

I Am Not A Pagan by Gabriel Hughes

I am not a pagan. That is a strong phrase in light of what I believe. You might say “but you believe in six Gods” and I would say yes I do, but I am not a pagan. You might say “but aren’t you knowledgeable about the Tarot, pagan belief, ritual and metaphysical practices, have friends who identify as pagan” and I would say yes, but I am not a pagan.

I am a Veritan.

Then you might say “well what’s the difference?” and I say the difference is in what way I wish to label myself. I choose to reject the label of pagan, and I am going to try to convince you that you should as well.

Pagan, from the Latin Paganus, means a heathen. It means an infidel. It means one who does not hold one of the main world religious beliefs to be true. Specifically it means all of those things from the view of the members of those religions. Pagan is an outsider word, a word to signify the other, the alien, or the undesirable. It is a word to close the door on the person it is used to describe. You are lesser because you are pagan. You are not part of this community, or family, or culture because you are pagan. You are less than me because you are pagan. This is the purpose of this word.

And that is reason enough to not self identify that way. Perhaps I don’t like being defined by others, and I don’t. Perhaps I choose not to identify that way because from a Veritan perspective all Gods are our Gods, all belief is belief in them, which is true. Perhaps I do not wish to frame my faith as an outsider faith, always to be the other, because I know all religions started small, and we will not always be so.

But those do not encapsulate all of my reasons for choosing to identify with our word, Veritan, one who is of Truth. Why I choose to stand by the Six and apart from the millions of names and beliefs people have had in them. Why I choose to reject the word pagan and all that it means, and what it has come to mean.

Pagan is commonly used as an umbrella term for a group of faiths like Wicca and Asatru, and can also be used on its own to describe a person’s personal religious and metaphysical practice, usually paired with the word “eclectic.” Pagan is seen as fun, as exciting. It brings up images of lit candles and standing naked under the starry sky howling at the moon. It is seen as energetic, young, and sexy. And those things can be true.

And so what could be wrong with those things? Do I hate fun? Of course not. But let me tell you about the pagan culture I have seen, and increasingly the culture I finally hear people talking about.

Paganism as a modern counter culture started in the 50s and 60s, the beginnings of the modern idea of free love, but also a time with those of different bodies and groups had trouble contacting one another.

It was a time when if something didn’t affect you directly then it was not your problem. Where those who were part of your group were like you, and those who acted in strange ways or believed strange things were outsiders. So the budding pagan culture naturally drew in only the outsiders, drew people who wanted to “take the word back”, artists, musicians. Beautiful, wonderful, accepting, loving people who would never dream of excluding anyone the way they had been excluded.

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And so they didn't. For a while that meant a large amount of free and unique thought. But there were other things mixed in with that belief, that freedom and beauty, and sometimes even most trusted voices gave hints to very troubling beliefs.

In her book "Mists of Avalon" Marion Zimmer Bradley described a Beltain ritual. In the pages before this she had described a young girl playing in flowers, and during the passage describing the ritual shows the same girl being "taken under a grizzled old hunter" forcefully. But not in disgust, not to show the monstrous act of raping a child in a negative light, but as simply an action which takes place during these kinds of rituals. Now I have been to Beltain rituals, I know that this is not true. But when I read it, and compared it to other troubling stories I had heard, it shook me. Even more so because I know this book has been many people's introduction to paganism. Ritual has been based upon the passages in it, people's views and beliefs shaped by it. I have seen it described alongside the Bible and Quran as a fundamental text of a faith.

When later it came out that Bradley along with her husband at the time sexually abused their children and likely abused others, I was not surprised. When I heard about a couple fundamental to the Wiccan faith, completely apart from Bradley and her husband, who described the ritual and systematic sexual abuse of children, who wrote ritual including it, who believed it was integral to that faith to initiate children this way, I was not surprised. When I heard the story of a Florida High Priest who abused children for years with the knowledge and consent of their parents, I was not surprised. Because all of these have simply been the biggest stories I have heard. Between them have been arrest for child pornography hushed up in the community so as not to mar the name of the respected person who did it. There have been strange and quiet rules for the protection of children at pagan events which have told me this problem is privately worried about by publicly ignored. There have been parents who just quietly disappeared from the community without comment as soon as their child was old enough to wonder off unsupervised. As well as the sexually inappropriate comments around and about minors, so often by those who claim the title "elder."

And this one thing is what I point to when asked why I do not call myself a pagan. Not because all pagans are predators, far from it. Not because these people made their way into the community, no one could have stopped every bad person with its decentralized nature. Not even because these people have often become respected members of the pagan community, even while their beliefs and actions are known. From predators being protected to debates on if the people who advocate for the ritual abuse of children should be allowed to come speak, it has been allowed. By being quiet it has been allowed. By being accepting it has been allowed. By holding them up as examples despite their actions it has been allowed. And by being allowed it has been approved of.

The pagan community is a community of outsiders. It is made up of a thousand different types of a thousand different faiths and practices. It is felt that to exclude anyone from the community is to act like those who have excluded you in the past. But this is what the predators have used, this acceptance is what they need to continue committing their monstrous acts. This acceptance makes me, in good conscience, unable to be counted among that number. This more than the common dismissal of good men, this more than the ignoring of Builder because he is worshipped by the Christians, this more than

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the removal of reverence for the divine in favor of seeing them as mere systems of make the practitioner more powerful. This, the lack of protection for those who will be our future, is my reason.

I am not a pagan. I am a Veritan. I worship the Six, Builder to guide and inspire, Healer to care and to mend, Nurturer to love and to explore, Trickster to teach and to warn, Death to remember and appreciate, and Destroyer to wipe away the darkness of the past and allow for a new day to dawn. They have been worshipped by many names, many faces, and by many people. They are not pagan gods, they are the Gods of all peoples. I follow Verity. Verity means Truth. The truth of them. This is the only title I need.