

## **A reply to Melanie Philips' article in The Daily Mail (Tuesday 5 October 2010) "Druids as an official religion?"**

When the trustees of The Druid Network sent out the press release letting the world know the Charities Commission had granted us charitable status for the advancement of our religion, we did so – we now freely admit – perhaps with more relief and joy, than with full preparation.

It had been a long journey. With all respect to the Commission, although it was at times enormously frustrating, it was clear that they were not being obstructive through prejudice. Their idea of religion was firmly placed within the bounds of the Abrahamic faiths. Indeed, close questioning of their understanding of Buddhism and Hinduism was often met with some evasion, and at times an honest acknowledgement that their information was very sketchy. Countless letters, telephone conversations and meetings were filled with their questions and our answers. It took some five years of fastidious enquiry for the commissioners to grasp the idea of nature as deity. However, we don't believe the decision was made just to move us out of the in-tray; they knew that to register us would be an historic decision and have a considerable impact on many other minority faiths. I really think they had begun to understand.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Melanie Philips, as a journalist determined to retain a view of the world through the blinkers of old-fashioned right wing indignation, writes a piece that makes it very clear she has not the first idea of about our faith.

Druidry teaches us to live through honourable relationship. It is a phrase that can appear meaningless to the non-Druid, and indeed it takes a lifetime of Druidic practice to grasp the fullness of the words; it is as simple and yet huge a concept as a 'love thy neighbour' to the Christian. At the risk of being simplistic then, essentially it means this: every part of nature has its own inherent purpose, its place within the fabric or ecology of an environment, formed and held by its relationships, humming with the forces of nature, and in recognising that, we can make decisions that allow for harmonious and sustainable interaction. We are all part of nature and nature's ongoing creativity; living honourably guides us to create with grace and inspiration. Forgive my poetry. Without the poetic, I might put it like this: everything we do has an impact, so be awake and care-full.

It is not a philosophy based upon conflict. We learn not to assume oppositions and polarities that provoke an antagonistic reaction. Indeed, where someone hurls abuse and invective in our direction, we are taught not to fight back. We don't turn the other cheek, we defend our position, but by reviewing the context, exploring what and why the moment has come to pass, why there is anger or fear, we respond accordingly.

Melanie Philips' attack on Druidry, so thick as it was with her offensive attitude and lack of research or understanding, has provoked many within the Druid and Pagan faith communities to feel hurt and angry. There has been much discussion as to what would be the best course of action. Together with letters sent to The Daily Mail in response, we hope this reply will explain a little more of what Druidry is.

The Daily Mail is not a newspaper read by many Druids: an obvious statement, no doubt. Many reading it have been horrified that such words could be published, but freedom of speech is an important part of our culture. Indeed, many

feel that Ms Philips has hoisted herself on her own petard of ignorance, and no further comment is needed. In many ways, that is probably true.

So do her individual points need to be addressed? I can find nothing in the article in terms of philosophical or theological statements that doesn't make me shrug and smile, frowning confused and bewildered. To begin with, I wonder if 'bedrock' was perhaps an unfortunate term to describe the creed of this nation as Christian, given that Druidry was the religion of this land long before the birth of Christ or the arrival of his followers in Britain.

Furthermore, given that Druidry is often erroneously accused of supernatural practices, I like the fact that Ms Philips declares the need for a supernatural focus in order for a set of beliefs to be a religion, a focus that Druidry, she says, fails to hold. Her dismissal of the explanation offered to the BBC Radio 4 Sunday Programme by my co-trustee Phil Ryder, that Druids might 'venerate many gods, inanimate objects or nature' (her words, not his) also made me laugh: she not only ignores the rich vein of pantheism in Western philosophy and spiritual practice, but reveals her ignorance about and prejudice against both animism and polytheism, traditions practised by countless millions around the world.

That we may venerate so many things, she decries with a tone of tired cynicism, is altogether 'very inclusive', as if to be inclusive is in itself laughable. She continues by dismissing our ethics of sustainable relationship in the same tone, and suggests the notion of 'equality' is ridiculous beyond words. That petard is happily flying in the wind.

Instead she calls for a return to reason. It is a battle cry that always somewhat confuses me. Where a Christian accuses Druidry as being irrational, I can again only direct him to the wealth of philosophical debate over millennia that, with flawless logic and rationality, questions the belief in a supernatural god. I must assume Ms Philips is not a Christian, but simply a proponent of non-religious 'Christian' conservatism; her attitude towards Druidry does not reveal Christian values. So is this fundamentalist atheism raising its ugly head? In which case, what is it about Druidry that is irrational? There is no blind faith or belief in something beyond nature. Nothing in terms of scientific discovery could undermine the Druid's view of the sanctity of nature. The 'spirits of place' which Ms Philips rightly points out we acknowledge are not 'ghosts in the machine' of nature, but the essence of nature, its constituent particles, energies, forces and patterns. Poetically we may use the terms spirits, soul, song, but we are talking about the stuff of existence, simply using our own religious language instead of that used by philosophers and scientists who are themselves exploring the essence of matter, consciousness and life. Where is the superstition?

Furthermore, on the simplest level, it is surely entirely rational to seek sustainability in this world. The tenets of Druidry teach us to live with respect for the environment and its human and non-human ecosystems. For Druids, this path is a religious one, instead of a secular one, yet neither is this evidence of a lack of reason. Our ethics are based upon devotion, study and gratitude, not imaginary spirits.

Ms Philips' ignorance or determined indignation continues beyond the definition of Druidry, but also shows how little she knows about charity law or the Commission. If an organisation is truly working for the public benefit, caring for members of society and the world within which we live, then the Charities Commission should indeed consider their application. Does it matter what beliefs

motivate their work? Surely, an organisation whose beliefs are in any way detrimental to society would not be registered by the commissioners. To be a charity, the parameters are clear: the public must benefit from your work. To dismiss an organisation whose work benefits the public simply because you don't like or understand their beliefs is religious prejudice: the Charities Commission understood this and sought to understand Druidry in order to ensure that they were not themselves expressing such prejudice. Ms Philips fails in this regard.

And forgive me if I just mention, again: very few Druids go to Stonehenge at the summer solstice or at any other time.

So where does this leave us? Actually, I am finding it hard to understand just what the target was of Melanie Philips' article. Going through the words a good number of times, the focus appears to meander. What I am left with is a sense of what perhaps she would like to present as her own values. It seems to me that her world must be very busy, noisy, colourful - yet empty. Descartes and those who took onboard his mechanistic worldview were happy to dissect living animals in order to understand what made them tick. This notion of a clockwork world, where only human beings have souls, sentience or consciousness, is still reeking havoc, bringing our world deeper into environmental and social crisis. It feels plastic and soulless to me. I sense Ms Philips is still treading its path.

If someone whose beliefs are wholly atheistic lives a life that is rich with respect, for the human and nonhuman world within which they live, then I embrace them. I am interested to hear the vision and philosophy that underlies their ethics. I don't need to evangelise Druidry. However, the tone of Ms Philips' article does not express any such ethical base, and for that reason I am saddened to read her words, and saddened too by the hurt those words have caused within the Druid and Pagan faith communities of Britain and beyond.

I would end with a link to Keith Kahn-Harris' article in The Guardian, which addresses Ms Philips' perspective from another angle (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jun/18/melanie-phillips-rightwing>), and to wonder if indeed we should have badges, like Stephen Fry, which celebrate that we are now 'hated by the Daily Mail'.

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