



Food and Faith in the Pagan Community

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

The author takes three aspects: Food – we are what we eat; faith – we take a lot on trust; and Community – your diet can cause you difficulties with others.

In the Beltane 2009 *Pagan Dawn* (no. 171) Old Dorothy Clutterbuck takes to task a woman who makes a pledge to abstain from eating chocolate in honour of Hygeia, goddess of health. It turns out that the woman hardly ever ate sweet things and that her abstention would not cause her any difficulty. This somewhat annoys Old Dotty who says that in order for an oath to have any real value it has to involve some degree of effort.

In preparing her book on Pagan ethics Emma Restall Orr held gatherings to discuss various topics. Discussion ranged from definitions and theories to the practical application of our ethical principles and moralities. Her favourite topic in these discussions was chocolate: 'it perfectly illustrates what must be a crucially fundamental issue in Western ethics: the *luxury* of choice'. (pp147-150)

A major cash crop, cacao, is native to South America but now largely grown in Cote d'Ivoire, West Africa, where it is the use of child and slave labour that makes many farms viable. Farmers continue to use dangerous pesticides and clear tracts of old rainforest for short term use. The handful of global companies that process and sell the chocolate deny any responsibility, buying through world markets and making vast profit for their management and directors.

Not only the chocolate but the sugar, milk, genetically modified soya and corn, and palm oil which go into the finished product raise questions of protectionism, environmental considerations, the use and abuse of dairy cattle and exploitation of workers. Emma says that most of these ethical problems can be met by buying fair trade, organic, vegan chocolate. However the fact remains that '...chocolate is always completely unnecessary. We have a choice as to whether or not to buy it because we live in sufficient luxury.'



Emma goes on to say that food is at the core of any culture:

The food we eat describes our lifestyle. It is the first bond between parent and child. Declaring one's diet different from that of the surrounding community is a poignant proclamation of ethics, of both belonging and rejection. (p222)

The parent-child relationship shows how food can be used as an instrument of manipulation. One of the first things a child learns is that he or she can refuse food, causing great concern to the parent and battles between parent and child over what the child eats, a balanced diet, no sweet until you have eaten the main course – and feelings of guilt when the parent does not have what the child wants to eat, the frustration of children changing what they like, the pressure whilst out shopping to buy what is advertised in the media. Pagan parents have no easy answers!

Discussion in the family, at school and in media about the food industry and how our food is produced is necessary for children to grow up with the knowledge to make choices about their diet.

Children are often concerned from an early age about animal cruelty. The concept that animals have been provided for humans to eat, and that those animals are also made to suffer whilst alive does not sit easily with Pagan philosophy.

Emma continues in a blunt and uncompromising way:

... from an animistic understanding, those who consume the flesh and milk of non-human animals are ingesting the toxicity of a long heritage of suffering, stories passed through blood and genes, generation upon generation, of traumatic loss, persistent abuse, desperate boredom and fear. These stories do not just disappear. Just as so much ancestral consciousness seeps into the mud through the natural cycle of burial and decay, so does the consciousness of what we eat move through our body, affecting who we are, providing the fuel for who we can be. (p 223)

Only about half of Pagans are vegetarian or vegan so obviously not all Pagans think in the same way as Emma. She cites Wiccan John MacIntyre who says that a vegetarian or vegan ethic is out of step with Paganism. The function of nature is that the predator is dependent on the prey and the prey is dependent on the predator, the cycle of life and death maintaining the necessary balance of populations. Eating organic, free range meat and animal produce is their choice of food.

My personal experience with food issues was highly emotional and controversial in the early eighties when I was a Bradford councillor. The issue was the supply of 'halal' meat for school meals. Animal rights groups were very vocal in their protests and a great deal of publicity was generated. To fully inform myself I visited the abattoir to witness the way that animals were slaughtered. I saw cattle being stunned with the captive bolt and pigs with electricity before their throats were cut and sheep who were not stunned, having their throats cut in the Halal way with the slaughterman saying a prayer as he killed the sheep. My conclusion was that the Halal way was no more cruel than pre-stunning and that indeed the saying of prayers made it slightly more dignified. There was no escaping though the obvious distress that all the animals were in. At that time I did eat meat. Shortly afterwards, discussions in our family about the whole process of meat production led my son to suggest we should follow a vegetarian diet, which we did.

It is a well known fact that it takes up to ten kilos of vegetable protein to produce one kilo of meat. It is an even more well known that valuable rain forest has been and continues to be cut down to graze livestock. The animals are mostly intensively reared and fed unnatural diets and



drugs to improve yield and lessen disease. In short, the food industry and meat production in particular contributes to, if not causes, hunger throughout the third world and obesity in wealthy countries, and is severely damaging to the environment. Many people in Britain know this, but disagree about what would improve the situation

Antagonism can and does occur at times, as Jenny Wren reports in *Pagan Dawn* (no.150, p27) when she encountered rudeness at a barbecue. Pagans do not have any instructions or tenets handed down by gods, goddesses or priests about what they should or should not eat. Food plays a significant part in Pagan rituals. Sharing of food and drink shows both our appreciation of the fruits of the earth and our concern for each other's well being.

What we eat is a matter of personal choice. The choice should be influenced by the knowledge of how animals are bred, kept and slaughtered; how crops are grown with the aid of fertilisers which damage the soil and our waterways; and how people are exploited in many parts of the world to provide cheap food but nevertheless large profit. We can seek out the Fairtrade and organic brands, choose food which is not packaged and make sure we eat what we buy.

I will conclude with the words of Greg Gwyther who writes in answer to Jenny Wren (*Pagan Dawn* no. 152 p32)

Personally I believe that if I can eat a nutritious, tasty meal without something being exploited and killed I'm doing the right thing – not moral high ground, but reasoned, practical, compassionate choice in action.

References

Pagan Dawn (The Pagan Federation, BM 5896, London WC1N 3XX)
Emma Restall Orr *Living with Honour, A Pagan Ethics* (O Books, 2007)