number of people, including historians of other periods and scholars in other fields, simply because her book and its theories was disseminated far more widely than the rebuttal. Serious challenge only came to public attention after Margaret Murray's death in 1963.

Her thesis had, however, caught the public imagination at a time when many people were becoming disillusioned with the established church. Initially, the idea of an ancient, indigenous, pre-Christian religion, which had survived despite centuries of persecution, appealed very much to people brought up on the Romantics, people who took part in the resurgence of interest in manifestations of English traditional culture, such as the folk dance and song revival between the wars. This was a limited, middle-class, wistful para-Paganism, looking back to what by then seemed the golden years before 1914, and seeking to re-create an imagined Golden Age of innocence in an increasingly industrialised post-war England.

Disillusion with all manifestations of the establishment had a resurgence after the end of the second world war; and then in the 1950s the impulse towards a different form of religion met the inventive, structured ritual practices which Gerald Gardner introduced, first in fictional form and then in 1954, after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1950, in his book Witchcraft Today.

A particular appeal of Gardner's new variety of witchcraft, or Wicca, was that it contained a
Goddess and well as a God, and a High Priestess who was not only the equal of the High Priest but in some respects his superior. This aspect especially caught the imaginations of those of us who were part of the Women's Movement in the 1970s, and it played a key part in the anti-nuclear demonstrations at Greenham Common in the 1980s.

Another aspect which sharply differentiated Wicca from Christianity, and which struck a note with people fed up with being patronised and preached to, was (and is) its ethical code, which is simply "An it harm none, do what you will". This is of course very similar to St Augustine of Hippo's "Love God and do as thou wilt". The key point is what it doesn't tell you: it doesn't set out a list of what you must and must not do: in any situation, you are obliged to work out what the appropriate thing is. The responsibility for making the decision, and for its consequences, rests firmly with you.

A third crucial aspect, which follows from this, is that the neo-Paganisms embrace light and dark equally, and don't relegate whatever one's particular culture defines as "bad" to a darkness which is set up in an artificial duality with "good" and "light". Life is always much more fuzzy than that; the idea, from Jungian psychology, of embracing one's Shadow and learning from it as a form of personal transformation has been incorporated into the practice of many Pagans.

Gerald Gardner presented, and may indeed have believed in, a long unbroken tradition behind his version of Witchcraft, but the rituals he presented actually owed more to the Western magickal orders, of which the best-known is the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which had been flourishing in a quiet and secret way during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and the current form of most of these rituals, which still make up the backbone of much Wiccan practice today, was written by Doreen Valiente (1922-1999) in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She wrote them in a deliberately archaic, poetic style, which was cheerfully embraced by people who thought religions ought to be old and were convinced that this was one of the oldest; but no small reason why her words are still used today is that they are genuinely poetic and powerful in their own right. At the end of this rapid survey I'll give you one of her invocations.

The discrediting of Margaret Murray's witch-cult survival thesis took a while to percolate through the growing Wiccan community, and there are still pockets, especially in the US, which refuse to believe that their practice hasn't been passed down unchanged since neolithic times, in rather the same way that some Christian fundamentalists seem to believe that the Bible was dictated by God in seventeenth-century English. In the UK, though, things took a rather different course. Instead of thinking "Oh, well, if it's all invented I'll give it up", a number of Wiccans and other Pagans had the opposite reaction, which was "How splendid! -- if Gerald Gardner made it all up then so can we!" Today, in keeping with this approach, there are probably far more eclectic Pagans than there are members of defined groups. We may still argue delightfully about the proper or authentic or original way to draw an invoking pentagram of fire, but that's because many Pagans, the ones I know in Oxford anyway, are also interested in the history and in the writings of people from Apuleius to MacGregor Mathers of the Golden Dawn.

And of course Gardner didn't quite "make it all up", because no-one ever does: what he and Doreen Valiente did was confect a coherent new religion by mixing together some of the most appealing ingredients from earlier practices and philosophies, or, as Storm puts it, "steal what works, fix what's broke, fake the rest."

Currently the mantra of "choice" is everywhere, but back in the 1960s and 70s the idea that one could choose, let alone invent, one's religion, rather than being born into one or alternatively having to identify the "one true" one, was very liberating and very exciting. I remember from my own childhood, and I'm probably talking about the 1950s here, thinking that the Greek gods were very much more appealing than the Christian one. But it did not occur to me at that time that the Christianity I was being brought up in was in any sense a matter of choice: it was assumed to be "true". Today, most Pagans have deliberately chosen their particular path; and, as I said, the Pagans I know are not interested in belief: what matters is whether their particular practice works.

Neo-Paganism has thus far resisted developing institutionalised leadership structures, powerful
spokespeople, or anyone who can at all plausibly claim to speak for all Pagans or for Paganism, or indeed for all Wiccans or all Druids. There is an umbrella body, the Pagan Federation, but we do not have a mechanism for arriving at an official line on controversial issues. There is no official line: we each have to take responsibility for our individual conclusions or decisions.

In his book *The Fountain* one of Don's key issues is becoming reconciled with transience. Most neo-Paganism is quite good at this: we have the constant change which is at the heart of the Wheel of the Year as a focus for ritual and for personal development. Samhain (Halloween), for instance, is the end and beginning of the year: we focus on death -- our friends', family's, ancestors' and our own -- and on the descent into the underworld which precedes the rebirth of the new year and a new cycle. The ritual cycle of the year is explicitly also the physical and psychological life-cycle of the practitioner.

In his Introduction to *The Fountain* Don says "My chief problem during this past 40-odd years of very intensive thinking and writing has been that we humans now seem to be permanently stuck with a restlessly dissatisfied critical mentality that can never be content with anything for long. I have been experimenting furiously, looking for a new religious outlook in an age in which it is perhaps no longer possible for any of us ever to find a permanent spiritual home."

What Don sees as a problem, most Pagans would see as an enormous positive advantage as well as a liberation. For most of us, the very essence of our Paganism is this constant search, this perpetual quest, this never-ending path up, down or around the mountain. We prize critical thinking -- constructive dissatisfaction -- and are on the whole deeply suspicious of anyone who has nothing left to criticize or be dissatisfied with, or who, indeed, claims to inhabit a permanent home. Bruce Kent, in another context, wrote: "Peace is not the goal: peace is the way of life." The way of life, the spiritual home, in my universe, is the constant-but-always-changing companionship of other people who are on a similar journey, even if their path only runs alongside mine for a little while. The spiritual home is never a fixed point, more an occasional circle of temporary tents around a camp-fire.

Why do it? Because, if you're like me, you've tried a completely secular life (actually, if you take the word "secular" back to its roots, neo-Paganism is probably a secular religion, or at least one focused on immanence rather than transcendence), or if you've tried doing without a religion and concluded that you missed the mythology, or the story about meaning, or the means of expressing wonder, or the practice of ritual, or even just the dressing-up and the singing, but you still don't feel especially comfortable with other people's solutions, the obvious and natural course is to put together your own set of stories and practices. Nothing is ever completely new; any re-invented religion is probably pretty syncretic, which is a nice friendly word meaning cobbled together out of all sorts of bits and pieces from the rag-bag of one's memory of other religions, mortared together with one's imagination; but you'd be hard put to it to find any religion, ancient or modern, of which that is not also true, even if they disguise this, not least from themselves, by calling it "reinterpreting" or "returning to our roots" or "a revival" or "renewal" or even "reformation".

We are that part of the Universe which does the conscious experiencing. We can invent our own story to give a three-dimensional shape to the part we play in the network of elements which make up the world. My own path perceives the sacred in the everyday, and it is a system of psychological and spiritual self-development within which I seek to balance the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional faculties.

Finally, here is Doreen Valiente's *The Charge of the Goddess*:

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess;
she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven,
and whose body encircles the universe:

I who am the beauty of the green earth,
and the white moon among the stars,
and the mystery of the waters,
and the desire of the heart of man,
I call unto thy soul: Arise, and come unto me.
For I am the soul of nature,
who gives life to the universe.

From Me all things proceed,
and unto Me all things must return;
and before My face, beloved of gods and of men,
let thine innermost divine self
be enfolded in the rapture of the infinite.

Let My worship be within the heart that rejoices;
for behold, all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals.
And therefore let there be beauty and strength,
power and compassion,
honour and humility,
mirth and reverence within you.

And thou who thinkest to seek Me, know
that thy seeking and yearning shall avail thee not
unless thou knowest the Mystery:
that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee,
thou wilt never find it without.
For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning;
and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.