

The Pomegranate

Readers' Forum

Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas. Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended.

JOHN YOHALEM WRITES:

To the Editors:

I always get a kick out of *The Pom's* letters column, but your issue #10 presented a bumper crop. I enjoyed them all very much—especially, perhaps, Jenny Gibbons (whose writing I always adore), and Prudence Priest's explication of the difference between 'unmanly' and 'unmanned'. Our society has become so skittish over anything that might be construed as a critique of one's sexual persuasion that decent English has been sacrificed to illiterate insecurity. Prudence, by insisting that words mean what they're supposed to mean, demonstrates the most antique sort of culture. Brava.

[Editor's note: Mr Yohalem's interest in the issues raised by Ms Priest's comments have moved him to offer The Pom an article on the subject, which we are happy to pass on to our readers. See page 45.]

I want to add my two cents, however, to the excellent comments of Sabina Magliocco concerning the myths of the Burning Times and why so many modern Witches feel a need to identify with the victims. (I use the word 'myth' here, of course, not to mean 'lies', but 'enhanced' truths: sacred narrative.)

Magliocco writes, pithily and well, on a subject from which treatises obviously could be quarried—the need so many groups feel in our society, perhaps in any society, for a self-justification based on past persecution, in order to “claim ... legitimate and authentic identity”. This means, of course, that the mere fact of being, say, a Witch, a Pagan, a Native American, an Afro-American, queer, a Jew (an example, perhaps the ur-example, that Magliocco curiously omitted from her list, perhaps because she is focusing on North American society, where Jews have had it comparatively easy) does not provide enough ‘identity’ to those who feel the need for victimhood as well. Many Native Americans, Afro-Americans, gays, lesbians, Jews and (I think and hope) Witches and Pagans do feel their identity strongly enough not to require twisting history to make themselves supreme victims. I have always been suspicious of those who seem to justify their individuality on ancient history and on separatist interpretations of it. They seem to doubt the reality of their professed beliefs unless they are being attacked by someone else for their differentness. Separate identity by itself seems to require a perceived orthodoxy to defy as much as the great mass identities tend to require a perceived ‘other’ to persecute and stand above.

It has always seemed to me that either my Pagan religion had a spiritual justification ipso facto or it did not. Twenty million martyrdoms would not justify it if it did not fulfil the criteria of faith. Consequently, the fact that my rather personal version of classical Paganism, derived from ancient texts, contemporary writings and delving into personal instinct, has tenuous links at best with the religion of Homer or Euripides or Augustus Caesar has not

made it hollow to me.

Similarly, the fact that the overwhelming majority of those put to death for Witchcraft during the Burning Times were Christians of one sort or another, and that those who did practice Witchcraft did nothing that resembled the modern Wicca in which I have been trained, has not invalidated Wicca for me. I have found it fulfilling on spiritual levels, and have observed it work for many others. If Wicca lacked spiritual content (and that, of course, is necessarily subjective), no number of martyrs, female, innocent, Pagan survivalists, whatever, would give it one.

John Yohalem
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DON FREW WRITES:

Dear *Pom* Readers,

In letters printed in the last *Pomegranate* (#10), Hanna Kassis of Budapest, Hungary, and Aaron Walker of UC Santa Cruz make some statements critical of my article "Harran: Last Refuge of Classical Paganism" (*Pomegranate* #9).

Some confusion may result from Dr Kassis' use of the term 'Sabaeen' where I used 'Sabian' in my article. This may seem a small point, but it focuses attention around the ambiguity of the term. In modern parlance, 'Sabian' (with an 'i') is often used of the people of Harran. 'Sabaeen' (with an 'ae') is often used of the Mandaeans of Southern Iraq, followers of John the Baptist. While 'Sabeen' (with an 'e') is often used of the people from Sheba (as in 'Queen of ...') in Southern Arabia.

Dr Kassis notes that "What exactly was the religion of the town [Harran] and its people remains open to question." This is not quite correct. The religion of the Har-

ranians was described in some detail by many contemporary Muslim scholars. All agreed that it included Hermetic and (what we would call) Neoplatonic elements, aspects of the indigenous cult of the Moon God, rites addressed to the seven Planets, etc. What "remains open to question" is whether or not this was indeed the "Sabianism" mentioned in the Qur'an. My article presented my views on this question.

Dr Kassis mentions "... the report—again by Ibn an-Nadim—that a rift over ideological and philosophical issues occurred between Th. Ibn Qurrah and his townsfolk to the point that he had to leave the town", and asks "How does one interpret this?"

I failed to discuss this rift in my article as I thought it an unnecessary detail and omitted it for the sake of brevity. Also, I have found no discussion of any substance concerning this rift, save that Thabit is sometimes described as "more liberal" than his co-religionists. Walter Scott says:

We are not told what the quarrel was about; but it may be conjectured that the learned men and students of philosophy differed so widely in their views from the uneducated vulgar, that it was found impossible for the two parties to act together. (Scott, Walter, ed. & trans., *Hermetica: Introduction, Texts and Translation*, Boulder CO: Hermes House, 1982, p.103)

Conjecture, indeed. Michel Tardieu doubts there was any 'rift' at all. Summarizing Tardieu's comments at the 6th International Congress on Gnosticism (U. of Oklahoma, 1984), Ilsetraut Hadot reports:

[Thabit's] departure for Baghdad was not the result of a 'schism', according to Tardieu. Rather, it would appear that Thabit b. Qurra was attracted by the Caliph's subsidies and had chosen Baghdad 'for social and political reasons, as the Abbasid capital

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