

My Experience as a Pagan in Modern Scotland

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The last thirty years have seen very radical and positive changes for Pagans in Scotland. We now live in what is probably the most progressive country in Europe when it comes to acceptance of Paganism. As a Pagan I obviously welcome that.

Paganism is very much a religion of reverence for life. Nearly all Pagans believe that Nature is sacred and understand divinity – whether perceived as divine beings or in more abstract forms - to be manifest within the living world.

Modern Paganism does not survive in continuous descent from ancient paganism, of course. Between the Theodosian Decrees of the 390's CE, and the conversion of Lithuania in 1387 under pressure from the Northern Crusades, all visible signs of pagan worship were eradicated from European life. Paganism became a cultural undercurrent, remaining familiar primarily through mythology, folklore, philosophy, literature and art.

Given the strength of that pagan heritage however, and especially given the inexhaustible capacity of Nature to inspire reverence and worship, it is not surprising that Pagan religion should have re-emerged in Scotland and in other Western countries as freedom of belief gradually became established.

Like most Pagans in Scotland today, I wasn't born and raised in a Pagan family, although that is becoming increasingly common as our numbers grow. I actually grew up in the Church of Scotland, with well-educated, open-minded, parents who encouraged me to think for myself. Even now I can still recognise traces of that ancestral Presbyterianism within my Paganism, particularly in a certain fondness for argument!

As a child I always knew I wasn't a Christian, though of course there's nothing wrong with Christianity and a great many decent people are Christians. Instead I always had the sense that whatever the divine might be, that numinous reality was much more in evidence out in the woods, on the hills, and along the seashore, than it was in any human institution. Eventually I came to understand that instinctive childhood feelings about nature, divinity and the old mythologies

were religious feelings and others, even if only a few others in those early days, shared them. So I eventually came to understand I was a Pagan.

I'm probably fairly typical in that. Paganism isn't a religion to which people are converted. It's one they find their own way into after realising it's what they've always been. Accepting that you're a Pagan brings no sense of revelation, still less of salvation, but simply a feeling of 'coming home'.

While Pagans are, and probably always will be, a small minority within Scottish society, most of us do not feel at all isolated as some characteristic Pagan attitudes – sexual equality, environmental responsibility and religious tolerance among them – are also now shared by large sections of the wider society. The Pagan community is not insular and does not seek to hold itself apart. Nearly all of us are well integrated into the wider society.

In many ways, Pagans are well suited to this increasingly diverse Scotland because Paganism takes pride in being a very diverse religion within itself. Understandings of the Divine in modern Paganism largely arise from, and are sustained by, personal experience of the sacred within Nature rather than through the authority of the written word. It appears fairly obvious to most of us that religion is less a matter of absolute truths than of subjective understandings that may be appropriate to those who hold them but are by no means universal. When we look at Nature – as Pagans tend to do rather frequently – we see that a great diversity of plant and animal species makes for healthier, stronger and more beautiful ecosystems. To Pagans, a great diversity of beliefs and practices makes for healthier, stronger and more beautiful religion.

Accordingly, Pagan tolerance is far from a resigned acceptance that we must endure other people being wrong; it is the active belief that religious pluralism is essential for a healthy society. That, of course, includes equal respect for those who do not believe in religion at all.

As parents, my wife and I did not try to raise our children to be Pagans. We share the typically Pagan attitude that commitment to a

religion should be an adult choice, best made with adult self-knowledge and understanding of life. Like most Pagan parents we taught our children about many religions and encouraged them to think for themselves. As children, they tended to view the family religion as either Cool or Weird depending on how they were feeling about us at the time. As adults one of them identifies as Pagan and one does not, both choices being equally fine with us.

Prejudice against Pagans has diminished considerably over the past few decades as our numbers have grown and more effort has been made to educate the wider community about us. We enjoy good relations with most of Scotland's other faith groups, and overt religious discrimination is comparatively rare nowadays. Pagans are a very diverse community whose members are found in all walks of life and drawn from all social classes, all ages, and all levels of education. There is no such thing as a typical Pagan. I admit I used to proudly boast that I'd never met a Pagan investment banker but sadly, I now have, so we really cannot claim to be better than anyone else!

On the whole, Pagans suffer very few problems in modern Scotland, certainly fewer than some other minority faiths. In part this may be due to us being largely invisible. Few Pagans wear any obvious marks of religious identity, and as we don't proselytise, we have no reason to draw attention to ourselves. Not only do we not seek converts, we see little point in people holding religious beliefs at all unless they are rooted in personal experience. For the most part, Pagans in modern Scotland live their faith quietly and unobtrusively, and my wife and I are no exception to that.