

Reason and Spirituality:
Evaluating the Philosophical Foundation of Neopaganism
by
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What are the consequences of a religion rejecting authoritarianism in social structure and belief? Is this a valid intellectual move, or is it the rejection of reason in favor of experience? Does it create philosophical implications/results that Neopagans themselves would reject? These are the questions I will explore in this paper. To do this, I will first describe the common beliefs and practices that characterize Neopaganism. Then I will attempt to extract the underlying philosophical foundation of Neopagan beliefs and offer a general critique of the major assumptions at play. I will argue that the underlying philosophical tenets are at times mutually contradictory and often have implications that would be disagreeable to many Neopagans. I will also briefly compare Neopaganism to another religious movement, the Protestant Reformation during the rise of the Enlightenment. As odd a comparison as it may seem, there are some interesting similarities to the genesis of both movements. Yet, the ultimate products are philosophical opposites in many ways. I hope to draw some fruitful insight from that comparison. Lastly, I will conclude with a summary of what this all means for the state of Neopaganism. My goal is to argue that rejecting doctrine creates philosophically unacceptable relativism and that many of the philosophical implications may be distasteful to Neopagans themselves.

NEOPAGANISM

Neopaganism is a very broad term similar to the term “Christianity” in that it denotes a very diverse set of groups of people who differ *greatly* in beliefs and practices. Margot Adler, in her influential book *Drawing Down the Moon*, attempts a general description with this:

“The world is holy. Nature is holy. The body is holy. Sexuality is holy. The imagination is holy. Divinity is immanent in nature; it is within you as well as without. Most spiritual paths ultimately lead people to the understanding of their own connection of the divine. While human beings are often cut off from experiencing the deep and ever-present connection between themselves and the universe, that connection can often be regained through ceremony and community. The energy you put into the world comes back.”¹

Neopagans live in the present and consider divinity to be intimately impressed on their lives, to the point where the goal is to “raise the human to the level of the divine” and locate the divine in the individual and in nature.² Rather than focusing on doctrine, Neopagans emphasize ritual as the most important and satisfying way to change the self and the world. Through communities, Neopagans aim to “overcome alienation, and... provide access to the various dimensions of the self that otherwise remain suppressed.”³ Neopagans, perhaps without exception, highly value religious autonomy, personal freedom, and direct experience of the divine without mediation.⁴

Although Neopagans do not focus on doctrine, at the very center of Neopaganism there is a strong core of polytheistic thinking. Polytheism is more than just the belief in multiple gods or goddesses. Neopagans often regard polytheism as more of an “attitude” or “perspective” that goes beyond simple religion.⁵ One vocal Neopagan, Isaac Bonewits, puts it this way:

“Polytheists... develop logical systems based on multiple levels of reality and the magical Law

¹ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. x-xi.

² Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, “Witches of the West: Neopaganism and Goddess Worship as Enlightenment Religions,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989): 83.

³ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁴ Norman L. Geisler, “Neopaganism, Feminism, and the New Polytheism,” *Christian Research Journal* (1991):.1-2.

⁵ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 22.

of Infinite Universes: ‘every sentient being lives in a unique universe.’⁶ The high regard for religious autonomy ensures that the specifics of any individual’s polytheistic thinking never become dogmatic. Instead, Neopagans live with subjective and unique experiences of the divine. For example, Wiccan Priestess Alison Harlow describes her beliefs this way: “To some people, it seems like a contradiction to say that I have a certain subjective truth.... Many people cannot understand how I find [the Goddess] to be a part of my reality and accept the fact that your reality might be something else. But for me, this is in no way a contradiction.”⁷ Neopagan communities are built on this celebration of subjectivity insofar as no one ever claims that their own views are the only truth or the only way to be spiritual.⁸ In some ways, Neopaganism can be seen as a reaction to monotheism, and in particular, Christianity. Monotheism’s hierarchical structure, often negative view of humans (in particular human sexuality), and its exclusive truth claims are all abhorrent to polytheistic thinking.⁹

Neopaganism, and in particular Wicca, can be seen as a religious response to the postmodernity of our time in its organizational structure and the “questioning of dominant forms of rationality.”¹⁰ Essential postmodern tenets abound in the religion. Truth and morality are essentially relative.¹¹ Neopagan epistemology is anti-foundational. Truth with a capital “T” is no “fixed, unchanging principle,” but a fluid outworking of individuals and communities.¹²

Neopagans prize “local” knowledge over universal knowledge.¹³ That is, what is true is true only

⁶ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 23.

⁷ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 26.

⁸ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Witches of the West,” p. 89.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 83.

¹⁰ Mark Bahnisch, “Sociology of Religion in Postmodernity: Wicca, Witches and the neo-pagan Myth of Foundations,” presented at The Australian Sociological Association Conference, University of Sydney (2001), p. 6. URL: <www.tasa.org.au>.

¹¹ Geisler, “Neopaganism, Feminism, and the New Polytheism,” p. 2.

¹² Eilberg-Schwartz, “Witches of the West,” p. 88.

¹³ Bahnisch, “Sociology of Religion in Postmodernity,” p. 6.

within an individual community. It is widely accepted that “there are as many truths as there are communities and each is valid in its own terms.”¹⁴ Again, much of this can be seen as a reaction to Christianity; monotheisms are seen to have an “excessive” obsession with linear thinking, foundational truth, and rationality, all of which Neopagans judge have had terrible consequences in modern society.¹⁵ Instead of using reason to decide which beliefs and practices to follow, the only way to decide what to do is through subjective experience. If one practice is seen to “work” and “feel right,” then it is acceptable to adopt.¹⁶

PHILOSOPHICAL RESPONSES

No religion functions only to categorize people on the basis of what they have individually come to believe. Instead, every religion has a normative element in which it “tells us about the things that it declares to exist, and... their relations to the moral code and religious feeling.” Every religion therefore has theoretical underpinnings which can legitimately be examined through philosophy.¹⁷ Despite the Neopagan emphasis on ritual and individual experience over doctrinal beliefs, it is apparent that Neopaganism does indeed rest on a philosophical foundation from which claims are made about the world. These claims include that there is not one foundational Truth of the matter about religious topics, and that reason is a faulty or even unhealthy measuring stick for religious adherence. My goal in this section is to offer some broad philosophical evaluations of the theoretical aspect of Neopaganism.

The first thing to note is that postmodern epistemology is primarily out of favor in current philosophical circles. While there are religious relativist philosophers, the most current

¹⁴ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Witches of the West,” p. 92.

¹⁵ Eilberg-Schwartz, “Witches of the West,” p. 80.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 91.

¹⁷ Josiah Royce, *Religious Aspect of Philosophy: A Critique of the Bases of Conduct and of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 3.

consensus, and indeed the most common historical view, is a sort of realism about religious truth. That is, most philosophers of religion believe there *is* a truth to the matter about various religious claims; they can be true or false.¹⁸ This is bound up partly in what it would take for our religious language to be meaningful. If the things we are referring to in religious talk are not strictly real and cannot be considered either true or false, then it is unclear how religious talk can be meaningful. Yet, people believe that religious talk *is* meaningful and is not just a bunch of noise. Even proponents of relativist religions such as Neopaganism probably want religious talk to have meaning.

The philosophical problems in Neopaganism are like the problems associated with any other relativistic worldview or religion. These lie primarily in the inability to maintain internal consistency and coherence. For example, religion scholar and Neopagan proponent David Miller believes that all values are completely relative. So, “truth and falsity, life and death, beauty and ugliness, good and evil are forever and inextricably mixed together.” Instead of “either/or” dichotomies, he believes the truth of Neopaganism lies in its “both/and” logic.¹⁹ However, that claim is rendered unintelligible unless others understand him to be making an “either/or” statement in saying that all values are relative.²⁰ To clarify, his statement that “all values are relative” implies the disjunction that *either* all values are relative *or* they are not, not that all values are *both* relative *and* non-relative. What would the latter even mean? This is one example of how relativistic religious claims often include contradictions which make them meaningless if true. Presumably a Neopagan would not simply reply, “so what?,” because presumably Neopagans also would like their actions and their words to match. It is impossible to make a

¹⁸ David Basinger, "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)," in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2012 Edition). URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/religious-pluralism/>>.

¹⁹ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p 26.

²⁰ Geisler, “Neopaganism, Feminism, and the New Polytheism,” p. 6.

claim, even a claim that all values are relative, without making an either/or statement. Therefore, it regresses into absurdity to reject “either/or” thinking for “both/and” thinking *via* an either/or statement!

Despite the absurdity, some Neopagans would definitely reject the above argument as a sad product of monotheistic brainwashing, which might very well be the case. But an important question that remains is why Neopagans should even care if their religious beliefs are philosophically unsound, if they could be proven to be so. As discussed above, many Neopagans view reason as an invalid and dangerous measure for religions. However, some philosophers have argued that people have a moral obligation to attempt to eliminate obvious religious disparity, and the only way to do this is to use reason as an objective mediator. These philosophers argue that “when an individual’s perspective on any issue...has important consequences for that person or others, then that individual is under an obligation to find the truth of the matter—to maximize truth.”²¹ For example, if according to my beliefs my friend Mohammed is going to burn in hell forever, I have some sort of obligation to negotiate with him about his beliefs and mine. Why? Because there are some serious consequences riding on the truth or falsity of my beliefs! Therefore I have a moral obligation to him to find the truth. Notice, I did not say I have a moral obligation to convert Mohammed to my religion, necessarily. The obligation is to be willing to submit any and all beliefs to rigorous testing in order to come to a point where our beliefs converge and either I discover my beliefs were wrong or Mohammed discovers my beliefs were right. So it is nothing more than ethical irresponsibility for a person to hold religious beliefs that may have serious consequences (as all religious beliefs do in some way) and for them to refuse to submit them to examination.

²¹ Basinger, "Religious Diversity (Pluralism)."

There are two counterarguments to the above: the first is that a Neopagan might reject the ethical responsibility argument because *it too* is a product of Western monotheistic reasoning. However, I would like to point out that beyond the philosophical wrappings, the principle being invoked is actually harmonious with the Wiccan principle of “Do what you will, but harm none.” The real gist of the ethical argument is not a logical trap of necessity; it is that people should examine religious beliefs when much is at stake simply for the reason that maximizing truth might be the method of avoiding harm to others. The ethical argument thus aligns with core Neopagan values. The second objection that a Neopagan might make is that the above example does not apply to their religion. It only applies to religions like mine which make exclusivist epistemological or soteriological claims. Once again, I would have to disagree that Neopaganism is devoid of exclusivist claims. They may be less harsh or always chased with “but that’s only my personal experience, not necessarily yours,” but that addition is virtually meaningless if my assessment of Neopaganism beliefs is philosophically accurate. Neopaganism *does* make metaphysical and epistemological claims about how the world really is, what the nature of truth is, and if we can know it. As soon as a religion begins making philosophical claims, it becomes fair game to ask for rational defenses of those claims.²² Therefore, Neopagans *should* feel an ethical compulsion to examine their beliefs in order to maximize truth and minimize harm to others.

AN HISTORICAL COMPARISON

Now that I’ve explored the general nature of Neopaganism and offered a demonstration and analysis of its major philosophical foundations, I will move to a comparison with another

²² Frederick C. Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 213.

religious movement, the Protestant Reformation. For this section, I will be referring to an excellent work by philosophy professor and historian Frederick C. Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason: The Defense of Rationality in the Early English Enlightenment*. This book is a historical survey of the rise of the Enlightenment and the effects this scientific movement had on the different religious groups of the time. According to Beiser, this time period marks the beginning of the idea that reason should be the judge of religious truths. It should be noted that this book puts me in a difficult position. As a philosophy student and an evangelical Christian coming from the thought tradition of Luther, Calvin and the Puritans, Beiser has similar things to say to both me *and* Neopagans. I of course disagree with him about his critique of *my* religious beliefs for various reasons, but this paper isn't the place to go into that. I just wanted to note that some of the same points that can be made against Neopagans are also problems that evangelical Christians have to deal with. Therefore, I am in a rather sympathetic position.

The main point of Beiser's book is to explore the philosophical arguments and triumphs of the idea that religion should be subjugated to the authority of *reason* rather than the authority of scriptures, traditions, or experiences. The final group Beiser discusses is called "Enthusiasts." This was a Christian mystical group which believed that "all religious faith is based upon a specific kind of revelation, namely the internal revelation of the spirit."²³ Sounds a bit Neopagan to me, but it gets more clear: "Enthusiasm is... an essentially epistemological position... some enthusiasts were naturalists and pantheists, holding that divine inspiration came from their awareness of nature as a whole."²⁴ Additionally, "All Enthusiasts maintain that we cannot completely express or reduce the spirit into words and propositions, and that we cannot prove it

²³ Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason*, p. 191.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.193.

or cram it into a tidy logical system.”²⁵ So in the Enthusiasm movement, there are similarities to Neopaganism in their disregard for reason in justifying religious truths as well as the high value placed on subjective experience in verifying religious choices. Beiser writes, “the Enlightenment values of freedom and equality can trace some of their origins back to Luther’s ideals of the liberty of a Christian and the priesthood of all believers.”²⁶ Enthusiasm shared in these ideals and therefore also resembled Neopaganism in its motivation to reject hierarchical authority and elevate individual autonomy.

Merging the previous section with this discussion of the Enthusiasm movement, what can we say about Neopaganism? It turns out that eventually in history, mainstream Protestants began to *use* reason instead of fight against it because “reason proved to be the most effective weapon for the Church to establish its authority and legitimacy against many enemies.”²⁷ In light of the argument that people have the moral obligation to examine any beliefs they have when the consequences are potentially important, it seems that entering the realm of *reason* might be the only way to do that. Certainly there is no capacity built into Neopaganism that could reach outside the movement to be persuasive or reconciling in judging the legitimacy of religious truth claims. This is not a strange thing: evangelical Christianity’s ultimate appeal is the authority of scripture, but that too, like experience, is useless outside of contexts in which those authorities are valued. I believe that is one reason why *reason* has become the preeminent judge of religious matters. As the world globalized and religions diversified, people encountered contradicting truth claims. None of the groups could agree on what authority counted to legitimize the claims. However, at some point, reason became a neutral arbiter. The point is not that reason should reign as the ultimate authority *within* religions, but a more modest claim that perhaps reason

²⁵ Ibid, p.195.

²⁶ Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason*, p. 22.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 10.

should reign as the ultimate authority *between* religions. It is not the primary internal judge, but it may be the only function capable of outer judgments as people in various religions attempt to reconcile contradictory truth claims and choose their personal spiritual paths.

CONCLUSION

To bring this discussion to an end, I would like to draw attention to one more quote from

Beiser:

“[the Enlightenment] did not consist in showing all the marvelous truths that this tool[, reason,] could reveal... Rather, they argued that we have a moral duty to use it regardless of the consequences.... To cease to inquire into the reasons for our beliefs is to forfeit our responsibility as moral agents. It is to allow someone else to think for us and so to govern us, when we should think for and govern ourselves. The great value of reason, then, is that it guarantees and indeed exercises our moral responsibility.”²⁸

Besides the philosophically problematic polytheistic thesis, Neopaganism’s second greatest value is the autonomy and freedom and dignity of the individual in spiritual matters. I have argued that there are some philosophical inconsistencies and undesirable implications within the foundations of Neopaganism. However, it is important to remember that the cry of the Enlightenment was *also* one of freedom. Arguably, the greatest effect of the rise of rationality was increasing human freedom. With increasing freedom comes increasing moral responsibility to use that freedom in a way that harms none. Margot Adler records one Neopagan’s opinion on the freedom of her religion: “In practice, Neopagans give a variety of reasons for their polytheism. ‘A polytheistic worldview,’ wrote one, ‘makes self-delusion harder. Pagans seem to relate to deities on a more symbolic and complex level. Personally I think all intellectualizing about deities is self-delusion.’”²⁹ When I first read that quote, it struck me as profoundly incorrect. I question it

²⁸ Beiser, *The Sovereignty of Reason*, p. 327.

²⁹ Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, p. 31.

again. Is it polytheism or rationality that makes self-delusion harder? Obviously polytheism is incapable of determining religious truth *between* religions; I regard this as obvious because polytheism takes itself out of that game by claiming that there *is* no Truth of the matter. Therefore it abdicates any ability to decide between religious truths. Yet, considering the hugely important consequences at stake, I agree with the philosophers who say we have a moral duty to examine our own religious beliefs for truth, in order to avoid any harmful consequences to ourselves or others. In one sense, using reason to determine religious truth externally seems like best way to cherish the freedom and autonomy of humans in spiritual matters as well as uphold the view that one should harm none.

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