

How do UU and Pagan Thea/ologies Fit Together?:

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Rev. Rudra Vilius Dundzila, Ph.D., D.Min.

Associate Professor of Humanities and Comparative Religion, Harry S Truman College (City  
Colleges of Chicago)

Pagan, Earth-centered, and Goddess traditions have been on the rise in the Unitarian Universalist (UU) movement for the past two decades. CUUPS, the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, provided a forum for the pursuit of earth-based, Pagan spiritualities and rituals within the multi-theological UU world. The Feminist spirituality movement provided an alternative, complementary framework. Tensions developed because the Unitarian side of the UU movement had been predominantly humanistic and atheistic for the preceding half century. UUs tend to pride themselves on their rational approach to religious matters. The influx of new pagan-esque ideas, rituals, and a renewed emphasis on the divine was viewed with suspicion and sometimes derision. The on-going question became, how do these new religious notions fit into the UU tradition as a whole? My paper attempts to address this question from a theological perspective.

Let us start with some data. Three recent surveys place Pagan, earth-centered, or naturalistic religious approaches within the UU denomination between 31% and 5-6%, depending on the survey wording and options. Overall, the numbers clearly indicate several types of new religious notions are on the rise in the UU movement. They fall into three groupings: 1) religious naturalism, 2) feminist Goddess spirituality, and 3) Pagan and other Earth-centered spiritualities. These three trends share significant theological understandings that this paper will compare and contrast. They also have significant differences.

## Religious Naturalism

We will begin with Religious Naturalism. The term combines two notions, as explained by Rev. Jerome Stone. First, naturalism asserts that “this world provide[s] whatever explanation and meaning are possible to this life” (Stone, *Is God Emeritus?* JLR 2). In other words, the world is a self-contained system, and humans find answers to their meaning and purpose from within nature. Second, the world can be perceived and appreciated with a religious sensibility. Human experiences of nature, the cosmos, and evolution include such reactions as marvel, awe, and humility. These are analogous to traditional religious experiences, except that they focus on nature. Religious Naturalism expresses a reverence for the wonder and mystery of the natural world. There are three different varieties of Religious Naturalism, according to Stone, who has defined the movement. I would call the three sub-groups process naturalists, pantheistic naturalists, and non-theistic naturalists.

The first group reflects the UU legacy of process theology. Process naturalists understand God to be an impersonal creative process within the world. Karl Peters in his *Dancing with the Sacred* is a current proponent of this approach. He argues that nature, and therefore God, are impersonal. God is the power behind serendipitous creativity, i.e. the unpredictable natural occurrences that create something new. This includes forms of life and community. They are unplanned, and beyond the ability to plan. They are random. Peters defines God as a verb that is synonymous with creativity. God is the power of creativity. He equates God with the Buddha-nature, the Tao, and the Hindu dance of Shiva. His argument becomes very inspired and poetic.

However, the creative process of nature is imperfect, resulting in random variation and natural selection. Random variation results in the new, while natural selection eliminates the new that cannot survive. Peters equates random variation with the Jewish and Christian concept of

Spirit, and natural selection with the Christian and Greek concept of Logos, word. Spirit creates while Logos brings order, according to the underlying laws of nature (physics, chemistry, biology, ecology). These two divisions of Peters echo George Dumézil's well-known paradigm of Mitra-Varuna: world religions have paired gods of creation, one for chaotic creation, and the other one for ordering creation.

The second division of religious naturalism understands God to be the totality of the universe, considered religiously. This is the pantheistic understanding. Pantheism means God and the cosmos form an undivided unity. According to Bernard Loomer in his Size of God, God enables living a creative life from the depths and immediacy of concrete experiences. Creativity emerges from within the cosmos itself, but not from beyond it. God is an actuality that represents the totality of the world and its possibilities. The experience of God comes through bodily feelings and sense perception. Furthermore, God represents the web of life, wherein humans create each other and develop relationships with each other. As part of the web, God is the drive toward wholeness through a struggling, imperfect, unfinished, and evolving world. God is not the perfected end result of that process. God is a **symbol** of ultimate values and meanings. Loomer specifically discounts notions of salvation and transcendence in his theology. On a sidebar, Loomer claims process naturalism to be panentheism, in particular Albert North Whitehead and Henry Wieman. However, process naturalists do not agree. The Panentheist stance sees God and the Cosmos as one, as in pantheism, but God simultaneously is also supernatural.

The third approach offers a naturalistic understanding of the world without God. The cosmos is all that exists; there is no need for God in it or outside it. Ursula Goodenough with her Sacred Depths of Nature represents this position. In Goodenough's thought, religion integrates

two primary issues of human life and meaning: cosmology and ethics (xiv). Cosmology explains the structure of the universe, while ethics or morality defines value. Religion ultimately serves to bring humans out of their self-centeredness to see the bigger picture that cosmology and ethics provide. Religious naturalism provides the scientific approach to resolving such human issues, without relying on divinity. A scientific understanding of the world carries with it potential religious notions. Moreover, religious sensibility includes the human responses of awe, wonder, and terror at the marvels of the universe that science has discovered. The twelve chapters of Goodenough's book each cover an aspect from the development of the cosmos and evolution of life, followed by a religious reflection. She emphasizes that humans can glean ethics from the natural laws of the universe. She concludes her book with four religious-ethical principles: the ultimacy of mystery, gratitude, reverence for the intense complexity of the cosmos and life, and belief in the continuation of life.

Let me briefly summarize religious naturalism. It focuses on the scientific understanding of the world. It experiences religious awe and reverence in the discoveries of nature. It finds the ultimate source of meaning in the universe. It discerns ethical principles from science and nature to help guide human life. These principles are similar to those of traditional religions.

Some adherents of religious naturalism also profess a belief in an impersonal God, understood in two different ways. In one view, God is the creative power of the universe. The other view understands God as the embodied totality of the universe: God is the web of life, matter, and emotions struggling towards fulfillment and perfection. Both these views understand God in non-anthropomorphic and abstract ways. To anthropomorphize God is to limit and to idolatry God. The tradition of religious naturalism seeks to interpret God in with the rational and logical language of philosophical speculation.

## UU Feminism

The second emergent religious tradition in Unitarian Universalism is feminist spirituality. This topic is, of course, very broad. UU feminism has various leading forms of religio-spiritual exploration: ancient Goddess religions, reclaimed Judaism, reclaimed Christianity, Gnosticism, and Wiccan paganism. Goddess spirituality emerges from two of these strands.

Margot Adler summarizes the spiritual goals of the UU feminist movement (UUA GA 2006). She is a well known Pagan author and NPR reporter; she is also a Unitarian Universalist. Women need Goddesses for several reasons. They need to honor their bodies, and the relationships between mothers and daughters. They need a sense of the divine as female, and, in particular, divinity embodied within their own bodies. They need the will power to go out and act on their behalf. The spiritual heritage of Goddesses from ancient Pagan religions helps women achieve these holistic goals.

Early UU feminism specifically focused on “The Great Goddess” of ancient times. This Goddess served as an inspiration, empowerment, and blessing for women, per Adler. Commensurate with early feminist scholarship, the Great Goddess was believed to have been a singular, universal, presiding deity in the pre-historic world. She was overthrown by patriarchal religions at the same time as women were subjugated by men. The Goddess then became demonized (Ranck 74).

By the early 1990s, feminist scholars and UU feminists realized that the Great Goddess was, in fact, a myth. In the time-honored UU tradition of seeking truth through rational means, UU feminists reexamined what is now called the myth of the Great Goddess. Meetings were held at Collegium Association for Liberal Religious Scholars conventions and UU General

Assemblies. Elizabeth Fisher summarizes the revised UU feminist understanding of the Goddess. She is the author of the UU Women's Federation curriculum Rise Up and Call Her Name. Instead of a single world-wide Goddess, nearly all cultures from around the globe worshiped or worship Goddesses in various forms. They represent a complexity of social patterns and roles that reflect their own cultural mores. This plurality of "insights and viewpoints" is still "powerfully inspiring." Fisher calls for UU feminists to engage in dialog "with respect and interest that surpasses curiosity" with the practitioners of these traditions. Spiritual growth and Goddess affirmation will happen through personal encounters that challenge one's own notions (Collegium 27). She notes that UU feminists will meet Goddess deists who believe their goddesses to be "actual, living, existing entities that affects human behavior" (26). This quote from her hints that UU feminists regard the Goddess as symbolic. This view also contrasts the UU tradition that had come to either emphasize an impersonal deity, or to discount deity as irrelevant or nonexistent.

Cynthia Eller explains the importance of historical accuracy for UU feminist spirituality. She is a feminist scholar and the author of the Beacon Press book The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory. The main problem with the myth was that it established an idealized archetype of the feminine that does not correspond to historical or cultural reality (67). The pressure to conform to the myth limited the potential of women's freedom, identity, and self-expression (8). The myth created a new form of sexism that ignores social gender roles and exaggerates the differences between women and men (70-77). Although her interpretations have been received in the UU world with acclaim, feminist scholars have issues with some of her conclusions.

The Goddess now understood plurally serves as an inspiration and empowerment to women. She helps them develop deep inner spiritual connections that other spiritual approaches

had failed to accomplish. Outwardly, she enables them to reclaim their rightful place in a sexist society. Publicly, she gives them a history. Goddess spirituality has also influenced the Gay spirituality movement.

Rev. Shirley Rank's Cakes for the Queen of Heaven originally brought prominence to the Goddess in the UU movement. Cakes has been taught in hundreds of UU congregations. Many believe it has been the catalyst that led to a shift of consciousness in the UU movement, emphasizing a renewed interest in spiritual development (Adler 230). The influence of Goddess rituals from the UU feminist movement have even transformed UU church services from a low-church emphasis on preaching to a high-church exploration of liturgy, according to Adler and others. However, mainstream Protestantism has been undergoing a similar transformation.

UU feminism focuses on the inspirational symbolism of the Goddess. Rank explains the Goddess emphasizes the inherent divinity of women (and men), the holiness of the body, the validation of all human emotions, the ability to nurture and create, and the spirit of life (Rank 137). Invoking Starhawk, UU feminists emphasize that the Goddess is not a parallel to the western notion of God. Instead, the Goddess is the world, manifest in each human and in all beings, life forms, inanimate objects, and biospheres. This is a pantheistic stance. She is an internalized divine. She is always embodied and engendered. She is accessible to all. Everyone has direct, unmitigated access to her. Consistent with the UU tradition, each person needs to find the truth of the Goddess within themselves, instead of accepting someone else's paradigm (137).

Ethically, Goddess spirituality inherently seeks equality, justice, compassion, and freedom for all, because all people are united. That unity includes nature: as the Goddess is the world, all humans are part of nature and interdependent within nature. She is concerned with the fate of the earth and the sacredness of life. Rank's definition leads to ecological ethics: the care

for the earth and all living beings. Goddess thealogy clearly reflects the physical experience of daily life with its joys and concerns. This thealogy serves as a counterbalance to a centuries-old western theological tradition.

The Goddess movement within UU feminism has a mystical and artistic approach to spirituality that emphasizes personal experience and inspiration within the whole of creation (Adler 2<sup>nd</sup> ed 435). It focuses on the embodied divine in our human bodies, especially including women, who have been excluded from divinity through Western male religious imagery.

#### UU Paganism

The third emergent UU religious tradition is a Paganism that might more correctly be called earth-based spirituality. The surveys I briefly cited earlier indicate this shift in self-identification. Rev. Dr. Christa Landon defines UU Paganism to include Goddess worship, Nature mysticism, and Paganism (CUUPS web 3/20/07). Margot Adler in the last two editions of her book Drawing Down the Moon documents the progress of Paganism with Unitarian Universalism. There is a clear overlap with Goddess Spirituality, as UU Paganism tends to focus on the Goddess with much less emphasis on the Horned God of American standard Wicca. In fact, the UU pagan organization CUUPS has been waning due to dwindling membership and chapters. In their place, more holistic approaches to integrating earth-centered spirituality are emerging.

Currently, there is one UU congregation that identifies itself as Earth-Centered: the Gaia Community in Kansas City. The first such congregation was Chicago's Panthea UU Fellowship, but it has folded within the last 2 years. Many congregations incorporate Earth-centered traditions in their regular worship and events. The 1993 UU hymnal Singing the Living Tradition contains a significant collection of earth-centered hymns, prayers, and readings, with more in the



2005 hymnal supplement Singing the Journey. As for CUUPS, it has about 70 chapters, most of which are associated with UU congregations. A smaller number of UU congregations hosts UU groups that focus on pagan-esque Earth-centered rituals and practices. These are not associated with CUUPS.

UU Pagans repeatedly explain that deities represent energy forms, symbols, powers, archetypes, human depth, inspiration, creativity, etc. Understanding of deity is clearly poetic, metaphoric, or symbolic. UU Paganism does not emphasize theo/alogy, the study of the divine. Its concepts of God come from the “free pew,” reflecting popular beliefs, not academic or dogmatic ones.

The immanence of the divine is a core trait for UU Pagans. UU Pagans accept the idea that everything is divine, thus rejecting the dichotomy between the spiritual and material realms. For example, “Divinity exists in all that is” and vice versa, according to CUUPS past president Rev. Joan Van Becelaere. She is the author of the CUUPS curriculum A Brief Introduction to UU Paganism. Clearly, UU Pagans define their understanding of deity as pantheism, i.e., the belief that divinity is identified with the material world. This often translates into the belief that the Earth is sacred and alive. UU Pagans frequently invoke James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis to provide scientific proof to this belief, although Lovelock claimed Gaia to be a living organism, not a Goddess. He did name her after a Greek Goddess.

UU Pagans believe the earth and its inhabitants live in a complex of interrelationships that science calls the ecosystem. Furthermore, they completely agree with the discoveries of the natural sciences, often interpreting them as proof for their belief in the web of life. As part of their view that everything is divine, they specifically clarify that humans are also part of nature, and not separate from it. They name the 7<sup>th</sup> UUA principle, i.e., the interdependent web of

existence, as part of their belief system. In fact, they consider that principle and the 6<sup>th</sup> UUA source (earth-centered spiritual traditions) to be their own contribution to the UU movement.

Regarding pantheism, there is an evolving issue with the UU Pagan position. Van Becelaere acknowledges that some Pagans hold a panentheistic view of God. To review, Panentheism is the immanence of God as in pantheism coupled with a transcendent element. The previously cited UU surveys also detected a presence of panentheism among UUs, but not necessarily aligned with Paganism. Another proposal for panentheism comes from UU Pagan authors Joyce and River Higginbotham, whose book Paganism CUUPS uses as a basis for curriculum. They include panentheism as a personal choice, because each Pagan has to define their own understanding of deity, and develop a relationship to it. This approach reflects a common UU characteristic: for everyone to define their own belief systems. UU Pagan conceptualization of God is a matter of individual choice.

The Goddess, i.e., the feminine divine, is exceedingly important for both UU Pagans and UU feminism. The Goddess is not merely a female God. She is not “Yahweh in drag,” as UU Pagans like to say. She is not a female version of the western, patriarchal, hierarchical, creator god paradigm.

UU Pagans accept a plurality of gods and goddesses, and deity is not the, or a unifying principle. The polytheism of UU Pagans reflects another commonly held UU belief: the diversity of experience and existence. Each person is unique, perceiving the world in their own way. The myriad of forms in nature, likewise, reflect a vast diversity of existence. Pagans delight in the multiplicity and complexity of the world. Variety is accepted as an expression of nature; there is no drive for a unity. The mystery of life is so vast and great, that a unifying principle would simply be an artificial human construct. For UU Pagans, natural diversity translates into a

pluralistic understanding of deity. The gods, after all, embody nature, among other things. This most sharply contrasts the historical Unitarian position of one God, or as Saul Mort quipped, “Unitarians believe there is at most one God.” The historical UU concept of unity continues its shift from God to the unity of humanity and the natural world in UU Paganism.

The UU Pagan ethical response comes in the form of environmentalism. Their ecological concerns focus on keeping the earth clean, restoring its pristine nature, and finding a sustainable harmony between humans and the earth with all its inhabitants. This is a common UU goal, not unique to UU Pagans. For UU Pagans, ritual is an important spiritual tool to achieve these ends. It is more much more important than deity or theo/alogy. Ritual symbolically celebrates, envisions, represents, enacts, and restores the harmony between humans and nature. It celebrates the cycles of nature, raising consciousness and reconnecting humans to nature. It is a tool of individual and collective self-transformation. Ritual action leads to ethical action.

Within UU Paganism, there is a strand of thought known as “Naturalistic Polytheism.” It is s response to Process Theology and Religious Naturalism. Tom Tadfor Little interprets the unitarian God of Process Theology to be a variety of individual nature gods with their own characters and experiences. They inspire, providing a catalyst for transformation. The God that is creativity in Process Theology becomes the nature Gods that provide inspiration in this framework. Worship engages the artistic senses to generate inspiration. He notes that the personification of divinity serves as a useful allegory (Sacred Cosmos 2).

## Conclusion

How do Religious Naturalism, Goddess Spirituality, and Paganism fit together?

First, deity, for the most part, provides symbolic value to human life. It represents creativity, cosmic totality, humanity, and the Earth. Whereas some Religious Naturalists see deity as the universe, considered religiously, Goddess spirituality and UU Paganism would emphasize deity in humanity and human individuals.

Second, deity and the universe form an inseparable unity. The divine, humans, and the rest of nature interact in the “interdependent web of existence.” All the perspectives I reviewed mention a variant of the phrase “we are made of stardust,” with physics in mind. Furthermore, they all believe in a human-nature connection, and the necessity for human community. This stance clearly confronts American individualistic tendencies. Ecological ethics flows from this understanding of interdependence. Non-theistic Religious Naturalists can be included in this drive.

Third, experience of the divine comes through nature, the body, and human senses, and not from outside sources. People experience transcendence of their limited individuality and situations with new possibilities: that experience of something greater than oneself is deemed the divine.

There are grave differences between the three positions as well.

First, Religious Naturalists and Pagans sometimes explore the distinction between pantheism and panentheism, but this is an irrelevant issue for Goddess spirituality.

Second, Religious Naturalists uses the term “God” in a singular abstract sense. Goddess Spirituality and Pagans prefer the term Goddess instead. UU Pagans in particular also favor a plurality of deities with specific, concrete names: for example, Gaia. Anthropomorphized divinity reflects human gender and sexuality, the human condition, and the multiplicity of life’s

expression in nature. This approach humanizes deity in contrast the abstract, unemotional, sexless but male god of the western tradition.

Third, the God of Religious Naturalism has a clear, unifying purpose. Goddess Spirituality and Pagans focus on the symbolic nature of deity. For Goddess Spirituality, the Goddess empowers the feminine divine. UU Pagans shift the question of purpose to ritual instead.

Thank you very much for your attention.