

Pagan Mysticism

Pagan Mysticism:

Paganism as a World Religion

By

Michael York

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-2047-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2047-9

This book is dedicated to Nancy York, Adrian Ivakhiv, Natacha Dauphin
and the memories of Deborah Ann Light and John Quincy Adams.

Existence is beyond the power of words
To define:

...

From wonder into wonder
Existence opens.

—Laotzu

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PREFACE

Immanuel Kant prefers contemplation over the pursuit of sensual pleasure since it reputedly allows access to the supersensible and the transcendent design of nature. For a pagan, by contrast, reality is implicitly a pantheistic unity rather than either a Cartesian duality of matter (*res extensa*) and consciousness (*res cogitans*) or what Stephan Palmquist allows as a Kantian hierarchy between the noumenal and phenomenal. In my *Pagan Ethics*, I argued that if we were to comprehend Kant's realm of moral obligation not as the manifestation of reason but rather more simply as honour-in-this-world, we have instead at heart a pagan understanding. Pagans tend to identify the ethical with the aesthetic (beauty is the good, and the good is beautiful), and they do not, as does Kant, divorce beauty from sublimity. Consequently, to whatever degree paganism might allegedly associate mysticism with superstition and/or fanatical practice, it nevertheless still understands genuine mystic experience as one of sublime ecstasy.

In this last, the pagan mystic goal as an enterprise of emotional feeling may coincide with the mystical as it is experienced in the world's other non-pagan religions as well. The significant difference could lie instead in the means of pursuit. Within the range of possible human experience, mysticism comprehends something supremely fascinating. The present work is dedicated to forming an understanding of what this fascination is and how it might be achieved. To this end, it has behooved me to look into the world's major religions to fathom how the mystical is conceived and sought by each of them and how this resonates with a pagan practice, theology and morality. In short, what are the similarities paganism shares with other religions concerning mysticism, and what does it offer that is different or even unique?

The present work represents a completion to my earlier explorations of *Pagan Theology* (2003) and *Pagan Ethics* (2016). As with the previous works, there emerges an unintended interfaith dimension in that I find *bona fide* pagan elements in other religions as well. These contribute to areas of possible interdenominational dialogue but are also important in themselves for our continuing divisive and fissuring world of the 21st

century. But in the current milieu of destructive conflict, terrorism, social division, environmental threat, disillusionment and *raison d'être* uncertainty, paganism appears to be re-emerging as an engaging spirituality that suggests the possibility of an innovative range of answers to the many problems humanity, life and nature are facing. This is not to say that paganism, especially institutionally, does not have its own difficulties – both internal and external-, but it does propose more broadly a course or mode of living that has a noticeable appeal to an increasing number of people. Primarily, paganism advances a grounded form of mysticism rather than one of world-denial.

Throughout the consequent research and reflections that have been involved for the purpose on hand, I have many friends and colleagues to thank. In particular, I am grateful to Adrian Ivakhiv, Barbara McGraw, Wendy Griffin, Helen Berger, Bron Taylor, Philip Lucas, Amy Whitehead, Marion Bowman, Elisabeth Arweck, Aline O'Brien, Paul Templeton, Darrell Louie, Maggie Stone, Serena Roney-Dougal, Barbara Jane Davy, Susan Greenwood, Liz Greene, Darrelyn Gunzburg, Meg Sanders, Shirley Eastham, Mary Alterator, Michael Strmiska, Patrick Curry, Susan Palmer, Penny Jarvis, Jacqueline Rogers, Natacha Dauphin, Santima van Nunen, Wylie Wong, Swami Mahadevanand, Ralph Forde, Francis Lanuza, Tilak Basnet, Sarah Pike, Shawn Arthur, Stephen Goodchild, James Eastman and Mika Lassander. Pagans that have been significantly helpful for providing continuous understandings and clarifications of pagan belief and practice include Selena Fox, Andras Corban-Arthen, Caroline Robertson, Claire Bellenis, Prudence Priest, Vivianne & Chris Crowley, Angie Buchanan, Phyllis Curott, Caroline Wise, Graham Harvey, David Rankine, Ross Downing, Tina Dare-Bella Mahri, Robin Taylor, David Parry, Patrick McCollum, Elizabeth Sturino, Paul Davies, Rowan Fairgrove, Macha Nightmare, Laura Wildman, Cat Chapin-Bishop, David Garland, Lisa Kennedy, Glenys Livingstone, Mark Green, Fritz Muntean, Aidan Kelly, Morgana, Leon Van Gulik, Lezlie Kinyon, T. Thorn Coyle, Jason Pitzl-Waters, Gede Parma / Fio Aengus Santika, Jon Graubarth, Andrew Theitic, Stead Steadman, and Francesca Ciancimino Howell.

A special mention for my personal insights into and love for paganism include the composers Maurice Ravel, Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Rachmaninoff and George Gershwin as well as Claude Debussy, Bella Bartok and Sergei Prokofiev. There are of course many, many more (e.g. Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Messiaen), but these for me are foremost.

The profession of teaching is itself a perpetually expanding learning process, and I have been particularly fortunate to have had and been stimulatingly encouraged by several students from both Bath Spa University and the Cherry Hill Seminary. From the former, there are Nicholas Campion, Anne Ferlat, Amy Whitehead, Bernadette Brady, Darby Costello, Faye Cossar, Steve Judd, David Charles Rowan, Silvia Pannone and Tristram Burden; and from the latter, Candace Kant (now the CHS Academic Dean), Holli Emore (Executive Director of CHS), Todd Berntson, Rayna Hamre, Laura Wildman, Ben Hoshour, William Blumberg, Karel Bouse, Mari Elm, Joan Ouimette, Wes Isley, Cynthia Cebuhar, Valerie Hahn and Jason Strobus.

For psychological insights in particular, I am indebted to Drake Spaeth and Dennis Carpenter as well as Eamonn Marshall. Especially provocative for his long-standing discernments and acuity is Gavin Anderson. And I continue to benefit from the finding of unusual articles concerning politics and social developments from Norman Sjoman, Vicky Enea, Kenneth Jay Wilson, Marie-Laure Legroux, Lise Geschiedt, Hecate Gould Massoubre, Pavel Horak, Rebecca McKee, Peter Orth, Roger Loveday, Stephan Michaud, Koen Peters and John Walder as well as from my wife Nancy York. Much missed now in this and further respects are Phoebe Wray, Deborah Ann Light, John Wilson, Stefanie Freydot, Warren Lee, Rosalie Ross Sennett, Nel Roberts and my aunt Florence Austin.

My thanks also extend to the helpfulness, professionalism and enjoyment of working with Cambridge Scholars Publishing. In particular, I would like to signal Adam Rummens, Commissioning Editor, and Amanda Miller, Typesetting Manager, as well as the Designers Courtney Blades and Sophie Edminson.

It is of course the personal contacts with friends and family that keep one sanely on course and connected with the living human dimension. My gratitude here extends to Fred Profeta, Leilani Lamb Brenner, Marion Bowman, Leslie Currie, Jim Clark, Freeman Gunter and Drew Stevens as well as my family: Chloe Dunscombe, Jennifer Dunscombe, Nathaniel John Pyke, Caroline Pyke, Iana Paris, Sylvester Sewell, Judy & Larry Kizer, Cathy Lentz and Jezzette Wilcox, and extended family: Marlowe Rosin, Lynne Eggers and Coral Paris. But perhaps above all, I remain beholden to my partner Richard Lee Switzler who never ceases to amaze in his never-ending creativity, his care & concern, his humour and his love.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Establishing the seriousness and relevancy of a new vocabulary to replace the secular-sacred dichotomy embedded in mainstream thought and bias is to be exemplified in a revised understanding of mystical experience.¹ In the elucidation of material religion, the present work looks at the world's religions but specifically using the perspective of paganism. As a body-centred 'material religion' in contrast to the more established transcendental orientations, paganism embraces matter rather than denying it and seeking to escape from it.² In a word, paganism is *the* quintessential material religion. Such considerations as earth, mother, *mater*, physical things and creativity itself that have been marginalized in the present world's dominant discourses have been instead re-centred within a pagan focus and furnish what would today be a new and different foundation for the mystical experience. While all religions are material to some extent, paganism is the spirituality that actually celebrates the tangible and does not obscure or officially repudiate this open veneration. This material religion orientation alone is challenging and provides a completely fresh understanding of what mysticism is or can be.

For Alfred Gell, inasmuch as agency is a social happening or event, it is concerned with the correspondence between the mental and the external.³ Objects such as ancestral shrines, tombs, memorials, ossuaries, sacred sites, venerated idols and icons, and so forth, contain extensions or *vestigia* of personhood beyond the limitations of biological life. Gell employs the anthropological term of 'abduction' for the appropriation of an external

¹ *Vide* Zitukawa & York (2007) and Zitukawa & York (2008).

² Plate (2015:4) provides a working definition of *material religion*: "(1) an investigation of the interactions between human bodies and physical objects, both natural and human-made; (2) with much of the interaction taking place through sense perception; (3) in special and specified spaces and times; (4) in order to orient, and sometimes disorient, communities and individuals; (5) toward the formal strictures and structures of religious traditions."

³ Gell (1998:222).

other's agency through its signs or indices which are assumed to be efficacious potencies. In this dynamic,

memory becomes a socially engineered medium for the transmission of the power to change the world and shape the course of events, rather than a mere passive registration of the past.⁴

This process works equally with enduring objects as it does with memory images. For both, it is personhood and its extensions or projections that animate the material world in rendering it as numinous and intentional. Ailsa Hunt appears to refer to the metapoetic ability to attribute meaningful divine behaviour as virtually integral to multiple pagan interpretations of agency.⁵ Material things become sacred through the visual and physical operative of a memorial tradition's embodiment. This involves the processes of material socialization by which objects and bodies are transformed into indexes or mediators of the otherworldly. In short, paganism is concerned with the enduring alliance between the senses, religiosity and the eternal silence of matter.⁶

If there is a single emotion to be associated with the mystic's rapture, it would by default be joy. Because of the increased rarity of mystical joy in comparison to joy more generally, I wish to designate the heightened feeling that results from the mystical experience as *jouissance*. This is to be distinguished from Jacques Lacan's understanding of *jouissance* as the suffering that occurs beyond the amount of pleasure that a person can endure. By contrast, the sense I am using for the word is closer to Carl Barthes identification of trans-subjective bliss. The mystic's joy is one that breaks free of cultural identity and ordinary enjoyment. Etymologically, the root behind such words as 'joy' and 'jouissance' is a religious term relating to the fear or awe that also carries the notion of rejoicing. And while it is perfectly possible to gain mystical insight in a secular context, mysticism itself is traditionally associated with religio-spiritual experience. Consequently, the religious underpinning of our terms 'joy' and 'jouissance'

⁴ Ibid. p 227.

⁵ Hunt (2016:213).

⁶ I am beautiful, O mortals, as a dream carved in stone,
and my breast, on which every man has
bruised himself in his turn,
Is designed to inspire in the poet a love
As eternal and silent as matter itself.

—'Beauty' from *Les Fleurs du mal*, Charles Baudelaire (1857). Tr. Kathryn Brown.

suggests these as appropriate in particular for the essence of mystical ecstasy. In fact, in distinguishing pantheism from mysticism, Andrew Seth recognizes that the essence of the latter is religious.

Another word that derives from the root that signifies ‘to rejoice’ and is thus related to *jouissance* is the word *gaudy*. While this last has come to indicate something that is tastelessly extravagant, its underlying idea is one of being bright and showy. Words evolve in various manners, and etymology or the study of words and their origins is a rich area circumscribing the historical development and changes of terms and root meanings. The joy or *jouissance* that is to be associated with mysticism is almost literally the sparkle of enlightenment or illumination. The brightness of the mystical experience is not one of blinding light but rather the glowing effervescence that is associated with magical insight and feeling. Its dazzle relates to the gaudiness of the extravagantly unordinary – the being beyond the norm that the mystic seeks.

In the present work, we are concerned with understanding what mysticism is or might be and then what might be a pagan’s understanding of the mystical and how this understanding might be different from more traditional or established conceptions of the mystical. Paganism as I understand it fundamentally embraces spiritual corporality. While corpospiritual elements are to be found in most world religions, as I explored in *Pagan Theology*, corpospirituality itself is pagan and constitutes a central comprehension of the material aspects of religion. Paganism differs from both Abrahamic and dharmic religiosity in centralizing the physical but also from secularism in not rejecting the magical or numinous. Ferdinand Mount captures the cognizance of material religion *qua* paganism when he mentions that Goethe

condemned what he saw as the poverty of Christian mythology, always longing for something absent, dwelling in a way that he regarded as unholy, deprivation, suffering, and expectation rather than empowerment and possession. The only true divinity was Nature.⁷

From a pagan and material religious perspective, the empowering holy is always present in the body and physicality of nature of which we are all a part. The living possession of tangible divine presence is the interface of paganism with the mystical.

⁷ Mount (2017:14).

There is of course no single definition of mysticism but instead a range of contrasting comprehensions. For instance, according to Elmer O'Brien, exposure to the theotic is tentatively "a singular pietistic twitch of the human psyche."⁸ The professor identifies three generic features that belong to the experience that we conventionally consider to be mystic: (1) the object of confrontation is conceived to be something ultimate, (2) this confrontation is immediate and directly experiential, and (3) this confrontation always contrasts with the ordinary and the more "familiar exercise of either sense perception or of reasoning."⁹ In reference to the Pahnke-Richards Mystical Experience Questionnaire, Michael Pollan states the following:

The questionnaire measures feelings of unity, sacredness, ineffability, peace and joy, as well as the impression of having transcended space and time and the 'noetic sense' that the experience has disclosed some objective truth about reality. A 'complete' mystical experience is one that experiences all six characteristics.¹⁰

This understanding of mysticism derives from William James' 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. With John Noss, speaking for a Hindu context, mystic liberation "comes by an ecstatic flash of certitude in the midst of deep meditation."¹¹ For Andrew Seth, while acknowledging that mystical feeling is not capable of exact definition, it connects "with the endeavour of the human mind to grasp the divine essence or the ultimate reality of things, and to enjoy the blessedness of actual communion with the Highest."¹²

Paganism, however, tends to avoid metaphors of value in terms of the vertical and would replace the word 'highest' with something like 'all' or the 'all of nature'. Because, however, mysticism in the West has operated and been described largely in relation to Christianity, the up-down symbolism is frequent – with an almost invariable implication of the earth-bound being lower and the transcendental being higher above.¹³ The

⁸ O'Brien (1965:13).

⁹ Ibid. 14f.

¹⁰ Pollan (2015:40).

¹¹ Noss (1949:225).

¹² Seth (1884:128f).

¹³ Peter van de Veer (*apud* Plate, 2015:233) discusses the "sense that the material is gross and the spiritual subtle and higher. ... This leads to a critique of materialist religion and to the contradiction that the spiritual often needs to take a material form to be visible." His contention is that "the spiritual and the secular are

general pagan impetus, by contrast, is not to denigrate the physical and desire transcendental escape. Likewise, with the concept of the ultimate, paganism evaluates not in terms of the best or worst but more in line with what is to be understood as basic, auxiliary, essential or even supreme. Consequently, paganism is equally at home with the secondary and even the phenomenally superficial. For a pagan for the most part, value is found in the whole of nature, including if not especially nature's physicality, as well as in the holographic part of nature rather than in some final and 'greatest' exodus from nature.

In short, the study of paganism (Pagan Studies) is relevant for the broader subjects of Sociology, History and Religious Studies. Though its institutional developments in today's world remain comparatively insignificant, as a spirituality paganism is unusually and often unrecognisably large – rendering it *de facto* as an important religion or consortium of religions and religious practices requiring academic attention. In addition, it is hoped that an increased understanding of mysticism might be beneficial to laypersons as well – both pagan and non-pagan. And whatever else it may be, paganism exemplifies material religion itself and becomes a significant part of “rematerializing the study of religion.”¹⁴

Paganism

Paganism is of course a broad and difficult-to-define spirituality. According to Christopher Jones, “Paganism is always a blurred and shifting category that defies neat taxonomies.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, attempting to counter this alleged vagueness, in my *Pagan Theology*, I presented two understandings of paganism both as a baseline or root-religion and as an on-going composition and expression of nature or earthen religiosity:

Paganism is an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by the individual or community with the tangible, sentient and/or nonempirical.¹⁶

produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalized religion in Euro-American modernity.” According to Susan Sontag, psychology is “a sublimated spiritualism: a secular, ostensibly scientific way of affirming the primacy of spirit over matter” (<http://izquotes.com/author/susan-sontag/11> - accessed 27 February 2018).

¹⁴ Angela Zito (*apud* Plate, 2015:26).

¹⁵ Jones (2014:7).

¹⁶ York (2003:157).

Paganism is an affirmation of interactive and polymorphic sacred relationship by individual or community with the tangible, sentient and nonempirical.¹⁷

The only difference between the two rests with the *and/or* conjunction in the first and that of *and* in the second. The first definition allows for what we could consider gnostic forms of paganism – e.g., Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Neo-platonism, Cabalism and so forth. In other words, its suggested inclusiveness embraces the wide-reaching pluralism that is in fact understood as contemporary paganism. ‘Gnostic paganism’, however, tends to dismiss the reality of the corporeal and sees the origin of nature *et al.* in something transcendental so that existence or life becomes in turn some kind of ‘fall’ from which consciousness properly and subsequently seeks to escape.¹⁸ This gnostic understanding conforms to what Catherine Albanese identifies as the consideration of Nature as Illusion.¹⁹ By contrast, the second definition applies more specifically to what I wish to term ‘pagan paganism’ or ‘telluric paganism’.²⁰ Here, consciousness is itself an emergent rather than an *a priori* Source, Creator or Fashioner. The matrix of evolution is instead nature itself (or herself). The physical is both divine and seminal and, by being all-generative, manifests as the full cosmos, the full range of sentience and whatever is or can be the magical. Consequently, pagan paganism or ‘deep’ paganism does not dismiss the tangible as illusory *māyā* as might Vedanta, and nor does it dismiss the possibility of the supernatural or preternatural as does atheistic secularism. In theological terminology, paganism is often pantheistic, frequently polytheistic, possibly henotheistic, occasionally monistic, and sometimes even atheistic.

Inevitably, paganism broadly or ideally is to be differentiated from the other ideal-types of religion, namely, the dharmic, the Abrahamic and the secular. While virtually no religion conforms to only one of the four ideal-types of religiosity, it is predominantly the pagan-gnostic and the

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 162.

¹⁸ *Vide* Filoramo (1990:60f).

¹⁹ Albanese (1990).

²⁰ Admittedly, the idiom ‘pagan paganism’ might be as contentious as that of ‘Christian Christianity’. While there are countless pagan variations that range from Vedic paganism and Classical paganism to pagan Christianity, Christian paganism, pagan Hinduism and the like, I employ the term ‘pagan paganism’, ‘telluric paganism’ or ‘deep paganism’ to differentiate from ‘gnostic or transcendental paganism’ – both of which being identified within what can be recognised as constituting the broad range of pagan consideration itself.

extramundane-empirical orientations that distinguish them. It is doubtless that “it can be found all over the world in different periods,” but rather than claim that there is “some immutable and timeless essence” to paganism,²¹ pagan religiosity may be observed to be a dynamic and perpetually developing orientation. Its core salience is the acceptance of *both* physicality *and* the otherworldly.

Briefly and for the purpose of differentiation, the Abrahamic comprises those religions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism and Islam) that revere a personal transcendent Creator. Magic broadly and competing deific entities or expressions specifically are claimed to be fiendish and abominable. The dharmic (e.g., Hinduism and Buddhism), by contrast, recognises tangible differentiation, whether real or not, as something to escape or transcend. Rather than conceptualising human behaviour in terms of sin, it is basically understood through assessment of error. And finally, like paganism, the secular (e.g., humanism, materialism, the Cult of Reason, communism, Church of Satan, the Cult of the Dollar, Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, etc.) values the this-worldly, including nature, but differs in its rejection of both worship and consideration of the magical.

Admittedly, many groups to which I am applying the ideal-type analytic would emphatically reject both the term ‘pagan’ and the association with some of the other groups which the ideal tool suggests. Another objection concerns the alleged significant differences between groups that are being glossed over by my taxonomic analysis. A third difficulty arises in that ‘pagan’ is supposedly a Eurocentric discourteous term that does not serve efforts for post-colonial self-determination.²² Nevertheless, it is to be stressed that the ideal-type is a sociological device for measurement and not a categorical classification. Most importantly, it is *not* a replacement for the required gleaning of the differences belonging to any given religiosity from another – whether indigenous spiritual traditions, contemporary Western self-identifying pagan revivals or various invented religions. In fact, it is to be used *to assist* in fathoming and uncovering the uniqueness of any specific religious or spiritual practice. To the degree that the world’s religions may be examined as they conform to four basic

²¹ Egil Asprem, responding to Ethan Doyle White, in “Reform among the (people who study) Pagans,” *Heterodoxology: Exploring the Heterodox in Science, Religion, and Politics* – <https://heterodoxology.com/2016/08/18/reform-among-the-people-who-study-pagans/> (accessed 22 August 2017).

²² *Vide* Doyle White (2012).

types, the benefit in the study of any particular religiosity as it exists in actuality may be challenged, but I will continue to argue for the advantages that are possible with its judicious and carefully objective employment while still keeping in mind no less the need to uncover individual identities as well. While, for instance, Lakota spirituality may have adopted various Christian elements over time, it is still predominantly not Abrahamic, dharmic or secular. If one wishes to create additional categories, fine! But on the default position and effort involved with Occam's Razor, that becomes a different task that is less advantageous to the present undertaking to understand pagan mysticism as an exception to traditional, established and non-material conceptions of mystical pursuit.

There is one further point that can be made at the present stage. It may be noticed that I capitalise the ideal-type of Abrahamism but not the other three. The reason for this is because Christianity, Judaism and Islam constitute the religions of Abraham – *Abrahamic* being the adjective derived from the proper noun. The words *dharma*, *saeculum* and *pagus* are not in themselves names of an individual, place or organisation. In a similar fashion, I am more interested in paganism as an extensive generic – including non-institutional vernacular expression – rather than Paganism as a legal or specifically identified proper noun organisation. For *pagus* itself, I follow Pierre Chuvin who understood the term to designate simply 'place' – whether something comparable to the ward of a city (e.g., Rome) or a countryside locality²³ - in short, simply and originally a *pagus* is a 'neighbourhood'. A *paganus*, therefore, is a 'neighbour or person of the place' who preserves its local traditions. The currently popular notion that understands the term 'pagan' as a Roman reference to the 'countryside' where the last people to be converted to the new religion of Christianity resided – suggesting that 'pagan' for the dismissive Christians connoted something on the order of 'country bumpkin' – is likely erroneous or at least a later development. To the degree that *paganus* first took root in the urban centres of the Roman empire, its understanding of 'civilian' is perhaps closest to the comparable Greek term of *Hellên* (plural *Hellênes*) that was used for pagans in the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Roman Empire.

²³ Chuvin (1990:8f). Jones (2014:5) dismisses "this view [as having] little linguistic support" but furnishes no evidence for his dismissal.

Mysticism

To understand pagan mysticism, it is essential to understand mysticism itself both in general and as it has been understood more specifically in Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, secular and gnostic traditions. The present work endeavours to examine briefly each of the world's major religions and the mystics who are associated with them and simultaneously to differentiate pagan contrasts and even augmentations that may be discerned in the examinations. The recurrent theme in the present analysis is the ideal distinction of pagan spirituality from the understandings of Abrahamic, dharmic and secular religiosity. This analytic allows one, at least vis-à-vis contemporary and traditional expectations, to appreciate the innovative comprehension and indicative material basis of mystical thought that paganism affords.

For instance, Seth acknowledges that the most intense thought of the mystic is “that of a supreme, all-pervading, and indwelling power, in whom all things are one.”²⁴ A pagan, by contrast, is just as apt to say “in *which* all things are one.” Nineteenth-century thought was basically unable to conceive of the ‘absolute’ as other than ‘God’. But overlooking this distinction for the moment, Seth correctly recognizes the essential pantheistic thrust of mystical endeavour and utterance. He identifies this as the theoretical or speculative aspect of mysticism. The more practical, by contrast, is the experiential in the form of direct intercourse and ecstatic union with divine nature. For Seth, mystical pantheism differs from its philosophic consideration by being primarily religious.

Following Alfred North Whitehead, Rupert Sheldrake explains in connection to the experiential that “every actual occasion is ... both determined by physical causes from the past, and by the self-creative, self-renewing subject that both chooses its own past and chooses among its potential futures.”²⁵ Any event is a process and not a thing, and likewise the mystical experience is an activity that has time within it. In essence, the mystic is one who detaches to the extent that she or he can reflect on the durational patterns of the present as if both an outside observer and yet the one who is enmeshed into experiencing the pattern of connections within the wider spatial and temporal context. The ecstatic insight of the

²⁴ Seth (1884:129).

²⁵ Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton/Coronet, 2013:121).

mystic is what often leads to understandings of purpose and evolutionary goals.

All the same, despite the essential materialism of paganism, this is not a scientific materialism that simply holds all matter to be unconscious and purely mechanistic. Nor is it one that is confined to purely material interests. Paganism, arguably, recognises an intrinsic desire for the physical to become conscious – one in which the evolution of animal and human life is a natural product of the teleological impulse of the material. In a word, paganism may be understood as celebrating the unfolding development of matter – a development that can come to *transcend* its corporeal origins. Consciousness, therefore, is appreciated as an emergent rather than the *a priori* author. It may come into play as an additional or augmenting factor, but it is not the first principle behind the entire cosmos. Awareness is accepted instead as the becoming and then on-going process of the cosmos – the embodied desire of the universe to be and come to see and understand itself.

In contrast to paganism, we have more purely transcendental forms of mysticism in the Kabbalah, Christianity, the dharmic religions of the East and even, within the pluralistic movement that comprises contemporary paganism, the Orphic, Hermetic, Pythagorean and Neo-Platonic practices. These in general conform to the religious mystical experience as formulated by Robert Charles Zaehner.²⁶ He contrasts what he considers the superior form of mysticism that leads to charity and compassion with natural forms that focus on the oneness with nature. For instance, the Boston Marathon bombings illustrate a typical horror of our time. Whilst, against the official version, a case might be made by some that Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev are patsies and not the perpetrators, they nevertheless have come to illustrate an Islamic propensity toward extremism that is contrary to the desired spirit of Western civilization and the global community that shares that aspiration. In the very least, the ethos of terror that can be traced to its god – or at least the jihadist version of its god – is not commensurate to the mystical quest as it has been traditionally and historically envisaged, but it may be contended that the suicidal death-wish and destructive religious indifference to the well-being of others are in themselves possible expressions of mystical sacrifice.

²⁶ R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Jess Hollenback distinguishes between the mystic and mystical experience. In the present venture concerning paganism, we are more concerned with the latter than the former, namely, what kind of experiences for the pagan are mystical and how are they to be distinguished? For Hollenback, “mysticism incorporates *two* important elements: a distinctive mode of experience or consciousness *and* the individual’s responses to that unusual modality of experience.”²⁷ The mystical mode of consciousness is traditionally understood as transhistorically essentialist and transcendent to the matrix of physical phenomena – achieved by the *via negativa* that negates the world and seeks the divine beyond both the cultural and this-worldly. Closer to a pagan materialistic approach, Hollenback stresses the context of the mystical experience over “an invariant common core of experiences” and as one that may include the supernormal, paranormal and/or mystical.²⁸ Reminiscent of Robert Corrington,²⁹ Hollenback says that “there is no reason to suspect that the supernormal phenomena of mysticism lie outside the domain of nature.”³⁰

Our term for ‘mysticism’ itself derives from the Greek *mystes* that designated an initiate to the mystery religions. Broadly, the term is to be understood as “a spiritual and non-discursive approach to the union of the soul with ... whatever is taken to be the central reality of the universe” – whether this last is conceived as a transcendent God or the cosmos itself.³¹ Following George Mavrodes, the mystical state represents an “altered state of consciousness.”³² In essence, it is a direct experience of wisdom beyond any norm. The mystic, by contrast, is the person who has been shaped by his or her mystical and/or unusual experiences and who develops a lifestyle that is distinguished from that of the non-mystic.

For pagans and an understanding of a pagan – or at least a *deep* pagan – mystical experience, it is perhaps helpful to distinguish between the *via negativa* approach that essentially removes the experiencing individual from the manifold world (and all that is) and a *via positiva* that is, in Hollenback’s sense, contextual and engaged with nature and the phenomenal rather than ‘transcendent’ to them. To the degree that we can

²⁷ Hollenback (1996:1 – my emphasis).

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 5.

²⁹ Robert S. Corrington, *Nature’s Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).

³⁰ Hollenback *loc. cit.* p. 17n40.

³¹ Reese (1999:501).

³² George I. Mavrodes, “Mysticism” *apud* Honderich (1995:599).

accept that the mystical state of awareness is largely dependent upon the individual's religious tradition, we have a launching point for distinguishing between pagan mystics and non-pagan ones. Of course, as religions themselves are not clearly delineated and wholly separate categories of beliefs and practices, we will indeed find pagan elements among Christian mystics and gnostic elements among even earth-based mystics.

What we want first to explore, therefore, are the instances of recognized mystics to fathom how much of the mystical bliss that has been obtained is formless and how much involved the corporalization of form. What is there to learn from any mystic in terms of technique and experience? How distinct are dharmic and Abrahamic forms of mysticism from the pagan? What material religion themes, if any, connect all religions across the board? And what does the study of mysticism suggest for the practice and involvement of the super-ordinary for the layperson concerned otherwise with the more mundane and ordinary vicissitudes of daily life?

Traced presumably to John Wright Buckham, mysticism may be defined as “the intuitive and emotive apprehension of spiritual reality.”³³ The spiritual-personal values whose realization it involves may not need to be ‘eternal’ as Buckham contended – this being yet again part of the Abrahamic bias through which mysticism has traditionally been understood in the West. While Buckham accepts that mysticism first emerges in “primitive religion,” he adds that it is here “subject to many imaginative *aberrations*.”³⁴ Moreover, Buckham considers that in the primal context, mysticism concerns apprehension of the numinous. Here, however, we need to distinguish between the numinous as a mysterious and transcendent force beyond reason, the good, the beautiful and the physical, as Rudolf Otto who coined the term posited, and the numinous as an immanent, mysterious-magical, *jouissant* quality inherent in sacred objects, forms and worldly experiences.³⁵ The *Mystic Way* which has come to involve both the relevant transcendent and pagan spiritual techniques consists, according to Buckham, of three or four stages, namely, awakening, purification, illumination and/or unification.³⁶ Buckham, however, is referring primarily to traditional Christian mysticism and understands the

³³ Buckham (1945:513). E.g., <http://www.uucharlottesville.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/mystic-032110.pdf> (accessed 3 May 2015).

³⁴ *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

³⁵ York (2011:9-12).

³⁶ Buckham (1945:29).

awakening and purification as often forming together the initial stage – ranging from the ascetic renunciation and intense discipline favoured by the Catholic Church to the toil and life engagement sponsored by Protestantism. Through a resulting catharsis and/or active contemplation, the illumination of the next stage is to be reached. For Buckham, enlightenment need not be confined to an ecclesiastical context but can occur in the physical/mundane world as well. But enlightenment is not the final stage, which according to Buckham, is instead the *unio mystica* or spiritual union (*theosis*). All the same, he allows this last on more vernacular levels and not exclusively to renowned mystics. Moreover, it may consist of ecstatic rapture, but it might also conform more to humble serenity and harmony with ordinary reality. Nevertheless, despite his more modern emphasis on self-fulfilment than on self-surrender, Buckham retains a traditional and not necessarily pagan understanding that differentiates “lower levels” from “higher aims and nobler ideals.”³⁷ Instead, a more profitable approach might be found not in the material-cultural mysticism as Alfred Gell terms it but in his *social agency* for imagining the forms of animism.³⁸

Pagan versus Abrahamic, Dharmic and Secular

What will distinguish pagan mysticism perhaps the most from other forms is its comprehension of godhead. In its fullest sense, the mystical enterprise leads to a self-made apotheosis. In the Abrahamic traditions, however, godhead is always separate from the human – being transcendent to the material and even cultural domains within which the human breathes and dies. Apart from the unique insistence of Christianity and its formulation of Jesus Christ, Yahweh/Elohim-Allah-‘God’ does not incarnate but remains intrinsically other and apart. This is a two-way block as well. The avenue for the human to become a god also does not exist, and from a pagan perspective, the Abrahamic god illustrates what we might consider to be an anti-mystic possibility of which the Tsamaev brothers and other Islamist terrorists are examples. Wanton carnage and divisiveness which occur under the auspices of the Jewish-Christian-Muslim god remain contrary to any collective dream of the human spirit – a dream that has often been embodied and/or expressed in mystical activity.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 55.

³⁸ Gell (1998:16f, 19 & 21).

Nevertheless, mysticism is still to be found in Islam as we see with the Sufis, in Judaism as is to be witnessed through the Kabbalah, and in Christianity as found with such figures as St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, St. John of the Cross, and St. Gregory of Nyssa among many others. Consequently, to understand the phenomenon of mysticism, how it manifests in the pagan context and what it seeks to achieve from a pagan orientation, it behoves us to examine not only the spiritual traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism but also those of the Abrahamic emergences from the Levant. We want to know how is pagan mysticism different, how is it similar and what it aims for that both ties it and distinguishes it from the broader varieties of mystic experience.

Consequently, in the understanding of pagan mysticism, there is the benefit if not requirement to examine the range of identifiable mystics to understand both what is a pagan experience from one that is not and how or what a pagan mystic perceives or experiences as pagan rapture, insight or even enlightenment. As has paganism itself, pagan mysticism in the West has been a neglected, marginalized and dismissed phenomenon, and the pagan mystic is a missing person among the fuller narrative of Western civilization. Instead and more clearly acknowledged are the Christian mystics which include St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Augustine, St. Maximus the Confessor, William of St. Thierry, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of St. Victor, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Edmund Rich, St. Mechtilde of Magdeburg, Richard Rolle, Blessed Henry Suso, St. Catherine of Siena, Blessed Jan van Ruysbroek, St. Catherine of Genoa, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross and Marie of the Incarnation. Less clear within the Christian tradition are Pseudo-Dionysius, John Tauler, the author of the *Theologica Germanica*, the author of *The Cloud*, Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich. Heretical Christian legacies are to be found with Origen, Evagrius of Pontus and Meister Eckhart as well as the movements of Hesychasm, the “Friends of God” and Quietism. For non-Christian forms of mysticism, we must begin with Plotinus, Sufism (including Rabi’a al-‘Adawiya, Abu Yazid al-Bistami and Djatal al-Din Rumi), Daoism, Hinduism and Buddhism. There are also the Judaic traditions of the Kabbalah and Hasidism. More contemporary considerations include Transcendentalism, Theosophy and New Thought.

Together, these various mystics and traditions allow us a rich and varied foray into discerning and examining the nuances and joys of the non-ordinary and the immediate or direct encounter with an intensified or awe-inspiring altered state of consciousness. Consequently, I propose to investigate some of these instances to see what might resonate with a

pagan paradigm, what mysticism is for a pagan and how it operates or is constituted. In contrast to both Abrahamic and dharmic practices for the most part, mystical rapture for a pagan is not a denial of life, nature or the worldly but an inspiring endorsement of these. Rather than escape or removal, it is involvement – a heightened sense of merging into and with cosmic plenitude. In other words, at heart the jouissant mystical experience for a pagan is an engagement with life, the material, the cosmos and the all and not a transcendental disengagement from them.

Formless versus Embodied

A further difference we might wish to keep in mind concerns the distinction Hollenback makes between ‘formless’ mysticism and ‘embodied’ mysticism. His preferred term for the latter is “visionary multiplicity” – referring to visions of forms and figures.³⁹ By contrast, “formless” mystical states of consciousness are characteristic of Teresa of Avila, the *asamprajñāta* of Hinduism and the nirvana of Buddhism. For Hollenback, the mystical objectifying of form is characteristic of “preliterate tribal societies,” but inasmuch as the “transmutation of hallucinatory processes” can be a product of enculturation in a similar manner to the achievements of the hypnotist, it is also something that may be encountered on occasion by the ordinary person of today as it does more pointedly for the mystic herself/himself. The critical issue concerning mystical experiences, however, is whether they are illusory and in extreme instances schizophrenic. The dividing lines here may be fine, but like the shaman whose social role is what keeps him or her from becoming lost in madness, the mystic has a grasp on super-ordinary reality that is and remains spiritually beneficial.

So the mystic experience in an overall sense is an immediate and direct conscious encounter that contrasts with both reasoning and ordinary sense perception by being focused on something that is extraordinary, miraculous or even ultimate. Whether with Hindus, Neo-Platonists or medieval saints, according to Seth, “mysticism demands a faculty above reason, by which the subject shall be placed in immediate and complete union with the object of his desire.”⁴⁰ Consciousness of self is traditionally

³⁹ In regard to the significance of religious vision for material religion, Robert S. Nelson (*apud* Plate, 2015:271) observes that “the denigration of sight began with the Reformation and has lasted in northern European and American religious cultures to the present.”

⁴⁰ Seth (1884:129).

considered to have vanished so that there is consequently a full union of subject and object. However, if we can acknowledge that there are *degrees* of mystical experience, the encounter may not necessarily be with an absolute but instead with any part of the whole – a part that may or may not function holographically in suggesting the whole or at least some reflection of the whole within the part. In the end, it is the concentrated attention that transforms or supersedes the individual’s mental, volitional and imaginative faculties into or beyond a non-ordinary state of awareness. Not for everyone but more so for a pagan, mystical consciousness can become both relaxed and thrilling – comprising a bizarre combination of opposites. Both the moment and situation become ecstatic – virtually a standing or being outside a position of normality.

The techniques for obtaining a mystical experience are many, but perhaps the most salient feature is that already mentioned by Seth and others, namely, extraordinary perception. In mysticism, the ordinary senses are bypassed or at least transformed so that perception of the non-ordinary, the super-ordinary or the non-empirical becomes possible. Traditionally, the supra-physical object of mystical perception is considered to be God, but as we shall find the non-sensuous need not be only God – especially for the pagan who conceives in terms of many gods or the pantheistic godhead, and along with the non-sensuous there is the super-sensuous with different consequences and possibilities. Among these last, the merely illusory becomes the imaginal – “a vast intermediate realm of image and representation that is just as ontologically real as the worlds of sense and intellect.”⁴¹ Short of the purely formless and wholly transcendent, proactive engagement with the imaginal can produce a mystical experience of psychic fields, transformed representations, phantasmic forms, archetypal images and oceanic emotions. The energetic encounter is itself the activity of enhanced perception and/or super-sensuousness – the very faculties that distinguish mystical consciousness from ordinary awareness.

This physical empowerment of the senses can be achieved variously. Yoga is one means, but deep contemplation and mental concentration are additional pathways. Others might include ritual hypnosis through chanting and dance as well as phisic use. According to Patañjali (*Yogasūtra* 4.1), apart for those who can achieve otherworldly powers and insights spontaneously, the routes to the mystical experience include incantations, austerities, concentration as well as herbs. Similarly, Hancock refers to “the 2 per cent of our species who are capable of spontaneously entering

⁴¹ Leloup (2002:14f).

trance states, or consume psychoactive drugs, or use arduous physical techniques such as long sessions of rhythmic dancing ... in order to induce such states.”⁴² Consequently, the techniques leading to the mystical experience are varied, but the key aspect is sensual enhancement that allows access to imaginal realities.

Embodied thoughts, emotions and images become central to the mystical experience in a pagan context. The incorporalized images in particular bring us to the dynamic of idolatry.⁴³ By contrast, with transcendental, gnostic and theosophic religious orientations, formless mysticism is considered to be ‘higher’ and more authentic than the mystical experience involving forms, appearances and phantasmagorias, but paganism by and large tends to reject the vertical metaphor of assessment. Pagan mysticism is, accordingly, not ‘lower’ than formless mysticism but simply *different*. This does not preclude the formless from also occurring for pagan mystics, but the possibilities for earthen spirituality remain more varied and comprehensive.

The mystical experience is traditionally understood – especially in such dharmic formulations as Hinduism and Buddhism – as a transcendence of desire. The wanting ego is quenched and bypassed. A serene stillness becomes the norm. With images and forms, however, there may be an emanating magnetism that, in the case of a pagan or material religionist, is not resisted. This would be the same mechanism that is to be found in idolatrous worship – an external corollary to the internal embodiments of mystic imagination. The similar dynamic between the two allows us additionally to understand how the mystical element of religion shades into the vernacular. Pagan worship itself may be understood as mystical. The joy of the worshipper parallels the liberation of the mystic. While freedom remains the paramount virtue-value for a pagan,⁴⁴ pagan mysticism is no less an experience of serene independence. If forms and images, even deities and divine metaphors, might be involved, a detached attachment is still the feasible result. With mysticism of all kinds, we must remember that combinations of opposites are often the predominant feature. The bliss of attraction that is simultaneously disconnected and separate, involved and unconnected, remains the integral paradox of mysticism. But with paganism, the mystical experience is not simply something for the

⁴² Hancock (2005:602f).

⁴³ For Gell (1998:98), “Idols ... are not depictions, nor portraits, but (artefactual) *bodies*” (author’s italics).

⁴⁴ York (2016).

“Mystical Masters” or mystics in general but also something for the ordinary individual in her/his personal navigation of both nature and co-nature, this world and the other, and through the consequences of worship, devotion and celebration.

In Hinduism, there are four central means for obtaining spiritual bliss: the calisthenics of yoga or austerities (essentially Raja Yoga), the use of the critical faculty of reason to dismiss the phenomenal masking for the supposed Brahmanic/Atmanic reality beneath (Jnana Yoga), the delight of service to others and the needy (*sewa*) and the ecstasy of pure worship (Bhakti Yoga). This last is essentially a form of idolatrous devotion. But as with the Buddhist *nirvana*, the Hindu goal of *samadhi* or *moksha* is to be understood as a liberation. Dharmic enlightenment may be different from pagan illumination, but the mystical metaphor of freedom and the bliss of freedom belong to both. And if the psychedelic has been judged by traditionalists to be an inferior means of obtaining the *unio mystica*, the functional role of a mind-altering substance appears to have been the case in at least some of the classical mystery religions of ancient Greece and beyond. It is for this reason interesting, therefore, that our very word for ‘mysticism’ is said to derive from *mystikos* or the Greek name for an initiate to the mysteries themselves. The chief difference between entheogenic mysticism and any drug-free physical and mental development would be in the greater sustainability of the latter in comparison to the more fleeting experiences of the induced mystical experience, but this need not diminish the former in terms of insight and the experiential understanding of bliss. The use of external aids, however, does indeed carry a greater risk to the unwary and spiritually unprepared individual, and for that reason, their employment is always suggested with a degree of caution. But as Patañjali himself understood, the physical through either bodily discipline or psychedelic ingestion suggests additionally effective ways to obtain *siddhi* along with the cultivation of purely mental faculties.

***Via Negativa* or *Via Positiva* and Similarities to Divergent Epagomenal Responses**

What we want to understand in a critical sense is the distinction between the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* to the *unio mystica* and/or mystical illumination. Although not exclusively the case, one contrast is to be seen in the more traditional and especially dharmic desire for the void of *nirvana* or *moksha*. Pagan spirituality, at least telluric pagan spirituality, might be understood through the *epagomenae* – those extra days of the