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Paganism and the World Forum of Religions

ABSTRACT: Using the sociological tool known as the *ideal-type*, there is a distinction to be made for ancient, indigenous and contemporary paganisms vis-à-vis the more established world such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. While both the New Age movement and contemporary Western paganism may be understood through what Gerlach and Hine identified as the segmented-polycentric-integrated-network (SPIN), New Age may be increasingly understood as one more denomination under the rubric of paganism. In general, pagan religiosity is to be identified through its corpo-spirituality, veneration of nature, this-worldly focus, plural understanding of the divine, humanistic undercurrent and pursuits of enchantment and pleasure. Diverging from the characteristics of the pagan ideal-type as well as deep, generic and/or vernacular paganisms are both gnostic and secular forms of paganism. The multiplicity of religions, however, allows and encourages the internal dialogue of paganism with itself as the external conversation with the other religions of the world.

KEYWORDS: Paganism; Corpo-spirituality; Ideal-type; This-worldly emphasis; Global forum of religious dialogue; Epicureanism

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Introduction

In 1996, I was hired as a Research Fellow by the Study of Religions Department of the Bath College of Higher Education under Brian Bocking as head of the department. The institution is now known as Bath Spa University and is located in the Newton-St.-Loe suburb of the city of Bath in England. The campus is part of the Duchy of Cornwall and comes as a result under the jurisdiction of Prince Charles who, ecologically minded, allows the construction of no new buildings but only the re-building of already-existing ones on what is otherwise a relatively large-scale farm. But this tension between the University and the Prince is a different matter and not my current focus here.

What was refreshing for me was the title of our department in which the concluding 's' was always stressed. The study of religion has experienced a long and sometimes difficult emergence in at least British academia where it has been traditionally a part of theological studies – and by this is primarily meant Christian theology. The study of religion has struggled to become something independent and objective – as opposed to the study of faith from an insider's perspective of bias and as a believer. Brian, however, took this study of religion even further and, rather than focus on religion as some transcendental abstraction, stressed the approachable plurality of *all* religions in the hands-on realities of life on this planet. Along with Brian, Marion Bowman, Denise Cush and Catherine Robinson appeared to me to all be *children of Ninian Smart*. From my own sociology of religion background under Peter Clarke at King's College London as well as Eileen Barker at the London School of Economics across the Strand from King's, the phenomenology of religion often seemed to be *messy sociology*. But that being said, we all shared – and continue to share – an essential social science approach to the study of religion and religions.

What I most appreciated about Brian in Bath was his intelligence and wonderful sense of humour as well as his courage and daring to be innovative and to contend against ossified administration and inflexible authority. What I most appreciated about the Study of Religions Department that Brian had developed was its emphasis on the plurality of religion. Although my research scholarship did not require me to teach, that was something I wanted to do. So when I approached Brian about the possibility of teaching a module on Sacred Geography, he sent me to the Geography Department to inquire if this would be a possibility since the proposed module included the identifier of 'Geography'. I think the Geographers were so astonished by my proposal that they gave me their permission. In time, John Robb, Principle Lecturer in Geography, gave several fascinating lectures to the class on Stonehenge and other Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments in Wessex – acknowledging that the 'ritual landscape' concept has had a checkered career in the academy due to the

diffidence that archaeologists have in interpreting human motivation and spiritual meaning from the like of potsherds ‘outside of TV series’. Dr. Robb hoped that the spiritual associations that sites maintained and/or re-suggested would come to confirm the respectability of the concept.

The dynamics between the material and ideational especially when approached as part of material cultural studies brings a focus upon the emerging area of contemporary paganism. New Age and pagan studies have been my personal academic interest, and these were able to find a home within the broad scope in understanding religions and their diversity that Brian Bocking had conceived for the university in Bath’s Newton-St-Loe. It did not follow that automatically that Brian and I were always in agreement. For Brian and Michael Pye, Shinto in Japan was only artificially created out of Buddhism with the Meiji decree of *shinbutsu bunri* or dissociation of Shinto and Buddhism in 1868.¹ My counter argument contends that a nature- or earthen pagan spirituality understood in Japan eventually as both *minkan shinkō* or ‘folk religion’ and *shintō* or *kami-no-michi* ‘way of the gods’ certainly preceded the import of Buddhism from China even if the designation ‘Shinto’ did not readily appear until the *shinbutsu bunri*. Instead, from the second half of the sixth century CE, the Chinese term referring to the *dao* of the *shén* or ‘spirits’ (Japanese *shin* or *kami*), namely, Shindo, comes to designate indigenous local worship. In a related issue, Mikirou Zitukawa argues that

Apart from whether the concept of transcendence is a mark of progress in religion, or of regression, or simply a type of specification, it cannot be considered to be a basic explanatory framework any more than the ‘sacred-secular’ principle itself. Instead, the concept of ... everyday life, the ordinary and mundane, and its mutual conversion possibilities with [the sacred-like as special] and [the existential condition that emerges from the special] allow the likelihood of the physical itself to be sacred – a cardinal feature of pagan earth-centered religiosity.²

Zitukawa’s point is that the Western concept of religion has been formulated with the notion of transcendence as necessary for any religion to be a religion, and it therefore misses much of what may be interpreted as religion in other parts of the world. Japanese Shinto is one example of a non-transcendental spirituality that is often not recognised as religion in itself. This may explain, at least in part, an inability to understand pre-Meiji Shinto as bona fide. When, however, the theological distinction between earthen religion and its understanding of divine immanence vis-à-vis non-pagan religion with its exclusive notion of the divine as transcendent is not kept in mind, the vernacular independence of Shinto to

¹ Cf. York (1999, 136f, 139, 146n28).

² Zitukawa (2007, 96).

Japanese indigeneity – not in fact as dependent on Buddhism but rather in intrinsic opposition to it, is easier to miss.

While often contentious and perhaps not in strict conformity to Brian Bocking's stress on the plurality of religions, I have tended to resort to the sociological tool first formulated by Max Weber and known as the 'ideal type'. This is not a classification, although there is a propensity for it to be still used as such. Nor is the construct a statistical average.

The ideal type involves an accentuation of typical courses of conduct. ... [Moreover, an] ideal type never corresponds to concrete reality but always moves at least one step away from it. It is constructed out of certain elements of reality and forms a logically precise and coherent whole, which can never be found as such in that reality.³

Or, as Julien Freund understands, 'Being unreal, the ideal type has the merit of offering us a conceptual device with which we can measure real development and clarify the most important elements of empirical reality.'⁴ In sociology and specifically the sociology of religion, the ideal-type is used as a measuring standard for approaching any given religion against a particular ideal in order to focus more clearly on the divergences between the religion from an empirical as well as analytical perspective and the ideal to which it most readily approximates. Sociology's task is inevitably the attempt to explain why and how the empirical and ideal diverge.

Consequently, in the study of religion and religions, I have approached the subject by employing *four* ideal-types, namely, the Abrahamic, the Dharmic, the Pagan and the Secular.⁵ While theology is often nowadays frowned upon in more 'liberated' approaches to religious studies, it is nevertheless still important in discerning the ideal possibilities when it comes to positing and identifying the relationships between the world, humanity and the imaginal/supernatural in terms of meaning assignment, value allocation and validation enactment (York 1995a, 197). While the Dharmic religions tend either to dismiss or devalue the world, such secular formulations as Humanism, Materialism, Marxism, atheism and even agnosticism exalt the world in one manner or another but eschew the magical or preternatural as having any reality – empirical or otherwise. But the point here is that each orientation (whether Hinduism, Buddhism or secular pantheism, etc.) takes *some* position on

³ Angus Bancroft, Sioned Rogers & Pierre Stapley from Coser (1977, 223f): <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/undergraduate/introsoc/weber7.html> (accessed 20 October 2015).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ E.g., Herzogenrath (2001, 287). See further York (2004, 13f).

the validity or reality of one of the three basic worldview components – whether ‘mankind/womankind’, nature or a transcendent.

The Abrahamic ideal-type obviously embraces the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Pagan spiritualities are perhaps, at least more initially, more nebulous and controversial, and identifying the various paganisms and their particular features and practices has been my own academic focus which the Bocking Study of Religions not only allowed but encouraged. So I wish to devote the rest of this contribution toward some of my own findings and analyses of pagan religiosity in the past and present as well as within the indigenous context and the contemporary West. But first one important caveat concerning the ideal-type and any specific religious particularity. This is the point already made by Bancroft, Rogers and Stapley that the ideal type of religion is logically constructed from empirical elements but cannot be found as such within reality.⁶ Consequently, any given religion will consist of some blending or mixing of various elements that can be identified from at least two if not more of the four ideal-types (Berger 2005, 90, 94). While this ‘blurring’ between the ideals is to be found in all religions, it is something that is perhaps more clearly perceivable throughout the range of pagan identities.

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In *Pagan Theology* (2003), I defined paganism as ‘an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by the individual or community with the tangible, sentient and/or nonempirical.’⁷ Since many pagans consider themselves to be atheists, I felt the ‘and/or’ conjunction to be important. Its inclusivity also allows people who call themselves ‘pagan’ but pursue a more gnostic understanding of spiritual aspiration to be understood within this broad rubric. But closer to what I will argue is the pagan ‘ideal-type’ would be the same definition listed above but with the conjunction reduced to a simple ‘and’. For purposes of differentiation, I sometimes refer to this more restricted form of paganism as ‘deep paganism’, ‘pagan paganism’ or ‘generic paganism’ and distinguish it from ‘gnostic paganism’, ‘secular or atheistic paganism’ or ‘nominal paganism’.⁸ Admittedly, within pagan circles, this alone is controversial, but I am arguing here from an etic perspective. Though as one who is sympathetic to and can identify in the emic sense with pagan spirituality, my work is primarily an academic endeavour, and the outsider perspective is more commensurate to objectivity. And although paganism is increasingly a legitimate area open to educational research – thanks to

⁶ See further York (2003, 159).

⁷ York (2003, 157). Cf. York (2004, 14f).

⁸ Ibid. pp161f.

the efforts of institutional incorporation along the lines of Brian Bocking's phenomenological approach as well as the openness of such venues as the Association for the Sociology of Religion, the Society for Scientific Study of Religion and, more recently, the American Academy of Religion – among many pagans the academic is vehemently and vociferously rejected.

Before delving further into the characteristics or elements of what can be attributed to a pagan identity, I would like to clarify my preference for the lower-case words of 'pagan' and 'paganism' instead of the upper-case 'Pagan' and 'Paganism'. This again is a further controversial subject. The upper-case preference for many stems from a desire to secure Paganism's legitimacy as a bona fide religion along with such others as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. This, however, is a legal matter, and while it holds my sympathy, my own efforts are different (York 2016, 7). These last are focused on the undercurrent that might be designated generic or vernacular spirituality in contrast to any specific sectarian identity let alone legal entity. Moreover, as Andras Corban-Arthen points out, in Europe and Latin America there is a predominant tendency *not* to capitalise month names and the names of the days of the week let alone the religions themselves.⁹ It is consequently primarily alone with Americans that the 'Big P-' versus the 'small p-' distinction becomes an issue.

Paganism as a newer religious movement of our day conforms more to the SPIN type of organisation as designated by anthropologists Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine.¹⁰ Paganism is segmented, polycentric, integrated and a network. In this sense, it differs radically from the more renowned post-1960 new religious movements (NRMs) such as the Children of God (now The Family), the Church Universal and Triumphant, the Unification Church (Moonies), Scientology, ISKCON (Hari Krishnas), *est* (Erhard Seminars Training; now Landmark), the Church of Synanon, Transcendental Meditation, Divine Light Mission (later Elan Vital, now Prem Rawat Foundation), Ananda Marga and Rajneeshees/Neo-Sannyasins (now Osho Multiversity). Virtually all the more controversial NRMs had charismatic leaders or founders and were often accused of employing brainwashing techniques and mind control. Some have since disbanded; others have been significantly reformulated. In the church-sect-denomination-cult typology used for sociological purposes, most of these could be classified as sects with tight boundaries and the provision for heretical expulsion.

By contrast, the SPIN-type of social structural organisation is acephalous/polycephalous/polycentric with a perpetually shifting rostrum of key figures and spokespersons. Gerlach and Hine perceived the reticulate nature of the SPIN as a means of group survival in a hostile

⁹ Ibid. See also Whitehead (2013, 13).

¹⁰ E.g., Gerlach and Hine (1970).

social environment and discerned its operation originally among such developments as the Black Panthers and Palestinian guerillas. The segmented structure allows for duplication and survival even with the destruction of individual cells. Both the contemporary New Age and neo-pagan movements assume a similar decentralised mode of operation – especially vis-à-vis an unsympathetic mainstream bias that is, or at least is perceived to be, opposed to religious innovation (York 1995b, 324-6).

My earlier consideration of both New Age and neo-paganism viewed the two movements as essentially rivaling spiritual orientations – the former transcendental; the latter immanentist. In the 1980s and 1990s, pagans often employed New Age terminology (e.g., Mike Howard, Vivianne Crowley, etc.). In time, however, a growing distance between the two became more prominent, and Crowley, for instance, renamed her original *Wicca, the Old Religion in the New Age* to *Wicca, the Old Religion in the New Millennium* – reflecting the kind of shift that was to be found across the contemporary pagan world. However, when I was preparing in 2003 to give a keynote address to the ASANAS conference in Milton Keynes on ‘Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies’ (my talk was titled ‘Wanting to have your New Age cake and eat it too’), I came to the conclusion that New Age could be considered one more of the many denominations that fall under the Pagan/Neo-pagan rubric.

It is clear, of course, that the New Age orientation in general does not conform to the pagan ideal-type I have referred to above, but contemporary Western paganism includes several gnostic forms of spirituality from Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Cabbala, theosophy, panentheism and even Wicca in its derivation from theurgic magic and Freemasonry. The underlying gist of the *soma-sema* or ‘body is a tomb’ notion with its concomitant transcendental aspiration to devalue and escape from the physical infuses the base of New Age thinking. Paganism represents a contrast. Whether contemporary paganisms, Nature Spirituality, Neo-paganism, Paganism, sectarian forms of paganism, generic paganism and even Technopaganism, each alike draws upon ancient and largely repressed or marginalised practices to resurrect and reestablish the sacred as immanent, tangible, feminine and/or pluralistic.

While there is ‘no complete list of characteristics that can identify any specific practice as pagan’ (York 2003, 65), the best that then becomes possible is to delineate the salient features that ‘we are *most apt* to discern or that most (though not necessarily *all*) of which will be [found to be] present within any broadly pagan identifiable spirituality’ (Lewis and Pizza 2008, 292). Most briefly, these particular highlights may be given as follows: corpo-spirituality; appreciation of nature; this-worldly focus; an understanding of enchantment; plurality of the divine; humanistic grounding; experience of enjoyment. There are three elements that come

to stand out among the practices constituting animism, pantheism, polytheism, immanentism, humanism, nature worship, numinousness, magic, organicism, fetishism and idolatry, namely, 'a this-worldly attitude or preference, ... a recognition of divinity in, or as, matter, whatever else it may be,' (York 2003, 65) and 'nature religion - one that either honours nature as the supreme embodiment of godhead or divinity or draws its deities essentially as personifications of different aspects and features of nature or both' (Lewis & Pizza 2008, 292).

The recognition of corporeal divinity I have come to refer to as *corpo-spirituality*.¹¹ Differing radically from transcendental formulations that comprehend the divine as purely ethereal and *ganz andere*, pagan spiritualities tend to accept the 'embodiment of an idea, or *idolon*, in tangible form, the incorporation of the holy in the corporeal, the worship of a physical object as a representation of the divine or the locus for an indwelling spirit or the sacred itself made manifest' (York 2003, 63). Pagan belief and practice is accordingly fetishistic. Whilst, thanks to the iconoclastic bias of Western culture, relatively few pagans in the West objectively reify the sacred in objects, idols or specific fetishes, what is done instead is to divinise the whole of nature into the sanctified idol. This becomes the veneration of nature that virtually all pagans will endorse and incorporate into their lives in one manner or another.

Much of the current appeal of paganism in the West is likely to rise from the growing awareness of the ecological fragility of our planet thanks to industrial and nuclear pollution, overpopulation, global warming and radical climate change. A decided environmental consciousness has come to identify itself as pagan and often with an eschewing of the theistic and supernatural.¹² These more atheistic and secular pantheistic positions appear to be becoming increasingly predominant but do not constitute what we may surmise as the whole of the picture. They do, however, represent an important theme within the pagan tradition that can be traced at least to ancient Greece and which has operated as a radical but seminally influential undercurrent in Western culture. These are to be found in the legacies of Epicurus, Bruno, Spinoza *et al.*, and they relate to three of the remaining features of the pagan ideal-type.

Paganism's *corpo-spirituality*, appreciation of nature and this-worldly emphasis are intimately interrelated. While an interest in the next or at least other world certainly exists, as a rule pagan spirituality is focused on the present life on planet earth. What becomes of us after death is a secondary interest at best. Epicurus argued that the human has nothing to fear in death. It is for us an oblivion and beyond any consciousness of pain. The only thing that matters to the individual is the here-and-now of living, and our chief concern is the avoidance of pain or

¹¹ Ibid. pp 296f.

¹² E.g., Taylor (2010).

discomfort and the enjoyment of reasonable pleasures. It is this hedonic aspect of life that virtually all of contemporary paganism appears to endorse. And while Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, he argued that with their perfect existence they would have no interest in or involvement with us mortals. Consequently, the school of Epicurean philosophy that developed from his teachings is recognisably humanistic, and this same understanding that focuses on human needs and values over supernatural ones operates patently throughout contemporary Western paganism.

It is of course through Carus Titus Lucretius (c. 99-55 BCE) and his poem *De rerum natura* that we know virtually all we know about Epicurus.

The rejection of the common conception of immortality is ... a marquee feature of the Epicurean philosophy from its inception. Nothing composed of parts can last forever, says Lucretius, and the human being is certainly composed of parts. ... In hopes of quieting our needless and harmful anxieties about death, Epicurus teaches, 'Death is nothing to us' (Stallings 2007, 3.830).

When we cower before the prospect of our own death, according to Epicurus, we surreptitiously imagine that we are still alive to witness it. But in fact, when we die, we die, and we are no longer around to experience death (Stewart 2014, 240).

Stewart summarises the popular understanding of Epicurus' teachings:

Happiness in this life ... is everything. The highest form of happiness is freedom from pain in the body and tranquility of mind. The surest path to happiness is a life of ordinary virtue. ... The worst of our misunderstandings involve the fear of inscrutable deities and the fear of death. [In contrast to religion which exploits these fears], Science - by which is meant the quiet pursuit of the understanding that brings happiness - is the only form of piety worth the name (Stewart 2014, 87).

From the perspective of the common and established religious consciousness as well as the defenders of orthodoxy, this is a radical and subversive assertion and by necessity must be suppressed. In a word, Lucretius traces to Epicurus the fundamental proposition that 'nothing is ever produced supernaturally out of nothing' (Stallings 2007, 1.150). As expressive of a heterodox philosophy, Epicurus and Lucretius violate and deny the *creation ex nihilo* dogma.

Lucretius' poem of over 7000 lines has been considered as the embodiment of the foundation philosophy for modern society.¹³ As Stewart puts it:

The revival of the Epicurean philosophy that followed upon the rediscovery of Lucretius in early modern Europe was the decisive episode in the history of modern thought. It was more important than what we now call the scientific revolution, which was really its consequence rather than its cause (Stewart 2014, 80).

Stephan Greenblatt tells the story of the Renaissance book-hunter Poggio Bracciolini and how, in 1417, he discovered the one surviving manuscript containing Lucretius' poem *On the Nature of Things*. In the preceding centuries before this fortuitous event, 'a hatred of pleasure-seeking and a vision of God's providential rage ... [had been] the death knells of Epicureanism... In one of the great cultural transformations in the history of the West, the pursuit of pain triumphed over the pursuit of pleasure' (Greenblatt 2011, 103). One of the first victims to the modern rediscovery of the philosophy of Epicurus is Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) who carried with him a copy of Lucretius' poem. He argued for a pantheistic understanding and denied such Catholic doctrines as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. One of his disciples, Lucilio Vanini (1585-1619), like Bruno, was burned at the stake. His other pupil, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), came close to suffering the same fate.

This Epicurean free-thinking intellectual tradition survived through such philosophers as Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655), Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), René Descartes (1596-1650), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), John Locke (1632-1704), Montesquieu (1689-1755), Voltaire (1694-1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744), and the American Founding Fathers Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), James Madison (1751-1836), George Washington (1732-1799) etc. While the American framers and revolutionaries were highly suspected by the religious conservatives, the success of the Republic and the constitutional document they had assembled enforced their redrafting from being impious atheistic pantheists into Christian deists. But when a group of clerics approached President Washington toward the end of his tenure to have him declare his faith in Jesus Christ, Jefferson recorded in his diary, "the old fox was too cunning for them" and simply skipped over the offending question without so much as a nod' (Stewart 2014, 36).

From the perspective of radical philosophy, the 'one form of self-deception that stands above the rest as the model and source of all the

¹³ <https://probaway.wordpress.com/2013/04/16/the-nature-of-things-by-lucretius-translated-by-stallings-book-review/> (accessed 23 October 2015).

others ... is religion in all its popular forms' (Stewart 2014, 377). Whilst the non-secular forms of contemporary paganism may be surmised by the available data to be more popular than their secular/atheistic counterparts, paganism as a whole is still not a popular form of religion vis-à-vis those mainstream religions which are. In many respects, the predominant expressions of contemporary Western paganism may be assessed as following in the wake of the radical tradition of Epicureanism. And while 'Plato and Aristotle [were] pagans who believed in the immortality of the soul [and] could ultimately be accommodated by a triumphant Christianity; Epicureanism could not' - especially with its 'credo of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain' (Greenblatt 2011, 98 & 107).

Consequently, along with their endorsement of pleasure, contemporary paganisms' corpo-spirituality, appreciation of nature, this-worldly focus and humanistic grounding identify these spiritualities at least broadly with the Epicurean radicalism delineated by Stewart and Greenblatt as a subversive non-Christian line of thought that has inspired Western modernism. That the universe is infinite and without beginning, end or defining border - or as Robert Corrington phrases it, there is 'nothing whatsoever outside of nature. The sacred is in and of nature and cannot outstrip nature' (1997, 10) - accounts for the emerging notion of modernity with which modern-day paganism as a rule identifies. This is Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* 'God is nature' assertion. The Epicurean 'doctrine of the infinite universe and the anti-theology that came with it ... reduced the very idea of a biblical religion to a farce' (Stewart 2014, 117). Hence what is often identified as - and often is - atheism. In the very least, it counters 'the otherworldly spiritualism of Paul' (Stewart 2014, 128).

In the divide between God as the ultimate (the established religious consciousness) and nature as the ultimate (the radical and Epicurean/Spinoza/pantheistic assertion), deep and generic paganisms side with the latter. For Bruno, 'Nature is none other than God in things' (Bruno 2004, 235). Or as Hobbes expresses this as a form of materialism:

The world (... the universe, that is the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal, that is to say, body; and hath the dimensions of magnitude ...: also every part of the body is likewise body, and hath the like dimensions; and consequently every part of the universe is body, and that which is not body is no part of the universe: and because the universe is all that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere (Hobbes 1651, 420).

If this corporeal worldview constitutes an all-embracing naturalism, which for paganism is certainly does, it also allows and encourages a humanism in the sense of celebrating humanity as an important if not central concern - emphasizing self-reliance over the intervention of an external divine

agency. Whether to be considered pantheists, atheists or freethinkers, the counter-mainstream current, to which ancient, indigenous and contemporary pagans largely belong, is also humanist in stressing the value of the human being and seeking problem-solving through rationalistic discernment and application.

Where, however, paganism may be distinguished for the most part from more secular and atheistic orientations is with the remaining features that delineate the fundamental pagan ideal-type. These are its understanding of a plurality of the gods or the divine and its celebration of enchantment. In actuality, Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, but he thought 'that if the concept of divinity made any sense at all, the gods could not possibly be concerned with anything but their own pleasures' (Greenblatt 2011, 98; York 2016, 65n3). It is precisely on this point that perhaps the majority of contemporary pagans would disagree.

There are countless different understandings of the gods and goddesses among all pagans. True enough, pantheists may tend to dismiss the gods as fictional, though other pagans will hold to the deities as living, corporeal beings. For others, they are chiefly psychological archetypes. For others still, they are understood as imaginal or co-natural metaphors. Perhaps in general, the gods are considered in various ways to be aspects of nature or natural processes, and they are also understood as cultural and ethnic legacies and/or values. Wiccans incline strongly to reduce the plurality of possible deities to the Goddess and the God. If pantheism is conceived by many to strip the supernatural from reality as an erroneous figment of the imagination, pantheism is a term that is also applied to the solely transcendental real in a dharmic religion such as Hinduism, but furthermore it is also understood as the informing possibility for polytheism. But in whatever manner the individual pagan conceives of her or his deities, they may be described in general as pluralistic and gender differentiated (Lewis and Pizza 2008, 294f).

The 'pagan gods as a rule are not vindictive or demanding. If ignored, they are believed simply to ignore the ignorer in return' (York 2016, 29; see further p. 50). But a pagan conviction and practice is to engage with deity through ritual, contemplation, appreciation of nature, exemplary behaviour and apothotic trance. In other words,

To inspire god-like lives in this world need not be predicated on a postulated total aloofness of the gods or the non-penetration of the divine otherworld with the life we know here on earth. Most traditional and contemporary pagans endeavour in some manner or another to interact with the gods through worship and divine intervention (York 2016, 74; 226; 228; 233n *et passim*).

On this feature, indigenous pagans and probably the majority of contemporary Western pagans diverge from Epicurean teachings. In the West, pagan hedonism considers that to enjoy life is to honour the gods.

However, along with the deific as embodiments of pleasure and to be honoured through pleasure, the corporeal or quasi-corporeal possibility of the gods and goddesses relates further to a pagan understanding of the magical. What I have specifically in mind here is the sacredness of place and – by extension – a revered object. Robert Corrington refers to the kind of aura encountered at Stonehenge or Delphi as comprising semiotic plenitude (Corrington 1997, 66f). The mysterious and numinous presence of a shrine, grove or idol ‘is always filled with awe and a kind of ontological shock’ (Corrington 1997, 195). ‘Whether his full intention or not, Corrington helps to open a new, post-Christian and, in this case, pagan way to understand religion and formulate an earth-centred, nature-centred theology’ (Lewis and Pizza 2008, 303). And as Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry states in his article, ‘Could paganism make a comeback? It’s not as crazy as it sounds’, ‘As seen in the ancient Greek, Celtic, and Norse traditions, the pagan idea most alien to the modern worldview is probably the belief that the entire cosmos is animated by agencies.¹⁴ But this very de-animation of the world by modernity explains most likely how contemporary paganism has emerged in our times as an antidote to what Max Weber described as the ‘disenchantment of the world’.¹⁵

Weber understood *Entzauberung* as the result of the bureaucracy and increasing utilitarian emphasis of contemporary society, and this translates into a mechanized world predominantly devoid of any sense of the magical. With the original advent of Christianity, the formerly animistic world of pagandom was reduced. Then with the Protestant Reformation and the break from Catholicism, a further stage of disenchantment occurred for the West. Finally, with the Age of Enlightenment and the subsequent shared *lingua franca* dominance of rational and scientific thought, the modern world was increasingly declared to be ‘emancipated’ from miraculous agency. But if paganism is perceived as offering a preternatural solace between the barrenness of the disenchanted world of science, on the one hand, and the questionable enchantment and even disenchantment of religions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism that seek ‘to undermine the very idea of the sovereign, unified self’ (Wood 2011, 88), on the other, then we might be able to understand the need and role for a re-found pagan sensitivity in our spiritually kenotic times. *À la* Weber, there is an increasing hunger for enchantment, let alone a social and personal need for it, and, consequently, the pagan rebirth of our times might constitute a natural

¹⁴ <http://theweek.com/articles/584634/could-paganism-make-comeback-not-crazy-sounds> (accessed 25 October 2015).

¹⁵ E.g., Weber (1930) & (1948).

consequence and commensurate vehicle for a viable understanding of meaningful re-engagement with a dynamic and animistic world. But this reconnection to a pre-Christian understanding is not anti-science but more the attempt to fill an emerging void within secular orientation. As John Gray has argued on Radio Four in Britain, 'Religion is ... not fundamentally different from science, both seem like attempts to frame true beliefs about the world.'¹⁶ For paganism in particular, there appears to be no inherent conflict with science to begin with, but, as a re-emerging spirituality in the 20th and 21st centuries, it counters James Frazer's evolutionist theory that argued for civilisation as an unmitigated progress from a primitive magical understanding to a religious one and finally to the age of science.

If not, by far, the whole of contemporary pagan practice and formulation, Amy Whitehead's explanation of the veneration of the Virgin of Alcala in Spain as well as of the Goddess of Glastonbury in England captures the essential fetishism inherent in corpo-spirituality. She is interested in the 'gender-specific anthropomorphized animacy' of revered statues and idols and understands this 'by engaging animism and fetishism as critical terms' (2013, 9; see further 130). Ingold refers to this as the animic ontology of place and object (Ingold cited in Whitehead 2013, 116). Whitehead's material culture studies amply illustrate the notions of embodiment, the numinous, the 'spirit of matter' and the talismanic to be encountered in vernacular and pagan religiousity. She again refers to Ingold who discerns the view contrary to Edward Tylor's animism that conceives of spirit as originally externally alien to the object or thing it inhabits, namely, 'that things are in life rather than that life is in things' (Ingold 2011, 29). In this line of perception, Whitehead finds that 'fetishist relationality deals with that side of relationality where power is inherent in the objects engaged' (2013, 8; see further 101; 120f; 174 and, on Tylor, 118).

For Whitehead, religious objects 'with their transformative abilities, combined with their mysterious and otherworldly value, push materiality to its limits' (2013, 6). It is exactly here that paganism transgresses into understandings of corpo-spirituality. In sensing that physical objects can be intrinsically imbued with power, pagan spirituality comprehends the material as capable of containing mystical or mysterious properties. For Jess Byron Hollenback, in his exploration of mysticism, there is an intermediate realm between the sensate world of corporality and the completely immaterial world of angelic beings which is 'a spiritual world of subtle bodies, of infinitely plastic quasi-material matter, and of empowered thoughts, desires, and imaginings' (1996, 258).

¹⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-14944470> (16 September 2011; accessed 26 October 2015).

In pagan mysticism, this imaginal world flourishes between the physical and the abstract as the place for pagan deities and animistic spirits to communicate with the human. Neal Robinson (1998) identifies this dimension to be where spirits are corporealized and bodies are spiritualized. Hollenback describes the intermediate/liminal world with the assertion that 'this realm not only functions as the place where human desires and imaginings objectify themselves but it also serves as the place where the purely immaterial angelic Intelligences ... manifest themselves to visionaries and take on form to communicate with them' (1996, 259). The importance of this view for paganism is paramount, and it allows a conceptual meeting zone by which gnostic pagans and telluric pagans could mediate and possibly find a mutual accord of some sort. It is a presentation of a border consisting of ontological symbols and metaphors, a dimension in its own right, but one between that of empirical and corporeal reality, on the one hand, and the purely abstract jurisdiction of number and Platonic Ideas, on the other.

So between the absolute ultimate and the sensate corporeal, in a pagan consciousness, the geographic realm of the visionary is to be found. When David Abram asserts that the inherent reciprocity between physical objects or entities, such that to be touched by the one is automatically to touch the toucher in return, and draws from this physical reciprocity that a wholly immaterial mind or realm of abstract being is one that would be unable to touch, feel or do anything at all (1996, 68), he opens up – whether intentionally or inadvertently – the liminal intermediate between the two as a co-natural area through which both inanimate and animate matter become alive and the transcendental can become embodied. In her material culture studies, Whitehead is saying something similar when she argues that 'relationality is animist in both theory and encounter. ... In other words, ontologies emerge in moments of active, relational engagement' (2013, 100) ... 'fetishism ... as a sub-species of animism ... pushes animist relationality to its limits (2013, 120). This is paganism's corpo-spirituality that

Allows for perception of the divine in nature, for idolatry, for appreciation of the sacredness of place, for contact with the divine through both local geodynamics and pilgrimage to revered holy centres, and for multiplicity of manifestation. ... It is this sacredness of the corporeal and the supernatural essence associated with it that is characteristic of the full range of pagan differentiation from the use of charms and rudimentary expressions of fetishism to more elaborate forms of ceremonial idolatry (York 2003, 13; 51f).

In the conversation between the differing positions of the world's religions, paganism's this-worldly but hybridic understanding of the

physical and the divine has until recently been missing and absent. My deep thanks will remain to Brian Bocking and his championship of religious multiplicity for re-opening the forum of dialogue in our times to a fuller and more inclusive collection of participants.

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