



## It's the Buddhist in you, and the Pagan in me

"Human beings are flawed individuals: the cosmic bakers took us out of the oven a little too early, and that's the reason we're as crazy as we are."

— Jimmy Buffet, Fruitcakes

This issue is all about identity, a word with two opposing definitions: a) the set of characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group, and b) the distinct personality of an individual.<sup>1</sup> The bipolar nature of identity comes from the way in which we construct our self-image: we want to be part of a group of similar people, but we also want to distinguish ourselves from the other members. It's one of the more perplexing paradoxes of the human condition.

Like our cousins, the chimpanzees and bonobos, we humans are social animals with a highly developed sense of discrimination between "our people" and everyone else. The ability to identify facial characteristics is apparently intrinsic in humans; recent research has shown that children only three months old can distinguish (and prefer) the faces of people from their own race. (They also strongly prefer voices speaking their native language.)<sup>2</sup>

Finding our group is only half the battle, however; for as soon as we become part of a group we try to find our place in its pattern of relationships, including our connection to its criteria for membership. In short, we are always jostling for position, inventing and reinventing ways to satisfy our conflicting needs for socialization and individuation.

This process applies to religion, too; there's pretty much nothing we won't try in our search for group identification and personal meaning. From the splendid smorgasbord of extant religion traditions, here's just a few of the more colorful ideas I stumbled across recently:

Rastafarians believe in the sacrality of marijuana and venerate Haile Selassie I, the former Emperor of Ethiopia, as a member of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup> Followers of a sect of Jainism — an ascetic tradition which takes the principle of *ahimsa* ("do no harm") to its logical conclusion — go skyclad their entire lives.<sup>4</sup> Mormons baptize the dead and wear sacred lingerie.<sup>5</sup> Traditional Christians participate in symbolic cannibalism (which the ancient Romans mistook for the real thing).<sup>6</sup> Orthodox Jewish women undergo a ritual bath in a rain-filled cistern before they can resume sexual relations after their menstrual periods.<sup>7</sup> A Buddhist Temple in Thailand offers "instant rebirth."<sup>8</sup> The list could go on and on.

A visitor from another world would likely find our plethora of gods mystifying. After all, we are just one species, so why do we have so many gods? I believe that the answer is that religions are a superb method of cultural differentiation — through them, we can sort ourselves not only by the shape of our eyes or the accents of our speech, but by our relationship to the divine. Unfortunately, in addition to creating a dizzying kaleidoscope of sacred art, literature, architecture, and music, this penchant for diversification also provides the perfect environment for that other iconic hominid pastime: waging war. There's nothing quite like a disagreement over fundamental meaning to provide justification for the ultimate case of "us-versus-them-ism," as a result, over two-dozen major conflicts in the world today have inter-religious strife as one of their primary contributing factors.<sup>9</sup>

But what does this all have to do with Paganism? Actually, quite a bit; for the proclivity to sort ourselves into "in" and "out" groups is alive and well in Paganism today. Here's a few of the more popular faultlines:

- eclectics vs. traditionalists;
  - newbies vs. old hands;
  - "frighten the horses Goths" vs. "corporate broom closet Witches";
  - Dianics vs. gender conservatives;
  - activists vs. apolitical Pagans,
- and, of course, a big favorite,
- "Fluffy bunnies" vs. "Darksiders."

And so forth. But there's a few people that most everyone in Pagandom has seemingly agreed to consider anathema: Satanists, prisoners and, most of all, Christo-Pagans.

First of all, Satan worshippers: there's been much written about the theological relationship (or lack thereof) between Satanism and Paganism. Consensus seems to coalesce around Isaac Bonewits' argument that Satanism is a fundamentalist Christian heresy whose patriarchal beliefs are inimical to Goddess worship.<sup>10</sup> This argument holds water if one sees Christianity and Paganism as mutually exclusive (and we'll get to that shortly) but is strikingly different from the popular notion that "all roads lead to the top of the mountain." In theory, we Pagans uphold the right of individuals to self-identify as a member of our tribe. In practice, we vote Satanists off the island; this placates mainstream society (whose icons Satanists are so eager to blaspheme) while simultaneously reinforcing our otherwise porous group boundaries. It's a neat trick, but is it theologically honest? Let me know what you think.

While the question of Satanists in our fold is sociologically interesting, it is relatively low-impact. However, the explosion in the number of Pagan believers among another outsider population — the incarcerated — is anything but. I've seen a huge upwelling in interest from Pagan inmates recently; and from the amount of effort they expend trying to receive our magazines, I judge that much of their the interest is genuine. Beyond the topic of outreach to the incarcerated is the more far-reaching question: how do we integrate offenders into our communities upon their release?

This is no trivial matter; over 600,000 felons are released every year in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> and if recent census

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estimates are accurate, we can expect roughly four thousand of them to be Pagan.<sup>12</sup> Are we ready for forty-thousand previously-incarcerated Pagans to join our circles, covens and communities during the next decade?

Much of the problem is theological, since most, if not all, Pagan paths lack satisfactory answers to issues of personal guilt and reconciliation. I believe that if we are to have a future as communities of faith, it's vital for us to develop tools for redemption (in the sense of "returning to community.") After all, you don't have to be a convicted felon to fall out of connection — with yourself, others, and the divine — and finding ways back to harmony is important to us all. I'd like to believe that our article on Pagans in Prison in this issue will start a conversation among our readers on exactly that subject.

R.J. Stewart argues in "Outsiders Holding Fast," that one of the core values of Pagan identity is our "outsider" status vis-a-vis mainstream culture. If that is the case, then it makes sense that the group we react most negatively to is the one most first-generation Pagans grew up in. I speak, of course, of the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

A substantial number of Pagans come to this path after rejecting the dogmatism, patriarchy, and triumphalism of these traditions. Spiritual rape — not too strong a word for what many have endured at the hands of fundamentalist monotheists — is a heinous crime. Victims of such abuse need, and rightly demand, places of spiritual safety where they can heal, sheltered from the symbols used by their abusers.

But for some of us, the spiritual quest has followed a more gentle path, one in which the interface between Paganism and Christianity is more like a backyard fence than a demilitarized zone. But if Satanist claims to be Pagan make folks annoyed, Pagans embracing Christian practices, deities, or rituals makes some downright furious. The Pagan community is such a fluid, heterodox zone that you'd think it was impossible to be accused of heresy here, but, as noted by our "Point of View" writer WoodStone, that's not really true — it's just a lot more difficult to make the charge stick.

Questions of personal gnosis aside, the crux of the issue comes back to drawing boundaries and deciding who is in — and who is out. Satanists, prisoners and Christo-Pagans are test cases for exploring fundamental questions. Do we welcome all seekers on the basis of their self-identification as Pagan, or are there barriers to entry? If we draw a line, on what do we base it? If we create a border, how do we enforce it?

I believe that one potential answer is to recognize the Pagan movement as a meta-religion, akin to the philosophical openness of Sanatana Dharma (the preferred name for Hinduism among its practitioners). Only the broadest and most simple boundary (for example, the Three Principles for membership in the UK-based Pagan Federation)<sup>13</sup> is needed to determine whom we consider "Pagan"; but individual denominations, covens, and circles can (and should) impose more rigorous faith-based qualifications for their membership. Such a system would provide a welcome for seekers, while encouraging more tightly-focused communities to create detailed standards fitted to their particular needs.

The answers to these questions, I believe, will determine the shape of Paganism for generations to come. Let us ponder them long and well. ▲

## Endnotes (all references circa 1.19.09)

- <sup>1</sup> [www.thefreedictionary.com/identity](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/identity)
- <sup>2</sup> [www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/science/sciencenews/3341166/Harvard's-baby-brain-research-lab.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/science/sciencenews/3341166/Harvard's-baby-brain-research-lab.html)
- <sup>3</sup> [www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/rastafarianism.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/rastafarianism.htm)
- <sup>4</sup> [www.religioustolerance.org/jainism.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/jainism.htm)
- <sup>5</sup> [www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Latter-Day-Saints/2007/12/What-Do-Mormons-Believe.aspx?p=2](http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Latter-Day-Saints/2007/12/What-Do-Mormons-Believe.aspx?p=2)
- <sup>6</sup> [www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/christian-cannibals.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/christian-cannibals.html)
- <sup>7</sup> [www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chimikvah\\_29jul29,0,2186833.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chimikvah_29jul29,0,2186833.story)
- <sup>8</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2008/09/27/world/asia/27thailand.html?\\_r=1&em](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/27/world/asia/27thailand.html?_r=1&em)
- <sup>9</sup> [www.religioustolerance.org/curr\\_war.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/curr_war.htm)
- <sup>10</sup> [www.neopagan.net/SatanicAdventure.html](http://www.neopagan.net/SatanicAdventure.html)
- <sup>11</sup> [www.usdoj.gov/fbci/progmenu\\_reentry.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/fbci/progmenu_reentry.html)
- <sup>12</sup> [www.openhearth.org/basics/demographics.shtml](http://www.openhearth.org/basics/demographics.shtml)
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.paganfed.org/about-princ.php>

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