

Meet The Modern Pagans

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It has been said that “When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing. They then become capable of believing in anything.”

I recently happened across an article that vividly illustrates that principle. The article is entitled, “Meet the Modern-Day Pagans Who Celebrate the Ancient Gods.” It was written by one Caitlin Dwyer, and was published on Narratively.com. The opening teaser reads,

Deep in the woods of the Pacific Northwest, a community of Druids is reviving Celtic rites. They might seem hokey or outlandish, but maybe, just maybe, they’re the ones who have it all figured out.

The article describes a grove of practicing Druids in Washington State. That grove is part of an organization with a Gaelic name I will not attempt to pronounce, but its initials are ADF. According to the article,

[ADF] is a polytheistic neo-pagan religion that draws its inspiration from ancient Indo-European traditions. It’s organized into local groups, called groves, and was founded in 1983 by a charismatic man named Isaac Bonewits, who, after completing a self-study program at UC Berkeley, earned a bachelor’s degree in ... Magic and Thaumaturgy [the working of wonders or miracles]. Bonewits had dabbled in Satanism and witchcraft before founding [ADF], which in Gaelic means “our own fellowship” or “our own magic.” Although [many] groves worldwide are affiliated with ADF, each organizes its own tailored rituals. At annual pan-pagan festivals, camping trips, and ADF training workshops, as well as over the internet, ADF’s ... members exchange ideas on what rituals should look like. Rather than including official liturgical script, the rituals they perform feature a netting of ideas and ideals, created and debated by poets, Roman legionnaires, mystics, nature lovers, proto-European language nerds, and all kinds of wanderers in search of a connection.

As that alludes to, one of the difficulties these pagans encounter in worshipping the gods of the ancients is that they really don’t know how to go about it. As one Druid put it, “There just isn’t enough preserved out there to actually recreate Irish paganism. One can do a nice superficial gloss, but we have no idea what any rituals actually looked like.” So, these Druids want to worship the goddess Fortuna, or Hermes, or Dionysus, but they don’t have the equivalent of a Bible. There is no guidebook for how these gods and goddess want to be worshiped. So, the pagans get together in forums and debate history and metaphysics, and come up with rituals that seem reasonable. To them.

As the article explains, their rituals center around making offerings. Quoting again:

The idea of reciprocity—of giving something in trade—holds particular importance in Druidic rite, according to [the Arch-Druid of ADF]: “Human relations are set up this way, and we in ADF do the same thing with the spirit world. We make offerings and hope for and ask for blessings in return.”

This the same idea behind trick-or-treating on Halloween, which also comes from Druidism—that is, giving the spirits a treat so they will not play a trick. Parents have no idea their children are playing the part of wicked spirits, extorting goodies in exchange for leaving people alone. Continuing:

So when [the priest] invites the audience to make offerings, one woman breaks apart a chocolate bar for Isis, an Egyptian goddess, and asks for good health in trade Another pours out wine for Dionysos, making the flames hiss. A gender-nonconforming member burns a poem written to Thor. A young white man in a purple cape and Phantom-like half-mask invokes Hermes, the Greek messenger god, stalking the inside of our circle. The diverse pantheon doesn't phase anyone.

Now, all of this may sound hokey—and it is. But these rituals are also deadly serious because of what the Druids are attempting to connect with. Here is another excerpt:

As this is my first Druid ritual, I have no idea how much of this to take seriously. It's hard to tell how much the participants themselves take seriously; there's a lot of laughter and self-deprecation. But when [the Arch-Druid] . . . asks the gates of the spirit world to open, creating a thin, traversable bridge across the red-gold evening breeze, we all grow tense Somewhere on the other side of the property, a bell trickles into the wind. "The gates are open," [the arch-Druid] says finally, and we begin.

So, they actively seek the spirit realm for their offerings. But at least they are safe about it. It says a couple of participants "recite a passage to ward off any spirits that might seek to challenge or question their practices." So, with certain words, they believe they can keep away spirits that might interfere. They only want spirits that support their paganism.

Many Druids chose this way because of dissatisfaction with mainstream Christianity:

Many druid practitioners are reacting to a childhood religion they found inadequate or oppressive. They speak of their practice as inclusive and pluralistic, but also self-define as rejects, misfits and seekers, drawing a protective boundary around their own otherness.

Many of the grove's members are ex-Catholics and are accustomed to elaborate rituals. However, ADF avoids "churchy" language as much as possible because it "can be a very big turnoff for people . . . who were angry at their past religious affiliation."

Dr. Sarah Pike, a religious scholar at Cal-State, explains that "It's that rejection" that defines Druidry. For Druids, creating an identity out of what they are rejecting is essential. They want a sense of community and purpose, and having been turned off by Christianity, they gravitate to a religion that is on their own terms—a religion with few rules, and one in which they can have a say in how it is practiced. Not only are there few rules, but there is little in the way of core beliefs or doctrine, aside from rejecting Christianity. Continuing:

. . . [one of the founders] realized that Druidry wasn't asking him to believe; it was asking him to show up and be in community, to make offerings and to light fires. He moved to Oregon and started a meetup called "Druid Drinks," a monthly gathering at a local pub, where he could chat socially with other curious-and-questioning Druids In ADF, he says, "It comes down to doing something together.

As Dr. Pike explains, Druids have “a different type of commitment” to their religion. Focusing on ritual action rather than creed can be “a relief” for people who have fled the constraints of orthodoxy, she says. “When belief becomes so important, you have sharper boundaries between insiders and outsiders.” And since they want to be inclusive, they downplay belief to get rid of any boundaries that might keep them apart.

I will make some observations on this vignette. One is that this fits the overall trend of people turning away from even nominal Christianity. The famine of hearing God’s word is deepening, and anything that promotes God’s word is being rejected. A great many now say they have no religion, but a smaller number are turning to pagan religions like this. Now, chances are small that we will encounter a Druid, let alone be pulled into their idolatry. Yet various forms of paganism are steadily on the rise, particularly among the younger generations. This paganism is not very far from what the ancient Israelites chose over the true God who blessed them so greatly, starting with deliverance from bondage. Part of this nation is following that same cursed path, believing they are free, but not understanding the enslaving nature of the spirits they make offerings to.

A second observation is that truth divides. Jude instructs us to contend for the faith, but these pagans instead de-emphasize belief in favor of being part of a community and having a shared experience. This allows for less conflict as each does what is right in his eyes. Ironically, the Druids share the same approach as the purpose-driven churches that some of them came out of. Both religions downplay doctrine to the point of ignoring it, because taking a stand on what is true alienates those who do not agree, and that would undermine their inclusive purposes. So, the Druids say you can believe whatsoever you want. Isis, Dionysus, whatever—just not Jesus Christ. All you have to do is show up and participate, and you are welcome. The focus is on community, on fellowship, on shared activities of making offerings, drinking whiskey and mead, dancing to drums, and reveling in non-orthodoxy. They are held together by a common experience rather than a unity of the faith.

A third observation is that, in type, many of us have seen people go down a similar path. The people we know probably didn’t end up as Druids, but because of the events in the church of God in the past decades, we have seen people turned off by a given teaching, practice, or personality, and perhaps with good cause. But the response of rejecting it all is the proverbial throwing out of the baby with the dirty bathwater. Often, those who follow this path focus more on what they reject than the specifics of what they do believe, because what they believe now is ill-defined and ungrounded. They will accept and even justify the lies that they could formerly see through, because that is easier than digging deep and perhaps being separated from those close to them. Easy fellowship and an accepting community matter more to them than truth. They often feel a great relief as they feel no pressure to seek out and live according to what God says. Yet the fact that the church of God did not get everything right does not mean it has nothing right. It just takes work—hard work—to examine the whole counsel of God, and to rightly divide the word of truth, and even more work to then live by it. But, as the Druids conclude, it is easier not to worry about the details. The Druids may be an extreme example, but the cause-and-effect principles involved work as consistently as gravity. When one rejects what God says, one opens oneself to falling for anything, even to the point of offering a chocolate bar to the demonic, so-called “queen of heaven” in the hope of receiving good health.