PAGAN PIECES

An anthology including the writings
of Robin Herne and Terry Smith
Edited by Robin Herne

First published by Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource.

Price £3.50

PAGAN PIECES

an anthology of writings on Pagans,
Paganism and Pagan Practices

edited by Robin Herne

First published by Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource
Reissued by The East of England Faiths Agency CIC

PAGAN PIECES

First Published by Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource
Reissued by The East of England Faith sAgency CIC
Office Telephone: 01394 448260 Email: office@eefa.net
First edition 2006
This imprint 2021

ISBN 1 902360 11 7

PAGAN PIECES - Table of contents

Preface

Most of the articles contained in this book were prepared for, and presented at, various Forums of Faiths, as part of the ongoing debate which Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) facilitates on matters of faith and on issues of public concern.

SIFRE has been strengthened and inspired by the contribution of its Pagan members. We are particularly indebted to Terry Smith and to Robin Herne for their scholarship and insights.

There is in general a lack of knowledge and much misunderstanding about the origins, principles and practices of the Pagan religions. This little booklet attempts to fill the gap and to set the record straight. May it lead to an ongoing and fruitful dialogue!

Cynthia Capey, November 2006

The contributors

Arlea Hunt-Anschutz used to be a member of the Ipswich Pagan Council, before moving north of the border. She is now the Editor of 'Pagan Dawn', the journal of the Pagan Federation, one of the pre-eminent Pagan groups in Europe. Arlea is a prominent Heathen scholar, and linguist.

Terry Smith is the Deputy Chair of the Ipswich Pagan Council, a Heathen of some years standing and currently working on a book about the life of King Raedwald and his Pagan Queen.

Robin Herne is the elected Chair of the Ipswich Pagan Council, Deputy Inter-Faith Manager for the Pagan Federation, and Hospitals Manager for the same organisation (co-ordinating services for Pagan patients and hospital staff.) He is a Druid.

Picture on the front cover

The guardian of a local Pagan group makes an offering of mead to the newly risen sun on Midsummer morning at a Suffolk beach.

Photo provided by Area Hunt-Anschutz for display in the Faces of Suffolk Exhibition.

A Brief Introduction to Pagan Religions

History

The word Pagan means 'from the countryside' and was first used by Christians in the Roman Empire to describe followers of other faiths. Before the coming of Christianity, the various peoples of Europe (such as the Greeks and Romans and the Celtic, Germanic and Slavic tribes) practiced their own indigenous religions. These religions were polytheistic, recognising many gods and goddesses as well as ancestral spirits and spirits of place. People interacted with their gods and spirits by making them offerings and requesting their help in exchange.

Christianity took root in Rome when the Emperor Constantine converted in the year 312. Over the ensuing centuries the political power centre in Europe moved from the Roman Empire to the Roman Catholic Church, and Pagan societies converted to the new religion ~ sometimes voluntarily, often through coercion. By the year 1300, almost all of Europe was (at least nominally) Christian. Old gods had either been transformed into saints or declaimed as devils. Pagan practices were either absorbed into Catholicism or forbidden.

However, since Greek and Latin continued to be the languages of the educated throughout Europe up until modern times, interest in Classical mythology remained strong. Greek and Roman gods were frequently depicted in the art of the Renaissance. In the Romantic period of the 19th and 20th centuries, nationalistic feelings led many Northern European countries to begin looking to their own native mythologies ~ hence the Pagan themes to be found in the music of Wagner, the poetry of Tennyson, and pre-Raphaelite art. The Victorian period also brought about an interest in spiritualism and mysticism that continued into the early 20th century and resulted in groups like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. All this set the stage for the advent of neo-paganism.

The first Neopagan traditions to appear in the 1950s and 1960s accepted the popular historical scholarship of the time, and therefore bear little resemblance to ancient Pagan religions. Wicca is often described as a religion for the 20th century. It was founded in the 1950s by a retired British civil servant called Gerald Gardner, who drew upon such sources as Masonic rites, folklore, Catholic holidays, and medieval ceremonial magic.

Many offshoots of Wicca soon sprang up, using the same basic ritual format but adding different emphases. As Wicca recognises a female deity, 'The Goddess', it gained popularity amongst feminists, and because The Goddess was often identified as 'Mother Earth', it gained popularity amongst environmentalists.

During the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly clear in educated circles that many of the assumptions about ancient Paganism were misguided, especially the assumption that all pagan religious practices constituted 'witchcraft'. At the same time, with Western societies becoming increasingly multicultural, many people of European origin began taking an interest in their own cultural roots. It was in this environment that the ancient Pagan religions of Europe began to be revived based on the latest scholarly evidence for their actual beliefs and practices. These traditions are known as 'reconstructed' Pagan religions, to distinguish them from modern Pagan religions. A form of reconstructed Norse Paganism called Asatru (trust in the gods) is now one of two legally recognised State religions in Iceland.

Today's Pagans

The religions, traditions and spiritualities lumped together under the word 'Pagan' are so widely diverse that the term is difficult to narrow down beyond the standard dictionary definition as 'anyone not a Christian, Muslim or Jew'. Some of the major categories of living Pagan faiths are described below.

Wicca And Wicca-Influenced Paths

Gardnerian Wicca has given rise to countless other neo-pagan paths with 'Wicca' in the title, such as Seax Wicca, Faery Wicca, Pectin Wicca, Norse Wicca etc. It has also strongly influenced most forms of modern Pagan Druidry. Gardner and his friend Ross Nichols were both members of the Ancient Druid Order (ADO.) When Nichols went on to establish the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), he brought many of Gardner's ideas with him. Wicca-based paths tend to be duotheistic, recognising The Goddess and her male consort, also known as the Lord and Lady (of whom all gods and goddesses found in mythology are held to be aspects.) They follow an eightfold cycle of annual festivals called 'The Wheel of the Year'. Their rites tend to take place in a sacred circle

and include the ritual of Calling the Quarters (honouring the four directions.) Magical practice is central to these traditions and involves working with elements first described by the Greek philosopher Empedocles ~ earth, air, fire and water.

Reconstructed European Pagan Religions

These are religions firmly based in the historical pre-Christian practices of a specific culture and adapted, where necessary, to modern times. They include Hellenism (Ancient Greek religion), the Religio Romana, Heathenry (Germanic religion), Celtic Reconstructionism, Romuva (Baltic religion) and others. All of these religions are polytheistic. They do not recognise a Lord and Lady, but rather a large number of gods, goddesses and other entities whom they see as distinct and real individuals. Rites take different forms depending on the religion, but all involve making offerings (usually of food or drink) to gods, ancestors and spirits. The calendar of seasonal festivals also varies widely and the number celebrated can range from only three in some forms of Heathenry to twenty-three in some forms of Hellenism. Magic (as distinct from prayer and sacrifice) does not play a large part in these religions, but is something that can be practised by individuals within the same cultural context.

Eclectic Paganism

An ever-growing number of people are attracted to certain ideas surrounding Paganism to the extent that they choose to call themselves Pagan, even though they are not involved with any established Pagan tradition or religion. These include seekers who are experimenting with various traditions that fall under the pagan umbrella; those who have inherited their own unique form of spirituality incorporating beliefs from various non-Abrahamic religions; people who have personal relationships with gods or spirits, but no particular religion; those who engage in solitary magical practices; and so on. Some choose to call themselves ‘eclectic Pagans’, others ‘hedgewitches’, or ‘neo-shamans’. An increasing number call themselves Wiccans, to the bemusement of traditional Wiccans who see Wicca as an initiatory religion practiced in a coven led by a High Priestess.

Nb: Outside Europe

There are a number of polytheist religions that originate outside of

Europe. Many religious scholars would tend to class most, if not all, indigenous religions as Pagan (such as the faiths followed by American Indians, Australian Aborigines etc.) Such faiths have, so far, had fairly minimal impact upon British society.

Some of those faiths that have their roots in Africa are growing in presence within Britain, some primarily within ethnic communities whilst others have a greater popularity in the wider community. An example of the latter is Kemeticism, which stems from the practices of Ancient Egypt. It is outside the capacity of this short booklet to explore that tradition, or its interactions with the form of Islam practised within Egypt.

Paganism and Art

Introduction

Paganism sees the physical world as an artistic creation of the Gods. While different Pagan denominations favour different art styles, all see the act of creation and self-expression as a means of honouring the world of spirit. Magic ~ the notion of harnessing spiritual forces to achieve changes in both the mind and the material world ~ is central to Paganism. For practically all polytheist cultures art can be a form of magic, a way of weaving spiritual energies into easily perceived forms. An example of this is Navajo sand painting. In creating these wonderfully ornate geometric patterns the medicine man aims to heal the sick. To release the healing power, they dance on the sand painting, thus destroying it. Throughout pre-Christian Europe it was common practice to make objects of beauty and then offer them to the Gods ~ quite often destroying them in the process. Occasionally some of these offerings survive to the modern day, such as the wooden and clay figurines cast into rivers and pools by ancient Celts.

This approach to the visual arts ~ what might loosely be described as 'talismanic art' ~ requires the artist to also be a magician, perhaps saying certain invocations as they paint, or only carving their creations at certain phases of the sun or moon etc. This practice continues down into the present day. Perhaps due to modern social mores, the contemporary Pagan is more likely to 'sacrifice' their art by giving it away as a gift to a friend, than by hurling it into a river or a blazing fire.

'Paganism' encompasses the ancient animistic religions of the world, and covers a diverse array of denominations and traditions. For the sake of brevity we will focus primarily on those traditions that have had a direct impact upon Britain within the last 5000 years.

Sacred Sites

The early Neolithic peoples seemed to have favoured outdoor worship (archaeological evidence suggests that the climate was somewhat warmer back then!) In amazing feats of engineering, which dispel the popular misconception of these peoples as painted savages, they created woodhenges. Little survives of these monuments today, but all the evidence suggests that they were impressive creations of circles of huge wooden posts, probably carved with tribal symbols ~ not unlike

the totem poles of some American Indian tribes. Wooden structures were eventually replaced by stone monuments, most of which can still be seen to this very day.

Most famous is almost certainly Stonehenge, though many others exist. The trilithon is aligned with certain sunrises so that, on special festival occasions, this vast stone 'doorway' would become a symbolic womb giving birth to the sun as it rose over the horizon. Other stones were placed so that their shadows enter into the horseshoe-shaped enclosures in a magical sexual act. Eroticism is a common feature of Pagan art, not only in mosaics and vase decorations but even in the designs of buildings.

While many standing stones are roughly hewn and undecorated, there are some that are intricately carved. Some Germanic and Scandinavian stones show runic inscriptions ~ this being the written language of the Northern tribes of Europe. Runes were used not only as a means of writing, but also for creating magical talismans and for divination. Some Scottish stones show Pictish knot-work designs. The strange interlacing patterns of surreal animals is indicative of the old Celtic view of all life ~ animal, human or vegetable ~ as irrevocably interlinked, ultimately each merging into the next.

In Britain roofed temples were eventually built by the Celts, though often these were subsidiary additions to the stone circles and sacred groves rather than the main focus of worship. The arrival of the Roman invaders brought Mediterranean-style temples and the use of house-shrines. Along with the Romans came settlements of foreign merchants, and their faiths. Temples to Mithras, the Persian God of soldiers, and to Isis, the Egyptian Goddess of magic, could be found in Britain.

Later colonisations by Angles, Saxons, and Norsemen etc. brought in the construction of long rectangular wooden temples, which contrasted quite dramatically with the Celtic preference for round buildings.

Two-Dimensional Art

If the early Celts created mosaics or conventional paintings, no evidence of it survives. However, they did make great use of body art, which can be classed as a form of two-dimensional art.

Tattooing (permanent imprints on the skin) and body painting (temporary woad patterns that can be washed off) were both popular.

Again, these forms of art were done for magical rather than decorative purposes. Prior to going into battle, the Celts were known to paint themselves with woad designs to give added strength, courage, skill at arms etc. Some tribes, such as the Picts, went naked into battle, but for their woad ~ presumably believing that the patterns were sufficient to protect them, without need for armour.

Permanent tattoos often depicted tribal emblems, showing allegiances or other important personal details, such as marital status, number of children, spiritual patronage etc. Many modern Pagans continue to use both permanent and temporary body art for sacred purposes.

The Romans brought with them their love of mosaic, which was not only decorative but often narrative. There are famous examples of a woman being initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries, a cult devoted to the corn-goddess Demeter and Her daughter Kore (who, in winter, becomes known as Persephone, queen of Hades.) Priestesses were common throughout the ancient world and, in modern Pagan religions, women hold total equality with men. In some more recent Pagan traditions teachings can only be passed on to a member of the opposite sex, though this is seldom the case with the older traditions.

Three-Dimensional Art

Statuary is common to most Pagan denominations, with sacred icons a major focus of reverence and ritual. Styles vary immensely from the idealised classical representation of Aphrodite, to the rough but elemental Scandinavian depiction of Frey. The druids placed great emphasis on carved stone heads, as they believed that the head was the seat of the soul. The severed heads of enemies were collected and preserved as magical trophies, and much respected chieftains and druids were often decapitated after death, so that their spirits could continue to watch over their tribes via their preserved heads.

The green-man is an image that stands on the borders of the old religions and the new (Christianity.) For many Pagans he emphasises the indivisible union between humanity and the forests that once covered most of Britain and much of Europe. The early carvings of green-men normally show greenery growing out of the mouth, reminiscent of various myths in which the songs or magical words of a deity create the physical world. In time the green-man became a popular architectural decoration in many churches, pubs, guildhalls and other non-Pagan

buildings. Also to be seen in older buildings is the image now called a sheila-na-gig, of which assorted different version can be seen throughout Europe. A common one, dating back to prehistoric finds, is a crude image of an amply proportioned woman who usually seems to be pregnant. These images may embody early Man's idea of the eternally fertile Earth Mother. Other, usually medieval, images are much more vulgar and often feature a disproportionate woman holding open the lips of her vagina. Whether these were intended to display the sexual power of a goddess, Christian fears about predatory women and the sin of lust, or something else again is now hard to say for certain.

The image of the Greek deity Pan has become far more wide spread in modern Paganism than it ever was in the classical world. To the ancients He was a minor deity worshipped by the '*pagani*' (from whence the term Pagan derives), which mean a country-dweller. Even to the ancients, *pagani* was a slightly patronising term, roughly comparable to calling someone a country bumpkin nowadays. Pan was, and still is, regarded as rather a jovial, lusty old goat full of joie de vivre ~ the grinning face on the door lintel at the Brewery Tap pub in Ipswich (where local Pagans hold monthly discussion groups) seems to express this sentiment fully. Modern Pagans, by and large, have inherited this attitude of the old god of Arcadia and seek to incorporate passion, vigour and humour into their worship. While no less reverential, Pagan worship generally lacks the deadpan seriousness of some more mainstream faiths.

While the rural dwellers of old Greece were called *pagani*, the city dwellers were the *communitat*i. Their Gods were the ones who governed such 'civilised' concerns as poetry, military strategy, law, theatre and, of course, art. This distinction between two families or branches of deities is common to many Pagan cultures, such as the Heathens who revered the rural Vanir deities and the more urbane Aesir deities.

Religious statues and icons are not just decorative objects, but serve as a focus of spiritual power. In the language of anthropology, they act as fetishes ~ objects imbued with magical force. The deity depicted by a statue may, if it chooses to do so, manifest through a statue and speak to the congregation. This is more a form of psychic communion, often accompanied by the worshippers entering into a trance state, than a belief that a carved lump of stone might suddenly begin speaking forth.

The old Pagan practices of reverencing statuary etc on holy days by dressing them in regal clothing, garlands of flowers etc is continued by many other religions today.

A subtle point needs to be understood with the notion of the fetish, one frequently missed by academic observers. For a Druid Danu is the goddess who created and continues to sustain the earth beneath our feet. She exists both as an abstract divine force present throughout the cosmos, but she is also quite literally present in the rocks and soil as well. Therefore a stone statue of Danu is both literally Danu Herself made manifest, and also a token symbol of a metaphysical being.

Functional Art

In animistic beliefs, it is not just statues that act as fetishes. Masks form an important focus of ritual practice. A mask is both a work of devotional art, created to embody a spirit or deity, and also a means of becoming that spirit being. Practically all Pagan traditions encourage a form of voluntary spirit possession, known by various names. This is the practice of inviting a friendly spirit to 'borrow' one's body for a short period of time, in order for that spirit to communicate with a congregation. The methods of making this happen are various, with one way including dressing as the spirit invoked. The mask becomes part of this ceremonial costume, and normally involves ritual procedures as to how and of which materials it is constructed, depending upon the spirit summoned. A variety of masks and accompanying costumes are shown inset.

The Celts, Romans, Anglo-Saxons, Norsemen etc were all warrior cultures, though each had a quite distinct concept as to the purpose and style of military endeavour. This strand continues, in a much diluted form, to the present day, with the inclusion of swords and daggers in ritual. The style of weaponry varies immensely, and nowadays is purely ceremonial. Some pacifist Pagans eschew the use of weapons, though this is a very modern approach and not widely held. For many the contemporary way of expressing the warrior ethic is either through martial arts, ecological campaigning or even through a biker lifestyle.

Within the British strands of Paganism the visual arts hold an equal importance with the performing arts, especially music, poetry and storytelling, which are often used in conjunction with each other.

Pagan Festivals

Below is a small sample of some of the festivals celebrated by various traditions. Many of these festivities do not have fixed calendar dates, but are geared to happen in response to variable natural events ~ the flowering of certain trees, the time the corn is ready to harvest, the flooding of a particular river etc.

Druid Festivals

The Ancient Celts celebrated a number of minor festivals, usually called feile (singular) / feillean (plural). They had 4 major festivals each year.

Samhain - (early November) the New Year and the start of winter, also a time to honour the spirits of the dead.

Imbolc - (early February) the festival of Brigit, goddess of the sacred fires and agricultural concerns generally. This time of year marks the lambing season.

Beltane - (early May) the festival marking the start of summer, when great bonfires are kindled to honour Belinus the sun god.

Lughnasadh - (early August) the festival marking the start of the harvest, a time to give thanks for the crop brought forth by the farming goddess Tailtiu.

Heathen Festivals

The various Germanic and Scandinavian tribes had a number of festivals, called blots (singular) / blotar (plural.) Some of the more widely held ones are given here.

Modranecht - (midwinter solstice) marked the start of the year for some tribes, a time to honour the mother goddesses and ask their blessings upon pregnant women.

Eostreblot - (late March or into April) honours the goddess of spring, flowers and new life ~ after whom the Anglo-Saxons named one of their months

Winters Night (usually late October or early November) marks the beginning of winter, frequently a time for honouring the dead and communing with nature spirits. Also called Alfablot, Disablot or Freyrsblot.

Roman Festivals

The Romans also had countless festivals. A small number of them are given here.

Matronalia (March 1st) held at the start of the New Year to honour the goddess Juno, in her role as matron of mothers everywhere.

Lupercalia (February 15th) held in honour of Lupercus, to ask for his blessings on the flocks and for the granting of fertility. Also a time for honouring the Great Wolf Lupa who suckled the twins Romulus & Remus, who later founded the Roman Empire.
Floralia (April 27th to May 2nd) a long festival to mark the beginning of spring, honouring Flora the goddess of flowers.

Saturnalia (December 17th to 23rd) a long midwinter party, at which it was common to give gifts of candles, to honour Saturn, a patron of agriculture.

Wiccan Festivals

Wicca is a modern form of Paganism, largely inspired by the writings of Gerald Gardner who lived in the early part of the 20th Century. Wiccans have 8 major festivals that they call Sabbats.

Halloween (31st October) marks the start of the New Year, and is a time for honouring the dead.

Yule (midwinter solstice) is seen as the time where the sun god is reborn.

Candlemas (1st February) is seen as the early signs of spring, and is a time when the Virgin Goddess is honoured.

Eostre (spring equinox) is the full flood of spring, when the Flower Maiden is honoured.

May Day (1st May) is seen as the start of summer, and is the time when the marriage of the Earth Mother to the Sky Father is celebrated.

Litha (summer solstice) is the celebration of the Sun God at his peak.

Lammas (1st August) marks the beginnings of the harvest tide.

Modron (autumn equinox) marks the end of the harvest tide, and is a time of Thanks-giving. Some traditions also celebrate the harvest of the first fruit of the orchards.

Sacred Spaces,
Special Places for Pagans

Different traditions of Paganism would give varied responses to this topic, but most would agree that ALL places are, ultimately, sacred and of value. There are no places that can be dismissed as profane or worthless in the Pagan world-view.

The land itself is alive sentient, feeling, purposeful. Each place has a spirit, the *genius loci* of Roman lore, which both shapes the humans who live there and is, in turn, shaped by them. Strong emotions leave their residue for future generations to respond to great love, deep peace, joy of learning, intense hatred, utter despair etc.

A special place for us is somewhere that echoes the needs of our soul at a given time. A serene woodland grove calls to the soul hankering for peace; a dusty mausoleum may open its arms to one seeking connection to their ancestors; a bleak, storm-wracked coast may grant a broken heart catharsis.

The Pagan seeks to embrace darkness along with light, for all things have their purpose in the universe. A place of great horror, like Auschwitz, may have as much to say as any cathedral. Being sacred does not automatically mean being serene or happy. Pagan creeds do not necessarily strive to redeem or transform that which is disturbing, ugly, or discordant. A dangerous volcano is as special as a peaceful forest glade.

Sometimes the most potent sites for a Pagan are those untouched by human hand, of which there are increasingly few left in the world. As we stand at the doorway of the 21st Century, with our scientists and their financiers striving to seize control of the very building blocks of life itself, it is worth reflecting that some of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring sites are those that remain just as the Gods created them. When humans seek to improve upon, add to, make more convenient, or just plain demolish, what nature has created the results are, all too frequently, disastrous.

However, Pagan civilisations have been as much part of this remodelling as anyone and many modern Pagans find the vast temples of Egypt, Greece and Rome to be sources of immense wonder and spiritual uplift. Yet, for all the desire that emperors and pharaohs had for imposing

themselves upon the landscape, much of the architecture is informed by a love of the natural world. One only has to think of the megalithic stone circles that dot Northern Europe, aligned to the passage of stars, sun and moon with baffling accuracy, to see that so many of these religious sites were means of studying and reflecting nature, rather than dominating or sublimating it.

Suffolk has no grand Pagan temples to speak of, no stone circles, no Hanging Gardens, no Mount Olympus. Yet there are magical places; quiet corners of woodlands, a particular babbling brook, a lonely field where the deer can be seen to run. Secret places where not many people go, and where (so far) no supermarket chain has felt the need to stick yet another ton of concrete and glass. That is how, I feel, they best remain. Secret.

A Pagan Perspective on the Environment

For many people both within and without the Pagan religions, the word Paganism has become virtually synonymous with environmentalism. A great many people come to our religions through their love of forests and fields, mountains and oceans. By far the majority of Pagans are actively involved in conservation ~ be it donating money to “green” causes, tree planting, road protesting, volunteering at animal rescue centres, political campaigning, recycling, and countless related activities.

From an historical perspective, our claim to green credentials is a tad more mixed! The Pagan cultures of the Mediterranean had a strong urban focus, creating vast cities with many amenities familiar to the modern townie. Ancient Rome, over 2000 years ago, had a population in excess of a million people. Urbanites then, as urbanites now, complained about the rising crime levels, the erratic sanitation, taxation, and ill-mannered youngsters.

The word *paganus* lost its early meaning of someone following the Gods of the locality, and rapidly became a slang term of the city-dwellers when referring to the supposedly thick bumpkins of the countryside. Ironically these days the term is applied as much to the devotees of austere Athena as it is to the lovers of wild and lusty Pan.

The tribes of Northern Europe, particularly those of the distant British Isles, lived largely or entirely rural lives. People lived cheek by jowl with their domestic animals, and encounters with wild bears, wolves and boar were quite common. For such people the modern landscape of concrete, glass and squalor would be an unrecognisable nightmare.

Whilst the Iron Age Celts deforested areas for agriculture, they were also amongst the first peoples to introduce laws to protect trees from wanton felling, and to guard domestic animals against cruelty. These laws were enshrined in the Fenechus, much of which can still be read today.

To Pagans ancient and modern the land is sacred. The Earth is a living, sentient being, ancient beyond our comprehension. Not without good cause did Professor James Lovelock name his ecological theory after the Greek goddess Gaia. To many early cultures the Earth was feminine, known by such names as Nerthus, Danu and Tellus Mater. We still

commonly refer to Mother Nature even now. Some cultures, however, notably the Egyptians, considered the land to be masculine.

In modern times we have come to realise the degree to which our species impacts on all others, frequently driving entire species to extinction. Many seek to preserve what little is left. The planet herself has seen innumerable species come and go. We do not aim to preserve life for her sake, but for our own. We have come to realise that the changes we make upon the planet will not only make it uninhabitable for countless other creatures but, ultimately, for ourselves as well. The human race, like the statue of Ozymandius, is turning into a "colossal wreck, boundless and bare." The Earth will still be creating when our kind is forgotten.

We share the Earth with countless species, each with its own hopes, fears, dreams, desires and degree of sentience. Some are animals, some plants, some are the spirits that inhabit things that science currently regards as inanimate, some defy current explanation. Pagan religions remain open to the mystery of life.

Part of being Pagan is to seek to communicate with at least some of the sentient creatures outside our own species. For some this is achieved through meditation, through clairvoyance or clairaudience, through divination, and so forth. The underlying purpose of such communication is to improve the quality of life for all concerned. It is not just to ask for help or aid, but also to offer it.

Pagan religions are often described as nature-worshipping ones. Whilst this is true to an extent, it can be misleading for modern urbanites. The Romantic poets of the 18th Century gave us idealised images of Nature as a rural idyll of farmland and woodland, something "out there" that city dwellers could travel to visit. Many people today still think in such terms. In truth, Nature is everywhere. Nature is as much in the cities as in the National Parks. The marble slabs flooring the local bank are natural; the moss growing up the side of the motorway bridge is natural; the rats filling the sewers are natural. Nor is Nature a matter of trees, flowers and bunnies. Humans are as much part of the natural order as any stag or eagle. Our urge to build towns is as natural to us as mound-building is to the termite. The desire to be at-one with Mother Nature must begin, not with hugging a tree in some picturesque location, but with embracing one's own human nature. The acceptance

of one's self is, perhaps, one of the reasons why so many ancient cultures not only reverenced many Gods, but tolerated a wide mix of people.

Mature Pagans do not tend to romanticise Nature as lovely and sweet. It is red in tooth and claw. Humans may be prone to sentimentality, but few other creatures are! Whilst Nature is often terrifying, ugly or repellent, we accept that there is a place for everything. Things that cause us pain or fear are not necessarily wicked, or punishments visited upon us by some irate deity.

In the 21st century, we must also come to accept that our species needs to learn restraint. Humanity must learn to share with other creatures, and not assume it has a divine right to go where it pleases and rob other species of their habitats, food sources, or very existence.

In terms of how a polytheist philosophy can impact upon how one relates to the world, we can look to Iceland. In that far off country there are two State religions, Christianity and a Pagan religion called Asatru that reverences the old gods beloved since ancient times. The acceptance of the existence of nature spirits is so widespread that people do not wish to upset or disrupt them. If a planned road or housing estate requires the removal of one of the many great boulders in which the elves are said to live, then the plans are changed. The rock stays, the road bends round it! Very different from the attitude in this country, where we merrily dig up cemeteries and disinter the dead simply to build yet another totally unnecessary supermarket.

Polytheists accept that we share this world with other beings, and must learn to share. We cannot simply blunder where we will, disregarding everything that gets in our way.

A Pagan Perspective on Health

The Pagan religions of the ancient and modern world leave to us a wealth of ideas, of which only a small sample can be conveyed in a forum such as this. Let us start with the word itself ~ health. It derives from the Anglo-Saxon word "*haelo*", which is also the root of the word hale, and means both physical good health and also wholesome, complete and unbroken. The same multiple meanings are present in the Gaelic words "*slàn*" and "*fallain*", and equivalent terms from other ancient tongues.

A hale and healthy person was considered one not just in robust physical condition, but whole in heart and mind too. Disease (literally to be ill-at-ease) was not seen just as a matter of viruses or germs, but also as a disruption of the soul. With each decade that rolls past, awareness of the psychological and social aspects of illness and healing are becoming accepted into the norm of conventional medicine, rather than being dismissed as the purview of the crank. In time the spiritual aspects may also come to the fore.

Large chunks of modern conventional medicine are based on the foundations of ancient medicine, particularly those practised in Pagan Greece. The Oath first sworn by Hippocrates is still adhered to today, including his ethical precepts to put the good of the patient first, and to do no harm. The influence of the philosopher Empedocles held sway for a great stretch of time, and the doctrine of the four elements is still followed by some today. As late as the 16th century doctors still viewed their patients in terms of the Four Humours, and perceived illness as being largely a matter of a person having tipped out of harmonious balance. Modern science may laugh at the description of sanguine and choleric tempers, but let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater ~ the underlying notion that a healthy human is one who has the various areas of their life in balance is one we are returning to in another guise. How often do modern pundits tell us that so much ill health is caused, or at least exacerbated, by stress, and that getting a work-life balance is the key to stress management?

The Greek use of astrology as a diagnostic tool also persisted for a long time. Whilst astrology may seem strange to the modern mind, the notion that a person is intimately affected by their environment, and cannot be treated outside of all the forces affecting their well-being, is

one that our over-stretched 21st century health service still lacks the resources to fully address.

The caduceus, the serpent-entwined staff carried by Hermes and later by Asclepius, is still the symbol of the medical profession. In the early days many temples served as hospitals, and the study of healing, surgery, and counselling were the purview of certain groups of priests. Back then, and in many parts of the world still, there was no distinction between science and religion, between service to one's Gods and service to humanity. The two went hand in glove.

As well as their symbols, the ancient Greeks also left to us their wisdom ~ one particular maxim, carved on the walls of the Temple at Delphi, ought to be painted on the walls of pubs, clubs and drug dens across Britain today: Nothing to excess. If more of us followed this simple teaching, the NHS would have an easier time of it (not to mention the benefits to our prison service!) Enjoy your drink, but not to the point of stupidity; Enjoy your food, but not to the point of gluttony. Good health does not require one to be a sour-faced prig, merely to keep everything in reasonable balance.

The Hellenic view of healthcare was somewhat different from our own. Those Greeks who could afford it paid to see a physician regularly. The medic would advise them on diet and general matters of preventative medicine. So long as the patient followed doctor's orders, should they still fall ill anyway, the doctor would treat their condition free of charge. The Greeks went to their doctors to maintain their good health, not just to get rid of disease. It is from the goddess of well-being, Hygeia (whose symbol was the five-pointed star), that we get the word hygiene.

I mentioned that the ancient world had hospitals. It is worth keeping in mind that our ancestors also pre-empted the existence of the NHS. The Fenechus, an ancient Irish law code, required each tribal chieftain to collect tax revenue for the purpose of running a hospital in each district ~ the forerunner of the cottage hospital, if you will. These buildings, known as a *tigh-eridinn* or House of Nursing, had to be run to certain standards. The attending physician had to be qualified to a minimum level, his or her (and yes, they had female doctors back then) nursing staff had to be reputable people, the building had to be well-ventilated and have access to clean running water, visitors had to remain quiet and well-behaved. The standards of hygiene expected in an Irish hospital

only started to be reintroduced to this country by the campaigns of Florence Nightingale.

Everyone in the tribe was entitled to a minimum amount of free health-care, as a benefit of having paid their taxes. If a person had been wrongfully wounded and required hospital care, their attacker had to pay *othrus* ~ which amounted to the cost of their medical expenses, plus compensation for lost earnings. Even back then a doctor who mistreated a patient and caused their illness to worsen, had to pay compensation.

In many ways the attitudes to health in ancient Britain foreshadowed our modern notions to a remarkable degree. The discovery of a druid's grave in Colchester yielded a set of surgical tools whose basic design is still in use today.

What ideas from the ancient religions perhaps most impact on the views of modern Pagans? Many of us use complementary medicine, some techniques of which date back thousands of years. There are various reasons we do this, but one of the commonest is the notion that (rightly or wrongly) such methods are safer than the endless chemicals churned out by the pharmaceutical industries. For some there are also ethical considerations ~ a distaste for substances tested on animals, or a dislike for certain multinationals who appear to be grossly profiteering. Perhaps fundamental to all these concerns is a positive decision to take responsibility for one's own health. People, in increasing numbers, are recalling the teachings of the Greeks and focussing on preventative medicine, to maintain their health. Rather than just blindly swallowing any pill they are given, more and more people are questioning what is best for them ~ and seeing that some unfortunate doctor with a massive case load and a burgeoning ulcer may not always be the best judge of what will work for them.

We are all of us acutely aware these days that our mental and emotional health impacts powerfully on our biological health ~ both in terms of causing illness in the first place, and of speeding or delaying recovery in the second. Aromatherapy, meditation classes, relaxation tapes, and personal-awareness courses are no longer the indulgences of the self-obsessed, but are massive industries in their own right.

Whilst assessing ones health by the passage of the stars may have gone rather out of vogue, we are all too aware that our mental and physical

health is hugely influenced by dozens of largely unseen or unheeded forces ~ the chemicals in the food we eat, the radiation thrown off by the all the endless gadgets we surround ourselves with, the pollution in the air we breathe, the interminable banal tripe pumped by the TV into our brains. Even those who do not share the Pagan belief in sentient spirits can appreciate the endless forces that we all expose ourselves to, for good or ill. By becoming aware of the issues, we are starting to take control and exercise discretion as to what we want to be affected by.

This move towards a holistic sense of responsibility for our own physical, mental and spiritual health can only prove to be of benefit to Society as a whole.

A Pagan View on Suffering

As there are diverse views within the Pagan traditions upon this topic, what I aim to present tonight is principally a view from within my own tradition that of Druidry, with a smattering of other traditions views for good measure.

We might take pain as primarily physical discomfort, and suffering as the mental and emotional anxiety that accompanies it, sometimes continuing long after the event.

Physical pain is good for survival. A child incapable of feeling physical pain would hold its hand in the fire until it became a charred stump. Nature has evolved us to hurt and, when our instincts have not been neutered by culture, to avoid whatever wounds us. Mental anguish that can cripple a person for years has no real evolutionary value, and from a Druid view no spiritual value either.

Pagan religions, generally we can be said to share an ethic of responsible hedonism. That is, the tendency to view life primarily as a pleasure, full of opportunities for happiness and growth. The pleasures of the senses are gifts from the Gods to be relished, though in a responsible manner. An inscription at the Temple at Delphi stated "nothing in excess".

The Heathen tradition, which has its source in the tribal religion of the Germanic lands, turns to a long poem called the *Havamal* for guidance. The *Havamal* tells us ~

"Less good than they say for the sons of men

is the drinking oft of ale:

for the more they drink, the less can they think

and keep a watch o'er their wits."

Again the guidance is enjoyment in moderation, with the warning that too much of a good thing can have dire consequences. In the modern West the health dangers of too much food, drink, drugs and watching TV are blatantly apparent. Hellene and Heathen alike concurred that plenty of suffering had its roots in over-indulgence, not just of food and drink, but also of lust, piety, grief etc. Indeed, most things taken to excess cause havoc.

This theme is reflected in the Irish poem 'The Instructions of King

Cormac', which starts with the guidance ~

"If you be too wise, men will expect too much of you

If you be too foolish, you will be deceived

If you be too conceited, you will be thought difficult

If you be too humble, you will be without honour."

Again, avoid excess! There are many reasons why a person may choose destructive excess. Several modern Pagan philosophers have discussed the Scarcity Model ~ the fear that there is never enough food, money, love or whatever to go round. This leads to fighting over resources, attempts to horde whilst others starve. Such an attitude is inculcated in many people from infancy, stemming from a general mistrust of the universe. Fear is at the root of this world view, and leads people both to personal despair and to do terrible things to rivals. Those who trust to the benevolence of the universe and share what they have tend to suffer far less.

Pagan religions tend to see humanity as the root of its own problems.

An Irish tale of King Aillil had him getting his ear bitten off by a fairy woman whom he had raped. The woman lived within a particular sacred hill, and the story can be seen as a metaphor for the king pillaging and violating the land itself. Not only did he lose his ear, but her kin also went on to cause the destruction of Aillil's whole dynasty. The magical beings aside, it was the king's own malice at the root of the disaster.

It was not just Aillil who paid the price, but his whole family. It requires no great belief in supernatural powers to see that the environmental chaos wrought by one generation will still be causing misery for many more to come. However, there is more to this tale than archaic ecology. Like many other ancient cultures, the early Celts believed in collective responsibility. A family unit, called a *fine*, was expected to take responsibility for all its members. The criminal actions of one member reflected upon all. They favoured a system of financial penalties, rather than prisons or corporal punishments, but the whole family might be expected to pay if the miscreant lacked the private wealth to pay their debts in court; the logic behind this being that people are not truly individuals, isolated from the rest of the world. We were then, and remain now, social creatures ~ the product of a given environment that we all helped to create.

Were an Ancient Celt to murder, rape, rob or engage in some other anti-social activity, then their kin carried part of the collective guilt ~ whether because they had helped shape the mind capable of such deeds, or because they remained completely oblivious of the canker festering in their relative's mind, or because they saw the poison and would not or could not do anything about it.

Greek myth has many tales of wrathful deities visiting natural disasters upon those towns that had offended them in some way ~ again the whole community was seen to take the collective responsibility for the actions of a few of its members.

Whilst Pagan communities around the world have wondered if the plagues, famines and other disasters afflicting them were brought about by an angry god, this does not indicate that every single upheaval is or was viewed in such a way. Obviously people can contribute to natural disasters ~ deforestation can lead to landslides, for example. However, in Pagan philosophies humanity is not the centre of the universe, and plenty of things happen regardless of us rather than because of us. Human tragedy can often be incidental.

Views on the Afterlife vary, but suffice to say that death probably seems a far greater tragedy to the humans left behind than it does to the Gods who know what lies beyond the grave.

Some tragedies can have a lesson underlying them. The lesson to a child who burns their hand, is to not put their fist in the flame again. A community that loses half its members in a landslide learns to stop cutting trees down and start planting them.

Few Pagans believe that everything has a purpose. A Pagan whose loved one has been killed by a drunk driver is unlikely to look for the hand of any god in such a loss. There need be no profound metaphysical reason behind such an act of crass selfishness. To borrow an image from medieval alchemy, the spiritually minded Pagan would seek to transform the dross of the tragedy into gold by keeping alive all the happiness and wisdom left by their loved one. To wallow in suffering forever more like Miss Haversham taints the memory of what is gone, and ultimately is sheer self-indulgence.

Pain is a natural part of life, and if its lessons are learnt quickly enough the pain can be minimised. Creating one's own suffering by dwelling in darkness is to follow a foolish path of excess. To avoid suffering ~ relish

life, share its pleasures, accept that everyone has worth and deserves a chance to sit at the banquet.

Death, Dying and Disaster

With regard to the major tragedies that have occurred in Britain in recent years, those Pagans affected were almost entirely members of

the attending Emergency Services, rather than amongst the dead and injured. Pagans respond to these events in exactly the same way that any other human being would ~ with compassion for the bereaved and wounded, and with efficiency to tend to people in need.

In the event that Pagans may fall victim to some disastrous event in the future, our needs are to be treated with kindness. It is not always easy to identify a Pagan by their physical appearance or dress. There are various Pagan religions, such as Druids, Wiccans and Heathens, who tend to favour certain forms of jewellery. However, many other people sport such items simply as a fashion-statement, rather than out of shared belief. An unconscious person wearing a pentagram or valknot may be Pagan, but may equally just be "into" trendy jewellery. Where it is known or assumed that a wounded individual is Pagan, treat them as you would any other. We have no especial rules around modesty or gender. Should the individual die, treat them with basic respect. We encourage all Pagans to appoint Funeral Executors, to ensure that their spiritual desires are not over-ridden by relatives hostile to their beliefs. If in doubt, Suffolk Emergency Services can consult with the Ipswich Pagan Council as to how to assist injured or dead Pagans.

In the aftermath of tragedy it is common these days to have interfaith services to express communal grief. It is also standard for such services to be largely or exclusively geared towards the monotheist religions. Pagans are invariably excluded from active participation, and are frequently expected to be grateful to even be allowed to sit in the audience. We do not want the crumbs from anyone's table. We are active contributors towards Society and expect to be treated as such. It is a sad truth that terrorist bombs tend to destroy everything except long-standing prejudices, and that even when public dignitaries talk of standing side-by-side with all factions of the community they often only mean certain politically correct sections and continue to ignore the minority faiths.

The Pagan kith and kin of disaster victims will usually go through the same stages of shock as anyone else. Where the disaster is a natural or accidental one, Pagans are usually disinclined to perceive them as inflicted by wrathful deities. The emotional focus will normally be upon healing the wounded or ensuring the souls of the dead transit safely to the Otherworld, rather than upon apportioning blame. Where a tragedy is a human-made one, the desire for justice will tend to be strong. Most

ancient polytheist cultures tended to expect criminals to pay compensation to their victims. Endless talk of reconciliation is likely to gall many Pagans, who will probably be more interested in seeing wrong-doers brought to book. As anger begins to abate, focus commonly shifts to celebrating the lives of the dead (or improving the lives of injured survivors.) Planting trees to remember those gone, as a beautiful living memorial to them, is very popular with Pagans.

When A Pagan Dies

It is difficult to generalise about Pagan funeral customs, but some commonly encountered ones within Suffolk are reviewed below.

The circumstance of a Pagan's life must be taken into account. Some Pagans are very open about their religion, and will leave very specific instructions about their funeral, including a named organiser. Within the Ipswich Pagan Council (IPC) we encourage our members to make codicils to their Wills specifying the nature of their funeral and a named executor to carry out the service. Other Pagans are very quiet about their beliefs, often through fear of negative reaction from others. They may not be active members of a community and their immediate family or carers might not have a clue how to go about organising a Pagan funeral. The person may have lived a solitary life, in which no one was aware of his or her beliefs. Where there is uncertainty about how to proceed, the IPC can always be contacted for free advice and assistance. There may even be doubt as to whether the deceased was Pagan or not. If relatives or funeral directors find books, statues etc at the deceased's home that suggest they might have had "unusual" beliefs, then a member of the IPC could be called in for advice as to the significance of such items.

Pagans view death in a very positive light even though the circumstances of a person's death may often be quite unpleasant. Most believe in reincarnation of some form, often with a "holiday" between bodies spent in an Afterlife. Death is not the end, and any Pagan friends and family will realise that the soul of the deceased can still be contacted.

Where a Pagan is terminally ill, perhaps kept alive only by drugs and machinery, many will opt to return home to die naturally in the bosom of their family or, if they live alone, with their closest friends.

The funeral marks a transition from this life into the next, and is generally a celebration of all that the dead person has achieved during their life. Obviously with the funeral of an infant, or a generally unpleasant person, there may not always be many achievements to celebrate.

Ideally the corpse should be transported home at the earliest opportunity, where loved ones may come to visit it. Usually a room will be cleared so that the corpse can be laid out in an open coffin for visitors. If the body were severely damaged, then a sealed coffin would be acceptable. The exact period of display varies amongst the traditions, but is commonly about three nights in length. At the end of this period

the corpse can be taken for disposal. If there are far more visitors than the home can cope with, a hall might be hired for the last day and the corpse moved there so a mass visit can be made.

Rituals regarding the preparation of the corpse vary from culture to culture, and would be made clear by the mourners. For example, amongst Heathens it is usual for the deceased to be washed and dressed by his or her nearest female relative. It is also usual for followers of this tradition to trim the nails of the dead. Amongst Hellenic Pagans it is usual to place coins in the coffin, often over the eyes of the deceased, so that they can "pay" the ferryman to take them into the land of the dead. The need to conduct individual little ritual acts is another reason in favour of having the corpse at home, so that funeral directors need not be bothered with such details.

In earlier millennia a variety of means were used to dispose of bodies. The Germanic tribes and the Romans frequently burned the dead upon great bonfires, or even blazing longboats. The Celts tended to expose corpses for birds to pick clean, and then store the bones in long barrows. The Egyptians mummified the wealthier dead with elaborate ceremony. Obviously many of these methods would be impractical given the countless legal restrictions of the modem world. Heathens will tend to favour cremation, whilst Druids and Kemetics will usually opt for burial. Other types of Pagan could go either way.

Green burials are increasingly popular, and a growing number of home-owning Pagans will opt to have their nearest & dearest buried on their own land (water tables etc permitting.) Most Pagans, of whatever persuasion, will normally opt for fairly plain coffins off a sort that will quickly biodegrade. Whilst the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt may have wanted to be preserved for posterity, most modem Pagans would sooner be returned to natural cycles as quickly as possible. For that reason few Pagans will opt for embalming or require cosmetic efforts to make the displayed corpse look "alive". To our minds death is not something to be avoided or disguised.

Grave goods are very common amongst Pagans. If the deceased held a rank within the community (such as a priest), then they will most likely be buried in their ceremonial dress along with such jewellery and equipment as they used in life. It used to be common throughout Europe to inter the tools of the trade, so a warrior would be buried with

his sword, a blacksmith with his hammer etc. Some modem day trades have rather unsuitable tools to put in a grave (the common tool for most office workers being their computer), and some people may have so loathed their jobs that they would hate to have any reminder of it in their graves. In ancient times, when funeral pyres were acceptable, such items would have been burnt along with the corpse. Modem restrictions in crematoria mean that these days the grave goods would be burned separately in a bonfire at home.

For practical reasons the main funeral ceremony is likely to be held in the home or a hired hall, with only the briefest of services at the crematorium or graveside. The nature of the main service varies, but commonly involves the recitation of poems and eulogies, stories told of the deceased's life, promises made to the dead (to carry on their work, look after loved ones etc) and often the presentation of grave goods.

If a brief service were held at the funeral parlour, then the officiating people would provide their own religious artefacts. These would commonly be statues of various gods and goddesses connected with death, candles and maybe a skull (usually a plaster one, not many people carry around real skulls these days!) Funeral colours vary from tradition to tradition, and would be reflected in the choice of candles, clothing, and cloth to drop over altar tables etc. For example, the Druids favoured patterns of red & white, while most Wiccans prefer black.

Headstones are not particularly popular amongst Pagans. Many would favour a tree planted over the grave (or elsewhere, if the cemetery would not allow this), yew trees being the most traditional grave-markers in Britain. Others would prefer a wooden marker, particularly if it is engraved with sentiments in whichever alphabet is favoured by that particular tradition.

All the Pagan traditions of which I am aware hold annual festivals to honour the dead.

At these times graves (or spots where ashes were scattered) may be visited and offerings made to the ancestors. However, these festivities should in no way impact upon funeral directors.

Some Notes on Pagan Attitudes to Death

There are subtle differences of belief about death both between, and sometimes within, the assorted forms of Paganism. It would be impossible to cover all possible variations, but some common themes are:

The Soul - most Pagans believe that there is an essence, a vital spark that survives physical death and continues on in some way. This force is known by various different names, and there are assorted views as to where it goes at death, how long it survives the body, and what exactly happens to it in the long run. Most Pagans believe that this soul is sentient and can be contacted by the living, either deliberately (through a medium) or unexpectedly (such as with tales of ghosts etc.) It is commonly accepted that humans are not the only creatures to have souls or to enjoy an existence after death.

Afterlife - most Pagans believe in a Spirit World (usually a whole selection of them) populated by a variety of intelligent forces ~ gods, nature spirits, the dead etc. Sometimes the soul's destination depends on the manner of death ~ Heathens believe that those who die courageously in battle go to Valhalla, whilst those who drown at sea go to the realm of the goddess Ran etc. Some perceptions of the Afterlife are a bit vague and unspecified, such as the Greek view of Hades. For others the Afterlife is very similar to the mortal life (albeit jollier), such as the Egyptian view of the Fields of Aalu.

Long Term - most Pagans subscribe to some form of reincarnation, where the soul eventually returns to the world of flesh. Some traditions believe that one returns as the same species (once a human, always a human.) Others, such as Druids, allow for transmigration ~ the possibility of coming back as an animal etc. The concept of attaining a state of spiritual perfection (and so ceasing to reincarnate) has no real relevance in Paganism. Most Pagans believe that there is a gap between death in one body and rebirth in another, and that this interval is spent in some Otherworldly dimension.

Funerals - these are held for two main reasons. Firstly, to honour the dead and ease their passage into the Afterlife. Having certain rituals performed may help the soul on its way over, conversely failure to do

such rites may cause distress to the dead, or slow their journey (so they come back and plague the living!) Secondly, it is to help the mourners. Usually Pagan funerals are jolly affairs ~ celebrations of the achievements of the deceased, rather than gloomy reflections on the misery of the relatives. Most cultures included the recitations of eulogies or similar means of praising the dead, often the presentation of gifts to the dead (buried or burned with the body), and a feast at which a plate of food is left out for the deceased. This will differ slightly if the person died too young to achieve much, or was largely disliked and little nice can be said of them. A common practice for modem Pagans is to plant a tree in memory of the dead.

Subsequent Rituals - almost all Pagan cultures have an annual festival (time of year varies) in which the generic dead are remembered and honoured with gifts, or special readings etc. Such rites may sometimes involve a visit to the graveside of specific corpses, or at least the recitation of a list of names.

Same-Sex Relationships, an Historical Overview

My intention in this presentation is to look at some of the main religious influences on our attitudes to homosexual relationships in Britain. The law banning consenting sex between two adult men was first addressed in Britain in 1967, before full parity with heterosexuals was granted in 2004. The origins of this common law can be traced back to the decision by King Henry VIII to incorporate the Church's condemnation of homosexuality into secular governance in 1533. Even then, the attempt to outlaw and punish those who preferred sex with their own gender was nothing new.

One of the earliest recorded laws so far found on the matter is usually regarded as the Holiness Code of Leviticus, which is generally considered well over 3, 000 years old. Verse 20:13 reads: "If a man also lies with mankind as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death." This passage has been used throughout the intervening centuries by innumerable religious sects and governments to justify the imprisonment, torture, and execution of people imagined, rightly or wrongly, to be gay.

Not all Jews and Christians have accepted it without question. Many, such as John Selby Spong, have pointed out that surrounding passages also call for the execution of teenagers who are rude to their parents, and describe the wearing of polycotton shirts as an abomination in the eyes of Adonai. That has a certain surreal humour value, unless you happen to know of someone who was murdered or driven to suicide by the unrelenting hatred of the supposedly godly.

Many scholars also look to Persian religion as a source of sanction against homosexuality. Whilst Zoroastrianism has not had a prominent influence on British attitudes, it has arguable had an indirect influence via its impact on Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In its earliest form, the religion of Persia was polytheistic and had no laws against gay sex ~ a fairly common circumstance back then, given that polytheism tends to embrace diversity. For most of those ancient religions, an individual's sexual preferences were essentially a matter of personal taste, rather than a matter of morality or spirituality.

When the prophet Zarathushtra converted the Persians to monotheism, he appears to have made no comment on the matter either. It was not until the writing of the Vendidad many centuries later, between 200 and 400CE, that we find the first Persian sanction. Fargad 8, Verse 32 states ~ "The man that lies with mankind as man lies with womankind, or as woman lies with mankind, is the man that is a Daeva; this one is the man that is a worshipper of the Daevas, that is a male paramour of the Daevas."

The word Daeva is usually translated as meaning a devil, though originally it signified one of the Shining Ones, or gods. Ahura Mazda was asked, in Verse 27, how a Zoroastrian might cleanse himself of the sin of homosexuality. He responded ~ "For that deed there is nothing that can pay, nothing that can atone, nothing that can cleanse from it; it is a trespass for which there is no atonement, for ever and ever."

It is curious that the word used to criticise homosexuals can mean either a devil or a shining god. The Phoenician or Canaanite religion had priests known as qedeshim. For a time they were part of early Hebrew religion too, though the Old Testament recommended their expulsion. This Canaanite word originally meant holy man, though the King James and various other translations render it as sodomite. The feminine term, qedeshoth, is conventionally translated as prostitute. These religious castes were primarily devoted to the goddess Asherah, also called Astarte. Historians hotly debate whether this caste offered sexual services in addition to the more conventional priestly ones. Certainly in the minds of a great many Bible translators they did. Modern-day devotees of Asherah take the concept of sacred sexuality very seriously.

Victorian schoolteachers would often find their Classics classes a little difficult when the euphemistic 'unspeakable sin of the Greeks' reared its head in poetic and philosophical texts. Way back in 630BCE, the Greek poet Alcman composed poetry for a lesbian wedding. Same-sex marriages are nothing new. The word lesbian itself, of course, derives from the Greek. The isle of Lesbos was once the home of poet, playwright, and headmistress Sappho, most of whose poetry to the beautiful girls in her Finishing School was repressed and burnt by the Vatican. Enough survived that people two thousand years later should speak of lesbians and sapphics. As well as being a literary genius, the bisexual Sappho was also a priestess to the goddess Aphrodite. Not only did the ancient world invent the idea of same-sex weddings, but it had

no particular problem with gay priests or priestesses either. It should be noted that Romano-Greek definitions of sexual identity were not structured by the issue of gender, such as our views are today. For the Mediterranean cultures the social status of the two partners was far more crucial than the gender, and defined what erotic acts were considered socially acceptable. They had no concepts of gay, straight or bisexual. Only ideas of high caste and low caste. Such sexual laws as those cultures had then, mostly dealt with issues of class rather than gender.

The Greeks also gave us such now-outmoded words for gay men as uranians and catamites, both terms derived from the names of old gods. Greek myth attributed the invention of homosexual love not to some fiendish devil, but to the most beautiful of all the Olympians ~ Apollo himself. His was the first male-male partnership, when he fell in love with the beautiful prince Hyacinthus. The mighty warriors of Sparta so admired Hyacinthus and his love for the radiant sun god that every summer they held a three-day festival in his honour, which still occurs in some places today.

The Egyptians referred to homosexual activity in a variety of mythical and cultural contexts. They have even left us what may well be the earliest tomb of two male lovers. Khnum-hotep and Ni-ankh-khnum were courtiers, unrelated by blood, who took the unusual step of being buried together in the same tomb. One of the wall paintings shows them with arms round each other, an act of intimacy almost unknown in Egyptian art ~ even for heterosexual married couples.

The Greeks, Romans and Egyptians were apt to engage in apotheosis - the process by which the recently deceased are elevated beyond the realms of minor ancestral spirits and into the ranks of demigods. One of the last pagans to be apotheosised was Antinous. This classically handsome young man was the lover of the Emperor Hadrian (he of the Scottish wall), who took the throne in the year 117CE, dying in 138. Greek-born Antinous was loved for a few short but passionate years, before he drowned in the Nile at the age of about 20. A spontaneous reverence for the lost youth soon sprang up, along with tales of his rising from the grave to become an immortal god. When Hadrian heard of this, he responded by instituting a state cult. At least seven large temples were built across the Empire to this sanctified figure, and a whole city was built in his honour on the banks of the Nile.

Festivals were instituted in honour of Antinous, most notably his death on October 28th and birth on November 27th. Whilst Britain was part of the Roman Empire, these festivals were marked here too indeed they are still marked by some modern Pagans. In the numerous small shrines built to him, he was (and still is) honoured as a patron of the arts, of male beauty, and seen as a general protector and guide to the dead. Whilst the impact of Antinous on British attitudes has not been large, it is worth noting that whilst for some faiths homosexuals are devils, for others they are gods!

Whilst the attitudes of Mediterranean polytheist religions are well documented, the views of the faiths from Northern Europe are less well known. Some commentary has, however, survived. The Hellenic writer Diodorus, back in 400BCE, described, with some degree of surprise, how the Celts had no concepts of social dominance within the sexual arena, but "...they weave around other males in a strange frenzy. They are accustomed to sleeping on the ground upon hides of wild beasts and indulge together with male partners on both sides for sex." At much the same time Aristotle spoke of "...those nations which openly approve of sexual relations between men, such as the Celts and certain others."

The Christian commentator Bardaisan wrote in the early 3rd century that "In the countries of the north, in the lands of the Germans and those of their neighbours, handsome young men assume the role of wives towards other men, and they celebrate marriage feasts." Fellow Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea, wrote in the 4th century that "Among the Gauls, the young men marry each other with complete freedom. In doing this, they do not incur any reproach or blame, since this is done according to custom amongst them." Commentary on lesbian relationships is harder to find, largely because the mostly male historians of that period had little interest in what women got up to.

Whilst we cannot say that every single tribe followed the same pattern, the suggestion is that same-sex love was not considered odd or strange, or something to be stamped out. The Fenechus law codes of Ireland, which changed little under Christian rule, made no specific mention of homosexuality. The Tain bo Cualigne myth, itself committed to writing by monks during a period when Ireland maintained both Christian and Druid traditions, contains some beautiful love poetry sung by the warrior Cuchulainn over the corpse of his dead companion Ferdiad. The poem describes them as "men who shared a bed", and does so in

entirely sympathetic terms.

During the 19th century it was common for European writers to refer to homosexuality as either the German or the English vice, different predilections being associated with different countries. Whether this was in any way a hang-over of those early tribal attitudes, or simply a matter of nationalist stereotyping, is hard to say.

We have already mentioned Leviticus as a source for justifying later laws against gay unions. Another Biblical tale frequently quoted is that of Sodom and Gomorrah. Two angels visited Lot in the city, and the men of the city gathered in a mob outside demanding to "know" the visitors ~ which a good many have taken to mean rape, though this is not actually stated. Many theologians have considered angels as essentially sexless, neither male nor female. The attempted rape (if such a thing took place at all) of a genderless entity could hardly be constituted as a homosexual act, or a heterosexual one either. Quite how it should be labelled is anyone's guess. Many commentators have focussed on the sin of Sodom as being inhospitality towards strangers, not a particular sexual predilection. By the end of the first century CE, an increasing number of Jewish and Christian thinkers, such as the historian Josephus, promoted the idea that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality. It is ironic that this tale should have been made into one of sexual morality, given that Lot's apparently religiously acceptable response to the mob was to offer his own two daughters up to be raped instead. Scarcely an icon of sexual probity.

Despite the proscriptions, there have been vicars, priests, rabbis and so forth over the centuries who have broken with tradition to bless same-sex unions. Often ending up in a good deal of trouble for doing so. In recent years those religions that stigmatise homosexuality have seen growing lobbies from within to either change their views entirely, or to distinguish between the sinner and the sin ~ that is, to tolerate gays so long as they are celibate. Much of the latter argument has been largely in response to assorted unproven psychological theories claiming genetic origins for homosexual desire. Those who subscribe to such ideas have inclined to the view that the urge is taken out of the realm of choice (and therefore can scarcely be condemned), it being only the decision to act on the urge that carries a moral value.

Pressure to change laws in Britain has been growing since the Victorian

age, and has come primarily from secular and humanist sources. Whilst some religious voices have been in favour of liberalisation, the loudest have usually been conservative ones. Britain has yet to see the more extreme examples from America of evangelists picketing the funerals of gay people, and screaming abuse at the mourners. However, we still have many examples of people who feel it their moral right to spit at, or beat up suspected gays. Or to kick them to death, or bomb gay pubs. The views of such people are not born in a moral vacuum, but out of generations of people being indoctrinated with the socially-sanctioned notion that homosexuality warrants violence or death.

In concentrating primarily on those religions that have had a strong influence on our British legal and moral system, I have not touched upon the wealth of sources from the Far East. Acceptance of same-sex marriages was common in China, as was nanshoku in Japan. Nor have I mentioned the diverse array of practices amongst the native tribes of North and Central America, some of which had third and fourth genders. Nor have we looked at practices in India, nor at the love poetry of Muslims such as Abu Nuwas and later medieval writers. Suffice to say that world is a vast and diverse place. Gay marriage is not some bit of contemporary political correctness. It is a long tradition, with its roots in the polytheist faiths of the ancient world, which has continued to grow and develop throughout the prominence of monotheism and secular humanism.

The earlier quote from the Vendidad relates specifically to how Zoroastrians are expected to behave. It makes no proscription as to the behaviour of non-believers. Clearly it is the right of each religion to demarcate what is and is not acceptable for its own followers. In exploring the attitudes of varying faiths, it is not my intention to suggest that religion A adopt the views of religion B, simply to comment on the source of those views. However, I would like to emphasise my personal view that the world would probably be a happier place if religions focussed on instructing their own devotees, and did not attempt to impose their laws on the world at large.

Pagan Justice

In law courts across the world statues can be seen of a woman holding scales and wielding a sword. This is the Greek goddess Themis, who continues still to rally her devotees to the cause of justice, as she did in the ancient world.

For the Egyptians, the goddess Ma'at also bore a set of scales in which truth could be weighed. For ancient and modern Kemetics, the harmony and order of Ma'at governs the universe, and both Gods and men bow to her. The power of Ma'at is not simply a matter of obeying rules, but of righteous living in balance and peace with the whole world – the living, the dead, animals, plants, the environment, the Gods themselves.

Given that women were not even allowed to sit on juries until comparatively recently, it may seem ironic to many that the West has continued to view justice as female long after turning away from the old goddesses.

The term Paganism covers a number of different religions, and each have their own ideas as to what actions constitute a crime, and how best to punish them. Some Pagan cultures are quite liberal, others draconian.

The early Celtic and Germanic tribes laid a heavy emphasis upon restorative justice, and the modern followers of their religions continue to do so. The Brehon law courts of early Ireland viewed crime as an attempt to forcibly take something from a third party. An aggressor might rob someone of their property, their good name, their health or their life. One of the duties of the judge was to allot a monetary value to that which had been taken, and order the criminal to pay this back along with a compensation to others affected.

Seeing a burglar imprisoned may give some satisfaction, but it still does not replace one's missing goods. For both ancient and modern druids, it is important that the victims should have some amends made to them by the criminal. This is a system that British law is gradually beginning to turn back to, though too often any compensation comes out of the public purse and not from the villain in question.

This principle may be applied to all areas of life. Justice is not simply something doled out in a courtroom – it is about how we treat each

other on a daily basis; about how our shopping choices affect the people who manufacture the goods we buy; about how our actions impact upon the earth and all her creatures; about how we thank our Gods for their generosity; about how we honour the memory of the dead.

It is unethical to take something without consent and, where we do, we should look to pay back with compensation: chop down one tree, plant three in its stead.

In ancient times it was the duty of every great warrior to protect the weak. It was the duty of every citizen of the tribe to bring pressure to bear upon the guilty, to force them to pay their dues. The Celts provided a number of social mechanisms for this, such as the *troscad* or hunger-strike. Most of these forms are no longer viable in the 21st century, but it is cheering to see ever-growing numbers of people from all walks of life that are prepared to become agents for justice – be it writing letters of protest, going on marches, shopping ethically, or using any of a dozen other non-violent means. The more that ordinary people are willing to take responsibility for justice, the better our collective futures look.

Unfortunately, rallying to a cause for social justice can, too often, mask a myriad of motives. Too many people enjoy fury for its own sake, and fuel fires of supposed outrage that they have no intention of ever quenching.

Feuds must ultimately end in the acceptance of justice by both parties, not just the captured miscreant. Greek myth gives us the example of Orestes, who killed his own mother in reprise for her murder of his father. The Furies pursued him for this terrible act of kin-slaying, till at last the wise goddess Athena, sustainer of civic order, judged him to have suffered enough under their yoke. Orestes was washed clean of the blood on his hands, and the Furies retired, satisfied.

At some stage the victims of injustice, and their defenders, must draw a line under the crime and move on. The perpetrators must be allowed to begin life afresh, their deed paid for. Otherwise the feuds become unending, and the shadows cast by the first act deepen until we are all wandering in the night.

Beannachd Diathan leat.

A Pagan View of Citizenship and Democracy

Suffolk once formed the southern province of the Saxon Kingdom of the East Angles. It is the Saxons who gave us the names for the days of the week, and we know that Tuesday is named in honour of the Saxon God Tiw.

Tiw is considered to be the Patron God of Law and Government. What else do we know about him?

He is one of the Aesir family of Gods.

When the worlds were confronted with the prospect of chaos and disorder being let loose in the form of a giant wolf, it was Tiw amongst the Gods who sacrificed his hand in order that the wolf could be tethered and the worlds saved.

The Saxons believed that to govern honourably and justly you had to be prepared to sacrifice of yourself. It is my belief that this concept is still valid in the world today.

Woden is another Saxon God, indeed he was to them the "ALL FATHER", "THE HIGH ONE", "A GOD ABOVE GODS", he is credited with giving to mankind the *Havamal* - translated as 'Words of the High One', this has been handed down to us today in the Eddas - works of prose and poetry.

The *Havamal* is a book of conduct and advises Heathens on how we should conduct ourselves in our life and in our dealings with others.

With regard to government we are advised that persons in government should be prudent in their dealings and should know their assets and deploy them wisely with foresight.

We are also advised that to debate in the process of deliberation is healthy and honourable.

With regard to Citizenship we are advised toward many noble attributes:

We are advised that our conduct and disposition both when at home and away should be honourable.

We are advised on our care of both the poor and disabled in society.

We are advised against excess, particularly with regard to food and

drink.

These are just a very few of the attributes extolled within the pages of the Havamal.

The *Havamal* if studied, still speaks to us today and is as valid now as it was over a millennium ago to our forefathers.

Not only in this country were our Pagan ancestors much concerned with the qualities of government and citizenship, indeed it was the Pagans of Ancient Greece who gave to the world the concept and practice of democracy. The first attempts were limited to wealthy and mature men, and it is worth remembering that the franchise has only very recently been extended to women, the poor and the young.

The ancient Gaelic laws of the Fenechus also allowed for a limited form of democracy, though under it both sexes were allowed to express their opinions, so long as they were members of the wealthy and educated elite. The Fenechus conferred full legal rights only on those who took full legal responsibility within the tribe. A member of the tribe, or of allied tribes, was considered to be an *Aurrad* ~ someone deserving of full protection of the law, and full access to all that tribal life had to offer. The rest of the world was classed as *Deorrad*, unknown strangers who should be treated hospitably, but with caution. Their legal protection was limited, as was their access to such things as the tax-supported hospitals that the ancient laws required each chieftain to organise. Only those who had contributed towards the system could expect to benefit fully from it.

The Romans concern with *Civitas* (good citizenship) is very well documented, the most overt examples being all the temples, public baths, libraries and so forth donated towards Roman towns by their wealthiest citizens. The no-less-important contributions of the poorer members of that ancient empire have not survived the ravages of time so well. To be a good citizen in Roman times was considered to be one of the noblest of virtues.

The very word citizen derives from the same root as *Civitas*, and meant someone who lived in a city and had both rights and responsibilities under law, much like the Gaelic notion of an Aurrad ~ though they, of course, lived an essentially rural life. These days a citizen is no longer just a city-dweller, the concept has expanded to include our rural population too. Though it has to be noted that all our major centres of

political power are to be found in the urban sprawl, not in the countryside.

Citizenship is no longer conferred only upon the wealthy, but upon all. This can only be a good thing. Of recent years the greater focus has been on people demanding their civil rights, with much less interest in people fulfilling their civic responsibilities. It is doubtful if this is desirable, but perhaps in time the balance will even out.

So we see that what concerns us today may not be too different from the concerns of our forebears.

The qualities required in democratic government today are really not very different from those required countless centuries ago, likewise the qualities of citizenship.

A Thought on Saxon Suffolk

This thought for the Day was given by Terry Smith to Suffolk County Councillors at the Council Meeting when they were setting the budget. Terry received a standing ovation.

Thank you for asking me to come and speak to you today. In preparing my talk I was very aware of Ipswich's Saxon Founding Fathers and the fact that Suffolk was the southern province of the Saxon Kingdom of the Eastern Angles.

It is the Saxons who gave us the names for the days of the week, and we know that Tuesday is named after the Saxon god Tiw. Tiw was considered by the Saxons to be the patron god of Law and Government. It could possibly be deemed therefore that Tuesday could be a good day for a council to meet and conduct its business.

What do we know about Tiw? He was one of the Aesir family of gods from Northern Europe. When the Worlds were confronted with the prospect of chaos and disorder being let loose upon them, it was Tiw among the gods who sacrificed his hand in order that the wolf could be tethered and the worlds saved.

The Saxons believed that to govern you had to be prepared to sacrifice of yourself in order to serve honourably and justly. Sacrifice in Saxon times was very different to what it is today, but sacrifice is still pertinent. In order to lead your community you must serve your community, you are available and at the beck and call of your constituents.

You sacrifice your time selflessly in order to ensure the continuum of local government and therefore are the main players in the writing of the local history of tomorrow. The burden of decision making is upon you, this can not always be easy, what with the demands on the purse, and the importance of the maximisation of resources. The path you tread is not an easy one, on occasions you will be damned if you do or damned if you don't. Your calling is not always a bed of roses.

Woden was another Saxon god, indeed he was to them the "ALL FATHER", "THE HIGH ONE", "A GOD ABOVE GODS".

It is from him that we have the *HAVAMAL* - translated as "The Words of the High One". These have been handed down to us in the Eddas - Works of prose and poetry.

“The Words of the High One” advise us to pursue moderation in most things, and of the qualities pertinent to government we are advised that persons in government should be:

Prudent in their dealings.

Should know their assets and deploy them wisely with foresight.

“The Words of the High One” also advise us that to debate in the process of deliberation is healthy. So perhaps not so much has changed since the times of the early Saxon settlers!

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you well in your meeting and to thank you for inviting me here today to talk to you.

SUFFOLK INTER-FAITH RESOURCE

Was a charitable company which was formed by members of local faiths in Suffolk.

Encouraged people of different faiths to meet and share their traditions to promote mutual understanding.

Took an active role in the inter-faith and multi-cultural process in Suffolk and East Anglia.

Collected and produced study materials and made them available for schools and other interested bodies.

Assembled a team of tutors from the local faith communities who were available to speak about their faiths.

Provided Diversity Training Days for professional people.

Provided a range of activities for the general public.

Promoted research and the exploration of ideas.

Liaised with national and international inter-faith organisations and networks.

Was committed to equal opportunities and encourages people from different backgrounds to contribute their life experience and their scholarship.