

Pagan Apologetics

Presenting you faith in a modern world

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Those of us who are part of neo-pagan religions face a unique challenge in the world today. We have no infallible leaders, we have no revealed scripture, we don't have a Billion-plus members and we don't have centuries of history and influence in the world to vouch for us as an authentically true religion. So, when we engage in discussion with those of other religions, it might, at first seem that the rock on which we stand is a little less steady than those in other religions.

The purpose of this workshop is to show that we don't need to stand on an unsteady rock, that we can have a solid footing when engaging with people of other religions.

The tool that we use to defend our faith position is called “apologetics”. Apologetics means to “speak in defense” of one's position. When it comes to religious matters, this means that we offer up to our listeners a justifiable defense of our position. You'll likely notice a similarity between the words apologetics and apology. They have the same root. Originally, an apology was an explanation – one might say “explain yourself”. But the explanation and the expression of regret were conflated, and it seems that over time, the expression of regret displaced the explanation.

While apologetics is the art of offering an explanation in defense of a faith position, in matters of faith, such an explanation can never rise to the level of scientific proof, but that doesn't mean that it will be a weak argument.

We also need to look at a few other terms. When it comes to matters of faith, these terms will be knowledge, belief and practice. Each of these is distinct and very important.

Knowledge is a word that has multiple meanings. In the scientific sense, knowledge means something that can be proved or demonstrated as true to another person. If I perform an experiment, I can give the details of that experiment to another person, and so long as the conditions are the same, that other person will have the same results. In mathematics, the same calculations will reproduce the same results time and again. This is knowledge that can be passed on and demonstrated without failure – it's repeatable.

But there is another type of knowledge that is known among spiritual people. This type of knowledge is personal and experiential. It is more closely aligned to the word belief. This doesn't mean that when a spiritual person uses the word knowledge that they are wrong, but we need to differentiate between the two meanings of this word. When I say that I KNOW that my faith is in something real, I can't say that I “know” this in the same sense that a scientist “knows” that Newtonian physics does not apply at the quantum level, or that Einstein's theory of relativity will accurately predict the operation of clocks as they approach the speed of light.

Being trained as an engineer, I once felt disdain for the use of the word “knowledge” as it applied to matters of faith. But I've since learned that an argument over the definition of terms is counterproductive. Instead, it is best to clarify the meaning of terms as one enters into discussion. If the verb “to know” comes up simply clarify the meaning of that word when speaking of faith and do not conflate it with the same meaning as knowledge in a scientific or legal sense.

Beliefs, or faith are things that are shown to work, to be effective in our own lives. We might not be

able to directly prove these things to another individual, but they do work for us. An example of this might be the belief that magic works in our lives. We can cast a spell and have real results. But because the mechanism by which that spell operates is unknown to science, we cannot provide direct evidence that it was indeed the spell which caused the desired result to occur.

Practice is the things that we do in regard to our faith. This is our celebrations, our spells, our worship and so forth. These are often the things that others know us for, just as, unless we've studied another person's religion, all we know about that religion is what we see the practitioners do. We might have been to a Christian service, and we see Catholics sit, kneel and stand, cross themselves and so forth. We see other Christians singing with their hands in the air or speaking in tongues and so forth. We've seen film of people at the wailing wall or the whirling dervishes and their dances ... these are all practice.

When it comes to explaining our faith, we need to keep in mind what is knowledge, belief or faith and practice and know how to address each of these in proper context.

Before we get more involved, I also want to point out that there is a major problem when people stand up to speak authoritatively on a subject who are not qualified to do so. Each of us might be qualified to speak in certain arenas, but when we step beyond our qualifications, we can do a great deal of harm to the larger community. Few of us are ever thrust, unwittingly, into a spotlight; most who wind up in the spotlight have gone there quite of their own volition.

One current example (August / September 2010) of this is taking place in Marion, Illinois, in which town, someone wants to erect a monument of the Ten Commandments. One Wiccan in that town objected, and said that if a monument to Judeo-Christian faith is erected, then perhaps they should open up that square to other faiths as well. The problem isn't that this man wants to speak; the problem is that he's quite new to the faith, and not entirely articulate with regards to pagan belief. In short, he's in the deep end of the pool, and not entirely ready to be swimming there.

Part of speaking up about our faith is being ready to do so, and in knowing to whom, and when and how we should. It can be easy to think we're ready when we're not. In today's world, everyone can have a voice. Most anyone can self-publish a book, anyone can start a blog or a podcast or a web site. But when we use that voice before we're ready, and when we say things that are wrong, it affects not only us, but our community as a whole. If we obviously don't know what we're talking about, and we've put our self out as a spokesperson, we can make it look like ours is a religion of fools. As someone once said – it's important to know what you know.

The most likely exchange you'll have will be with someone who is a Christian. It seems to happen fairly often – in public, among family or even online. The reason for this is that Christianity is a faith of evangelism; among many denominations, speaking to others is important. We see this among Mormons, Jehovah's Witness and other religions. I recall going to a Baptist church, and just above the door on leaving was a sign that read “You are now entering the missionary field”. Someone will likely wish to speak to you at some time or other about religion. They may question your current faith, or, as one asked me once – why I believe this “garbage” of paganism. The most important thing to keep in mind is that if you get upset, you've lost the discussion right away. The moment you get defensive, the moment you get flustered – whatever you say after that will be meaningless. In the Christian Bible, Peter admonished the believers to “Always be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within you, with gentleness and with respect”. That should be the aim for all of us. That is the goal for this

workshop.

What we're going to talk about in this workshop is how to answer the most likely charges that you'll hear about Paganism. Let's look at a few of these:

Wicca is a made-up religion. Gerald Gardner made it up in the 1950's.

Pagans don't have a Bible or an infallible scripture.

“An it harm none, do what thou will” is too permissive.

Paganism is a form of Satanism.

If you don't believe in Jesus, you're going to Hell.

Pascal's wager – the benefits of believing in Christ are so great and the penalties for not believing so terrible that it only makes sense to believe.

There are countless arguments that can be offered, but each of these has an answer. We'll be doing a role-play associated with them.

So the first argument – **Wicca is a made-up religion**. This argument is less likely to be applied to reconstructionist faiths, like Druidism and Asatru, but a variant of it could be. It could be easily suggested that because we're trying to recreate a dead mythology, that it's somehow made-up.

But my answer to such a question is simply this: *Every religion that has ever been practiced on Earth has been made up. Every one of them has a beginning. The Christian Bible has a beginning – a time before which it did not exist. Christians take it on faith that it was penned by God, or inspired by God. But that is a matter of faith and belief – not provable or verifiable fact.*

We'll sometimes hear that because the Bible has remained relevant for so long, that it must be true. But there are works that do predate the Bible, and religions that predate Christianity. Even so, we run into a logical problem here. To suggest that because a religion is old, it must be true, is to imply that antiquity proves authenticity. If this were true, then the religions of the Egyptians or the Romans would be more valid than that of the Christians.

Mormonism is also a very new religion. Though it claims that Joseph Smith found the Book of Mormon, and despite the historical contradictions that book suggests, Mormons are still part of a religion that is recognized as legitimate.

No, the fact that modern Paganism is relatively new, and that it was “made-up” cannot invalidate it.

We might also hear that because we don't have an **infallible scripture**, that ours is a lesser religion. Many religions on Earth base their faith on “revealed scriptures” - that is that the foundation of their faith is based on a text that they historically claim to have been revealed to them by their God. Christians have the Bible, Jews have the Torah, Muslims have the Koran, Mormons have the Book of Mormon, and so forth.

As Pagans, we don't have any revealed scripture that we consider to be the word of our Gods; nothing is carved in stone and delivered to us as infallible. But unlike Christianity or other religions, we don't have to worry about which **version** of this scripture is correct. Nor do we have to worry about interpretations or translations or anything else that encumbers such a text. Here's an example that we might pose to a Christian, who comes to us with such an argument:

It's true that pagans don't have an authoritative scripture given to us by our God. We believe that Deity speaks to us through nature, through the Earth, the Sun, Moon and stars, and to each of us individually. That's a benefit to us. We do have those whom we consider inspired at times, but we don't hang on their words as infallible.

Now, when it does come to infallible scripture, take the Christian Bible – which version is correct? There is the King James version, the Revised Standard Version, the New American Bible, the New Jerusalem Bible, the Today's English Version, the Amplified Bible, the Latin Vulgate and dozens more. Many suggest that the King James version is correct, but what was correct prior to that? Did God's word disappear for well over 1000 years?

The problem with calling any book the sacred word of God is that it's impossible to prove, and it's difficult to defend. So, even though pagans believe that some of our writers and their work may have been inspired, we don't believe, as human beings, that we're ready to make any such claims, and that to do so would only burden us with the same problems that others claiming infallible scripture are now faced with. While we respect and honor many writers, we accept that any of us is as capable of being inspired as any other. What we write will have to stand or fall on its own.

“An it harm none” is too permissive. This is a claim that I've heard from people who left Wicca or other forms of paganism. The charge is that Paganism has no objective moral code. And I'd agree that we don't have a well-defined strict moral code that we must adhere to. But let's look at the Rede and see just how permissive it really is.

The Rede is, as written by Doreen Valiente in 1964, “An it harm none, do what ye will”. This does seem quite permissive – if it doesn't hurt anyone, do what you want. But is that really what this is saying? How many of our actions EVER cause no harm to anyone?

Do you smoke or eat too much or drink to excess? Doesn't this harm you? Aren't you included when it says “an it harm none”? Where do you buy your clothes? Are you supporting sweat-shops somewhere? What about

Do animals count when we hear the words “harm none”? Does this mean just the animals we eat, or does it include leather or even those we might step on while walking down the street?

What the Rede really means to me is simply this: If what you are considering will cause no harm, to anyone, you may act with liberty. But if what you are considering will cause any harm, to anyone, or any being, then you need to consider carefully those actions. And when you have, then act in the way that will lead to the least harm for all.

Paganism is a form of Satanism is another charge we'll hear. Many Christians think that if it has to do

with witchcraft, it's of Satan. The problem with this argument is that Paganism predates Christianity, and knows nothing of Satan. Neo-Paganism with its roots in paleo-Paganism also rejects Satan. There are religions that follow Satan, but to do so implies that one believes in Satan, and to do so implies that one believes at least part of Christian scripture. Thus, to be a Satanist, one has to believe at least some of Christian scripture. Pagans do not accept Christian scripture as valid, and we have no use for Satan.

So how did paganism become conflated with Satanism? When Christianity first came to the Celtic lands from Rome, they noticed that the Pagans did worship a horned God. Christians decided to call this God Satan. But as the saying goes – A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Likewise, calling the Horned God Satan doesn't make him Satan. I could call anything Satan, but that doesn't make it so.

If you don't accept Jesus, you're going to hell. Many people offer up this argument, but really it means very little to a non-Christian, who does not accept the idea of Hell. So many times I've heard “I'll pray for you” and so forth, but that is simply an expression of *their* fears and insecurities. This leads into

Pascal's wager. Blaise Pascal was a French Mathematician and philosopher, in the 17th century. Basically his argument, and you're likely to hear this in a number of different ways, goes like this:

The benefits from belief in Christ are eternal life. The penalty for not believing in Christ is eternal damnation. The penalty for not believing in Christ are none.

The argument has its basis in decision theory. It creates a matrix that looks like this:

| | If God exists | If God does not exist |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Belief in God | Eternal bliss | Lose nothing |
| No belief in God | Eternal misery | Lose nothing |

For decisions where the outcomes are known and definable, such as whether or not it's worth it to purchase some lottery ticket, or some other chance, decision theory is a valuable tool. But when it comes to religious choices, and where the outcomes are not entirely certain and penalties are not as clear and definable, we can't relegate such choices to a simple matrix.

Pagans, for the most part, tend to believe in reincarnation. If this is true, and we follow a religion that isn't true, how many lifetimes might we be losing doing so, and ignoring our truer purpose for being here? Thus, in this decision matrix, “Lose nothing” is an invalid entry.

Also, to accept the idea of eternal damnation requires that we believe that there is a god who would create BILLIONS of people with the foreknowledge that they would spend eternity in torture. Is this something you can believe? Thus the entry “Eternal misery” is a non-certain entry.

Moving on.

But once you've got past others' objections to your faith, the next problem is just how to accurately present what it is that you do believe. And this is where many of us run into a problem. How many of us have actually taken the time to define just what it is that we believe?

It's impossible to articulate something if you haven't taken the time to adequately define it for yourself. The problem with us, as Pagans, is that few of us will do this. And when it comes time to present our own position, we find ourselves unable to do so.

I've spoken to many people, some who have been involved in paganism for longer than I, who are unable to define the word "pagan", let alone what a pagan believes. So, for the sake of this argument, let's come up with a few handy definitions.

The trouble with the word "Pagan" is that it has many meanings. Originally, it meant "country-dweller". Likewise "Heathen" may have meant one who lives on the heath. Both of these words were pejoratives that meant "unconverted", or, essentially, one who does not follow one of the Abrahamic religions. So, even in the 10th century, the words Pagan or Heathen could have meant one that followed any of a number of religions. It means, most broadly, one who does not believe in the God of the Bible. This definition includes among Pagans, any aboriginal beliefs, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism and even new-age philosophy, so long as any such practitioners do not consider themselves Christian as well.

But for our purposes, as pagans, this definition is a bit too broad. So how can we properly identify what a Pagan is? For most of us, the term Neo-Pagan is not too much of a burden. Some associate Neo-Pagan with New-Age, but this isn't really the case. While there are those who take New Age beliefs and bring these into a Neo-Pagan tradition, not all do.

For me, when I define Neo-Paganism, I define it as a system of belief that has its roots in the Proto-Indo-European religions, and which bases its liturgical calendar on the positions of the Sun and the phases of the Moon. This definition includes the Neo-Pagan traditions that I know of including Wicca, Druidism, Asatru and so forth. This definition does not properly include things like the Church of All Worlds and the religion of Jedi, as these were created from Science Fiction novels and movies, but I don't discount them as legitimate religions. Certainly the Church of All Worlds has historically played a part in the Neo-Pagan Community, but it comes from a different place. Perhaps we might consider such religions Trans-Pagan signifying that they are beyond historic paganism.

Once we have a definition of the word Pagan, the next problem is to articulate what, exactly, we believe. This, for me, I did years ago, working with my own teacher, who asked me to write my own creed. If you're trying to explain your faith to another person, this can be a very good exercise, and I recommend it for anyone. Here is the creed that I wrote for myself some years ago:

I believe

That in the beginning was the Great Spirit, who dwelt above the abyss.

Hse found hirsef lonely and shewed forth the aspects of the God and Goddess.

The God and Goddess work together, not as opposites, but as parts of a whole.

The God and Goddess stirred the void and brought to being the universe.

The Stars,

The planets,

The moons,

And all other heavenly things.

The God and the Goddess chose some planets on which to bring forth life. One of these planets is the Earth. The God and the Goddess planted the seeds of life. They blessed the seeds and caused them to

grow. They caused creatures to grow male and female and all that lies between. Man and woman are descendents of the Great Spirit, charged with the care of the Earth.

The Great Spirit revealed himself to all peoples on the Earth. Various names reveal the one Great Spirit: Isis, Osiris, Ishtar, Cerridwen, Cernunnos, Lugh, Brigid, El Shaddai, YHWH, Jesus, Buddah, Artemis, Odin, Kali, Castor and Polux, Romulus and Remus and countless others.

To some are given the task of a witch. On them falls the task of propagating the blessings of the Great Spirit. These must dedicate themselves or turn away from the task. Half measures faileth all.

I am a witch, blessed by the Great Spirit, daughter of the Goddess and son of the God.

I grow between the worlds.

I exist between the sexes.

I tarry in spirit between the elements.

The Center is my path.

To me, this creed speaks to my view of how the Earth began, who the Gods and Goddesses are, and what my relationship with them is. When we try to articulate this to others though, we don't want to present them with a creed, but we do need to give them something tangible. The creed helps us to understand what we believe, but we want to present to our listeners a statement that THEY can understand. So, one way to do this is to distil that creed into a fairly short statement. If I were to do this for myself, I might say something like:

I believe that all religions are our own unique definitions of our relationship with deity. My own religious beliefs are based on what I know of my pre-Christian European ancestors. I look to deity with multiple names because in each of these names, some characteristics present themselves. I don't know if there is one God or many, but I do know that I have a variety of relationships with deity, therefore I consider myself a polytheist. I believe that Deity speaks to each of us in her or his own way, individually, and through each other, and I don't believe that any single text can capture all that the Gods have for us to know, therefore I don't believe in any infallible revealed scripture. I worship on a calendar that follows the cycles of the Sun and Moon, and these are metaphors for my own life. I believe that I have been here many times before, and may be many times in the future, and that each of these times is an opportunity for me to learn and grow to some ultimate end. What that end is, I can't yet say.

Our next task is to defend that position when people question us on various points. If we believe what we say, then defending that position isn't a difficult task. But if we are just making things up, we'll likely be called on them.

The most important part in defending our position is listening. There can be multiple reasons why people might question us regarding our faith, and the proper response to each of them will depend on the reason they are asking the questions in the first place.

Some of these reasons might be:

- **Concern over what we are involved in**
- **Fear**
- **Curiosity**
- **Disdain for something different than their beliefs**
- **An attempt to prove their beliefs by attacking something else**
- **An attempt to ridicule and thus feel superior.**

- **They wish to experience something new or different**

The answers to a person who wishes to learn about our faith are going to be different than the answers given to a person who is trying to attack our positions. Basically though, there are very few motivations for any questions. And offering the proper response requires that we truly listen to the people we are engaged with. We need to not only hear their words, but to discern motivation. We need to read body language, to look at the expressions on their faces, and make an accurate determination as to what they are really saying.

I once heard Bishop Gene Robinson, the gay Episcopal Bishop in New Hampshire talking to someone about responses to his detractors. His words were golden. He said that for the most part, it mattered little WHAT he said, so long as he treated them with respect. To those who wish merely to make their point that what we are doing is somehow wrong, no words will convince, but treating them with respect will go a long way in demonstrating that their views that we are somehow evil are wrong.

In the Christian Bible, Peter admonished believers to “Always be ready to give an answer for the hope which lies within you, with gentleness and with respect”. The qualities of gentleness and respect are the most important tools for anyone, of any religion who are standing up for their faith.

When we speak to most anyone from an Abrahamic tradition, it's important to remember that making the point that our religion is right for us, implies that there is a flaw in their religion. Even if we can accept that their religion is right for them, Christianity, Islam and Judaism do not have room for a reciprocal relationship with another religion except in the most liberal of denominations. Once upon a time, when Christianity was very small, a Christian would have little problem with the idea that their religion was right for them, and ours might be right for us. Those days no longer exist.

So how do we know for what reason a person might be asking questions? With some people, like our parents or relatives, what we know of them will be a good indicator. We can also look at their body language – are they open to hear what we say, or are they on-guard? How a question is phrased can tell us a lot.

Some examples: Why do you believe “that”, instead of believing in Jesus? This single question could have multiple meanings depending on how it's presented. If it comes with a person exhibiting an air of superiority, it obviously suggests disdain for other views. But if it's a relative, and they are showing concern it might suggest that they are honestly worried. Yet again, the same question could come from an attitude of simple curiosity – it's merely another way of asking “why are you a pagan instead of a Christian?”

It's easy now to see that this single question will require three different answers depending on how it is asked.

In the first case, where we sense disdain, the proper response could be polite disengagement. If we are adventurous, we might wish to take up the reins and take control over the conversation and put the other person on the defensive – but without experience, this can be tricky. I recall once about a year ago when I was approached by a Christian who said “Why do you believe all that garbage?” I looked him in the eye and said “What do you think you would feel like if I asked you why you believe in Jesus and all that garbage?” I was careful not to suggest that his religion amounted to garbage, but reminded him

of what he had done. He apologized and we had a good conversation afterward. But the important things to remember were that I needed to be respectful, and that I couldn't relinquish my control of the conversation. In a dialog, each person must control their side of the conversation, or it becomes not a conversation but a sermon.

In the second case, where someone is worried, the response needs to be one of reassurance. If someone is worried it is because they care; perhaps they love us. It's tough to offer any generalization regarding this sort of reassurance because the fear can come from many places. The Christian might worry we're going to hell. Others might believe we are involved in some sort of cult. Again though, we need to be respectful. We can let people know that paganism isn't Satanism. We can use Isaac Bonewits's "Advanced Bonewits Cult Danger Evaluation Frame" and let people know that this was created by one of us, and is used by law enforcement agencies to determine what is, and isn't a cult. In short, we need to do what we can to reassure those who care for us that we are safe.

In the last case, to the truly curious, this affords us the opportunity to actually share our faith. We aren't seeking to defend, but to present. But even here, there are questions to ask ourselves:

How much are we ready to share?

Is this person looking for a teacher?

Are we ready to teach?

If not, are we able to recommend a teacher?

It's strange that this last case, the most welcoming one, requires the greatest amount of preparation. But no matter what we encounter, it doesn't help us if we go in unprepared.

All of this works best if we have practiced it. If you can, get someone to work with you to ask you the questions and see how well you do at answering them. Role play is good practice. Also, when, as often happens, you are visited by some missionary at your door, whether it's Jehovah's Witness or Mormon, or what have you, and they ask if you'd like to hear about their religion, take that as an opportunity to share as well. The worst that can happen is that they will leave when they discover that you aren't letting them control the entire conversation. But who knows – you might actually afford them a chance to open their mind as well.

But the most important thing of all is to remember that respect is truly important. No matter how sincere you are, no matter how many facts you can present, without respect, they will fall on deaf ears.