

# PAGANISM AS RESISTANCE

by Christoph Manes

*I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river*

*Is a strong brown god*

T.S. Eliot

*Only a god can save us*

Martin Heidegger

It probably is no coincidence that Iceland was both the last outpost of paganism in Europe, and the last bastion of resistance to the rise of European feudalism. The relationship between Iceland's religion and its independence evidently wasn't lost on the Norwegian King, St. Olaf, who schemed to Christianize the Icelanders as vigorously as he did to subjugate them. History proved his strategy effective, though it took a little longer than he had hoped - 265 years after he met a watery death at the hands of pagan Vikings unsympathetic to his church-going megalomania. Similar patterns linking primal religions to non-hierarchical, Earth-harmonious ways of life, are woven into the fabric of history, from the Ainu of the Japanese archipelago, to the Indians of the Amazon basin. In its unrelenting march across the globe, civilization consistently represents paganism as an obstacle, somehow intimately associated with independence from central power.

What did St. Olaf and the thousands of other proselytizers for civilization know that we don't? If the general goal of radical environmentalism is to resist the ever-widening control of Technological Culture over nature and human nature, we should examine civilization's perception of paganism to see if it holds any knowledge we can use strategically. In an unthematized way, we can already see a connection. The rise of radical environmentalism and neopaganism occurred almost simultaneously, no doubt in response to the same concerns over the desacralization of Earth that modern industrial culture represents. Coincidentally, the official "rebirth" of paganism in Iceland, under the auspices of Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson, took place in 1972, the same year the Norwegian thinker, Arne Naess, wrote his historic article laying out the concept of Deep Ecology. (St. Olaf would turn in his grave, if he had one.) The large number of neopagans in the radical environmental movement confirms the fact that people involved in the struggle against accumulated power sense an affinity between Deep Ecology and "The Old Ways," as Gary Snyder calls primal religions. The purpose of this article is to thematize that affinity. In particular, I want to consider what paganism offers in resisting the way power works in today's hierarchical society, not only in terms of philosophy, but in actual social practice.

'Paganism' itself is too broad a term, including as it does not only the animism of hunter-gatherer tribes, but the rather stuffy polytheism of agricultural states like Egypt, Greece and Rome - which proved all too compatible with centralized power. For the former, then, I reserve the term 'primalism', meaning the entire religious complex of preagricultural peoples, including animism, animatism, shamanism, and ancestry worship. For what Professor Drengson calls "third wave" religions (see his accompanying article), i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, I'll use the term 'ethical religions'. This is meant to emphasize the fact that all these religions concentrate on humanity's ethical nature. They all concern

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themselves with generating "moral" or "right" behavior, and create institutions to encourage or enforce that end: monasteries, churches, schools, courts. I realize this is a reduction. Certainly some ethical religions, such as Buddhism, have proved less serviceable to the accumulation of power than others. Moreover, there are different forms of each of these religions: Meister Eckhart's Christianity is quite unlike Jerry Falwell's. Nonetheless, taken as a whole, over a long historical process, the ethical religions have been and remain the *vectors* of civilization and its power.

To see how civilization makes use of religion, therefore, we begin with the ethical religions. The most obvious way in which they are implicated in the power relations of organized societies is through the support their cosmologies give to civilization's values. Even a brief look at these cosmologies indicates that they all represent the universe as a hierarchy - if not in actual physical terms as in the Bible, then in ethical terms as in Buddhism. The universe has an order, proclaim the ethical religions, and humans can discover it through revelation or self-examination. By their content, then, ethical religions lend metaphysical credence to the "orderliness" of civilization and its power

relations, providing it with a universal analogue to its various historical forms.

But beyond the specific details of cosmology, the very attempt to represent the world totally in terms of some principle of order fixes the world in a valuational framework. The values may vary with the particular religion - so that Christianity, Judaism, and Islam see the world as the expression of God's goodness, tainted by its contrary, sin; while Hinduism distinguishes *Atman*, the divine within man, from the illusory reality around him; and Buddhism emphasizes the all-encompassing effects of desire, and their relinquishment through *nirvana*. In the very process of valorization, however, regardless of the form it takes, a problematical relationship between humanity and nature is created, which is intimately associated with civilization. As Heidegger says in his *Letter on Humanism*: [*P*]recisely through the characterization of something as "a value," what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man's estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object.

By converting the world into values, the ethical religions play an indispensable role in the way power relations work in hierarchical societies. In the discourse of civilization, the projects of hierarchical of states are validated in terms of value, so that the real action of these projects - the accumulation and spread of power - disappears from view in the shimmer of ethics. To give an example, sexual behavior became a locus of values in the early stages of organized society. A biological act was transformed into a social means of regulating human bodies (what Michel Foucault calls "bio-power"), through the promotion of such values as increasing population, the economic productivity of the nuclear family, or in more recent times the industry of pleasure - as supported by increased consumption. The particular values aren't of fundamental importance and critical thinking need not - indeed, should not - take them seriously. What is important is the fact that civilization relies on a "totalization" of value; that is, values represented as universally applicable - to everyone, everywhere, at all times. Through totalized values, organized societies have at their command a medium in which to propagate the kind of human behavior upon which they depend. Whether that means plowing a field, working in a factory, or dropping an atomic bomb, the discourse of civilization can find an alibi in values - such as God's commandments, "progress," or humanism in its traditional or more arabesque forms

(e.g., Murray Bookchin's "social ecology" and its apologetics for civilization's power structure in such giddy definitions of man as "natural evolution knowing itself").

We tend to think of power only in terms of its ability to repress behavior. The king's army puts down an insurrection, the police arrest a criminal, a principal expels a student – this is tangible power. But, as Foucault has so convincingly argued (in *Discipline and Punishment* particularly), the power of organized societies is also *generative*. It causes people to act in certain ways, not only by the limited means of coercion, but by creating a field in which such actions are "just," "moral," "good," "civilized." Values envelop the members of organized societies, and act as alibis for the accumulation of power, which defines civilization.

I'm suggesting that the ethical religions are more than just a convenient repository of metaphysical concepts and images that civilization draws on; they are, in their axiological structures, creations of civilization to be used as alibis for the accumulation of power. Some of these alibis are painfully obvious today. The agrarian states, for instance, adapted late pagan theogeny into the concept of the divine origin of kings. When Christianity made supernatural copulation disreputable, feudalism used Christian doctrine to construct the divine right of kings. The historical alibis are endless, but once their mythological source falls into desuetude, we can discern a singular process occurring all along: organized societies using values to accumulate and augment power.

The situation becomes confusing when new, more efficient forms of social domination develop new, more efficient alibis, such as nationalism or the Enlightenment concept of "the natural rights of Man." The result is that the ethical religions momentarily take on the role of opposing the further enveloping of nature and human nature in civilization's power. A complexity also arises in the fact that some, if not most, of the myths that displaced the ethical religions still act as alibis for power today. Therefore, the many thinkers who have analyzed the role of religion since the 17th century find themselves reconstructing history according to a universe of discourse surrounding these prevailing myths. The gradual eclipse of religion in the waxing power of science is represented as "progress" in actuality (by traditional humanists), or *in posse* (by Marxist historians). Even Max Scheler, whose description of science as *Herrschaftswissen* – "knowledge for the sake of domination" – influenced Heidegger and initiated the questioning of scientific neutrality, still saw the rise

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of modernity as a radical shift away from the relatively benign religious values of the Middle Ages. This stance has introduced itself into the environmental debate in the form of arguments for Christian stewardship, whose advocates (followers of Teilhard de Chardin, Wendell Berry) claim it to be the answer to the scientific reductionism destroying the environment. (And perhaps it is – what it isn't, however, is an answer to the general power relations of civilization, which have other ways of destroying the environment besides science: the sublime Christian metaphysics of medieval feudalism, for example.) To “explain” the declining fortunes of ethical religions in the last three centuries, there is no need to delve into the teleologies of “progress,” the dialectics of history, or the rising tide of nihilism – one merely has to look at the surface of events to see the operation of power finding more complete methods of domination. We might reverse Scheler and characterize civilization as *wissenproduzierende Herrschaft* – domination that produces knowledge – whether scientific or religious is hardly decisive.

Ethical religions may be able to resist some forms of power accumulation threatening the environment, especially those associated with the modern myths that displaced the central role of religion. But ethical religions can never offer resistance to civilization as a whole, because they count among its many children – more beautiful, perhaps, than the dreary scientific offspring that disinherited them, but kindred nonetheless.

(This doesn't in any way suggest that people who practice ethical religions don't fit into the radical environmental movement. A Deep Ecology perspective can arise from many sources, as Devall and Sessions explain in their book, *Deep Ecology*. Ultimately, resistance is a personal commitment related to action, not ideology.)

Civilization uses religion. But what is the reason for its antagonism toward primalism? Simply put, organized societies have never succeeded in using primal religions to accumulate power. In fact, as Professor Drengron notes, the elements of primalism that live on in polytheistic paganism and ethical religions act as loci of resistance within those religions, emerging from time to time, for example, in the writings of Meister Eckhart and St. Francis.

We can distinguish a number of general characteristics of primalism that retard its assimilation into hierarchical societies. Again, within the broad range of primal religions, there are probably exceptions to these characteristics; but on the whole they apply.

1. *The world is alive.* Primalism generally conceives of a world spirit, under numerous names, which is the origin of all things and to which all things return. This not only includes humans and animals, but stones, waterfalls, mountains, and so forth. The world, therefore, is a community; the same force that animates people brings forth the cherry tree, the scorpion, and the cliff. This corresponds with our *factual* knowledge of biology, geology, and cosmology, – a knowledge which unfortunately has been assimilated into the valuational framework of civilization's myths. In the observation of nature, there is not one scrap of evidence that humankind is any more unique or important or “creative” than lichen (unless of course one defines these concepts tendentiously). This view of the world is unserviceable to civilization's need to totalized values.

2. *Time is cyclical.* In particular, the world doesn't have a *telos*, a universal goal governing everything that happens (or at least such a *telos* is not intelligible to us). Even if, as is often the case, primal myths include a catastrophic end to the world, this is usually represented as a prelude to a reconstituted Earth, beginning the cycle again. (This kind of myth bears a striking similarity to

the Big Bang/Closed Universe theory, which has received so much scientific attention recently.) Primalism, then, doesn't supply a universal principle that organized society can use as an alibi for its projects.

3. *This life is more important than the next.* The field of comparative religion traditionally views primalism as “undeveloped” because its mythic narratives give only the vaguest portrayals of the afterlife. This misses the point: primal peoples usually aren't very interested in life after death. This life is sufficiently full to hold their attention. Elaborate concepts of the afterlife seem to be the product of societies under the influence of groups whose concentrated power and abstracted, specialized way of life generate speculation about their souls' ultimate fate, as part of their obsessive desire to transcend nature. The Egyptian aristocracy is a case in point, with its ludicrous monuments to death.

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These aspects of primalism render it indigestible to organized power. But more importantly, primalism avoids the kind of totalization of the world which civilization requires. Value in primal religions (e.g., as presented in the *Havamal*, an Old Norse shamanistic text) doesn't pretend to be universal truth that should envelop every individual at all times. Killing causes strife, but sometimes is necessary. Stealing is bad, but some people deserve to be plundered. Adultery usually causes problems, but it won't consign anyone to hell. In other words, the values of primal peoples usually present themselves only as observations of what often happens to men and women trying to get along in this contingent world, not as metaphysical injunctions. This is, no doubt, one of the reasons primal peoples never felt the urge to proselytize as those of ethical religions do.

Finally, the structure of primalism is non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian. Religious institutions either do not exist

or are limited in authority. They are rarely involved in regulating behavior. Shamans, witch doctors, priestesses, sibyls are invested with a certain amount of power, but generally it is negative and discontinuous, repressing rather than producing certain activities. These religious figures aren't leaders in the sense of possessing and enforcing a continuous regime of power over the community. Even in their roles as "wise-men," these figures hold only a discontinuous power, for their knowledge comes into play only in certain unusual circumstances, such as famine or plague. In contrast, the wise-man or guru or master of the ethical religions totally envelops those who seek his knowledge. It is another example of organized power, as the incredible behavior it generates (asceticism, self-mutilation, abstinence) should suggest.

Primalism has demonstrated its historical incompatibility with the forms of power that have plundered Earth. Does it offer, however, a viable opposition to civilization's present form: Technological Culture. Obviously, a primalism reconstructed from scholarly knowledge is not the same as the primalism that inhabited the natural world. But perhaps a *future primalism* can assist in the reinhabitation of that world.

First, on the large scale, the experience of space, time, and value in primalism is as valid today as it was for our ancestors. If Deep Ecology is to articulate a new vision of the world — one that is not another totalization easily converted into an alibi for power — then the fact that civilization rejected primalism suggests that its world view, its localized ethics is a good place to look for a model. Ideas like the Gaia hypothesis and bioregionalism seem to be steps in that direction.

Second, primalism also seems to resist Technological Culture on the personal level. The practice of primal rituals is *subversive*. This is suggested negatively by the hostile response it elicits from privileged speakers of hierarchical power, such as ministers and scientists. And positively, primal rituals screen out the "techniques of the self" (to use Foucault's phrase) with which Technological Culture envelops us — psychotherapy, improvement of productivity, consumerism. Rituals have no "purpose," if we mean this in a technological, economic sense. But in their attentiveness to natural cycles, to biological space, to localized values (the rising of the sun over *this* place, the birth of *this* child, the coming of *this* spring), they nullify the regime of totalized experience.

One must be careful, of course, in offering answers to the environmental crisis rather than action, insofar as such answers can help fuel the totalization of the world that civilization uses to keep intact the "circuitry" of power — among institutions, fields of knowledge, and techniques of the self — responsible for 10,000 years of environmental abuse: manifested as agricultural states, feudalism, capitalism, socialism; as medical science, humanism, "social ecology." If by resisting civilization's power relations, intellectually and physically, we can short out that circuitry, we will need no answers. As an open form, useful in exposing civilization's alibis and undermining the techniques of the self which Technological Culture encourages, primalism has the potential to assist radical environmentalism in forging this ethics of resistance.

*Christoph Manes, a regular contributor to EF!, has an article appearing in the next issue of Environmental Ethics.*