

{1900w}

## **The Protestantization of Paganism**

Fritz Muntean

Presentation for the Gaia Gathering

Edmonton AB

May, 2005

Here's something I'd like us to think about. If the central purpose— the primary directive of our modern Pagan enterprise — is to reclaim and revere those elements of ancient spiritual expression that we think are supportive of our own growth and well being, then maybe avoiding the mistakes that other religious movements have made in the meanwhile might be an important part of this process.

Much could be said, for example, of the unfortunate choices made by the Early Christian Church (the subject, in fact, of my graduate thesis, for anyone who's interested). But for the purposes of the discussion at hand, I'd like to concentrate on some more recent developments — of N American Protestant Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries — specifically Revivalism, Pentecostalism, and Fundamentalism — and their surprising relationship to Modern Pagan beliefs and practices.

I think we've got a lot to learn from these religions — especially from their earliest forms — from the time when they were, like us today, New Religious Movements. It's especially interesting to note that in their earliest days, Revivalism, Pentecostalism, Fundamentalism and other related forms of off-the-wall American Protestantism were, in many ways, remarkable and interesting religions.

Consider the very first Revivalist camp meeting, at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. In addition to religious ecstasy and intoxication of the spirit, a level of sexual abandon was reported, along with the enthusiastic consumption of alcoholic beverages, that would make most modern Pagan gatherings seem downright, well, Protestant in comparison. It's important to remember here that the Christian association with Prohibition was still almost a century in the future.

In the mid-19th century, Charles Finney, the founding father of Evangelical

Revivalism, came up with a purely emotional and entirely individualistic religious model that emphasized immediate experience over all theological considerations. Like his modern Pagan equivalents, Finney also demanded good works from his converts, specifically on behalf of the antislavery movement, which in many ways is the 19th century equivalent to the environmental concerns of today. Unfortunately, the men who came after Finney and exploited his ground breaking work — like Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and (our own) Billy Graham — started denouncing attempts to improve human rights or heal social ills as incompatible with their efforts to cleanse the world of human sin — alas, yet another parallel with the modern environmental movement.

But the parallels to modern Pagan beliefs do not end here. Most dramatically, in 1908, Edgar Mullins, the father of the Southern Baptist movement, announced the doctrine of ‘Soul Competency’, “The competency of the soul in religion excludes at once all human interference and every form of religion by proxy. Religion is a personal matter between the soul and God”. In the words of a modern Baptist theologian, “To me [soul competency] means that I am unassailable in my own understanding of God’s will for my life. It means that when someone says, ‘This is what God means to me,’ I cannot tell her she is wrong. I can merely say that her understanding lacks meaning for me.” According to this doctrine, which lies at the heart of American Fundamentalism, religious belief or experience cannot be mediated by the community or the congregation, but is a one-on-one act of confrontation, a sense of conversion within the self, unaided by any larger context.

It may appear ironic that a religion so committed to a personal, subjective and experiential gnosis could end up taking such an extreme and even obsessive attitude toward dogmatic correctness.

Much of the blame for this unfortunate state of affairs can be laid on the American tendency, popular since the waning days of the 18th century, away from the concept of a national church. While at the same time longing for a church in legitimate descent from ancient authority.

There appear to be two ways of accommodating this longing. The first is the Reconstructionist approach. The second is accomplished by simply ignoring the obvious, considerable differences between historic Pagan civic religion and the Mystery Religions of Pagan antiquity, in spite of the undeniable fact

that it is the latter on which modern Paganism was originally based.

Like many others, I'm distinctly uncomfortable with the current trends toward congregationalism, prison chaplaincy programs, 'weddings, funerals, and bar whitzvas', and so-called Pagan seminaries. — Not to mention scouting movements (!), Pagan graveyards, and all the other attempts afoot to restructure Paganism on the model of 'respectable' 19th century Protestant civic religion.

The Paganism that my colleagues and I worked so hard to establish back in the 1960s was an excursive counter-cultural phenomenon, not a 'Church'.

The major difference between a 'church' and an excursive religious movement is that a Church reflects and supports (and is supported by) the culture and society in which it finds itself imbedded, whereas a counter-cultural religion proposes changes, at a root level, to the way spiritual activities are structured.

If you want to be a 'Church', you can, you may. But a Church is what you'll actually have to become. But Churches are not countercultural institution, nor are they likely to produce (or be home to) much in the way of religious thinking that is either original or based on what many of us consider to be the more psychologically sound — and more fully evolved — religions of the pre-Christian era.

In fact, the Christianity of the last two centuries here in N America comes in two very distinctive flavours. The first Christianity, of both the 'high-church' Catholics and Protestants, is hierarchical and practices apostolic succession and oversight. Lengthy catechism classes are required of prospective members. Clergy are extensively educated, carefully and critically examined, and expected to be continuously responsible to their superiors in matters of faith and practice. For the most part, their organizations are coherent, methodical, and intensely collegial.

Their seminaries are genuine graduate schools, serious centers of advanced theological learning, many of which are currently welcoming — and graduating — modern Pagan scholars. These are the Christians who we are most likely to meet on Interfaith Councils, and whose works — especially in regard to the healing of social ills, the protection of the environment, even

the veneration of the divine feminine — are so closely paralleled by our own.

The ‘other’, low-church Christianities — the Pentecostals, Revivalists, and Fundamentalists — reject the notion of organizational hierarchies. Gnosis is expected to result from a personal relationship with the divine, unmediated except by scripture (eccentric interpretation of which is the rule). Only the simplest possible form of creedal agreement is required of converts. What little training the clergy receives only marginally qualifies as post-secondary education. Those who rise to positions of leadership and authority do so on the basis of personal charisma at best and political demagoguery at worst. These Christians are often fiercely sectarian, and the basic organizational units tend to be quite small.

This latter version of Christianity is the one that we, as Pagans (along with much of the rest of the world), worry and complain about. And yet it is the one many of us seem to prefer as an organizational model. I object to this model, as do many others, partly because I have no interest in organizing Paganism in the form of fundamentalist Protestantism, but most of all because I believe that we have the opportunity to create Paganism as a superior spiritual path — a quality religion — not one that is no better than the very worst Christianity has to offer.

The problem boils down to there being two distinctly different responses to the perceived abuses of privilege by (some) mainstream churches. Particularly in the areas of tax relief, the administration of marital unions, access to ‘captive’ populations of the marginalized, etc. Most of us are appalled by these inequities. But some have no objection — at least in principle — as long as we Pagans get a piece of the action too.

This has led to the proliferation of Pagan ‘seminaries’ that bear about the same relationship to genuine seminaries as barber colleges do to medical schools.

How many of those who are struggling to create or maintain prison chaplaincy programs are aware of the terrible damage done in the 70s and 80s to the Hare Krishna Movement by their own prison ministries? How can these programs not be considered missionary work, considering how very few of the prisoners being served showed any interest in organized Paganism prior to their incarceration? And how many of these well-meaning people

are aware of Gordon Melton's observation about the not-so-obvious uses to which prisoners put religion, particularly the need of the Aryan Brotherhood to have a religion (ours will do just fine, thank you) to serve as the equivalent of the Black prisoners' Nation of Islam?

Until about a year ago, it could be safely assumed that any marriage ceremony would be recognized by all other jurisdictions as legal and binding, as long as it was officially documented. Even if it took place in Mexico, or Vegas, or at a Moonie wedding. But recent events in California and Oregon should give serious pause to anyone who believes that marriages, once performed by a currently accredited agency, can never be retroactively annulled.

Likewise, students of religious history know that once the Early Christians won the right to perform legal marriages in the wake of the Theodosian Codex of 391, rivalries broke out between the various Churches, and the Catholics, who were just one of many Christian organizations of the day, achieved universal hegemony by finessing the Imperial Court into retroactively annulling all marriages that had been performed under rival bishops. And this is the reason for the nervousness expressed by many educated Pagans of today when this or that Pagan meta-organization declares itself legally capable of performing marriages.

So what are we to do? In the midst of all this serious scholarly disputation, perhaps an appeal to the great literary tradition of humor may be useful. In his 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr introduced us to Bokononism, a fictional religious philosophy, which, as one reviewer put it, "focused on humanity as sacred, but was (ultimately) no help in saving the world". The value of Bokononism to Vonnegut's readers was found in its pithy sayings and, especially, in the eccentric definitions of the many (vaguely Sanskrit-sounding) religious concepts that made up a Bokononist's worldview.

One of these terms was 'Wrang-Wrang'. A 'wrang-wrang', according to Vonnegut, is someone "who steers people away from a line of speculation by reducing that line, by the example of the wrang-wrang's own life, to an absurdity".

It would seem now that many of the excursive movements of 19th century Protestantism might well serve as 'wrang-wrangs' for some of the more

attractive (but possibly marginal) ideas that have accumulated to our own Pagan worldview, especially over the last 20 years. A devotion to the primacy of personal emotional experience (especially at the expense of attention to form and aesthetic qualities), combined with a doctrine of impulsive individualism, in which dramatic personal behaviour is seen as the outward mark of an inner grace, and the belief that religious experience cannot be mediated by a community or a congregation but is a one-on-one act of confrontation between the individual self and the Divine, have produced results among the Revivalists, Pentecostals, Southern Baptists and Fundamentalists, over the course of nearly 200 years, which are quite different from anything we might have hoped for or, indeed, expected.