

The First Pagan

Pagan Identity in the Religion of Julian the Apostate and Contemporary Neopaganism

Jelige: "Julianus"

I. Introduction

In 2010 the Druid Network was given charitable status by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, which for all intents as purposes means – to quote The Telegraph – that “Druidry (has been) recognized as a religion in Britain for the first time”¹. Events like this signal that religious paths that define themselves as Pagan or Neopagan are becoming more and more significant among the religious movements in the western hemisphere². In the recent years a growing number of scholarly papers have been dealing with this rather diverse phenomenon, and more and more aspects of it are being analyzed³.

Perhaps the hardest part of dealing with Pagan religions (this term with a capital “P” I reserve for those paths that define themselves as either “Pagan” or “Neopagan”), is the almost complete lack of common creeds, ritual structures and ethical systems – a fact which can be ascribed to the “organic” way many of these religions developed⁴. Among these paths we can see reconstructionists, who work to revive the religious paths of some given ancient cultures, often not without nationalist political motives; alongside with quasi-anarchistic groups that reject dogmas, hierarchical structures, and who are developing a sort of “open-source religion”⁵. There are those who are practicing a modern version of Shamanism⁶, and those who are reinterpreting the Greco-Roman religious heritage into a religion meaningful today⁷. The Pagan community is so diverse that in many cases virtually the only observable common point among the them is the word “Pagan”, even though even this is not always simple – for example the followers of the Germanic Neopagan religion called Asatru generally prefer the Germanic term “Heathen” over the word “Pagan” which has Latin origins⁸. Yet a sense of

1 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8036952/Druidry-recognised-as-religion-in-Britain-for-first-time.html>

2 Barner-Barry 2005:3

3 Strmiska 2005:1 in Modern Paganism in World Cultures

4 Barner-Barry 2005:101

5 Strmiska 2005:4 in Modern Paganism in World Cultures

6 Znamenski 2007:233

7 Magliocco 2005:4 in Modern Paganism in World Cultures

8 Sigurvinsson, Strmiska 2005:128 in Modern Paganism in World Culture

common movement and community clearly shows that it is indeed meaningful to talk about a “Pagan community”⁹.

As the number of practitioners rise, and as the religious organizations become more and more structured, the question of a better-defined religious identity also becomes more important for many within the community¹⁰. The examination of the religious identities of Pagans is also essential for researchers of Religious Studies to understand the dynamics at work behind the formation of these religious movements, and to be able to better describe them in general.

The large diversity of Pagan religious beliefs and practices often makes it hard to start a dialogue with Pagan traditions and organizations. The lack of strict hierarchy often leads to a problem of authority, and spiritual legitimacy.¹¹ Pagan traditions can be better understood if they are placed within a proper historical-evolutional context – through examining the historical instances of Pagan identity, and the common “cultural threads” found within these. Although it is true that modern Pagan paths are mostly rather new inventions, and even the oldest ones among them weren't around earlier than the beginning of the twentieth century¹²; if we view them in a wider context and compare them with similar historical phenomena, we begin to see a common pattern emerging, that we can interpret as a sort of tradition in its own right. In the last decades the romantic myths of hidden religions surviving the Middle Ages have been completely discredited¹³, but nevertheless religions that attempted “Pagan restorations” do share common historical, ideological and practical patterns. By unlocking these patterns and similarities, we can get closer to understanding Pagan religious movements today.

In this work I am going to explore the roots of Pagan identity. I believe that these roots are not to be found in the 20th century, and not even in the romantic idealism of the 19th century. These roots are present in late antiquity, at the dawn of organized Christianity, when the thinkers who followed the traditional religions of their cultures first reflected on their identities from a

9 It must be noted, however, that actual community involvement may not be as important for contemporary Pagans as it is in most other religions. The highly individualistic character of contemporary Paganism is shown by the research of Sian Reid (in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*), in which 45.7% of asked Pagans responded that working with others is “not at all important” in maintaining their involvement in Paganism.

10 Reid 2009:187 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

11 Puckett 2009:153 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

12 Drury 2009:60 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

13 Clifton 2009:113 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

Christian perspective. I believe that the first thinker who consciously constructed a (Neo)Pagan religion on such an identity was Flavius Claudius Julianus, also known as Julian the Apostate. The title of Adrian Murdoch's book calls Julian the "Last Pagan" - but as I intend to show in my present work, I think in a way it is more appropriate to think of him as the first. In the following I will examine the basic questions of Pagan identity, the understanding of religion in traditional Graeco-Roman and Christian contexts, and how these appear in the surviving writings of Julian. At the end of my work I will look at the parallels in the structures, beliefs, practices and historical reflections of modern Pagan paths, and Julian's Pagan religion.

II. Religious Identity and Concepts of Religion

Understanding religious identities is crucial in understanding the interactions between religious entities and people, and the also the wider social dynamics in any cultural context.¹⁴ Religious identity includes the self-definition of a given religious group (even if there is a difference between the self-definition of the followers and the "official doctrine"), but on a deeper level it also includes how the given group views – explicitly or implicitly – as the concept of religion, what phenomena do they regard as defining points of a religious path. This of course also makes it necessary to contemplate just what "religion" means for any given group, as the subjective meaning of religion will ultimately have a great effect on what it means to be a *member of a religion* in those groups.¹⁵ Religious allegiance often plays an important role in one's social identity, and on many levels this identity defines the behavior of groups and individuals towards others perceived as friendly, hostile, or neutral. Understanding the cultural dynamics of any era is thus inseparable from understanding religious identities, and the terms that religious groups use in their ways of self-identification, verbal, and non-verbal.

What is religious identity? In this paper the term "identity" is used in the constructionist and relational models developed by followers of Fredrik Barth. According to these models, religious identity is always *relational*: it is always described in terms of how a certain group is *similar* to or *different* from another.¹⁶ Thereby the existence of religious identity always presupposes a religious-cultural context in which the given identity develops. Religious identity always needs other religions or groups to define itself by, just as the psychological

¹⁴ Sandwell 2007:3

¹⁵ Sandwell 2007:4

¹⁶ Jenkins 2008:18

development of a healthy individual self needs its own social context.

The implicit or explicit definition of religion is always an essential element of religious identity, and this can show great differences in different cultures. As in the scientific community even today there isn't a single consensual definition of religion – and even if there was, religious communities wouldn't necessarily accept it – in late antiquity we can also find various attitudes towards the meaning of religion, which was primarily defined by the cultural contexts that believers lived in.

The question of religious identity was especially relevant in late antiquity. It was a turbulent era in religious interaction and in changes in religious mentality.¹⁷ Hellenistic culture has brought together a large number of traditional religious groups in a way never before seen, which has brought religious communities into situations of self-reflection, a quest for identity, and a search for the solution of the problem of coexistence. Late antiquity has seen the development of several new religions and philosophical schools as well, often claiming descendance from traditional religions, cultures and philosophical establishments to which in reality in many cases were only loosely related¹⁸. Neoplatonists and Neopythagoreans “warmed up” the teachings of their namesakes, and took them far away from their original meanings and concepts – the rational examination of Plato started to acquire signs of oriental mysticism, and his teachings were integrated into theurgic rites. The Greeks imported the cult of Isis and Osiris (Serapis) from Egypt, and shaped it into their own image, according to the traditions of the *interpretatio graeca*¹⁹. The Romans have adopted the Persian Mithras, and fused it with Sol, to create a distinctly Roman mystery cult²⁰. The ancient religious traditions of these cultures created a kind of legitimacy for these new religious movements, and their exotic natures attracted followers. At the same time, they never ventured far enough from Graeco-Roman forms and traditions so to render them unrecognizable as a religion for the average Roman or Greek believer. Christianity also belongs to this category, which rooted itself in the Hebrew traditions, just as the Isis-cult grew on Egyptian beliefs, and the Mithras-cult was legitimized by a Persian past. It has gained wider and wider acceptance, until Constantine has adopted it as the state religion of the Empire, and thus Christianity was also transformed into something inherently Roman²¹. Even the iconography of Christ Pantokrator

17 Van Nuffelen 2012:11

18 Tripolitis 2001:16

19 For a description of a Roman procession for Isis, see Book 11 in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

20 Tripolitis 2001:47

21 King 2008:47 in: *Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity*

was based on Roman imperial imagery, and one of the earliest depictions of Jesus is reminiscent of the iconography of that of Helios.²²

In late antiquity, there was a trend to reinterpret traditional religions from a more philosophical perspective, in an attempt to make rational sense of mythologies and practices that were sometimes seen as “monstrous” and irrational²³. Some philosophical schools even went as far as attacking traditional practices and beliefs (for example the Epicureans), some of them were trying to reconcile them with their teachings (as the Neoplatonists). Myths were seen as deliberately cryptic, so that it has a certain effect of the mind, and thus capable of communicating deeper truths to those who are able to understand it. This strategy was useful to create a bridge between traditional values and the intellectual expectations of the era. As for the every day experience of religious pluralism, most thinkers dealt with it in a syncretistic fashion²⁴. Greeks accepted that their goddess Artemis was worshiped as Bastet in Egypt, and that Romans understood the local fountain-spirit Sulis in present-day Bath to be a manifestation of Minerva.

When we are discussing the religious culture of late antiquity, we are often tempted to give in to the ideological dichotomy developed by Christianity, and thus view the era from a Christian or “post-Christian” viewpoint²⁵. This dichotomy is of course “Christianity vs. paganism”, an ideological stance that implies a homogeneity among the adherents of traditional religions. Generally the rich diversity of religious alliances, beliefs and practices are ignored for a more simplistic approach arising from the Christian heritage of our culture, although in recent scholarship a favorable change can be observed in this regard²⁶. Identities in the religions that are often called “pagan” were diverse, as were practices and beliefs²⁷. Indeed, pagans never thought about themselves as “Pagans”²⁸, not only because of the diversity of traditional religions, but also because they tended to view religion in different terms than Christianity²⁹.

Interaction with Christianity however, had an interesting effect. As pagan writers started to

22 Brandon 1997:165 in: Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults

23 Veyne 1988:32

24 Woolf 2007:247 in: Ritual Dynamics and Religious Change in the Roman Empire

25 Athanassiadi and Frede 1999:3

26 Cameron 2011:14

27 For a good discussion of the diversity of Greco-Roman religions, see Religions of Rome: A History (2008) by Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price

28 Athanassiadi and Frede 1999:5

29 Sandwell 2007:150

reflect on themselves in Christian terms, a new kind of religious identity arose based on the Christian negative category of “paganism”, transforming it into a basis of positive religious identity³⁰. Based on the source material available from the era, I believe that the most notable instance of the birth of this “positive Pagan identity” can be pinpointed on the writings of Julian, the Apostate.

The word “pagan” originates as a negative term used by early Christians to designate those who did not convert to Christianity^{31,32}. This did not usually include Jews, who were seen not as pagans, but as the predecessors of Christianity, with Christians representing the “new Israel” (although there is also a little evidence of early Christians not viewing themselves as Israelites)³³. Alan Cameron makes a compelling case for proving that the Latin *paganus* was used in the sense of an *outsider*, and not *country-dweller*, or *civilian* as previously thought³⁴. Previous theories claimed that *paganus* was used because supposedly traditional religious practices survived in remote areas of the countryside – current research however shows, that it was in fact the more educated segment of society in the cities that held on longest to the – mostly philosophically interpreted – Graeco-Roman religion. The “civilian” interpretation is based on the instances of *paganus* where it is used as the opposite of *milites*. This theory claims that those who didn't join the “Army of Christ” were considered “civilians” - *paganus*. This also seems unlikely. The common point however between both interpretations is the *outsider* meaning of *paganus* (country-dweller: someone outside the city; civilian: someone outside the army). It seems that the original meaning of *paganus* was simply *non-Christian*.

The origins of the word are to be found in the Jewish term *goyim*, transferring to Greek as *ethnikoi*, and to Latin as *gentiles* and *nationes*, all roughly translating to “peoples”, i.e.: *not from among us*³⁵. Paul also uses the term *Greek* in this sense: in his world humanity is neatly divided between Jews and Greeks (Christians being the new chosen people), and as Greek culture was a multicultural melting pot in the Hellenistic era, the word Greek came to designate all non-Christians³⁶. Although *graecus* was also used to some extent, *paganus*

30 Athanassiadi and Frede 1999:5

31 Johnson 2009:14

32 North 2005:127 in: The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries AD: Essays in Explanation

33 Townsend 2008:213 in: Heresy and Identity in Late Antiquity

34 Cameron 2011:23

35 Cameron 2011:16

36 Athanassiadi and Frede 1999:6

became far more popular in Latin, starting roughly in the 4th century C.E.³⁷.

There is a recent tendency in scholarly writing of trying to avoid using the term “pagan”, because admittedly the term represents a Christian view of religious development, and it also implies that traditional Pre-Christian religions form a homogenous entity. Some writers opt for using other terms like polytheism, to avoid the historical connotations of the word *pagan*. Although the adoption of new terminology to describe traditional religions is justifiable, the world *polytheist* is also problematic, because – as thoroughly explored in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* – not all pre-Christian religions were polytheistic, and indeed, Christianity itself can not be described as strictly monotheistic (The Christian Trinity is comparable to Julian's “Pagan trinity” derived from other Neoplatonic writers, manifesting the solar Godhead in the Noetic, Noeric and Physical realities). It is perhaps the best solution to refer to traditional religions in cultural terms, i.e. “*Greco-Roman religion*”, thus avoiding the cultural bias that comes with the term pagan. In this present work however, since I am defining a sort of Pagan identity developing in late antiquity, I will still use the word pagan when I feel it is appropriate, at other times I will use terms like Greco-Roman religion, to specifically refer to certain religious entities.

It is hard to understand the religious dynamics of late antiquity if we don't pay attention to the basic conceptual difference in the understanding of religious identity in the Greco-Roman world, and in Christianity. In traditional societies socio-cultural and religious phenomena do not deviate from each other, they constitute a coherent unity. This means that in classical Greco-Roman culture it is hard to tell where one's religious duty starts and social duties end – they are unimaginable without each other, they exist intertwined with each other. The emphasis was on the participation in the public cult, the proper performance of sacrifices, and the following of divine guidance- For Greeks and Romans theologies and personal faith were a less important matter, and religion was viewed as a set of human obligations to the gods, to ensure the peace of human life – called *Pax Deorum* in Roman religious practice³⁸. If any citizen in Rome was *pious*, meaning they performed their religious obligations properly (viewed in the same terms as one's obligations to their parents and elders), they belonged to the Roman religion, even if they didn't believe in the gods in the literal sense³⁹. As long as

37 Cameron 2011:17

38 Burkert 1985:8

39 In his *Euthyphro*, Plato has Euthyphro define religion to Socrates as: If someone knows how to say and do what is agreeable to the gods by both praying and sacrificing, this is holiness, and these things save both private families and city-states. The opposite of what is gratifying to the gods is impious, which, quite obviously,

they didn't spread teachings that were clearly at odds with the implicit values of the culture, they were free to think whatever they wanted. This is clearly contrasted by Christianity, where pretentious behaviour in the church is considered wrong, no amount of ritual makes one a true Christian without faith.

Such freedom of thought made it possible for various philosophical schools to form, which were in a sense closer to our understanding of a religious group today, and which all had their own ideas about the gods – a good sample of which is given by Cicero in *De Natura Deorum*. Yet no one would have argued that a Roman following Plato belongs to a different religion than another Roman, who called himself a Stoic – even though in a modern sense, their *religious faith* was indeed very different⁴⁰. *Religio* was a practical matter, that ensured the goodwill of the forces more powerful than humanity towards society. Even in mystery religions that offered a sort of personal salvation from death, and a more personal connection with divinity similar to Christianity, it was the personal experience of the mystery, and the bond between humans and the divine that was important. And even though it did come with personal faith in the god or goddess at the center of the cult, this faith was not *universally exclusive*. No follower of Mithras would have claimed that the mysteries of Eleusis, Isis or Cybele were false religions or false faiths. Indeed, the Christian idea of a *false religion* didn't exist, even if some cults of foreign origin, or those that were considered “low-class”, were sometimes viewed with suspicion. But then again, the reason for that was not that the faith of these cults were considered “universally wrong”, but rather that they were seen as posing a threat to public order, and this included the fulfillment of the ancestral obligations to the gods⁴¹.

It is clear, that in Graeco-Roman culture the defining point of religion is right pious behaviour, which can be termed *orthopraxy*. Religion is not universally right or wrong: it inherently belongs to the fabric of the culture, thus it makes no sense for a Barbarian to perform the ancestral duties of a Greek. Conversion here is not primarily a religious, but more of a cultural affair – one is either civilized (Greek), or not: a Barbarian. As intercultural relations became more prominent in the age of Hellenism, the definition of religion shifted with it, syncretistic and universalist pursuits came into focus. As the concept of a universal “humanity” developed, religion also became more and more a universal affair. In this process,

overturns and destroys
everything'

40 See *De Natura Deorum* by Cicero for various views on religion and the gods

41 Timothy 2009:35

religion was started to be emancipated from its traditional socio-cultural context. In the mostly foreign mystery religions the desire for a more personal contact with divinity took shape, but the emphasis here still was the practical union with the god or goddess and the experience of the mystery, that ensured fortunes in this life, and in the next. In a way, this process reached a zenith in Christianity, which was signalled in its universalist approach and its focus on conversion.

The cultural emancipation of the concept of religion resulted in a shift of emphasis from *orthopraxy* to *orthodoxy*, or “right faith”. In Christianity especially the proper system of dogmas take center stage as opposed to the correct rituality of Graeco-Roman culture. For Christians, the basic term of religion is *faith*⁴². And this view has had its mark on our culture, as in the English language today the terms *religion* and *faith* are often used interchangeably. What you believe in designates a religious path, and this belief-system defines your rituals, your morality, etc. So in Christianity, religious identity is based on both a set of dogmas – *orthodoxy* – and a set of practices – *orthopraxy*. If you believe in the wrong things, you are excluded from the religion.

In Christianity, the ritual practice of religions were merged with the kinds of theological teachings formerly an attribute of philosophical schools. The Christian notion of religion is characterized by a set of *dogmas*, religious teachings that have to be accepted in order to belong to a religion. In the traditional Christian worldview, pagans are wrong because they believe in the wrong things, and therefore their practices are also wrong in a religious sense. This divides humanity into *right believers* and *wrong believers*: Christians and pagans. Consequently, religion becomes a universally exclusive term, since it is impossible to have more than one set of beliefs at the same time without contradictions. One either fully subscribes to the right beliefs, or remains a pagan. Since Christianity was viewed as the *universally right religion*, it became important to convert others. Religion thus is elevated to a higher status, a universal affair, one that transcends national and tribal boundaries. More importantly, it transcends the traditional notion of Greeks and Barbarians⁴³.

III. Pagan Identity

“Pagan identity” can mean a number of different things depending on context, so before we go any further, clarifications have to be made. At least two distinct categories may be

42 Kennedy 1983:245

43 Clark 1999:122 in *Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity*

described under the term:

1, When we write “pagan identity” with small-case “p”, we usually refer to the religious identity of those we generally consider to be “pagans”. This is the individual instance of religious self-description of someone who belongs to the Greco-Roman, the Egyptian, etc. religions. These identities can be very diverse, and vary from individual to individual.

2, “Pagan identity” with a capital “P” first and foremost refers to the religious identity of those (1) who use the word “Pagan” as a way of positive religious identification. Pagan identity also includes those who describe their religious identities with the terms that *paganus* translates: *gentiles*, *ethnikoi* and *goyim*, used in a Christian sense. The term *Hellene* can also belong here, when it is used in a Christian sense, although this is a bit more problematic, as *Hellene* has another well-defined meaning, that is although overlapping, distinct: belonging to the Greco-Roman cultural sphere.⁴⁴

The usage of *paganus* or any comparable Christian term as a way of religious self-description, also implies an (2) identification with (traditional) non-Christian religions as a whole, although this whole is often loosely defined. It may or may not include Judaism, or only polytheistic religions for example. A person with a Pagan religious identity will see him/herself belonging to the same *religious category* as these other religions, contrasted by Christian religious identity.

If one decides to identify with the religious category *pagan* – an essentially Christian category – that means that that person reflects on his/her religious identity from a *Christian perspective*. This directly implies that the first development of Pagan identity has to be on Christian terms, i.e. based on the Christian understanding of what it means to belong to a religion. This means, that those who possess a Pagan identity, will generally define their religion by a set of dogmas (orthodoxy) and a set of practices (orthopraxy)⁴⁵. Faith is going to be a defining feature, even if it emphasizes the primary importance of orthopraxy. Pagan dogmas can be really elaborate, as we can see in the case of Julian, or really simple designations, for example: “we believe in the gods”. In Pagan identity, the importance of *correct faith* becomes a central issue of religious identity, that can be contrasted by the

44 Clark 1999:122 in Constructing Identities in Late Antiquity

45 An example of Greco-Roman religious development into a unity of orthodoxy and orthopraxy is to be found in the writings of Iamblichus, who was deeply influential in the development of Julian's system. (Shaw 1995:

traditional notion of belonging to a pagan religion, described above.

Any sort of Pagan identity is connected to Christianity in a historical sense, historically we can only talk of Pagan identity in the western cultural sphere. Also, as we have stated earlier, Pagan identity could not exist before Christianity, because then the Christian understanding of religious identity, and indeed the idea of “pagan” simply did not exist.⁴⁶

IV. Julian's Paganism

Julian the Apostate was the emperor of the Roman Empire between 361-363. He was raised a Christian, but in his twenties he decided to adopt the worship of the gods, and this conversion has turned into a project to re-introduce what he viewed as the traditional religion as the state religion of the Roman Empire: the religion of the “Hellenes”. On February 4, 362, Julian ordered religious freedom in the Empire, along with the restoration of the temples. Julian's religion however is a very unique understanding of Greco-Roman paganism, that in many ways is quite distinct from the traditional Roman religion. For purposes of clarity, in this paper I will call this religion “Julianic Hellenism”.

How is Julianic Paganism different from the pagan religions of those before him, and why is this relevant from the perspective of Pagan identity? I believe that the answer mainly lies in Julian's Christian upbringing. From early childhood Julian was conditioned to view the world in the dichotomy of Christianity, the dichotomy of Paul: a world of “Jews” and “Greeks”. This conditioning also included the Christian understanding of religion. And this view of religion is clearly projected on Julian's pagan (and Neoplatonic) heritage: he sees himself not only belonging to the Greco-Roman religion, but to the Greco-Roman religion *in a Christian sense*⁴⁷. Although now he is “on the other side of the fence”, he still holds to the Christian definition of religion, and clearly views his religion as a *coherent, indivisible structure of practice and dogma*. The catechism known as *On the Gods and the Cosmos* written by Sallustius, which is thought to be written on the instruction of Julian, is a clear example of the new direction into which Julian developed the traditional Greco-Roman religion, a direction clearly defined by Christianity⁴⁸. In one his letter fragments, he even instructs his priests to imitate Christian virtues to ensure success of the “Hellenic Religion”, and the theme is echoed

46 Athanassiadi and Frede 1999:6

47 Sandwell 2007:9

48 Murdoch 2008:346

in his letter to Arsacius⁴⁹. There is also evidence that shows that Julian identifies with non-Christian religions as a whole. When talking about the Jews worshiping (in this case, Solomon) several gods in the past in *Against the Galileans*, he calls them: “our gods”:

*“Did not this Solomon serve **our gods** also, deluded by his wife, as they assert?”*⁵⁰

More importantly, besides exploiting the double-connotations of the term “Hellene”⁵¹, in a letter written to the High Priest Theodorus, Julian uses the term *ethnoi* to define his religious alliance, when he talks about the Jews only worshiping one god. While he affirms his allegiance to the “God of Abraham”, he notes that he finds it to be an error that the Hebrews don't worship the gods of the “Gentiles”:

*“...they do not conciliate the other gods also, but the other gods they think have been allotted to us **Gentiles** only...”*⁵²

Julian identifies with all traditional religions. In the *Contra Galileos*, he tells Christians that if they followed the pure Hebrew tradition, although they would still be “inferior” to the Hellenes, yet “holier and purer in worship” than now.⁵³ He also affirms this allegiance by declaring how close Hebrew worship is to the Hellene:

*“the Jews agree with the Gentiles, except that they believe in only one God. That is indeed peculiar to them and strange to us; since all the rest we have in a manner in common with them – temples, sanctuaries, altars, purifications, and certain precepts. For as to these we differ from one another either not at all or in trivial matters”*⁵⁴

There were of course others before Julian who reflected on their religions in contrast of Christianity, which is evident from writers who wrote essays against Christianity. Porphyry is a well-known example, who looked at the teachings of the Christians with a pagan eye, and criticized them in a philosophical manner. Many of his arguments found their way into

49 Julian's Letter to Arsacius:430

50 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 221.

51 Cameron 2011:7

52 Julian: Letter to Theodorus

53 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 202.

54 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 306.

Julian's similar writing, the *Contra Galileos*⁵⁵. Another well-known philosopher critic was Kelsos.⁵⁶ There is a crucial difference between the writers before Julian, and Julian however: before Julian, there is no evidence that any pagan writers applied the Christian religious categories at themselves, which means that before Julian, there is no evidence of a direct Pagan identity. This makes Julian's religion a very special case, one that reflects a direct Pagan identity for the first time in history. Not only that, but Julian's religion, Julianic Hellenism is the first religion specifically constructed on this identity. Seeing how the Roman Empire was already largely Christian at the time, it is perhaps not a big mistake to go as far as stating that Julianic Hellenism was the first Neopagan religion of history. He himself calls his religious agenda a “restoration”⁵⁷.

Julianic Hellenism placed a lot of emphasis on “Pagan dogmas” that can be discerned from Julian's writings. In the *Contra Galileos*, Julian not only attacks Christian teachings but presents the “teachings of the Hellenes” as well, understood to be a coherent whole. Even though the Greco-Roman culture was far from unified in terms of philosophical thought, the “teachings of the fathers” are presented in a way as if this Julianic Hellenism has always been the religion of the Roman/Greek people, with a single “mainstream” set of philosophical teachings, rooted in Platonism⁵⁸. Julian projects his Christianized view of his religion back into the past, and emphasizes the unity of the Greco-Roman religious tradition, solidifying and legitimizing the religious identity he is developing. More importantly, even though it is clear that Julian saw Hellenic teachings as superior to all others, he clearly identifies with all religions who worship their “natural gods”, and sees these as possessing common characteristics. Julian's religious identity thus reaches beyond the traditional designations of Barbarians and Hellenes, as the contrast with Christianity becomes stronger than this traditional divide. Julian subscribes to the idea of “Pagan religions”, and – reversing Christian teachings – sees them as the legitimate and correct religions for humanity⁵⁹, seeing Christianity as a “modern perversion” that doesn't even worship a god, but a man, or even “a number of wicked men”.

V. Julianic Hellenic Dogmas

55 For a good collection of these arguments, see Cook: *The Interpretation of the Old Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (2004)

56 Kobusch 2008:17 in *Kaiser Julian 'Apostata' und die philosophische Reaktion gegen das Christentum*

57 Murdoch 2008:28

58 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 184.

59 Julian's *Rescript on Christian Teachers*:423

Julianic Hellenism is a religion that is clearly modelled after Christianity, with its own set of dogmas, portrayed as the "teachings of the fathers" by Julian⁶⁰. The main "dogmas" of Julianic Hellenism can be discerned from the *Against the Galileans* as such:

1. Universal Conception of Divinity

Julian says that all nations have a "natural concept" of the gods, and thereby they all possess a sort of "natural religion", which are all authentic in their own right. In section 52 of the *Contra Galileos* he says:

*"Now that the human race possesses its knowledge of God by nature and not from teaching is proved to us first of all by the universal yearning for the divine that is in all men whether private persons or communities, whether considered as individuals or as races. For all of us, without being taught, have attained to a belief in some sort of divinity..."*⁶¹

This is contrasted with the Christian idea that true religion was only given by God to the Jews, and consequently to the Christians. Julian's idea is rooted in the traditional Hellenistic universalism that is also manifested in the various aretologies of Isis, the most famous of which is perhaps the one transmitted by Apuleius in the *Metamorphoses*, in which Isis says:

*"...my name, my divinity is adored throughout all the world in divers manners, in variable costumes and in many names..."*⁶²

Julian also asserts that this natural concept of divinity also holds some universal truths, and he gives the example that divinity is universally regarded as residing in the heavens.

2. Myths as Symbolic Truths

Julian regards traditional mythologies as symbolic accounts that hold some inner truth not visible on the surface. This corresponds to the fourth point Sallustius' "cathecism", *On the Gods and the Cosmos*. He argues that the myths of the Hebrews in themselves, if interpreted

60 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 96.

61 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 52.

62 Apuleius: *Metamorphoses*, Book 11

literally, can not be taken seriously, and the same can be said about traditional Greco-Roman myths. One has to look through the layer of symbolism to understand the true teaching of the myths. This symbolic interpretation is commonly employed by Neoplatonic writers, and it arguably gives a lot of room for religious syncretism, which fits very well with Julian's universalist tendencies. In section 94 of the *Contra Galileos* he says:

*“Accordingly, unless every one of these legends is a myth that involves some secret interpretation, as I indeed believe, they are filled with many blasphemous sayings about God.”*⁶³

Further references to Julian's belief in the symbolic interpretation of myths can be found in Oration 5.

3. Divine Teachers and Lawgivers

Julian holds that traditional religious laws are transmitted to various nations through divine teachers – the argument here in *Contra Galileos* is that Moses is not unique, just as he has established rites for the Jews, Numa, the legendary king of the Romans did the same for them. The “dogmas” of religion are different for different nations, but this is natural and good. Plato has a special place in Julian's view, and his account of creation is directly contrasted with that “of Moses” (in the Genesis).

*“Observe then what he says about the creator, and what words he makes him speak at the time of the generation of the universe, in order that we may compare Plato's account of that generation with that of Moses.”*⁶⁴

4. Divine Hierarchy

Julian also subscribes to the Neoplatonic idea of divine hierarchy, with the One God as the highest, and lesser classes as we go further away from him. Of the gods, he distinguishes between *visible* and *invisible gods* – the first being the planets, the second the invisible intelligences that govern them. All nations have their own gods that rule over them, that give them their special characteristics, i. e. languages, laws, customs, etc. “according to their own

63 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 94

64 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 49

nature”. This is how Julian explains the differences between the nations, and states that Jewish and Christian beliefs are unable to account for such differences.

*“Therefore, as I said, unless for every nation separately some presiding national god (and under him an angel, a demon, a hero, and a peculiar order of spirits which obey and work for the higher powers) established the differences in our laws and characters, you must demonstrate to me how these differences arose by some other agency.”*⁶⁵

5. Natural Law is Divine Law

God made the laws of the Universe, which are therefore the natural laws, against which it is impossible to err.

*“For how could nature be at variance with the ordinance of God?”*⁶⁶

6. Virtue is to Imitate the Gods

The gods are said to be perfect, and without any form of passion (see also XIV. in *On the Gods and the Cosmos* by Sallustius). People have to rise above their passions, and become like them, this can be achieved in philosophy.

*“The philosophers bid us imitate the gods so far as we can, and they teach us that this imitation consists in the contemplation of realities. And that this sort of study is remote from passion and is indeed based on freedom from passion.”*⁶⁷

7. The Role of the Hellenes

In Julian's cosmology, the “Hellenes” play a special role as a people who “*were born with an aptitude for the mysteries and theologians*”⁶⁸. The political ideal of the Roman Empire is reflected in this religious identity: just as the Roman Empire is a superior, unifying entity for different nations, Julianic Hellenism becomes a religion that explains and supports all other “Gentile” religions. Theologically, as all nations are cared for by their own national gods, the

65 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 143.

66 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 143.

67 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 172.

68 Julian: *Contra Galileos*, Section 176.

“Hellenic nation” is looked after by the highest one of all: the Sun⁶⁹. In this sense, with the clearly marked dogmas and prescribed practices of Julianic Hellenism, this religion becomes a sort of “*Paganism par excellence*”, an ideal for all Pagan religions.

VI. Pagan Identity Today and Julian's Legacy⁷⁰

Pagan identity has seen a revival since the 1700s⁷¹. Since then, a number of religious entities were born that consciously adopted the term “Pagan” for their self-designation, often with a highly romanticized view of Pre-Christian religions⁷². In this section I will attempt to introduce contemporary Paganism, along with its main features, comparing it to Julianic Hellenism, focusing on the common cultural thread found in both. As noted earlier, this is no easy task: Paganism is a highly diverse religious community, where it is almost impossible to make statements that universally apply. Nevertheless, common traits and tendencies can indeed be discerned.

Perhaps the most notable Neopagan religion is Wicca⁷³. It is a religion that is not only important in its own right, but also because many Neopagan religions take it as a sort of “template” for their own ethical, liturgical, etc. practice. The sacred space of Wicca for example, a circular area often simply called “the Circle” can be found in most contemporary Pagan paths⁷⁴. Another good example is the “Wheel of the Year”, the Wiccan “liturgical calendar” of eight festivals (solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter days), which by most Pagans is seen as an instance of pan-Pagan heritage⁷⁵. On many Pagan-themed websites, the terms “Pagan” and “Wiccan” are often used almost interchangeably, which shows to what great extent the ritual and simple theological structures found in Wicca are projected unto a larger, idealized ancient “Paganism”. This is no wonder: Wicca seems to have been consciously constructed in a way that it reflects the Victorian ideals and expectations about how a Pagan path should look like: a great emphasis on Nature, fertility rituals, joyful,

69 Julian's Letter to the Alexandrians:434

70 A good introductory work to the topic of Neopaganism from the inside is Ronald Hutton: The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft

71 Hutton 1998:320

72 Salomonsen 2009:366 in Handbook of Contemporary Paganism

73 Strmiska 2005:2 in Modern Paganism in World Cultures

74 Salomonsen 2009:375 in Handbook of Contemporary Paganism

75 Butler 2005:108 in Modern Paganism in World Cultures

dynamic celebrations, often in the wilderness, and in some instances, even naked⁷⁶. The same can be said about its theological teachings: in most instances a Fertility Mother⁷⁷ and a Hunter God figure are worshiped (the “Divine Couple”)⁷⁸, and a sort of communion is observed with the “wild spirits of Nature”⁷⁹. Because of the inherent connections between “Nature”, “Divinity” and “wilderness in Pagan culture, contemporary Pagan paths in general seem to place a larger emphasis on environmental issues.”⁸⁰

Wicca was founded by Gerald Gardner, an amateur British anthropologist in the early 20th century⁸¹. He claimed that his religion is a survival of an actual Pre-Christian cult, that survived the widespread “Christianization” of the Middle Ages underground. Gardner's ideals were directly influenced by Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist whose two books (*The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* and *The God of the Witches*) presented a theory now widely considered anachronistic: according to her (and Gardner), the fertility religious practices that were seen to go back to as far as the Neolithic era survived in Europe, and were organized in a secret Pan-European “pagan” cult during the Middle Ages⁸². This fertility religion, with its God and Goddess at its centre is considered to be the basis for all ancient religions. Murray claims that the witch hunts of the Middle Ages were in fact persecutions directed against this surviving “pagan” cult, and that “witches” were actually people who followed Pre-Christian religious, healing and magical practices⁸³. This is the reason why Gardner initially called his religion the “Witch-cult”, and its followers “the Wica” (sic!)⁸⁴. The term “Wicca” that is widely used today originates in the Middle English term for “male witch”, although pronounced differently (“wicca”, as opposed to “witcha”)⁸⁵. Murray sees the descriptions found documents of the witch-hunt from different parts of Europe – the witches' sabbat for example – as examples widespread of pagan cult practices. Murray wasn't the first to make this claim – a book published in 1899 by G.E. Leland, the “*Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches*”

76 Winslade 2009:241 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

77 Strmiska 2005:37 in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*

78 Strmiska 2005:37 in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*

79 Magliocco 2005:68 in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*

80 Barner-Barry 2005:35

81 Cusack 2009:347 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

82 Strmiska 2005:7 in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*

83 Lewis 2009:481 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

84 Aloï 2009:561 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

85 Online Etymology Dictionary (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=wicca&searchmode=none)

describes itself as a collection of the beliefs, rituals and legends of the Witch-cult in Tuscany⁸⁶. In this religion, the center stage is taken by Diana, the Moon Goddess, also the goddess of primordial darkness, who created the world with her brother, the God of Light and the Sun, Lucifer⁸⁷. Their daughter is Aradia – a soteriological figure who is sent to Earth to instruct the common folk in the “art of witchcraft”, so that they can overcome the suppression of the aristocracy and the priesthood⁸⁸.

The romantic notions of paganism in the 19th and 20th centuries were often intertwined with occultism, as it is evidenced in the richness of occult symbolism in Wicca⁸⁹. In the Victorian era, spiritualism, magnetism and similar concepts became popular, and many self-styled occult groups were formed⁹⁰. Gerald Gardner himself was involved with a number of such organizations – the Rosicrucians, the OTO, and the Freemasons for example⁹¹. He even claimed to have met the “witches” who initiated him into the cult at a meeting of the Crotona Fellowship – a mystical organization named after the place where Pythagoras lived⁹². The legacy of this can still be seen in Wiccan, and in contemporary Paganism in general: one of the most recognizable emblems of the movement is the pentagram, with its 5 points signifying the classical elements, along fifth, variously called “Spirit” or “Aether” - a similar usage was said about the followers of Pythagoras⁹³.

Thus, one of the primary sources of Neopagan liturgical structures and theological ideas is in western occultism and esoteric mysticism. The sacred space of Wicca for example, the Circle was directly taken from the “Magic Circle” of ceremonial magical traditions, that were supposed to have protected the practitioner from the demonic forces invoked during the ceremonies⁹⁴. The first book in which Gardner published the ideas and rituals of his “Witch-cult”, was a novel titled “High Magick's Aid” - in this book a witch cooperates with ceremonial magicians. The rituals described therein are derived from the grimoire (a book of magical theories and ceremonies) titled “The Greater Keys of Solomon”, a popular

86 Hutton 1998:301

87 Strmiska 2005:356 (Glossary) in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*

88 Leland (1899):8

89 Aloï 2009:571 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

90 Drury 2009:32 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

91 Drury 2009:56 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

92 Drury 2009:56 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

93 Hutton 2001:68

94 Hutton 2001:87

sourcebook of the western occult tradition⁹⁵. In Wicca, and most Neopagan paths, a great emphasis is placed on the four classical elements, and their “spirits” are invoked from the four cardinal directions at the beginning of every ritual. This echoes the ceremonial magical practice where the four archangels of the cardinal directions – usually Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel are asked to guard the space against evil influences⁹⁶. In many rituals the four “elemental spirits” given by Paracelsus are invoked in the four quarters: “undines” for Water, “salamanders” for Fire, “gnomes” for Earth, and “sylphs” for Air⁹⁷.

Such occult practices of the western tradition have a long history that goes back to antiquity. Many of them are based on a Neoplatonic philosophical understanding of the Universe. Neoplatonism inspired the writing of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's 3-volume work, the *De Occulta Philosophia* (1531)⁹⁸ – a book that continues to have a profound influence on the occult and Neopagan community today. A good sign of this is that the book was republished in 2005 by Llewellyn, one of the leading publishers of Neopagan books today. The book features important elements of both Neopaganism and Julian's Hellenic religion: a theory of the four elements, the seven planets and planetary spheres, planetary spirits and gods, angelology and demonology among other topics. A common idea in Julian's religion, in western occult philosophy and Neopaganism is the thought that the Universe proceeds from the One, and is manifested through several layers, which give home to different orders of beings. There is also a persistent belief in a female “World Soul”⁹⁹, who is named Hecate in the *Chaldean Oracles*¹⁰⁰ (a work held in high esteem by Julian as a sacred book of his religion), and who is identified as the Great Goddess in the perhaps most influential sacred text of contemporary Paganism¹⁰¹, the “Charge of the Goddess” (which – it is worth noting – is based on the popular Isis aretologies, especially the one found in Book XIV of the *Metamorphoses*). Book I of *De Occulta Philosophia*, Chapter XIV. is titled “Of the Spirit of the World, what it is, and how by way of medium it unites occult Vertues to their subjects”. In the *Charge of the Goddess*, the Goddess describes herself as:

95 Hutton 2001:85

96 Drury 2009:53 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

97 MacMorgan 2001:315

98 Davies 2009:48

99 Johnson 2009:327 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

100 J. D. Turner: The Figure of Hecate and Dynamic Emanationism in the *Chaldean Oracles*, Sethian Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism in: *The Second Century Journal* 1991:221

101 Barner-Barry 2005:69

“For I am the Soul of Nature, who giveth life to the universe; from me all things proceed, and unto me must all things return; and before my face, beloved of gods and mortals, thine inmost divine self shall be unfolded in the rapture of infinite joy.”

Hecate herself is a deity whose popularity is rising in contemporary Paganism¹⁰². She is imagined primarily as a *Triple Goddess*, often having three faces of Maiden, Mother and Crone – according to the now anachronistic theory presented by Robert Graves, in his 1948 book, the *White Goddess*. Her aspects are attributed – similarly to how it was imagined in late antiquity – to the realms of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld. As a Goddess who presides over transitions between different states, today she is even given a new role of looking over the LGBT community, and people of various sexual identities. Today certain groups of Hecate worshipers even adopt the surviving fragments of the Chaldean Oracles as their “holy scripture”, similarly to Julian¹⁰³.

The Neoplatonic concept of the phenomenal world also appears in contemporary Paganism. But although in many Gnostic, Hermetic and Neoplatonic streams physical reality is given a negative role, not so much in contemporary Paganism, where the inherent sanctity of all physical manifestations is emphasized¹⁰⁴. Nevertheless, the Neoplatonic heritage is evident in the widely used text for the consecration of holy water in Wicca and other Pagan traditions. This text is derived from the Greater Keys of Solomon, and it appears in the Gardnerian Book of Shadows, the primary sacred textual source for traditionalist Wiccan practitioners:

*"I exorcise thee, O creature of Water, that thou cast out from Thee **all the impurities and uncleannesses of the Spirits of the World of Phantasm**, so they may harm me not, in the names of Aradia and Cernunnos."*

The magical rituals described in books like *De Occulta Philosophia* and the *Greater Keys of Solomon* brings to mind the theurgical works of Iamblichus that had a great influence on Julian¹⁰⁵. Traditional Wiccan ceremonies similarly include a series of purifications –

102 Magliocco 2004:79

103 An organization dedicated to Hecate, the Covenant of Hecate is organizing a world-wide ritual every year in honor of Hecate as the World Soul. They use the Chaldean Oracles as a sort of scripture of authority. For more information visit their website: <http://hekatecovenant.com/about-the-coh/>

104 York 2009:295 in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*

105 The introduction to his Panegyric to Constantine says: "Iamblichus he ranked with Plato and paid him a fanatical devotion."

cleansings through censing, ritual bath, and even bondage and light scourging, that is said to “purify the soul”¹⁰⁶. It must be noted however, that this aspect of Neoplatonism is not as popular as it was in traditional Wicca: as the number of adherents grow, the emphasis of personal mystical purification and union with the Divine is shifting towards more exoteric forms of worship, that in many ways resemble contemporary Christian services – complete with sermons and singing of hymns. A westernized form of traditional Jewish mysticism is still important however – the system called Hermetic Qabalah¹⁰⁷. Also featured in Agrippa's work, the system shows common Neoplatonic ideas – the world was created through various layers through which God emanated himself – the soul, in order to fulfill its purpose, has to retrace its steps, and through ritual work, lifestyle change, and knowledge of certain divine names and principles has to achieve union with the Godhead¹⁰⁸. Many Neopagan paths are heavily influenced by the teachings of the Qabalah – for example a popular divinatory and mystical teaching tool, the 22 primary Tarot cards are usually treated in correspondence with the 22 Hebrew letters, which are seen as the primary “building blocks” of creation. The 22 letters represent the 7 planets, the 12 zodiac signs, and the 3 “primary principles” (reminiscent of the Chaldean/Neoplatonic trinities), embodied in the three “mother letters”, Aleph, Mem and Shin (sometimes attributed to 3 of the 4 elements, completed by the lowest sephira of the qabalistic Tree of Life, Malkuth (“kingdom”) representing Earth).

The ancient idea of “like influencing like” - appearing in both Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, is very influential in contemporary Paganism. “As above, so below” - says the fabled “Emerald Tablet” of Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary founder of the Hermetic traditions. This idea is so popular in Neopaganism¹⁰⁹, that many “Paganism 101” type books contain long tables of correspondences, attributing certain gods and goddesses, plants, animals, minerals, incenses, etc. under the influences of planets, zodiac signs, and elements. Lists like this can also be found in the *De Occulta Philosophia*, and many other magical grimoires, but the idea is also inherent in the works of Neoplatonic Theurgists, for example *On the Egyptian Mysteries* by Iamblichus, which describes theurgical work as a sort of “ritualized cosmogony”. In theurgical works too, certain plants, fumes, animals, symbolic

106 Descriptions of these practices can be found in the “Gardnerian Book of Shadows”, the primary public sacred text of Traditional Wicca, found online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/gbos/>

107 The Golden Dawn – in many ways an „ancestor” of Wicca even uses initiatory degrees attributed to the various sephiroth of the qabalistic Tree of Life.

108 The „westernized” version of Qabalah that is most well-known in contemporary Paganism is throughoutly described in the book titled “Mystical Qabalah” by Dion Fortune

109 Clifton 2009:110 in Handbook of Contemporary Paganism

images can be employed that correspond to gods¹¹⁰. Through this *sungeneia* can the soul enter the *energeiai* of the gods. The four primary tools of Wicca and many Neopagan paths (with which parallels are drawn in the Pagan community with the tools of the Mithras cult)¹¹¹ directly correspond to the four Elements, and the divine principles connected with them: Dagger (Fire, Male God), Chalice (Water, Goddess), Pentacle/Diskos (Earth, Law and Protection), Wand (Air, Power, Creation and Destruction)¹¹². Neopagan cosmologies often see the world as divided into different levels: often named “Physical/Material”, “Mental”, “Astral”, “Ethereal”, and “Spiritual” - although variations exist¹¹³. These in turn, also correspond to the five Elements (with Spirit or Aether being the fifth). The classical triplicity of “Heavenly Realm”, “Middle World” and “Underworld” is also often observed – here the first is seen as the realm of higher gods and heroes, the Middle World as the world of mankind, and the latter as the realm of the Ancestors, and chthonic deities and spirits.

Divination was an important aspect of Greco-Roman religion, and was also held in high esteem by Julian, who considered it the means to communicate with the gods. Not only did he see wisdom manifesting in the oracles (especially the collection already mentioned, known as the Chaldean Oracles), but he saw it as vital to reinvigorate the ancient oracular centers. Contemporary Pagans also see oracular activity as the primary way to gain insight from the divine world, and for this aim various methods are used – bibliomancy, gazing on dark surfaces known as scrying, tarot cards, throwing of runes, and invocation of spirit allies in trance induced by drumming among others. In later years, arguments have arose in the Pagan community for reinstatement of animal sacrifice, and with it, haruspicy, even though most members of the community consider it inhumane, and indeed, many observe vegetarianism or other types of dietary restrictions based on ethical principles – practices that would have resonated with Porphyry or Julian.

Julian's religion was pronouncedly solar in nature – and even though thanks to the “Witch-cult” mythology there is a great emphasis placed on the symbolism of the Moon in contemporary Paganism, the most important rituals, corresponding to the seasonal changes of the year are admittedly solar, and are often built on solar mythology¹¹⁴. On the Winter Solstice the Sun is said to be born – similarly to Horus, Mithras, Sol or Jesus of Late Antiquity. As he

110 Shaw 1995:158

111 Grimassi 2008:128

112 MacMorgan 2001:56

113 Grimassi 2008:10

114 Grimassi 2008:47

grows, he consummates the Hieros Gamos with the Goddess (seen in this manifestation as the Earth Mother) at the Summer Solstice, then sacrifices himself so that people can consume him as grain and bread, fruits and wine. He then becomes King of the Underworld, and the cycle starts again. The solar heritage of Neopaganism can also be seen in ritual directions: if one is to create positive change, he or she has to move *clockwise* in the Circle (the term often used is the germanic *deosil*), the *direction of the Sun*. Some say that great care must be taken not move in a *widdershins* or anti-clockwise direction, *against the Sun*, as it brings bad fortune.

As most Pagan religions today have developed from occult and spiritual movements of the Victorian era, they reflect how (1) Pagan religions were imagined in that era, and (2) the knowledge they had about Paganism. The primary source of information was of course Greco-Roman culture, which has left a clear mark on contemporary Paganism. The belief that “Diana” is the “Goddess of Witches” comes from a description from the Middle Ages, when a description of the “Wild Hunt” led by a local female spirit – perhaps Holda – is identified with Diana's entourage in the *Canon Episcopi*¹¹⁵. Hecate's description of an “old hag” - even though in classical times she was known as a virgin – has a lot to do with the old witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Many Pagans today adopt the Pythagorean belief in reincarnation, often mixed with oriental notions of Karma (often known in Paganism as the “Threefold Law” or “Law of Return”)¹¹⁶. Wicca – today held by many to be a “free religion” - started out as an initiatory mystery tradition, with exclusive membership, where only initiates were allowed to participate in rituals¹¹⁷. The mystery tradition was modeled on the cult of Eleusis (about which Gardner wrote extensively in his books)¹¹⁸, with the central legend and most important ritual being the “*Legend of the Descent of the Goddess*”¹¹⁹. Initiates were given the “secret names of the Gods”, which were used in inner rituals, and were considered more effective than commonly known divine names. These names – along with other sacred sounds – are often “vibrated” on rituals – for example “IIIIAAA OOO”, a divine name that originates in Gnostic and Hermetic traditions. The effect of Pythagoreans can also be observed in the traditional stress on the importance of numbers – certain numbers – 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, and 40 especially hold special significance, and are held to be representative of mystical truth. Trinities, especially the “Trinity of the Goddess” is thought to be very important. All these beliefs and practices would have been rather familiar to Julian as well.

115 Ginzburg 1990:94

116 MacMorgan 2001:32

117 Hutton 2001:96

118 See Chapter 7. of “Witchcraft Today” by Gerald Gardner

119 Drury 2009:69 in Handbook of Contemporary Paganism

Christianity continues to have an effect on not only the way religion is defined in Paganism today (with less stress on creeds, but stressed nevertheless), but also in liturgy. For example virtually no Pagan ritual can take place without ritual eating and drinking, often started by a ceremony similar to the Christian communion, called “Rite of Cakes and Wine” in Wicca. Following the example of Christianity, more and more Pagans adopt “sacred books” - Germanic Neopagans often choose the Poetic Edda for example. The Judeo-Christian system of angels (often that of Pseudo-Dionysios the Aeropagite) is widely adopted, thanks to the Christian heritage that was built into the Neoplatonic and Qabalistic systems through the centuries. A curious consecration/purification ceremony, the ritual of the “Qabalistic Cross”, a part of the “Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram” is clearly of Christian origins – it is almost identical to the Catholic *signum crucis* (although right to left, as it is done in Eastern Orthodox traditions), but with more visualisation work involved, and with the words being said in Hebrew¹²⁰. The interpretation of Dying-Rebirth Gods (and thus, also Jesus) given in the Golden Bough is almost universally accepted in the Pagan community, and in the solar myths constructed for the celebrations of the seasons (also seen as allegories of human spiritual development) this is manifested.

Of course, Christianity has another important role in Paganism, as a sort of virtual “antithesis” to what most Pagans stand for. It is clear that the dichotomy constructed by Christianity survives in Paganism, but just as in the case of Julian, it is reversed. Pagans generally consider themselves to be “open-minded”, and this is emphasized in virtually all introductory books on the subject. In this spirit, it is not the whole Christian religion that is being rejected, only the church structure that is seen as being corrupt, teachings that are seen as oppressing individual freedom and sexuality, but above all, the claim to the “only right path”. Jesus, however is generally considered to be either a “wise teacher”, or a “Death-Rebirth God”, like Tammuz, Adonis or Osiris, and thus he is invoked and worshiped. Some even created syncretistic “Christian Pagan”, and “Christian Wiccan” groups, where often Mary, Sophia, or Mary Magdalene is considered to be the Goddess, and Jesus is worshiped as the male God¹²¹.

Modern Paganism, just like Julian's religion, is highly syncretistic. Most Pagans would also agree with Julian about his assertion of a “universal conception of divinity”. A popular myth

120 The text is often given as “*Ateh – Malkuth – VeGevurah – VeGedulah – LeOlem – Amen*”

121 An introductory book on the subject is “Christian Wicca: the Trinitarian Tradition” by Nancy Chandler

that survives is that all gods and goddesses (even the Christian God) have an ancient “archetype” as a “Horned God” (the “Horned Moses” passage is sometimes used as proof) and a “Great Mother” of Neolithic times – a myth popularized by Margaret Murray. All gods are thus often seen as “one God”, and all goddesses “one Goddess”, together forming an even higher unity, “the Spirit”. Mythologies are also interpreted as expressing symbolic truths, even though usually not as sophisticated as Julian's Neoplatonic cosmological teachings, but the turnings of the tides in the seasons of the year. “Becoming like the gods” is also an ethical ideal that is often emphasized as the goal of one's spiritual journey. For some, the gods are “symbolic archetypes”, useful for a meaningful connection with the Universe, for others “astral forms” that “channel the unspeakable Divine” in a way that we can interpret it. Again, others – mostly those in reconstructionist traditions – aim to return to a more traditional, non-symbolic understanding, and a literal belief in the existence of the gods as a higher order of beings.

Sallustius describes a pantheon of 12 “high gods” in Julianic Hellenism that lead the universe – all other gods and goddesses are found “within these”. This idea is a reinterpretation of the traditional notion of the twelve Olympians. Some contemporary Pagan paths also have similar concepts of pantheons – a good example is the “Feri Tradition” in which a pantheon of seven gods and goddesses take center stage (3 gods, 3 goddesses, and a central “Star Goddess”, both male and female) – all other gods and goddesses are interpreted as aspects of these. Hellenistic traditions often have a similar concept of the 12 Olympians.

The figure of Julian himself is not very well known in the Pagan community, even though some Hellenistic communities did adopt him as a “hero”, a figure of ancient authority. Generally speaking, the Pagan community is slow to let go of the pseudo-historical myths the more prominent ones of them – Wicca, Druidry – were founded upon. Recently a shift can be observed in this as well – on Pagan forums more and more articles are written about the necessity of a more “realistic” attitude towards Pagan history, and some have even recognized Julian's significance as a pan-Pagan symbolic figure: a certain “Julian Society” was founded in Maine, that describes itself as a *“non-denominational religious order dedicated to the advancement of Pagan religion”*¹²².

The summary given here is satisfactory in showing that the Pagan identity in contemporary Paganism is a construct that has been influenced by many schools of thought over the

122 <http://www.juliansociety.org/>

centuries. The primary influence – as in the case of Julian, too – is Christianity itself, from which both “systems” gained the basis of their self-definition. The philosophical and mystical schools of late antiquity – Neoplatonism, Neopythagoreanism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, the cults of Persephone, Cybele, Isis and Mithras (and of course, what we know of them, whether it be true or not) among others continue to have a strong influence on how Julian constructed his identity, and how Pagans today view the world and themselves. Although Julian didn't succeed in his lifetime with the restoration of the Greco-Roman pantheon as the focus of public worship, many of his ideas indirectly survive today, and live a renaissance in Neopaganism. The goal is the same in both cases: to return to something more ancient, more sacred, and more authentic, something that can be only found in the depths of history and human nature.

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