

In Defence of Heron's Beard

Katy Jennison explores contemporary Paganism.

This is really an article about the importance of both/and (as distinct from either/or), why it's particularly applicable to contemporary Western Paganism, why Paganism is particularly appealing to many people today, and why it dovetails with the principles underpinning SOF. But I will start with Heron's Beard. It is called after the humanistic and transpersonal psychologist John Heron, who introduced 'Heron's Beard' as the counterpart to Occam's Razor.

Occam's Razor, as everyone reading this will know, is the principle that the simplest explanation is generally the correct one. Thus, a particularly vivid dream in which, for instance, the dreamer encounters a divine being, or has a mystical experience, can be explained (or 'explained away') by the fact that the dreamer unwisely indulged in cheese-on-toast shortly before bedtime. Heron's Beard, by contrast, says that the experience may be *both* a cheese-on-toast phenomenon *and also* a genuine mystical experience. After all, if a mystical experience is to be delivered to a flesh-and-blood human, it can only take place within the human's nervous system, brain cells, and so on, and one of the easiest ways to act upon these is via the digestive system. And mystical experiences, like other sorts of magic, will always find the easiest way of manifesting themselves, which is why magicians must always remember to be very, very careful what they ask for.

Heron's Beard might, perhaps, be expanded to counter the exasperating phenomenon which must be familiar to all *Sofia* readers, the assumption that every follower of any sort of religion or spiritual path is an unthinking believer in the literal truth of all sorts of irrational, anti-scientific and dysfunctional doctrines and deities. Parts of the media foster this misleading simplification, presenting the wilder extremes of belief as if they were the norm. Inevitably this divides people into polarised, oppositional camps, and entrenches each side in its antagonism to the imagined other.

We so easily fall into this either/or, right/wrong, us/them trap that there must, surely, be some kind of evolutionary advantage in believing that 'we' are right and therefore 'they' must be wrong, even in the teeth of the evidence. Indeed, in a life-or-death situation survival may depend on being able to decide instantly whether a person or animal or piece of technology is

dangerous or not, OK or not-OK. That kind of certainty can be a life-saver, or at least a reassurance of security; however, we seem to have become addicted to it, and look for it even when it is impossible or downright counter-productive. Most real-life decisions are more nuanced: there may be no 'right' answer.

Nonetheless, the other great survival characteristic of humans is adaptability. We notice that the sea level is rising, or that the animals we hunted seem to be disappearing, so we move to new environments, and learn to build with different materials or to eat different foods. There is a 'checks and balances' feel to this: on the one hand, we're good at stability and security; on the other, we're good at creativity and change. It seems very likely that the two go together: a solid sense of security is at least an important condition, and perhaps an absolute prerequisite, for the ability to pursue and embrace new developments and ways of thinking.

A profound new development, in the past fifty years or so, is the extent to which we have become willing to abandon whatever religion we were brought up in, and deliberately to choose another, or none at all. We could construe this disparagingly as just another example of our consumerist, choice-driven economy. On the other hand, it might be an indication that we are, collectively, finally reaching a sort of spiritual adulthood, where we no longer take on trust everything that our parents or teachers taught us, and instead begin to think for ourselves.

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The current flowering of contemporary Paganism in the UK is part of this trend, which gathered momentum when the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951 allowed Gerald Gardner to publicise for the first time a version of witchcraft or Wicca. Interest in Wicca led to increased interest in a range of other Pagan spiritualities, including Druidry. (Anyone keen to understand the history of contemporary Paganism in the UK should read Ronald Hutton's scholarly

accounts of its development, see Bibliography.) These caught the public imagination for a number of reasons: two of these were the widespread disillusion with established authority, including the authority of institutionalised religion, following the Second World War; and the rejection of an exclusively male godhead and priesthood, prompted by the same dissatisfactions which inspired the Women's Movement in the 1970s. From the 1960s to the 1980s, from flower power to the New Age, for the post-war generations everything was up for grabs.

Initially, however, almost all the Pagan paths which came to public notice in the 1960s and 1970s presented themselves as the continuation of ancient traditions which had long been preserved in secret. (What is it about humans which predisposes us to give religions high marks for having been founded centuries or millennia ago, and no marks at all for having been invented last year or even last century?) Some people were happy with this, and for refugees from the perceived oppressions of male monotheism there was a particular attraction in the 'Great Goddess' archetype, and a sense that a female deity was a welcome restoration of balance.

As time went on, however, many of the freethinking, anti-authoritarian, counter-cultural people who were drawn to Pagan spiritualities found that they were equally disinclined towards the unquestioning acceptance of any Pagan authorities or leaders. With a few exceptions, most of the claims of ancient wisdom secretly passed down from antiquity were debunked. Various people, both here and in North America, began to devise their own spiritual paths, drawn from several sources: many included a cycle of eight seasonal festivals, and some principles and ritual practices from Wicca or Druidry, along with ceremonies from Starhawk or Aleister Crowley, celebrations of particular local festivals or sacred sites, and new practices which were peculiar to just one individual or group. Celtic, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian deities were invoked and their myths embraced. In another part of the forest, Northern European (Norse) Gods were on the ascendant; elsewhere, shamanism and shamanic practices attracted new followers. Some of these developments rapidly became 'traditions' in their own right ('after the third time, it's traditional') and some were meticulously reconstructionist. There continues to be an important place for groups with a lineage of several generations and an established set of practices, but as the field has

expanded, and particularly as the burgeoning of the internet has given people access to any number of different variations on the theme, it has become normal to explore widely before settling upon, or if necessary syncretising, a spiritual path with which one feels, simply, at home.

This sense of feeling at home in a particular spiritual system is crucial, because it is not predicated on the truth of one religion and the falsehood of all the others. I have a clear memory from my schooldays of thinking how much more attractive the Greek pantheon appeared than the Judaeo-Christian one, and regretting that (as I assumed) it was the Christian one that was 'true' and not the Greek one. Looking back, I had fallen into the trap of thinking of 'truth' as a synonym of 'fact'. An enormous obstruction to clear



Druids prepare to celebrate the autumn equinox on Primrose Hill in London.

thinking fell away when I understood 'religion' as a term for a system of integrating my life experience (including my experience of the transpersonal or the spiritual), rather than as a set of facts. As a child I remember my father telling me 'the mountain of Truth has many sides'. My choices were no longer between deciding that all religion was rubbish and, alternatively, deciding that one particular religion was the (only) true one and therefore disciplining myself to believe it as factual; instead, it becomes a matter of choosing, or creating, a path going in the direction I'm travelling. If others are on different paths, it's simply that they're going a different way up the mountain.

Notice that I have not mentioned 'belief' as a component of contemporary Paganism. Like all religions Paganism includes adherents of a variety of temperaments, and there are some Pagans who are temperamentally disposed to see their deities as real transcendent entities. Many more of us see them as human-generated archetypes, or as personifications of

immanent divinity, or as symbols, or as psychological constructs, or as a way of giving a human shape to a transformative spiritual experience, or, indeed, as all of the above. In all these cases, 'belief' is inappropriate. Karen Armstrong has pointed out that until relatively recently, and for most religions still today, the key components of religious faith were practice and commitment, not belief, and certainly not belief in its modern sense of willed acceptance of an implausible proposition. Yet this appears to be the only characteristic which people now expect of a religion. I remember seeing, not many years ago, a message from an enquirer to a Wiccan internet site, which read 'I'd like to become a Wiccan. What do I have to believe?' This seems distressingly typical of the popular perception of religion both here and in the US.

For most of the Pagans I know, Paganism works not as a belief system but more like a stick-and-ball molecular model: real molecules don't actually look like the model, but the model helps the researcher to visualise what might be going on within and between the molecules being studied. Similarly, our rituals and ceremonies invoke and manipulate symbols or representations of human characteristics. The purpose of our practice (or at any rate, the ideal) is continuous personal development, constant transformation, and ultimately planet-wide change. Importantly, this is a journey, not a destination: a means of enquiry, rather than a set of answers.

John Heron characterises the people on this sort of quest as 'co-creators ... of planetary transformation, manifest in terms of social justice and human rights, personal and interpersonal development, aesthetic creation and celebration, economic sustainability, ecological balance and cosmic attunement.' In other words, if you engage in a spiritual practice, expect it to change you, but not only that: expect it to change your priorities, expect it to change the way you engage with the rest of the world, and expect it to involve you in political or ecological or social action. (This can apply, of course, to any spiritual practice, not just a Pagan one.)

For Pagans, this means that the vehicle for personal transformation is not belief, nor indeed the harnessing of divine assistance through prayer or supplication, but the power of ritual practice and enacted myth and story to awaken the creative imagination. 'Myth' is another ambiguous concept: Karen Armstrong, again, makes it very clear that myths, properly construed, are not fictitious histories or childish tales, but expositions, in story form, of timeless psychological truths, and I am using the term in this sense. The author Margaret Atwood notes that 'we identify with and remember stories, learning more easily from them than we do from more abstract presentations'; whether

the events in the story ever happened in real life is irrelevant. The familiar good/bad duality is a common theme in drama and literature, our modern alternatives to myth: Jeanette Winterson, in a recent review, writes of 'the Jungian Shadow that we often deny but that must eventually be met and integrated for psychic wholeness, resolving the dualism of our natures'. Role-playing characters from a myth or a story, and taking roles in a shared ritual, are ways of awakening aspects of one's personality which may not normally, in everyday life, be recognised or exercised. And this can be *both* creative play-acting *and* a profound spiritual experience.

Of course we make it all up: how could it be otherwise? We all create the religion which works for us. Seasonal cycles can mirror the cycles of a human life; ritual tools can symbolise aspects of human personality; invoking a deity can manifest that deity in my own actions. How else, after all, could any deity, any divine immanence, be manifest in this living, breathing, loving, dying, painful and ecstatic material world? The danger of assuming that one's deity exists in some other dimension is that responsibility, praise and blame can be projected out towards that deity and away from ourselves. It may not be easy, instead, to grow up and to realise that we're on our own.

Katy Jennison has a first degree in English and a PhD in biophysics. She represents the Oxford Pagan Circle and the Oxford Council of Faiths.

References:

- For an introduction to the specific Pagan paths, see the BBC website, www.bbc.co.uk/religions/paganism and the website of the (UK) Pagan Federation, www.paganfed.org
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