



Atheopaganism: An Overview

1) The Sacred

We can't talk about religion without addressing the issue of what is to be considered sacred: what that means, and how it informs the values by which the practitioner is expected to live.

While many traditional religions seek to define the sacred as an inherent quality possessed by certain objects, beings, or activities--and, therefore, not by others--at root "sacredness" is an ascribed quality: an opinion. It is applied to whatever is highly valued by the tradition or practice in question, and to those objects, events and practices which evoke internal narratives which communicate the religion's beliefs and values.

So: what, exactly, is sacred to an Atheopagan?

Here are the Four Pillars:

The World. Meaning generally the Universe, but most specifically the biosphere: *Life*. Evolved from the mathematical unfolding of the exquisite Universe, the interconnected fabric of Life on Planet Earth is the single most sacred of all phenomena. It is these systems which gave rise to all humanity—and thus, to ourselves—and which support our ability to survive. All we eat, all we breathe is this, and it is thus holy.

Beauty. Beauty is that which inspires joy in living and which communicates the inner truth of the creative person. Beauty fills our hearts and provokes our minds, strikes us motionless with the recognition of our good fortune in being alive. Bright and dark, soaring with joy or filled with rage, we know beauty because it sets our Limbic brains to singing. It is not optional, trivial or superfluous. It is to be cultivated, celebrated, revered as the means by which the finite and precious moments of our lives are best measured.

Truth. we believe that what is true is of deep and inherent value. It is the only beacon we have to light our way into the unknown future. And the more significant the topic, the more sacred is the truth about it. It is a deep wrong to lie about matters of deep significance: to deny human-driven climate change, for example, or the genocides of the 20th century from Armenia to Germany to Rwanda. It is a deep wrong to deny what is true when it effects what is sacred. This isn't about

“little white lies”. It's about the tremendous and humbling power of Truth to right wrongs, to advance liberty, to advance closeness between us.

Love. Living as we do, each of us, trapped inside our skins with the endless ongoing dialogue between our various parts, our various minds, humans are subject to a degree of loneliness suffered by no other creature. Evolved as social creatures, we are nonetheless subject to such fear, such doubt, such storms of self hatred and delusions of inadequacy that many collapse under the weight of it, fall to self-destruction and madness.

But love corrects this. Love lights up the dashboards of our Limbic brains and provides us the courage to reach across the great gulf to the Other. It drives our kindest and best impulses, enables us to forgive what we suffer, spurs us to face down the darkness and carry on, to insist that betterment is possible, that the ugly moment needs not be the end of the story. Love brings hope where it has flagged, sometimes for years. It is the redemptive power each of us bears within us to deliver another from suffering and into light.

2) Principles: Guidelines for living

Principles define ethical and moral guidance rooted in understanding of what is sacred.

Principles tend to be practical and specific, specifying how the adherent of a religious practice should behave in day to day life. Here are the principles of Atheopaganism. They're not in any particular order, but there happen to be 13 of them, a culturally significant number in the Pagan community—it's the number of lunar cycles per solar year.

1. SKEPTICISM AND CRITICAL THINKING: We recognize that the metaphorical is not the literal. We acknowledge value in poetic expression of feelings about the experience of living, while not going so far as to confuse a poetic description with a factual definition: *Spring resurrects*, we can say, while understanding clearly that there is no such thing, literally, as resurrection from death.

2. REVERENCE FOR THE SACRED EARTH: We honor the Earth which produced and sustains humanity. Recognizing the unique role into which human capacity and history has delivered us, we accept as our most important value our responsibility to minimize our impacts on the biological fabric of Planet Earth and to heal and steward its natural systems.

3. GRATITUDE: We are grateful for the gifts we enjoy. we celebrate and express regularly and often our gratitude for the beauty and bounty of our life. we am thankful for our good fortune in being alive, and honor the many processes which enable me to continue to live, both natural and human. we celebrate and wonder at the beauty of the Universe, of the natural world and of humanity. we honor beauty and seek out its enjoyment. we speak our gratitude though we know there is no ear to hear it but our own and those of those around me.

4. HUMILITY: We are humble, acknowledging that we are small, temporary beings not inherently better or more important than any other persons. We recognize our commonality with others, the human condition we all share. To the degree we exercise leadership, we do so out of willing participation of those we lead, and with full recognition of the value of their contributions.

5. HUMOR: We laugh a lot—including at ourselves. In a world containing horror, absurdity, disappointment and terror, if we can't laugh we can't stay sane.

6. PRACTICE: we enact regular ritual observances, in which we willingly suspend our Neocortical thinking mind and use the technologies of religious ritual to invoke a state of presence in the moment and heightened experience of the metaphorical. we do this in order to celebrate the turning of the seasons, to live our lives as fully as possible

in honoring the sacred Four Pillars and to share meaningful experiences with our loved ones.

7. INCLUSIVENESS: We celebrate diversity and are respectful of differences in race, color, culture, gender, sexual orientation, body shape, and able-bodiedness.

8. LEGACY: We recognize and embrace our responsibility to the young and future generations.

9. RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR: We acknowledge that freedom is tempered by responsibility, respecting the rights and freedoms of others and meeting our social responsibilities by voting, paying taxes, serving jury duty, obeying laws which appropriately promote the safe and orderly conduct of civil society and supporting and participating in social movements which are consistent with the Four Pillars.

10. PLEASURE POSITIVITY: We celebrate pleasure as inherently good, so long as others are not harmed in its pursuit and the Four Pillars are respected.

11. CURIOSITY: We understand that knowledge is never complete. There is always more to be learned.

12. INTEGRITY: We conduct ourselves with integrity in word and deed.

13. KINDNESS AND COMPASSION: We practice kindness and compassion with others and ourselves, recognizing that they and we will not always meet the standards set by these principles.

These principles enable the living of a good, productive, and happy life, and the fostering of healthy relationships. Being a moral person is about how you act, not what you believe. And principles help us to know how to act.

3) Practices and Observances: Rituals and the Wheel of the Year

Sabbaths

The eight Sabbaths (or holidays) of the modern Pagan “wheel of the year” present an annual cycle of holidays tracing seasonal changes, agricultural cycles, and metaphors of the cycle of life. It's not a bad point to start from, rooted as it is in astronomical fact (the holy days are the solstices and equinoxes, and the midpoints between them) and the reality of seasonal change in parts of the world which have a European climate cycle.

YULE, the Winter Solstice, around the 20th of December (in the Northern Hemisphere, and in June in the Southern) is the shortest day of the year and the beginning of the Atheopagan "Wheel of the Year". It is when we celebrate community and family, give thanks for our gifts and community. Traditions include erecting and decorating a Yule tree, creating and burning a Yule log, feasting and singing Yule carols.

BRIGHTENING is the midpoint between the Winter Solstice and the Vernal (Spring) Equinox, and depending on where a given Atheopagan lives, it may be celebrated as the beginning of Spring. It is sometimes called by other names by Atheopagans. Brightening is the time when the beginning of the returning of the light is noticeable, and a good time for planning and making preparations for the year's efforts.

HIGH SPRING is the Vernal Equinox (around the 20th of March each year), when the days (at the equator) are equal in length. It is a time to celebrate childhood and children, and is often observed with traditions like coloring eggs, playing children's games and the like.

MAY DAY, roughly the midpoint between the Vernal Equinox and the Summer Solstice, is a time for celebrating young adulthood, the arrival of summer, and sexuality. It is the official beginning of Summer in the Atheopagan calendar. Traditions include dancing around a Maypole, drinking May wine, enjoying sweets and fruits, and other pleasures.

MIDSUMMER, or the Summer Solstice, around June 20, is the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere (it is celebrated in December in the Southern Hemisphere). The Midsummer holiday is a time reflecting the robust comforts of mature adulthood, and as it is between the times of planting and of harvesting in the agricultural cycle, it is a time for relaxing, creating works of beauty, and enjoying the company of friends.

SUMMER'S END, or **DIMMING**, is the midpoint between Midsummer and the Harvest, and falls in the first week in August in the Northern Hemisphere. At this time of year we begin to notice the fading light and shortening days. It is a time to celebrate early middle age, work, effort, craft and technology, and is the first festival of harvest: the grain harvest. Bread and beer are traditional at Summer's End.

HARVEST, the Autumnal Equinox, falls around the 20th of September in the Northern Hemisphere each year. Like High Spring, it is a point in the year when the days are of equal length with the nights at the equator. Vegetables and produce are abundant at this

time and it is a time for feasting, gratitude, celebration of elders and appreciation for what has been harvested over the past year.

HALLOWS, the midpoint between Harvest and Yule (roughly during the first week in November) is the Sabbath of loss and remembrance. Here we acknowledge death, mourn and say our thanks to our departed loved ones, and gird ourselves for the arrival of the dark, fallow time of Winter.

Rituals

Every religion practices rituals: formalized procedures the intent of which is to provoke and maintain a mental state of liminal presence (which we have termed the “Limbic state”). Activities in religious rituals take place in a manner participants come to know and anticipate, fostering a sense of familiarity with what is happening and what will come next. This contributes to the sense of safety necessary before this ritual state may fully be entered.

Atheopagans practice rituals to mark the passage of the seasons, to mark passage of life’s milestones such as birth, attainment of adulthood, marriage and death, to focus on challenges and goals in their lives, and to feel connected with one another, with the Sacred Earth and with the Great Cosmos.

The Focus

Rituals commonly have at their center a collection of symbolic objects which carry meaning for the participants. Some religions call these “altars”, but to avoid the implication of “sacrifice”, we choose to call this assemblage a “Focus”.

The Focus contributes to the mindful presence of participants, and their contemplation of the symbolic meanings associated with the purpose of the ritual.

A Focus might, for example, include bright spring flowers, colored eggs and/or seeds for a High Spring ritual. For Hallows, there might be pictures of ancestors or those who have died in the previous year, and a jack o’lantern or two. A Focus can be as elaborate or as simple as the participants wish, or they may prefer to have none at all.

Conclusion: What It Looks Like

An Atheopagan Prayer

Praise to the wide spinning world
Unfolding each of all the destined tales compressed
In the moment of your catastrophic birth
Wide to the fluid expanse, blowing outward
Kindling in stars and galaxies, in bright pools
Of Christmas-colored gas; cohering in marbles hot
And cold, ringed, round, gray and red and gold and dun
And blue, pure blue, the eye of a child, spinning in a veil of air,
Warm island, home to us, kind beyond measure: the stones
And trees, the round river flowing sky to deepest chasm,
Salt and sweet.

Praise to Time, enormous and precious,
And we with so little, seeing our world go as it will
Ruing, cheering, the treasured fading, precious arriving,
Fear and wonder,
Fear and wonder always.
Praise O black expanse of mostly nothing
Though you do not hear, you have no ear nor mind to hear

Praise O inevitable, O mysterious, praise
Praise and thanks be a wave
Expanding from this tiny temporary mouth
This tiny dot of world a bubble
A bubble going out forever
Meeting everything as it goes:
All the great and infinitesimal
Gracious and terrible
All the works of blessed Being.

May it be so.

May it be so.

May our hearts sing to say it is so.