

Paganism And Its Influence In Contemporary Society

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Abstract:

Lyotard's notion of 'paganism' paved the way for his meta-narrativeless philosophy in the Postmodern movement. The concept of Paganism is not merely a sense of religion that talks about myths only rather it has a significant reflection on the society and philosophy of life. Lyotard observes and contemplates on the matter; thereafter, he wrote the essay "Lessons in Paganism"(1977). Originally, the essay, published in French - that instructions paiennes, explored themes of knowledge, power, and the marginalization of minority narratives in life, Philosophy and Society. Though paganism is conventionally a belief about multiple gods, Lyotard specifically deployed this connotation of multiplicity and plurality, his basic commitment to an ontology of singular events. This manuscript will also try to recount how Lyotard developed the notion of paganism in terms of incredulity toward a fixed or universal law of judgment claiming to legitimate all events. Initially, "Paganism" is associated with the diverse collection of nature-based, polytheistic religions, drawing inspiration from pre-Christian and pre-Abrahamic traditions, but Lyotard took the sense of Plurality from Pagan Religion that is significantly working in the Postmodern era. The manuscript will discuss the influence of the pagan religion on contemporary society.

Keywords Paganism, Meta-narrative, polytheistic religion, Christianity, Pre-Abrahamic, Postmodern Movement, Paiennes, Narratives

INTRODUCTION-

Paganism is a broad and significant term that encompasses a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs and practices, typically polytheistic, nature-based, and rooted in ancient traditions that are often people use in the context of Western countries. The term has evolved and can have different meanings depending on context, though this belief has a salient footprint in religion and beliefs in God, it is often used to describe pre-Christian belief systems as well as modern revival movements. The phrase viz. 'May 1986 movement' is itself a criticism of ideology because the very term 'movement' rules out a collection of beliefs that are representable in words. Rather in this movement, we can see a corresponding picture in society. This movement brings transformation of desire, which disrupts the traditional politics of the society. it forms 'politics' as an event consisting of numerous desires, having their energy and intensity to build a new society with various new political agendas. Hence, the May 1968 movement is a political intervention and a political desire. These very political desires disrupt the conventional political systems that feed on meta-narratives. "Paganism" played a huge role in contemporary society in changing the political ideologies and belief systems. In "Lessons in Paganism"(1977), Lyotard discussed the pagan's religious philosophy and its impact explicitly on society.

Paganism and Contemporary Society

In modern times, Paganism is the notion that is often regarded by researchers as a form of religious pluralism that offers an alternative to the dominant monotheistic religions. In today's scenario as well, some Pagans consider themselves as reviving ancient wisdom or practices that were suppressed during the rise of Christianity or other monotheistic religions in the medieval era. Others may be drawn to Paganism because of its emphasis on environmentalism, ecological sustainability, and a holistic view of the world - which promotes plurality over singularity.

"paganism" was originally used as a derogatory term by early Christians, who associated it with "heathens" or "country dwellers" who did not adopt Christianity even after arriving in the era of Chruch's domination. Today, some people still use the term in this way, but many Pagans embrace it as a way to describe their spiritual practices and beliefs.

Paganism is the most crucial stage in the evolution of Lyotard's philosophy especially in navigating toward his engagement with the postmodern condition¹. As we have noted, his earlier works were based on events

¹ Here I have followed *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, Keith Crome and James Williams, Edinburgh University Press, George Square, Edinburgh, 2006; *The Lyotard's Dictionary*, Stuart Sim, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006; *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction*, Own Davies, Oxford University

as desire and the later works like- The Differend, Just Gaming, etc. are focused on the notion of the sublime. Between these two lives, another working career figures as a copula or edge. Before The Differend and after Libidinal Economy it was at this phase where he dealt with the 'pagan'. He released two more works named Instructions païenne² (Lesson in Paganism) and Rudiments païens³ (Pagan Rudiments). Not only in his work Lessons in Paganism, but Lyotard had also applied this notion of paganism in his later works such as Just Gaming. Besides (Lesson in Paganism) and Rudiments païens he wrote many articles and essays published from 1974 to 1976.

In these two books, Lyotard presents postmodernism in the light of paganism. As the term 'paganism' refers to a way to ensure justice to incommensurable discourses, it supports plurality and multiplicity. Though it was used in pagan religious belief in various different gods, Lyotard was influenced by its belief in multiplicity and plurality which is his basic commitment to an ontology of singular event. The concept of paganism was used in these two works to describe the notion of event as an incredulity towards a fixed universal law of judgment that is supposed to legitimate all events. Lyotard shows the events as various discourses which must be legitimated by their own terms, without attempting to reduce them to a universal law. Thus, his works on paganism work as a bridge between the works of his earlier and later life. Two points emerge from the above discussions : 1) Lyotard's works are based on 'events' from the beginning, 2) As his philosophical perceptions changed with the passage of the time the criterion of event underwent a transformation, though its characteristics remained the same.

When Lyotard participated in the movement of Left-Wing University, he followed that all political movements are actually in the form of a collection of various desires. Through those fluxes of desire, every political movement tends to create something new for the society, though the materialization of the desire depends on its intensity. In his earlier work, he considered events as a collection of desires while in his later work, he prioritized the notion of 'phrase' based on sublime feeling. Lyotard's work on paganism can be considered as the bridge between his earlier and later phases, but not as a later work itself. It is the works like The Differend, Just Gaming, etc. that reflect his 'later' phase in a more extreme sense of the term. At the same time postmodern thought is inspired by 'paganism', and hence paganism can be considered as a past era of postmodernism or as the influencer. 'Pagan' is a term mainly invented by Church and mostly used by Christians. Despite its heavy religious background Lyotard did not take the sense of religion in his philosophy, he mainly took its meaning and sought to eke out a philosophy from the main motto with which the term was sought to be spread through the religious sectors. The philosophical import that he extracted from the term was that of plurality in relation to social life.

'Pagan' is not a term introduced by Lyotard but its meaning remained the same even in the 20th century. The 'pagan' carried the same meaning even during the domination of Christianity on the society. Christianity used the term 'pagan' in a derogatory sense to label a section of people who were rejected as non-Christians. Here it must be said that 'pagan' also has two usages – an earlier origin and the other being a later usage. The earlier origin is related to religions especially that of Christianity, while the later usage was brooding from the religion to the political use. By the first sense Christians mostly referred to the non-Christian and non-religious activities associated with the rustic folk. Blamed as atheists, i.e., not believing in the Christian God, they were even thrown out from the mainstream society. It can be said that this early definition of 'pagan' had both the sense of (i) non-Christianity as well as (ii) that of being rural idolaters (a sense against or not allowed in the sense of Christianity). In the ancient time the 'pagans' were insisted for forceful conversion or technical baptism. Thus the term 'pagan' can be seen to have a long history which is sometimes related to religion and sometimes to a conversion of pagans in Christianity.

In the later usage, people started using the term 'pagan' in its political significance. Even it might not be wrong to say that Lyotard had also taken that term and used it in the political domain. During the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, a traumatic European religious conflict has arisen. Due to this conflict, some religious views underwent a significant transformation, and the sense of 'pagan' was also shifted from non-Christianity to false religion. Some protestant theologians claimed that there is nothing

Press, Oxford, 2011; 'An Exploration of Jean Francois Lyotard's Theories of Multiplicity of Judgments, Justices and Gods', Msryam Soltan Beyad, Katerina Delogiorgi, Taraneh Kaboli *International Academic Journal of Social Sciences*, vol-4, 2014

² Lyotard Jean-Francois, *Instructions païennes*, Galilée, Paris, 1977

³ Lyoyatd Jean-Francois, *Rudiments païens: genre dissertatif*, Galilée, Paris, 1977

that is more false than Catholicism, with its icons, the rituals of saint worship, or partaking of Christ's flesh and blood, etc. From this discussion of pagan history, the two most salient queries crop up – first, why Lyotard at all took this concept, and secondly why he soon endowed this concept with a more expansive meaning and reinforced his philosophy by introducing 'postmodern' instead of 'paganism'. To answer this first question it can be said that 'paganism' was a step that was taken by Lyotard in his journey towards incredulity to metanarratives. In this step, Lyotard has shown his interest to reject the Christian belief in one God. Though 'pagans' were not atheists they believed in plurality of Gods, and by following this shift from the critique of religions to politics Lyotard also finds out a linkage between religion and politics. Establishing this connection between religion and politics was an intention of his in his two books on 'paganism'. In this sense the disbelief in oneness, and the affirmation of singularity had its inception in 'paganism', enabling one to take paganism as a starting point of postmodern movement. Thus, it is in this sense that paganism became a bridge between the desire-based event (Discourse, Figure and Libidinal Economy) and the sublime feeling-based phrase (The Differend, Just Gaming).

Now the second question is: why does Lyotard abandon this concept of 'paganism' soon? His engagement with this concept, his parallel observation of the conditions after the 2nd World War in 1945, he realized that all sectors of society have undergone a rapid transformation all over the world (which were elaborated in his PC.) After observing this changing situation, Lyotard realized that the incredulity towards metaphysics deployed in all domains were not limited to Religions or God only. This for the purpose of establishing the philosophy of 'incredulity towards metanarrative', the concept of 'paganism' has become insignificant. Hence, Lyotard preserved paganism but replaced it with a broader sense of the 'postmodern'. Let us concentrate on the intermediary phase of Lyotard's philosophy where paganism did play a role. It is already said that 'paganism' has its own religious background – viz. 'Pagan' tradition believed in pluralism and the manyness of God. Lyotard adopted this idea and applied it in his philosophy by giving his own interpretation. Lyotard finds the concept of 'pagus' useful because it helps him to identify a region that has not been assimilated by consensual politics. For Lyotard, the pagan is that which releases the possibility of pluralism and multiple differences when the homogeneous polity is thought under the sign of one totalizing regime. The pagan is that which rejects the homogeneity and replaces that homogeneity with heterogeneity of a polity.

Each individual thinking is a narrative that makes a philosophy as a unit and the attempt to link all these individual and incommensurable thinking within a single norm will be a sheer naivety. Basically through the thought of 'pagan' Lyotard refers to a way of thinking that takes into account and strives to do justice to these incommensurable differences. As a demand for justice paganism is a central thought in Lyotard's philosophy; it is not a 'period' or 'movement' but a strategic aspect of 'discourse pragmatics'. The innovative way in which Lyotard developed the notion shows that it is not determined by prior criteria.

Why the 'pagan' is not classical? In classical times an author can write while putting himself at the same time in the position of the reader. The author believed in homogeneity of culture or an internalized set of rules, a possible consensus that enables the author to anticipate the reactions of readers. But in the postmodern situation, there is no such specific rule in writing. Today's writings are experimental, innovative and are associated with the heterogeneous cultures, choices, thinking and preferences. In the Lesson of Paganism Lyotard thoroughly explained the process of writing and how the writings change their narration from author to author, edition to edition, even from narrator to narrator. He observes: "The names of the authors of the books are same as those of the first readers, or as those of the authors of the articles. Each author is the next author's reader, and each reader is an author who is read by the other readers." ⁴

Here Lyotard tries to show how each reader is the author to the next author. In this way, all the secondary editions or commentaries act as a frontline narration and '[e]ach frontline narrator is a second line narratee and each frontline narratee (each first reader) is a second line narrator.'⁵ As we know that a primary scripture is written by several authors and their way of narrating are different from each other. As we can say like 'Vedas' all sutras are based on 'Vedas' and all Acarya's like Samkara, Ramanuja, Madhva have written 'bhashya' on that Brahma-sutra and after that on the 'tikas' were written based on those bhashyas. Though the primary Scripture is one, their explanations and interpretations vary with respect to different persons and different space and time. Where Vadarayana happens to be the front line narrator

⁴ *The Lyotard Reader*, Lessons in Paganism, p. 146.

⁵ Ibid

he also generates a set of his first readers (the first line narratee) who write commentaries on his sutras. Now Vadarayana himself becomes a second line narratee with respect to the commentaries written on his sutras. I.e., Vadarayana becomes the target reader of his first reader (the first line narratee) who write the Bhashyas or commentaries on Vadarayan sutra.

In the Lessons of Paganism, Lyotard used the concept of 'pagan' to mean Godless with the intention to teach a lesson that it is possible to be just by following the notion of multiple gods in paganism. In Lessons in Paganism, Lyotard said that the essence of his 'pagan' study is 'justice in a godless society'⁶ Lyotard distinguishes society into two parts – the liberals and the left – where for Lyotard, both parts have problems to make a godless just society. The liberals may well be godless but they are not interested in justice and on the other hand, the left according to Lyotard wants justice, but their piety may not support godlessness. Due to these problems, society has always faced problems in creating a godless just society, as it was always dominated by the Christian belief.

To revert to the question - if 'paganism' believed in a plurality of God, then why Lyotard used 'Godless' in the place of 'plurality of God'? For Lyotard, 'Godless' means disbelief in one God. Lyotard said that paganism is not opposed to religion nor is tantamount to atheism. For Lyotard, Paganism is a 'religion in which for the least hiccup, the least scandal, a copulation without issue, a birthing, a pee, a military decision, there was a God, a Goddess, several gods and goddesses attending the act...' Lyotard argues that the implication of this multitude of gods is not to divest the subject of these acts of their responsibilities, it is rather to ensure that all these everyday happenings are appreciated as intensities, and do not get deflated into utilities. They retain their status of being self-sufficient singularities, without being subsumed under an absent Law or meaning.⁷

It emerges that Lyotard preferred 'pagan' over the idea of a single law-like theoretical schema which could be applied to any situation in which judgment is required. For him a justice of multiplicities requires a multiplicity of justice instead of any pre-existing criteria, in matters of truth, beauty, politics, and ethics.

Now the question is - how can we judge things without any criteria? To answer this question Lyotard has invoked both Kant and Nietzsche's insights. As Kant says that we judge through our constitutive imagination, and this ability to judge and to invert criteria is mysterious – thus the faculty of judgment cannot be known fully, and very little can be said about it. By following Nietzsche, Lyotard says that judgment is an expression of the will to power. And the pagan is that judgment without any universal criteria. By affirming paganism Lyotard denied the possibility of a discourse that forces a fixed adequate criterion on us for judgment in each and every case.

So, paganism gives us a plurality of criteria, a plurality of judgments, a plurality of justices, in this way it is opposed to belief in just one rule or set of rules (God). It is justice made by the judgment that has no foundational philosophy for their legitimation. It does not subscribe to a single code (of political Right or Left) but rather finds itself negotiating with political complexity. With the advent of paganism, there can no longer be a demand for a single homogenized identity, rather heterogeneous identities would affect all the aspects of pagan life. The pagans are opened up or expressed not through the universal speech act, rather through the moment they are spoken, their transformative potentialities and the possibility of thinking. In this way we can take 'paganism' as a step towards the postmodern movement adopted by Lyotard. And after applying the concept of paganism in his social-political philosophy he thought to apply it in a broader sense to build ethics without the domination of metanarrative. Lyotard was against all doctrines about universal principle for judgment. He rejects the concept of universalism, absolutism, dictatorship, conventionalism, cliché, fixed rules and standards. As a postmodernist he claims that different judgments are related to different ideas, different mind-sets, and different decisions. In the domain of aesthetic judgment as well there is not merely only one criterion to define something as beautiful. Something that seems to be ugly to someone can be considered as beautiful by someone else, showing that the supposedly fixed criteria for judging should be changed to multiple criteria, or even to no criteria at all. Lyotard does not reject the value of making judgments and decisions rather he rejects universal judgments - in order to respect each individual's right to judge and decide according to their beliefs and opinions. As for Lyotard different individuals and societies have different language games and forms of life, they should not have the same kind of criteria, it would be better if each individual in different positions and circumstances decides and judges for him/herself. Deciding a judgment as per the

⁶ Benjamin, A, (Ed) *The Lyotard Reader*, 'Lessons in Paganism', p. 123.

⁷ Lyotard, 'The Great Ephemereal Skin'. *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p. 53.

situation is an individual's right and liberty. If different language game are subjected to one universal rule, it would inevitably incur wrongs – the prevention of which was the primary objective of Lyotard. Here, Lyotard was influenced by pagan's thought of multiple judgment, whereby he rejected the clichés and classical format of judgments. For him multiple judgments and opinions on a fact would provide a sort of freedom to choose, choosing what people like to choose for themselves instead of what authority obliges people to choose.

A society which plays different language-games has to seek multiple judgments - that clearly reject the concept of determinate. All judgments are indeterminate - whether it is political, aesthetic, or ethical. Lyotard supported the multiplicity in judgment at the onset of his postmodern journey but in his later works like *Just Gaming* and *The Differend* he did not only resist the transfer of indeterminate judgments to the political as if they were determinate but he resisted any determinate judgments in the political sphere. As for Lyotard everything is political, so he does not project the political as a realm of prescriptive performance, nor as a site for determinate judgment into which aesthetic and ethical judgments must not sneak, rather the political is itself a realm of indeterminate judgment into which determinate judgments of any kind must not be transferred. Thus, for Lyotard, ethics, politic, and aesthetics – all three are the realms of indeterminate judgments and none of these can claim to function as a meta-language, i.e., as a ground of determinate knowledge regulating the others.

Further Lyotard rejects totalitarianism or absolutism by his arguments in support of the pagan judgment. According to totalitarianism people should follow rules that are fixed and formulated beforehand, they are not allowed to participate in any process that would gradually lead to a consensus on the concepts of right and wrong. Even in liberal regimes, people have to follow the judgments of the authority which are built upon the general rules. The judgment would rather be based on a broad scale which will normally result in dismissing specific facts and situations of an incidence, opposing the multiple ideas, judgments, and justices. On the contrary, as per pagan justice (multiplicity of judgments), all individuals can judge what is just or unjust for themselves without concentrating on the authority's judgment. This would be a participation and evaluation in the true sense of the term, and not merely an exercise of analyzing or criticizing the fixed rules imposed by the authorities. For Lyotard a judgment made without criteria is a real just judgment. Through the multiplicity of judgment (pagan judgment) Lyotard tries to set freedom of individuals in choosing, and thinking, discarding the doctrines of conventionalism, universalism, and absolutism. For Lyotard, justice is personal, for even the connotations of 'right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad' are situational. Murder in normal situations is a criminal act, but when it comes to an army or a police-force who serve for the country, killing enemies/ terrorists are not considered as criminal offenses. For Lyotard, people should not follow the universal laws imposed by the authority rather we must be more critical in choosing things for ourselves. Only in this way people can have the freedom to judge their acts whether it is right or wrong and disrupt the taboos to which we are obliged to adhere the established rules.

Lyotard believed in 'reflective judgment' which supports multiple rules, it invents different rules each time, depending on the cases. He believes in multiple justice that is opposed to 'universal values' and at the same time, each of them is defined in relation to the rules. For avoiding 'wrong's he values the small narratives - each judgment is an individual narrative. It is only when each and every person belonging to a minority will have the freedom to seek justice for their actions that a society can become a just society.

CONCLUSION-

Now the following questions can be raised here: i) whether Lyotard's hypothesis of a multiplicity of justice is logical and practical in all aspects or not, because the presence of multiple rules can make the world chaotic and anarchical. (ii) If all individuals will make rules by their own choices then that could be formed by a selfish intention for their personal profit. What ensures that the multiple judgments do not breed unhealthy an unethical approach to society? Here we can only reiterate that Lyotard's intention was not to make a chaotic society - he mainly tries to reject authoritarianism, dictatorship, universalism, etc., to valorize free will, individual liberty, freedom of thought, to establish a rule for him/herself what is just and unjust for themselves. For Lyotard, justice could not be ensured by models, rather, it should welcome possibilities and opinions. The pagan concept of having many gods and multiple justice influenced Lyotard towards the belief in pluralism, which directly rejects universal justice and seeks individual freedom to think on any sort of issues as just or unjust. Justice is always open to question, its criterion is always debatable, and it should not be allowed to be a forceful and suffocating imposition on an individual. In fine, justice should not be allowed to lapse into an injustice.

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