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'What do the Faiths Teach About the Environment?'
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Paganism and the Environment

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Paganism is about living a sacred relationship – with other people, other life, the land, the Earth and the Gods.

I have taken the term 'sacred relationship' from Druid Priestess and author, Emma Restall Orr. She clarifies the term. It is about respect and responsibility, and, especially, honour.

Honour is a deep concept. It is about 'doing the right thing' and being true to your soul and your convictions. It is also about honouring – Nature, other people, your food, your word and, particularly, yourself. For how can you honour anyone or anything else if you do not honour yourself?

This cuts to the heart of ethics. If we live by honour in sacred relationship, external moral commandments are unnecessary. Indeed, simplistic prohibitions have caused many of our current problems by suppressing the natural in people in the so-called developed world. By denying, rather than celebrating, the natural, we create demons. We suppress sexuality and we get paedophiles. We suppress pleasure in the material world and we get rapacious profiteering. If we see our bodies, our food and our land as dirty, then we see life itself as dirty and expendable.

We are of one substance with the rocks under our feet, the waters of the sea, the air around us, the stuff of distant stars, and all the life that teems on this planet. We strive for the stars, but our feet must stay on the ground. In life and in death, we are, and can only ever be, part of Nature.

Paganism does not look for a path out of this world. We do not dismiss it as evil or of mere utilitarian value. We do not look to an afterlife in some immaterial realm; the Otherworld, in whatever form we conceive it, is the flip-side of this one.

No, we value this world as our home, the home of our children and that of our ancestors. The Pagan way is to seek a renewed, sacred relationship with our world.

And that relationship starts at home. Where we are, wherever each of us is, is the centre of the Universe – and the Universe has as many centres as there are people to recognise them. This works on a physical as well as a spiritual level. We are, literally, what we eat. In as much as we eat the produce of the land in which we live, drink its water, breathe its air and honour it, we are *all* natives, regardless of our origins, race or creed.

Equally, to move forward on ecological issues, decisions – especially economic decisions – have to be made at the most local level practicable. We need global environmental treaties, but far too much economic control is *already* globalised.

If we are in sacred relationship with the rest of Nature, with the land and with the human community, then we nurture, heal and defend them. That is part of the deal; there is no getting away from it. And that is often political.

If we are to find real, long-term solutions, then they have to be democratic. Globalisation and ‘world government’ kill democracy; genuine subsidiarity (to reclaim the EU’s word) fosters democracy.

Paganism does not take you out of the world, but rather draws you deeper in – although perhaps in unexpected ways. There cannot be a separation between politics, economics and a spiritual life, as if politics and economics could be practised without a value system. Politics is the way we as a society organise our relationships with each other and with the rest of Nature. Economics is a medium for doing that.

Yet we in the modern, so-called developed world have elevated economics to a religion, whose dogma we must not question. We have made the craftsman serve the tools. The result is a wasteland.

Living a sacred relationship necessarily dictates our actions. Those actions – whether shopping, travelling, working or voting – impact upon the environment, other people and other Nature. This is a sacred ecology – living our lives and choosing our actions in sacred, mindful relationship.

Mindfulness is also central: mindfulness and awareness. We cannot bury our heads in the sand. I was surprised to hear, earlier this afternoon, that pollution has been solved in this country. Sadly, that’s not the case. Three examples will serve. We have some of the highest *per capita* carbon dioxide emissions in the world (and they are increasing), we still have rivers and wetlands with levels of phosphates and nitrates above ecological tolerance levels, and we continue to import products made in polluting ways from other parts of the world. We are told that we can’t do anything about the latter because of the economics of ‘free’ trade.

Our ecological footprint is huge and unsustainable. We must tread more lightly.

Reference

Emma Restall Orr (2005) ‘The Ethics of Paganism: The Value and Power of Sacred Relationship’, in Ly de Angeles, Emma Restall Orr & Thom van Dooren (eds.) (2005) *Pagan Visions for a Sustainable Future*, Llewellyn, Woodbury, MN, pp. 1-37.