

PAGAN COMMUNITY STATEMENT ON SEXUAL ABUSE

BELTANE 2010

We are here...

A circle of spiritual people from many traditions, groves, hearths, and circles. We are young and old, from many walks of life, and many parts of the world. We are Pagans of the modern era, Druids, Heathens, Wiccans, Witches, Shamans, practitioners of magical lore, and many more paths besides these. We walk the paths of the sacred Earth, in the footsteps of the Goddesses and Gods of the Land, the Sea, the Sky, and the Tribe.

We have learned of recent incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse perpetrated by individuals claiming to be religious teachers, some of whom claimed to be members of our community. **In response to these incidents, we have crafted this statement.**

STATEMENT SUMMARY

1. We hereby categorically reject, disavow, oppose, and repudiate any and all coerced, nonconsensual, harmful or exploitative sexual acts, especially when claimed to be part of our ways and traditions. We identify all such acts as sexual abuse, and we refuse to tolerate them in our community.
2. Many of us believe the human body is profoundly sacred. Many of us believe that the presence of the Divine dwells within in the body. We therefore find that human sexuality, and acts of love and pleasure between consenting, informed, and mature people, have great religious significance. We affirm the goodness of human sexuality, and the goodness of celebrating sexual identity.
3. Because of these beliefs, we also find that coerced, nonconsensual, harmful or exploitative sexual acts are extraordinary affronts to the Divine presence which dwells within every human body. These acts grievously harm the victim, and inflict deep wounds upon the sense of bodily identity which all of us hold so dear.
4. A sexual predator who exploits the relationship of trust that exists between teacher and seeker harms the whole religious community,

and undermines the good work of the honourable teachers in our midst. Similarly, acts of sexual abuse between seekers in the same circle, whether one party is a teacher or not, also harm the whole community.

5. An accusation of sexual exploitation is a very serious matter. The accusation alone, even in the absence of evidence, can damage the reputation and the self esteem of good people. We therefore find that a false or vindictive accusation of sexual misconduct is but another form of sexual abuse.
6. Yet we also recognize that real sexual abuse victims experience deep feelings of guilt and shame, and that they often struggle to admit that they have been abused. Their condition should not be made worse by a predisposition to doubt the validity of their claims. Nor should they be automatically counter-accused of having a vindictive intention, or of lying. We hold that anyone alleging sexual abuse should always be treated with compassion as a primary response, and that claims of sexual abuse should be handled with intelligence and concern for all.
7. We voluntarily commit ourselves to this declaration, and we encourage others to commit themselves to it, whatever their path.

FULL STATEMENT

Our movement has many principles of moral thought, not just one singular monolithic principle. As there are many gods in the world, so there are many models of the good and worthwhile life for humankind. Some of us practice Heroic Virtue, others Classical virtue, others a Utilitarian principle such as the Wiccan Rede. There are also many among us who find that ethical principles are revealed through the intuition of a Divine presence that dwells within the human heart and mind. This presence unites us with the Earth, with each other, and with the cosmos.

Among our many traditions, groves, hearths, circles, and communities, there are broad areas of moral agreement. For the purpose of this statement, we (the authors and the undersigned) wish to emphasize the matter of sexual abuse. We agree to the broad and general principle that the human body is a sacred temple, a work of art, and a good home for the self and the soul. Many of us believe that the body is the dwelling-place of the Divine, and the seat of a deeply integrated web of relations which ultimately includes the whole of life on Earth. The human body is thus among the first of all things that deserve our care and respect. On this principle, the differences between our various circles tend to be only a matter of emphasis. Indeed, on this principle, we may share

some moral agreement with the dominant religious traditions of our dominant culture: the view that the body is made in the image of the Divine.

In our circles, the sacredness of the body, as a religious truth, leads to positive conclusions about human sexuality. Our view is that sexuality, sexual identity, sexual expression, and acts of love and pleasure, between consenting, informed, and mature people, have great religious significance. Indeed such acts can take on the significance of ritual. We hold that our sexual identities are worthy of celebration. And for many of us, an occasion of shared sexual pleasure and lovemaking is a most spiritually meaningful event: a communion with the Divine which dwells within ourselves and within each other.

Indeed, there are some traditions in which a sexual act is performed as part of some rituals, such as higher-level initiations. Various names designate these rituals: Heiros Gamos, the Great Marriage, or the Great Rite, to name a few. In most cases, the Great Marriage is performed "in token": for instance, a priest touches the tip of a wand or a blade to the bottom of a chalice held by a priestess. This is an ancient gesture, with precedents in the ancient cultures of the Greeks, the Romans, the Hindus, and other great civilizations of the distant past.

Naturally, given our perspective on the sacredness of the body, our view is that all coerced, nonconsensual, harmful or exploitative sexual acts, are seriously morally wrong. We find that sexual exploitation and violence are particularly worse than other forms of criminality, such as property offences, because sexual offences invade the body. Sexual abuse ignores the sacredness of the body, and ignores the privacy, the dignity, and the freedom of the victim to use and delight in his or her own body. It is an extraordinary affront to the Divine presence which dwells within every human body and which animates the body with goodness. It severely harms the victim, and degrades the dignity of both victim and offender. Sexual abuse also inflicts deep wounds upon the precious sense of bodily identity which all of us hold so dear. No exceptions or relativist interpretations can alter the basic moral wrongness of sexual exploitation and violence. We identify all such acts as sexual abuse, and we refuse to tolerate them in our community.

Thus in our contemporary circles, the rite of the Great Marriage, if it is not performed in token, is held privately and by invitation only. The participants come in full knowledge of what they have been invited to. If there are any initiatory "surprises", they are never intended to violate the sacredness of the seeker's body. Ideally, the invitees already know, love, and trust one another. They have already given their informed consent, and retain the right to withdraw from the event without prejudice at any time. When we mix sexuality with religion, there is no space for deception or coercion. Religious sexuality is always consensual and never obligatory. No one should enter a circle with eyes covered when sexuality, sexual identity, and the sanctity of his or her own body is

put to a test. This remains true even when the ritual participants are not strangers to each other. Initiatory surprises, tests, and ordeals are intended to help a seeker find the sacred within him or her self. If they threaten or invade that self, then the initiators are harming, and not helping, the seeker.

If someone finds a private group's practices uncomfortable, he or she is always free to find another group to join. It is wrong to hold someone back from spiritual progress or knowledge for refusing to participate in a sexual act. We are always right to doubt the sincerity, honour, and spirituality of someone who claims that a sexual act is a mandatory requirement for initiation, or for any kind of relationship with the gods, goddesses, or deities.

An accusation of sexual exploitation is a very serious matter. The accusation alone, even in the absence of evidence, can damage the reputation and the self esteem of good people. We therefore find that a false or vindictive accusation of sexual misconduct is another form of sexual abuse.

Yet we also recognize that real sexual abuse victims experience deep feelings of guilt and shame, and that they often struggle to admit that they have been abused. Their condition should not be made worse by a predisposition doubt the validity of their claims. Nor should they be automatically counter-accused of having a vindictive intention, or of lying. We hold that anyone alleging sexual abuse should always be treated with compassion as a primary response, and that claims of sexual abuse should be handled with intelligence and concern for all.

It is clear that one need not be a spiritual person to recognize the wrongness of sexual abuse. Yet we are especially outraged when the perpetrator is a leader or a teacher in a religious community. In our circles, religious teachers are held in high esteem. A seeker who approaches a teacher in search of spiritual guidance and comfort offers a special kind of trust to the teacher. Teachers and seekers often open their hearts and minds to each other, and thus they become very vulnerable. It is for this reason many of our traditions require teachers to possess not only great knowledge, but also great integrity and honour. It is also for this reason that sexual predators will pose as religious teacher: in that way, they may find more victims for their gratification. There are also some teachers who, exploiting the trust given them, become sexual predators as well.

Furthermore, a person who uses this relationship of trust to exploit people thus harms the whole social environment in which teaching and seeking take place. For the sexual predator's harm touches more than just the victim. It affects all the victim's friends, family members, fellow seekers in the same circle, colleagues at work, and anyone to whom the victim may turn for help. The harm of sexual abuse thus affects numerous other people who the predator may not know, nor ever meet. Moreover, sexual abuse also casts suspicion and doubt on the intentions of the honourable teachers in our

midst, undermining the good work that they do.

Finally a sexual predator can sometimes exploit the relations of trust that grow between fellow seekers in the same tradition, hearth, or circle, even when he or she does not pose as a teacher. This kind of exploitation also harms the whole community. In all cases, we maintain our condemnation of unwanted sexual acts.

Therefore...

We, the authors and signatories of this statement, commit ourselves to:

- Demonstrate by example a fully moral sexual spirituality;
- Vigorously entreat others to agree to the principles of this statement;
- Handle all accusations of sexual exploitation and misconduct with intelligence and compassion, for victims of real sexual harm, and for victims of false or vindictive accusations;
- Cooperate with the police when an incident of sexual abuse in our circles is under investigation;
- Help bring comfort, medical assistance, legal aid, and spiritual healing, to victims, as far as ability and opportunity may allow; and
- Help seekers find groups, circles, traditions, or individual teachers, whose practice involves as much or as little sexuality as the seeker feels comfortable exploring.

We voluntarily commit ourselves to this declaration, and we encourage others to commit themselves to it, whatever their path.

We remain, respectfully,

A community of Pagans.