

THE PAGAN ISSUE

and where it led to

*A dialogue between Tony Merry, David Jones, and Vivian Milroy.
Yvonne Craig joined later.*

DAVID: It seems to me that the term 'paganism' presses more buttons than sex. Some people froth at the mouth at the very idea of paganism; the word seems to conjure up threats to decent folk. One of the things I'd like to understand is, what is that threat? Another point is that pagan practice, - and I've not read a great deal about it - is to be sound ecologically, and 'whole-some', in both the easy to love splendours of nature, and also the bits that are difficult, the bits that are red in tooth and claw. It's the integration of all of that with love, death, suffering, and with all that is beyond individual and collective human experience. Shall I go on?

TONY: Sure.

VIVIAN: You seem to have it all worked out: so get it off your chest.

DAVID: Well, this is where I think the threat is. We construct a religious system a cosmology, to make the world safe. Other religions challenge the system on which we depend; So we feel frightened and that leads to fighting off the threat. As to what pagans really do, they seem to me to be a mixture of fringe humanistic practitioners. Some people find them fascinating. I must confess that I find them as exciting as a born-again mormon, i.e. very boring indeed.

Dr. Vivienne Crowley: I am also sorry that some people find Paganism frightening. I think this is because they have been indoctrinated by monotheisms which teach people that there is only one correct version of God who is usually addressed as 'He'. All other versions are wrong and if one worships them, one is worshipping the Devil.

Brian Thorne: Paganism strikes fear into many people because they associate it with attempts to placate or collude with dark forces. Pagan rituals are therefore especially to be feared because they have the power to sweep people into what they experience as a dangerous unknown without any compass.

VIVIAN: You link paganism with humanistic; perhaps you could give us your definition of humanistic?

DAVID: To me that which is humanistic is also 'whole-some'; it links mind, body, and spirit. It values systems for self discovery and for exploration of experience and awareness, and the empowerment of

TONY: I agree with everything you said. But I don't believe that that is the issue - whether paganism is a good thing or a bad.. The issue was brought up or stimulated by the possibility -that the AHP inadvertently, or without properly thinking it through, might be on its way to hanging its hat on a particular religious peg. My understanding of paganism is that it is a religion of no religion, as it were.. That is, if your'e not a christian, and not a mohammedan and not a jew, then you're a pagan. There's danger involved in associating AHP with one of other of these particular disciplines. There's danger in alienating people with sincerely held different spiritual views.

DAVID: I'm prepared sometimes to take that risk; and I take it with pagans without needing to hang the whole of AHP on it. It does seem to me to be humanistic, like Zen, and Father Herbert Slade for example: if he came to do things for AHP, I'd be delighted. Sometimes I think this risk is worth taking.

Shan Jayran: all this is rooted in Judaeo-christian propaganda. 'Pagan' comes from the latin 'paganus', a country person. When christianity became the trendy city religion, country folk who kept to older ways were sneered at as 'country bumpkins'. Later the Church developed this into more sinister thought policing, claiming that anyone outside their flock had no valid religion. So 'Pagan' became a life threatening insult

TONY: Yes, Brian Thorne has written about the connection he has made between humanistic psychology and christianity.

VIVIAN: Frank Lake of course made the same connections.

DAVID: In his book, *Clinical Theology*, he comes out with it very clearly.

TONY: I don't believe that religious or spiritual beliefs are necessarily incompatible with being humanistic. That's not what I'm saying. But . . . I don't froth at the mouth when I hear the word 'paganism'. My response is much more in line with yours of being slightly bored by it., rather than threatened or whatever.

VIVIAN. I think paganism sounds splendid. like the association with nature . . it is down to earth, back to the earth, the open air; using some kind of ritual to associate with the earth and nature. How about the Red Indians, David, - do they bore you?

DAVID: No, they're fascinating

VIVIAN: But it's the same thing with slightly different emphasis.

DAVID: I've never met a Red Indian . . . but I'm always slightly suspicious of the British Red Indians.

VIVIAN: I once met a wonderful Red Indian called Sun Bear: he was an enormous man, tremendously charismatic and he had some splendid rituals like hugging trees for energy, and digging a hole and shouting all your pain and hatred into it and then burying it.

Brian: Humanistic psychology by affirming the doctrine of original righteousness can actually communicate to Christians who have suffered at the hands of punitive judges, the essential meaning of the incarnation and the resurrection.

Vivienne: Pagans generally subscribe to a view that the divine is immanent in nature and the wider physical universe, and that both are sacred. Most would also subscribe to the view that the divine is immanent in human beings; within each of us is a divine core. Some, but not all, would also see the divine as also being transcendent and outside matter. I see this immanence as a key difference between Paganism and most other religions, in that its attitude to the material world which must be treated with reverence and respect.

TONY: But all these things stand on their own, for themselves,. I don't think that we need even to be talking about whether they're humanistic psychology or not, or whether it is legitimate to include them in AHP kinds of activities. If your're a pagan, you're a pagan, and I'm happy to let you be a pagan, and if you also have a feeling for what John Rowan calls 'the heartland of humanistic psychology' and you want to get involved in that, then, what's to stop you?

VIVIAN: But what we're talking about now is not the pragmatics, but what is the nature of these forms of belief - of paganism, shamanism, roman catholicism, buddhism and all the other isms. Is there a common link? And is that link likely to be humanistic or life-enhancing?

DAVID: I think that religions always contain an element that is life-enhancing, but they always contain an element that is institutionalized, which can be very oppressive. and death dealing.

VIVIAN: Well, some do, some don't; the quakers, for example, I don't think are at all oppressing.

DAVID: I should have said 'a tendency', but I'm sure the majority of religions, or isms, do have an element of pressure.

TONY: I'm sure that's because the church, in today's culture, is tied up with the structure of the state and that they are both in their different ways, forms of social control, in encouraging

Shan: *Completely true. There is no one thing I do as a witch that cannot be done by anyone else who is not. But whether dancing naked by moonlight, hugging trees, journeying to meet the Shadow in trance, or passing the cup of celebration booze (= chalice), all these things are more intense and more meaningful if I do them to express my beliefs in raw freedom, a live Earth, my continuity with my ancestors and my descendants etc. So, it's my inner stuff that marks me Pagan, not the activities I choose.*

Vivienne: Yes, the institutionalism aspect of religion can be very 'death-dealing', sometimes literally when we consider the history of religious persecution.

John: This reminds me of the important distinction between legitimate religion (rules and rituals) and authentic religion (a living experience) which Ken Wilber talks about.

ways of being that are acceptable and controllable. They develop norms that are oppressive and they're oppressive because they control people's freedom to be who they are.

VIVIAN: But part of these oppressive norms has to do with the transpersonal, the numinous, the world of the structured isms. There is something floating up there, or in here and do we have anything coherent to say about it? . . . or do people not want to know?

TONY: What is it they don't want to know?

DAVID: The nature of God ?

TONY: Well I think we can get confused between questions about the nature of God, and questions about organized religion.

VIVIAN: But they are linked.

DAVID: I think the significance of the 'god' religions is that they are positive that there is an entity out there who in some way embodies all that is right and good and so on.

TONY: You may have put your finger on something. The 'god' religions - mainly judaeo-christian - seem to me in the main to be fundamentally incompatible with the aims of humanistic psychology, for one, I think very good, reason and that is, if you believe you are born into the world in a state of sin and that your role in life is to redeem your sins by knowing God, and if that's the point of life, I don't see how you can hold that view and at the same time

Vivienne: I think Tony is right, but another reason why the Church and patriarchal monotheisms are oppressive is because their followers must adhere to a prescribed set of beliefs.

BRIAN: For me what is immensely encouraging at present is the way in which the Christian churches in Britain - and especially the C of E and the Roman Catholics - are becoming increasingly potent critics of the government of the day.

Shan : Or of the Goddess, who has been even more thoroughly ignored as more intimate, more insidious, more gutsy, more whole.

BRIAN: For the Christian, that is precisely why the incarnation was necessary.

John : This all takes it for granted that religion must be monotheistic. But paganism, for example is a polytheistic religion. That is why it is so tolerant. And James Hillman has suggested that most psychotherapy is 'monotheistic' in the sense that it aims at the final unity, the total self, the full integrated being - in other words, the One. But why? Why shouldn't people be fundamentally multiple?

BRIAN: This is a travesty of Christian belief, although it is

call yourself a humanistic psychologist, because humanistic psychology doesn't recognise original sin.

DAVID: Well, I think all that is totally translatable into humanistic ideas. Ideas of the 'shadow', ideas that self discovery and self exploration can never be complete. We're always tied up in stress, in other words, part of what you call evil, or sin. It's all translatable.

TONY: You have to bend it a lot.

VIVIAN: I wouldn't bend it. I would cut straight through to the start of it. This is a 'church' problem, not a 'religious' problem. The basic teachings of Christ for example, were 'love your neighbour as yourself', 'take no thought for the morrow', 'lay not up for yourselves treasure on earth.' In fact, live a poor, aware, loving life, full stop.

DAVID: And render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

VIVIAN: Exactly, and render unto Margaret Thatcher the things that are Margaret Thatcher's.

DAVID: But look, Jesus Christ was just one of many holy men wandering about in Palestine or wherever it was. They understood that sort of thing. Just as in China many people intuitively understand the essence of buddhism. But if you get a publicity-minded Lhama and he begins to write things down, then you get something as closely related to buddhism as present day church christianity is related to Jesus Christ.

what many Christians believe. St. Athanasius put in in a much more liberating nutshell: 'God became man so that man might become God'.

VIVIAN: Which is why people today are looking for alternative ways of experiencing their spiritual dimension. Is there any common ground . . . and what, if anything do we have to say about it?

TONY: It seems the main thing that we say as humanists is to encourage people to explore meaning, the meaning of life if you like, in whatever way they find fruitful or life-enhancing for them. And that is not exclusive. It doesn't exclude their being christians: it doesn't exclude people being in any religious group.

VIVIAN: How do we encourage people to explore meaning?

TONY: From a humanistic perspective we make available to people different ideas and principles and philosophies and disciplines, so that they themselves can choose from a position of more understanding or more knowledge, without at the same time our appearing to be endorsing one lot against the others, or even getting involved in this kind of discussion. It's perfectly reasonable for people to choose spiritual disciplines for themselves. And it's perfectly reasonable that we, as humanists should encourage that.

DAVID: I'd like to get back to finding out what is the essence of being humanistic, and I'd like to add one thing to what you've already said, and that is, one of the things humanistic is, is a commitment to validating other people's power and rejecting the idea that there's any good way in which I should exercise power

BRIAN: I certainly agree that Christians who have an Augustinian understanding of original sin would be hard pressed to operate from a humanistic perspective.

over you. I can exercise power some times, so long as I am committed to the value of you developing your own power.

TONY: That is we can only use power in a way that empowers others.

VIVIAN: Yes, in a loving, aware way.

TONY: That seems to be a central concept that joins us together as humanists; that we are suspicious of power, or the way that power has traditionally been used, as the power to manipulate people. One of the things that in the past has tended to overpower me, in religion, is the christian church-orientated religion where the message I got was that I was somehow bad. You know, that I was a sinner. The hymns that I sang in church all said I was a miserable sinner, I was a lost sheep, I've strayed from the ways, forgive us our sins, forgive us our trespasses. In other words, it all came from the point of view - 'you're a shit!' and what you must do to clean up your act is to get to know god through Jesus.

DAVID: Well I'm against all of that.

TONY: So maybe this kind of thing which many of us experience - that's the reason why we froth at the mouth a bit when it looks like we're being pulled into another religious dogma, I don't care what it is, paganism, theosophy, whatever it happens to be.

John : Starhawk, a feminist witch has written very well about power, distinguishing between power-over, power with, and power-from within. Her latest book is all about this.

VIVIAN: But they're all in some way looking for meaning.

TONY: I feel the power of organised religion is more used to overpower and manipulate me than to liberate my spirit, let me put it that way.

VIVIAN: So, is there a pecking order of authoritarianism in religion? like obviously Khomeini muslim fundamentalists are top of the league and the quakers are I guess somewhere at the bottom of the league. Paganism I should think fairly low.

TONY: As far as I know there's not a pagan church.

VIVIAN: There are a lot of churches.

DAVID: I don't know how autocratic they are; they might be very. They might be like the freemasons for all I know.

TONY: Yes but, as soon as you call yourself Priestess Josephine Smith you are immediately, with no question at all, placing yourself in the position of the knower, and the giver and other people as the congregation, and that's a hierarchy.

DAVID: Well, look into it; I think they'll claim that the christians who came along, robbed us of priestliness.

TONY: Yes, I'm sure.

DAVID: And what they're practising is the real priestliness where everyone in the community is a priest.

John: Paganism is not, of course, an organized religion; it does not have an orthodoxy or a hierarchy or a central body of any kind.

Vivienne: Modern Paganism is basically anti-institution and generally operates in small groups of people who work and share together. Vivian's example of the Quakers is very appropriate. The move away from authoritarian religious structures and religion organised on our behalf by others seems to be an essential feature of New Age spirituality and a very welcome one.

John: There is an interesting feminist discussion of this question in Starhawk (1982)

TONY: Well if everybody's a priest
.....

DAVID: Well, it's like everybody
is a friend in the quakers; everyone
takes an equal part. Very human-
istic.

TONY: Well the history of paganism
may very well be as you describe,
that we were robbed of our true
religion by the christians, but .
. .

DAVID: They were persecuted
by the christians certainly.

TONY: Religion persecutes people;
that's what it does. Like, garage
mechanics mend cars, and religions
persecute people.

DAVID: And no doubt paganism
at some point in its history, persec-
uted people.

*John: No, paganism has never
persecuted anyone.*

TONY: Religions tell you what
it is you must do to get it - you
know, to become one with the
universe. These are the disciplines,
you practice like this, and you
make these kind of relationships
with people in the know and they'll
teach you, help you along.

DAVID: That's not the way I see
buddhism, or even paganism.

TONY: Well I'm talking about
the judaeo-christian religions at
the moment..

VIVIAN: Is the problem, perhaps,
that organized religions today
are not concerned with the individ-
ual as a person, or as part of a
mystic community.

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final unity, the total self, the
full integrated being - in other
words, the One. But why?
Why shouldn't people be fund-
amentally multiple?*

DAVID: Christianity certainly seems to have lost its mystic threads.

VIVIAN: There's a way in which, if you are in touch with your own inner core, then you can be in touch with everybody else.

TONY: That's right. It doesn't matter to you that some people are islamic, or hindus or jains or zoroastrians, because you don't see them as religious people in that sense. I don't look into your eyes and say, 'Oh look, there's a buddhist there !' I'm looking at a human being and I know that we have something to say to each other, provided we don't let these other constructs get in the way.

DAVID: And mystical practices can lead to just such an appreciation.

TONY: But, as we've already said, 'do they?'

VIVIAN: Does paganism do that? Does dancing in the moonlight get you in touch with your inner core?

DAVID: I'm sure it does. It's very like sufi dancing.

At this point we were joined by Yvonne Craig

TONY: It helps to get you in touch with something unnameable, with that which cannot be named .

DAVID: As we were talking then, I realise that there images coming into my mind of the worse kind of oppression, and I suppose the worst kind was Auschwitz. I've just been reading this Primo Levi book, and the thing that strikes me about

him is that he provided us with an answer as to how to live humanistically, with integrity in a situation where the power is utterly malevolent. He was able to be himself, to see other people's motives, to know when he was confused, to know what it was that he wanted, and to do it in a way that didn't make him culpable.

TONY: You mean he didn't join in with it?

DAVID: That's right. He always stood apart from it. I suppose you could say of him that he was clinging to life. There is a time to die, and really, in his situation he should have said 'this is the time to go' What he did say was, I want to tell the world about this'. And that justified his trying to survive in a situation where one person's survival means another person's death. And he survived and he fulfilled his wish.

TONY: It's easy to say that that's oppression; but how much oppression do we actually do to each other? Is that where it starts from? Is that actually present somewhere in me? You know, if you'd interviewed twenty five future Auschwitz guards in 1938 and asked them if they could ever imagine such a thing happening and would they personally be able to behave in such a way, they'd all say, 'no, of course not. That's horrible. We couldn't contemplate it for a moment. Yet the political situation and the cultural situation arise when that kind of behaviour is not only possible but is encouraged and rewarded. I'm sure that perfectly ordinary decent men and women found themselves concentration camp guards.

VIVIAN: And they were brainwashed by a quasi-religion, which is what nazism was at one time.

YVONNE: Did you see the film 'Shoah' that jewish film? Doesn't that seem to show that the seeds of it started much earlier? And it confirms what people like Laurens van der Post say, that it's a manifestation of something within us. Each of us has got a dark side. In certain cultural formations that darkness, that daemonic archetype, becomes unleashed and reinforced. We always need an enemy: we need someone on whom we can project our negative feelings. It's the history of every country and in some cultures it comes out like a boil, like an abscess. It's not just out there: it's in here.

TONY: What you've just been saying has hit the nail on the head in terms of developing some kind of spiritual awareness of ourselves as individual people, and of our fellows as brothers and sisters. If in some way or another we can find ways of encouraging people to do what you just said, and that is get in touch with that nasty part and to do something positive with it: if we can find ways of encouraging people integrating the daimonic and make some kind of creative use of it - and that's what spirituality means to me - because it is contacting people at a deep human level which transcends all those labels - jew, communist, catholic, black, white, male, female - and that's our job, each of us as individuals. How we go about doing it, that's for us.

John: All the forms for the committal of people to Auschwitz, etc, were prepared by psychiatrists, first of all for mentally handicapped people, and then for Jews, homosexuals, etc. Psychology can be oppressive too.

Shan: Witches say, almost as a proverb, that 'the Burning Times' are only just beneath the surface. Szasz described the scapegoating process very well, using witches as his prime example. A recent one is Geoffrey Dickens MP who has tried to project child abuse on to the witches.

Vivienne: This is a problem which is very fundamental to the human race and hence to all religions including Paganism. In one of the rituals of my own Pagan group we say 'darkness and light are met within me'. We cannot deny one or the other part without distorting ourselves. What we must do is to own the darkness within the human race and say, 'I too could have maimed and tortured and killed'.
