

Freedom, Responsibility, and Reproductive Choice: A Pagan View

*"I am a bold and Pagan soul, a rattling
through this land
I judge the world by my own lights and I
come by my own hand
And if you ask me how I learned to live so
recklessly
My skin, my bones, my heretic heart are
my authority!"¹*

The most important religious question is also the most basic: **what does it mean to live by this?** How might I bring my whole life into accord with the values that are drawn from my deepest understanding of Deity and that, in turn, ground the myths, symbols and rituals of my religion? These questions are inherent in the very word "religion." The words "religion," "ligament," and "link" are all derived from the Latin root, *ligere*, which means "to connect."

So religion, re-linking, is a pattern of activity that restores a connection. What connection? Several, actually, but the most important for Pagans like me is the connection between us and the Ancient Gods. Or, if you prefer to say it in a more inclusive way, between the Sacred, however we may understand it, and our most everyday, ordinary behavior, here and now, in the world of form.

For this reason, the rituals we enact or participate in may be thoroughly enjoyable, even psychologically useful, but they are not functioning as religion should unless the values they express permeate, empower and guide every part of our lives. That goes for anybody, of any religion, although the specific values and teachings vary widely from one religion to the next.

How might that work for Pagans like me? We are the free-spirited folk who dance wildly beneath the Moon. We are goats, not sheep, and glad of it. We resist all

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This publication is one in a series of educational resource materials. The views are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the member groups of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

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arbitrary constraint. We are by our nature allergic to rulers and rules. We sing out in our pride:

*"I once was found but now am lost, away
from the faithful fold
The ones who preach that holiness is to do
what you are told
Though law and scripture, priest and prayer,
have all instructed me
My skin, my bones, my heretic heart are my
authority!"*

Like every other faith group, Pagans have some customs, some cultural practices that help us to recognize one another. These customs help sustain an ongoing awareness of sacred presence and power within and around us, and a sense of community among us. But we do not confuse these customs with ethics; we do not assert that following these practices makes us any holier or better than neighbors whose customs are different.

However, we have no set rules concerning the tragically real and dauntingly complex life issues that everyone occasionally confronts—issues around sexuality, marriage, reproduction, military service or its avoidance, assisted suicide, and more. The decisions we make at those critical junctures will deeply affect our lives and the lives of others. Mistakes can cause great harm. Yet Paganism offers us no rulebook, no simple answers to ease our tough choices.

The only law that truly binds Pagans is the law that binds all, the adamantine law of cause and effect, which condones nothing and condemns nothing. This is "law" in the same sense as the law of gravity: descriptive rather than prescriptive. Descriptive law cannot be circumvented or evaded, because what it describes is real—impartial and implacable as Nature herself. Every action we take necessarily affects the whole system. As we are part of that system, every action we take eventually comes back to us, but in unpredictable and sometimes unrecognizable ways, and often

amplified. This is the basis for traditional Pagan teachings about threefold return, which state that whatever we do—good or ill—will come back to us multiplied by three.

Although we can never have perfect knowledge of any situation, we must make choices, always in the sobering certainty that we will experience the outcomes of our actions, good or ill.

Never confuse radical freedom with moral indifference. Our religion sanctions neither laxity nor callousness. Pagan freedom demands far more of us than the most stringent set of commandments ever could. It demands introspection, discernment and decision. All who know that what goes around will surely come around, understand from this that unmitigated selfishness is never a virtue and "do what you will" can never truly be the whole of the law.

Pagan elders remind us that they were once bluntly taught by their own elders that we have no firm moral rules. Instead of devout obedience, the mature Pagan weighed out what was involved in any situation, and what might be the probable outcomes, then acted—or chose not to act—in the full expectation that she would "bide the issue." Today, we have borrowed a more exotic term: *karma*. As we use it, it means precisely the same thing.

There are two main misconceptions about karma floating around the Pagan community. One is that somewhere there is a judge—more commonly some sort of committee of judges called the "Lords of Karma." They sit around some cosmic conference table in the Otherworld, evaluating our conduct and assigning appropriate rewards and punishments. We trust their perfect knowledge and perfect fairness. Well, no, the Gods do not so micro-manage the world of form.

Another is that karma is some sort of moral bank account that is under our direct control. So we can choose to do things that will bring us "good karma" or "bad karma" or "burn up bad karma" or even—get this!—"get around karma." Sorry, no.

The interactional system just within the human community alone is far too complicated for any of that. Then add several additional layers of complexity for our interactions with non-human realms—seen and unseen. Like the weather, karma is ultimately neither predictable nor controllable.

All this would be horribly unjust if the Gods were intentionally leaving us without guidance, playing cruel guessing games in order to entrap us in karma. At moments of crisis, we may feel that way, confused and isolated. This is not just untrue, it's impossible. We are inseparable from the web of life and from our Gods. As such, we are given not one, but two, guidance systems. Neither is perfect, but combined they are very good.

The first is human empathy, a sure guide to how to treat other living beings. This is also reflected in the various Golden Rules of other religions, ethical prime directives that are all too often buried under trivial restrictions.

In addition, we have access to sacred guidance immediately and directly through intuition, insight and dreams, the flashes of inspiration that come to all who truly learn to listen. As part of a religious community, we share divinatory and meditative techniques to aid us in listening.

So we listen to one another and we listen to the inspirational Voice. We also have a heritage of such guidance previously received by our elders, experientially tested, filtered and focused by human wisdom, and gathered in our cumulative treasury of poem and story, symbol and rite. This lore contains and presents the collected experience and collective values of our faith group. It helps us to make sense of present situations and newfound insights. It is our wealth.

But it's hard to practice empathy with regard to non-sentient or non-human life. It's hard to distinguish genuine flashes of sacred insight and guidance from cultural programming or personal desire. And so it is hard to discern what to do

about an unintended pregnancy, or even a much-wanted one in a case where the circumstances have drastically changed.

Each pregnant woman or couple needs to test the inner leadings they receive for clarity and feasibility and make decisions based on both insight and factual information about all aspects of their situation. For help with this, they can seek counsel from others who share their basic values and whose wisdom and experience they respect.

Since I am known in the Pagan community as a professionally trained counselor, as well as a priestess, sometimes people ask for my help with this, and other, critical decisions that they face in life. In accordance with my understanding of Pagan freedom and responsibility, I never tell them what to do, nor do I interpret an elaborate body of law or issue reasoned and authoritative decisions. People cannot—and I believe should not—cede their personal responsibility to me or to the Tradition.

Instead, I guide them through a decision making process, trying to make sure that they have considered all aspects of their situation, explored all possible options and their probable outcomes in full depth, considered many perspectives, reflected on the values our religion cherishes, and made a conscientious decision guided by both reason and compassion.

I start from some premises that I believe to be foundational to a Pagan worldview.

- All life, human and otherwise, is sacred. No life is more sacred than any other.
- All life is entirely interdependent. Living beings eat, and feed, one another. Animals breathe what plants exhale, and vice versa.
- Life is continuous, although individual lives are episodic. Life itself is a cycle, not a line.

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The first thing people need to clarify for themselves when faced with a decision concerning a pregnancy is whether, or at what point in the process of pregnancy, they believe the fetus is human. This question is philosophical in nature, not subject to scientific proof.

- Life has no beginning. Human sperm and egg are alive before they join to form a new organism, one that is potentially human. When this biological life actually becomes human is an essentially religious question, and must therefore be left to individual conscience.
- Life has no end. It continues as the organic matter in dead organisms, including human bodies, feeds and fertilizes others. There is no “food chain,” only a food cycle.
- Death is just as much part of the life cycle as birth, and therefore just as sacred. Each individual organism, each particular instance of life, eventually dies. Death feeds life. Trees compete for water and sunlight; animals eat to live. Humans are no different. So, one of my favorite blessings before a meal goes like this: “Lady and Lord please bless this food unto the nourishment of our bodies and our bodies unto the nourishment of the Earth.”

How these premises play out in practice is a matter of individual circumstances, values, needs, and priorities. Your sacred right to choose carries with it an equally sacred responsibility to choose conscientiously. Here are some things to think about in approaching a decision about a pregnancy:

The first thing people need to clarify for themselves when faced with a decision concerning a pregnancy is whether, or at what point in the process of pregnancy, they believe the fetus is human. This question is philosophical in nature, not subject to scientific proof. The answer is often based on religious teachings and values, so legislating an answer amounts to an unconstitutional establishment of religion.

People who believe that it is morally wrong to terminate any *sentient* life, usually choose to be vegetarians. Is it hypocritical

or wrong for a vegetarian to have an abortion? Only if she perceives the fetus as being sentient, a very debatable issue. The question of sentience becomes infinitely more pressing and poignant at the other end of life. We have seen instances where a brain-dead person, unquestionably human, was also tragically and irretrievably non-sentient.

Conception creates an individual living organism. It is not yet sentient. It is, however, full of potential to become both sentient and human. So, to prevent conception is to interfere with the creation and continuity of at least the potential for human life. Does that make temporary abstinence wrong? Lifelong celibacy? Birth control? In some religious cultures, intentional childlessness is regarded as socially or even morally unacceptable.

On the other hand, we know that any single species that increases disproportionately risks overburdening Mother Earth’s capacity to support life. Humankind impacts the planet far more than any other species because of our technologies. How many more people can She afford? Pagans, who honor all life as sacred, might choose to limit their procreation to no more than two children per household, lest we cause further damage to the delicate web of life on Earth.

When does a new organism become *human*? Is it at the moment of conception or does it happen when the newly fertilized egg is implanted in a woman’s womb? Your answer to this question will influence your opinion about the morality of emergency contraception. While recent research suggests that emergency contraception prevents fertilization, not implantation, research into the matter is ongoing. Your opinion about embryonic stem cell research, which uses fertilized eggs that have not been implanted to help develop life-saving therapies, also hinges upon this question.

And finally, you may believe that the growing fetus becomes human at the point of quickening, viability or actual birth. There are reasoned arguments for setting

the conceptual threshold of humanness at each of these moments.

Humanness is not the only thing you need to get clear about. Some people believe it is morally wrong to intentionally end human life in any circumstance. They oppose euthanasia, legal execution, combat, and even killing in self-defense. If this is your belief, and if you also believe that a fetus is human, then abortion is completely out of the question for you.

But if you believe that it's acceptable to kill humans under some circumstances, but not others, what are those circumstances? Medical threats to the life of the pregnant woman? Sudden and drastic changes of circumstances, such as the unexpected death or departure of her husband/partner? Discovering that the fetus, if born, will be severely disabled? Other and overwhelming responsibilities, perhaps to older children? What if having and raising this baby means that an older sibling will be deprived of adequate food, medical care, or the opportunity for an education?

Does the psychological trauma of rape give good cause to terminate a pregnancy, lest the victim have to endure another nine months of constant reminder of the outrage? There's no problem with terminating a pregnancy that began with a rape if you don't think this is yet a human life, but what if you believe that it is? The fetus is not the rapist.

Might simple interference with the pregnant woman's personal goals be sufficient justification? I once made all the arrangements for an abortion for a young woman whom I was serving as priestess. She was going to college at the time, on scholarship. Raising the child would have probably meant dropping out of school, severely constricting her opportunities in later life. And yet, had I believed that the fetus was human, I would not have assisted. If she had believed it was human, the abortion would never have happened.

For me, and for her, convenience is not enough reason to end a *human* life. Yet, even if I did believe that the fetus was a human, had that pregnancy been a medical

danger to her life and health, I would have assisted her to end it without a qualm. Along the same line, a Pagan lab technician that I know will take jobs requiring animal testing, which can cause pain to sentient beings, if the purpose is to develop medicines, but not cosmetics.

And finally, most of us believe that all children, once born, must be nurtured. Do you have the ability, resources and inclination to raise a child at this time in your life? If not, could you place the child for adoption? Do you feel it would be a moral and honorable decision for you to bring a child into the world and not take primary responsibility for that child's upbringing? Will you spend the rest of your life wondering and worrying what became of your baby? Or would you prefer to trust this child's fate to the Gods rather than deprive him or her of any chance at all? Both of these decisions are painful. Only you can know which will hurt less as it sits in your memory and your conscience through the years.

So it comes down to three key questions:

- When do you believe that life becomes, or ceases to be, human?
- Under which, if any, circumstances do you find it acceptable to intentionally terminate a human life?
- What do you owe to a child you choose to bring to term?

Your answers to these questions, applied to your specific circumstances, will give you a preliminary answer.

Beyond that, I urge you to do more than just think it through, however carefully. Test the logic as scrupulously as you would test any inner leadings you receive against the practical considerations in your life. Consider your choices with your heart and spirit as well as your mind. Seek sacred guidance in the ways known to you from your own spiritual practice: meditate,

Make your final choice with your whole being, for your whole being will surely be affected by this choice for the rest of your life.

pray, dream, use your favorite method of divination. Make your final decision with your whole being, for your whole being will surely be affected by this decision for the rest of your life.

May Sacred Wisdom guide us all, in this and in all else.

*“So while I breathe this glorious air, an outlaw I’ll remain
My body will not be subdued and I will not be tamed
And if I cannot shout it loud, I’ll sing it secretly
My skin, my bones, my heretic heart are my authority!”*

Endnote

¹ The song lyrics are from “Heretic Heart” by Catherine Madsen

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The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973 by people of faith, is the national organization dedicated to preserving reproductive choice on religious grounds. RCRC members are national groups from 15 denominations and faith traditions including the Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalism and Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism and Catholics for a Free Choice and other independent religious organizations. A non-partisan, non-profit education and advocacy organization, the Coalition includes the Clergy for Choice Network, Spiritual Youth for Reproductive Freedom chapters, The National Black Church Initiative, state affiliates throughout the nation, and individuals committed to reproductive and religious freedom.

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