

Michael York

# Pagan Ethics

Paganism as a World Religion

 Springer

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*Dedicated to the memory of Johannes  
"Joop" Slagter Friesian poet  
29 May 1931–25 July 2013*



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**Part I**  
**Introduction**

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# Chapter 1

## Overview

Black Rock City and the Monarch's Birthday celebrations in Amsterdam represent two ephemeral moments of humanity at her extravagant best – the one being a makeshift 'city' of 60,000 people gathering for the Burning Man Festival in an inhospitable Nevada desert; the other being a nation's honoring of itself through its monarch in the land at the mouth of the Rhine that artist Jim Clark has identified as the '*riool van Europa*'.<sup>1</sup> Both events, one a week-long and the other a day or two, express the extreme joyousness of collective association. Burning Man establishes itself as a 'gift economy' of radical self-expression in which the only items sold are coffee and ice<sup>2</sup>; The Netherlands is a birthplace of capitalism in a country in which individual freedoms are perhaps the most established of any other nation in the world and the Amsterdam birthday festivities reveal capital exchange and accumulation at its most gentle and understandable.<sup>3</sup>

Both Burning Man and the Queen's or King's Birthday are pagan in spirit. Both express the euphoria and gregariousness that can – even should – characterize the human adventure on planet earth. But both are marginal to mainstream life – one occurring in a wasteland in which not even insects are to be found; the other in a bog and terrain that has been wrestled from the sea. With global warming and the possibility if not likelihood of rising sea levels, the very future of Holland is increasingly in doubt. But however temporary, each celebration allows a glimpse of *the* happy life and the ethical freedom that is concurrent with it. Normal life, of course, occurs well short of such extremes, and yet an understanding of ethical behavior is no less important. Any examination of morality can hold up the Burning

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<sup>1</sup>'Sewer of Europe'.

<sup>2</sup>See [http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/principles.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html) (accessed 22 July 06) for the 'Ten Principles' of Burning Man, namely, radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation and immediacy.

<sup>3</sup>For the Dutch celebration, see <http://www.thehollandring.com/koninginnedag.shtml> as well as <http://www.answers.com/topic/koninginnedag> (accessed 22 July 06).



Man and Queen's Birthday as ideal models but must concentrate instead on how we live on an ordinary day-to-day basis. If paganism is expressed by the fringe and unusual, it is no less at home with the atavistic, the vernacular and the everyday mundane, and if we are to locate a pagan ethic that is applicable to all who consider themselves pagan, if not as well to all human beings of whatever faith or practice, we must begin with those pagan energies that infuse and are discoverable in the ordinary. In other words, to comprehend paganism is to comprehend ethics and, vice versa, to appreciate the ethical is to be familiar with the pagan foundation of life.

What, then, is this book to be about? For me, it has been attempt to understand *both* a pagan ethical understanding that I perceive to be implicit behind most pagan and Pagan expressions, and as well to fathom a global conversation concerning ethics in which I will insist paganism has played and continues to play a significant role. If need be, however, I will accept that I am endeavoring to develop what could be termed a pagan idolatrous ethics. The reaffirmation of idolatry as either a concrete practice or a spiritual endorsement is, I feel, a vital distinction that contrasts earthen and related spiritualities from competing religiosities, at least ideally, including especially the Abrahamic religions.

Perhaps in my understanding, the best way to understand the dynamic that elucidates paganism is to acknowledge the fundamental interchange between the terms 'pagan' and 'human' – especially with the latter in the sense of 'earthling'. To be human, whether we recognize it or not, is to be pagan and vice versa. The fuller implication of this terminological equivalence suggests that 'paganism' and 'humanism' are also synonymous. I contend this despite the more traditional understandings of humanism as either rationalism or secularism. As we shall proceed, I will attempt to make clear the importance of secularism both to paganism itself and as a liberating wedge between paganism and the Abrahamic and dharmic faiths in particular. Following in the line of Graham Harvey's 'new animism' (that concerns relationships between persons) in contrast to the 'old animism' (focused on alleged 'spirits' inherent in inanimate objects), the 'new humanism' equivalent of 'paganism' is one that recognizes the importance of the human *qua* human but within both natural and preternatural contexts.

In my *Pagan Theology* (2003), I attempted to elucidate three overlapping areas: a delineation of those religions that may be comprehended as pagan (e.g., Shinto, Candomblé, Wicca, etc.) in order to discern what elements or features they have in common, an exploration of the pagan behavior of the other world religions to explicate the overall atavistic pagan impulse that belongs to humanity in general, and to distinguish the theological divide between what we are permitted to identify as pagan belief and practice, on the one hand, and what is transcendental or gnostic religiosity, on the other. For various historical reasons, paganism as a religion has not been appreciated as such vis-à-vis the more established practices of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism, that is, those religions belonging to well-over 90 % of the world's population. Nevertheless, my contention in the previous book has been the pagan propensity which is characteristic and detectable in the human *qua* human. For paganism as a specific religious orientation, the salient features include a this-worldly emphasis, a corporeal understanding of the spiritual,

a stress on nature and the natural, an appreciation of deity as multiple and gender differentiated, humanistic valuing and an approach to the sacred as pleasurable and to pleasure as sacred. While paganism is notoriously difficult to pinpoint and define, my argument has been and remains that these specific considerations are what is shared between the various religiosities, spiritualities and venerational practices that we may identify broadly as pagan.

In the present work, my attention has turned to ethics. In particular, I want to locate what we might identify as the moral position of generic paganism that even the specific sectarian forms of paganism could be understood as sharing. Historically, ethical study and consideration has been born in paganism. In other words, morality is a pagan product. But even more than this, I contend that paganism *is* ethics, that is, that paganism is a particular understanding of the divine that merits a particular kind of relationship to it, for it, by it and from it, namely, an ethical relationship. Consequently, in understanding pagan ethics or ethics in general, it behooves us to discern the contributions made to ethical reflection by classical pagan philosophers and schools of thought. I wish to stress here, however, that I am *not* seeking to frame ethics in philosophy, though I recognize the importance of philosophical thought in the evolution of ethics as well as the mere fact that ethics constitute one of the major branches of philosophy. But to the degree that contemporary paganism seeks to reestablish itself in the public arena, the seminal roots of pagan ethical reflection are important, and I shall seek to present a brief digest of the earliest classical contributions – ones I will argue remain very much alive and present for paganism – and the world – today.

Although I could be accused by some for having left sociology for theological research and/or visioning, I will contend that my affinity is with the sociologist Peter Berger and such works of his like *The Sacred Canopy* and *A Rumor of Angels*. Theology itself is an important consideration for the sociologist and helps in understanding the dynamics within any particular religious practice. In my own search for the ‘ideal-type’ behind religious differentiation, my argument concerns not any lumping of indigenous religions, pre-Christian folk religions, shamanisms, etc. across time and space into some unitary belief system, but instead to discern an early spiritual perception and how it was different from the historical religious developments that followed and remains discernable to our own times. If this endeavor sounds more poetic than academic, then so be it, but to lump all religion into one pot without comprehending how faiths and practices differ from one to another hampers our desires for knowledge, sociological or otherwise. At the same time, contemporary paganism is nascent and represents an ongoing rediscovery of a way of seeing and assessing the world that contrasts with both Abrahamic and dharmic perspectives as well as with secular disenchantment. Consequently, even when attempting to locate the inherent theological perspective within pagan perception, pagan theology is not bound by the textual canons, rules of interpretation, methods and disciplinary boundaries such as exist for the academic discipline concerning traditional religions. In our day, paganism is formative, but with its roots in the organic, natural and environmental, I will argue that despite the enormous variation in pagan expression, there is more unity involved regardless of the myriad

pluralistic differences in cultural and social contexts, cross-practices, high and low traditions, social stratification in terms of age, gender, lineage, status and ethnicity, etc. Although it differs from its historical contenders (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism), there is a real pagan tradition. It is not a ‘made-up’ one but a re-discovered one and yet one that now in a different era and situation cannot be said to have existed in the same way as it or the many different paganisms existed previously.

But I have a second agenda in the present work which stems in part from my contention that pagan and human are essentially equivalent terms. If an understanding of pagan ethics is important, equally important is an understanding of a viable human ethic that might assist us in locating an equitable good life for most if not all people on our planet. Consequently, while I argue that paganism has a more universal appeal and relevance to persons who do not necessarily identify themselves as pagan, its ethics are important for us all in not only coming to terms with what we hold to be of value in life but in whatever negotiations we must all engage with to be fully human yet respectful of each and everyone’s right for a life of meaning and fulfillment. If religion serves as a means to distinguish the valuable and meaningful, ethics inform us on how to engage with whatever it is we hold to be of worth and significance.

My task in the present work is to investigate not only the pagan roots to ethics but, inasmuch as ethics are something that matter to all of us whether we identify as pagan or not, also to consider some of the key players in post-classical ethical debate. The area of ethics is huge. It is arguably the most important to us as human beings and is one that has occupied an endless amount of human attention let alone artistic endeavor. In exploring ethics and pagan ethics in particular, the present work is only a mere sampling of the many treasures that the legacy of human culture contains – a legacy that we all share as we navigate our individual and collective courses through life on this marvelous planet.

After the exploration of the pagan and philosophical facets of ethical study, I shall turn in Part III to a presentation of the virtue-values that appear to me to be universally normative to pagan and human ethical pursuit. To this end, I have devoted two chapters on liberty, comfort, health, worship, pleasure, productivity and generosity – a grouping of common denominator dispositions that I identify as a heptatheonic<sup>4</sup> collectivity comprising a fundamental quadrivium (Chap. 11) and a trivium subset (Chap. 12), that is, the four principle virtue-values and the three auxiliary components of worship itself. These seven I argue could be considered the distilled essences of all morality and consideration of the good life. They interrelate and serve as a guiding dynamic of ethical checks and balances.

But if moral norms are the ideal, it is the ethical dilemmas and quagmires that are the reality. Consequently, in Part IV, I will examine various contemporary issues to discern what a prevailing pagan position on these might be and how this position contrasts with a more traditional or established outlook. To this

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<sup>4</sup>An *heptatheon* is a pantheon of seven figures: *hepta* ‘seven’ + *theon* ‘gods’.

end, while the particular foci selected are not meant to be comprehensive, they are nonetheless illustrative of specific areas of contention that have arisen in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These include questions concerning same-sex unions, recreational drugs, hegemony, environment, terrorism and the death-issues of abortion, suicide, physician-assisted suicide, capital punishment, etc. Once again, these issues are examined both as humanitarian concerns in general and pagan concerns in particular.

Paganism for many is a religion; for others like myself it is approached as a generic spirituality and hence not capitalized. This is known contemporarily as the 'Big P- versus the small p-' distinction,<sup>5</sup> and I find myself in concurrence with Andras Corban-Arthen who likewise argues for 'paganism' over 'Paganism'.<sup>6</sup> Generic spirituality is itself not a religion and does not oppose any religion.<sup>7</sup> What is meant by the generically spiritual might be gleaned in part from Finkeldey's description of 'generic' medicine as "the medicine itself apart from the trappings of the original manufacturer's marketing department."<sup>8</sup> In other words, generic spirituality is the natural religious response without the obfuscation that comes with the overlay of dogma and doctrine. The generically spiritual is vernacular religiosity, and in as much as it comprises the raw natural spontaneity of human mystical perception, it is the pagan undercurrent to all religion as well as the many sectarian formulations of paganism itself. It is primarily for this reason that I stress the importance of using non-specific paganism over Paganism as a religion or any specific 'Pagan' religion.

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<sup>5</sup>See <https://finnchuillsmast.wordpress.com/2013/10/05/why-i-dont-capitalize-pagan/> (accessed 9 February 2015). In my writings, I have always preferred and employed the term 'paganism' over that of 'Paganism' and for several reasons. In the face of editorial 'dictatorship' such as I have encountered with *The Pomegranate*, my usage has been altered in the final publication from the original submitted manuscript. In the pluralism that is characteristic of contemporary Western p/Paganism, however, I am not alone and made this argument to Dennis Carpenter back in the days of submissions to the Pagan Spirit Alliance. I fully respect the efforts of Selena Fox and many others to have 'Paganism' accepted as a fully legitimate religion along side such others like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism, but the legal side of the question is not my present concern.

<sup>6</sup>Personal communication, 3–6 July 2014. Corban-Arthen points out that Europeans and Latin Americans (unlike Americans) tend not to capitalize 'pagan' as well as 'christianity', 'islam', the names for months and days of the weeks, etc. On 16 February 2015, he further clarifies for me the following: "As for the question of 'p' vs. 'P', I have several reasons for preferring the former to the latter. I don't capitalize *pagan* for the same reason I don't capitalize *animist*, or *polytheist*, or *indigenous*, etc. To me, all these words convey generic categories that are just not specific or homogenous enough to warrant capitalization. In the case of paganism, in particular, the pagan movement is notoriously incohesive: not only is there no single accepted definition of what paganism is, but large numbers of pagans, as a matter of principle, have strongly resisted any efforts to bring greater cohesion to the movement. On the face of that, to insist that *pagan* should be capitalized strikes me as naively optimistic, and perhaps even a little dishonest."

<sup>7</sup>Michael Foster: <http://recoverybydiscovery.com/week0918.htm> (accessed 14 February 2015).

<sup>8</sup><http://www.examiner.com/article/conscious-recovery-generic-spirituality-part-one>.

It is, of course, not my intention to annoy or upset anyone with my preference for ‘small p rather than big P’. I employ a capital letter for personal names (e.g., Abraham), place names (e.g., Israel, the West Bank), official designations (e.g., the United Nations, the Pagan Federation) and at the beginning of a sentence. Consequently, I tend to write ‘Abrahamic’ but not ‘dharmic’ or ‘secular’ in reference to three of what I perceive to be the world’s broad religio-spiritual orientations. ‘Paganism’, I argue is the fourth. I will admit that in the historic and even recent past, the use of the expression ‘paganism’ has been derogatory if not “offensive,” but it is exactly lower-case paganism that I choose to champion because for me it signals – and has always signaled – what distinguishes the old earth-spirituality and root-religious practice from *all* its competitors. For me, this is a reclaiming effort akin to the use of the words ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’. I do not expect everyone within the contemporary pagan/Pagan community to agree with me – far from it in fact, but I do wish for the indulgence and hopefully for the generosity of freedom of expression of which I understand that community predominantly to consist.

Another caveat concerns the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’. A reviewer has said, “The use of gendered pronouns is inconsistent and clumsy.” Again there is a nuance involved here, and my lack of consistency has been an attempt to express the fluidity of gender and the variety that has emerged with these pronouns in present times. I will, however, accept in general the reviewer’s preference for ‘he or she’ (or ‘he/she’ or even ‘s/he’), but at the heart of my grammatical soul, I am prevented from substituting the plural ‘their’ as a singular third person general pronoun much as I cannot refer to something as ‘very unique’.

Again I wish to stress that a basic guiding framework in understanding paganism and pagan ethics is informed by the realization that ‘pagan’ and ‘human’ are fundamentally interchangeable terms. There is a third term, however, while not fully an equivalent of the other two, that conveys the distinctive approach of paganism to the spiritual and ethical, namely, ‘natural’. While ‘pagan’, ‘human’ and ‘natural’ are not identical adjectives, pagans in both indigenous contexts and throughout much of the contemporary West will often use them as such. To be pagan is to be natural, to be pagan is to be human, to be human is to be natural, to be natural is to be human, to be human is to be pagan.

The pivotal issue that arises from this understanding is the contrast to the natural. For most people, this is the artificial, and Western history has often emerged as a contest between culture and nature as if the two are opposed and separate – a division that is still retained in much contemporary pagan thought. Throughout this present work, however, in order to achieve a clearer and more fundamental understanding of concepts and terminology I will turn to the inherent ‘logic of seminal etymology’, that is, toward an understanding of the original rationale behind the components that make up a word, in order to discern the word’s earliest significance. For instance, if we were to look to the root components of the term ‘artificial’, we find the words *art* (Latin *ars*) and Latin *facere* ‘to do, make’. The suggestion here is that the artificial is something that is made by man rather than something that occurs in nature. As an artifice, it is understood as a crafty expedient or artful device – having developed the auxiliary connotation of clever or ingenuous deception. In time, the emerging opposition becomes one between art and nature.

But if the human is natural, if humanity is part of nature – nature’s product or child rather than her master and engineer, what the human does and produces is also a condition of nature. For an emancipated pagan as for an emancipated human, art and the artistic are the sought for achievements. As we shall see later, ‘art’ and ‘ritual’ are cognate terms – ones that convey at heart matters that are simply ‘put together properly’. The making of art is not the creation of artificial things that are to be dichotomized from nature but rather the production of civilization that is grounded in the natural but serves as its flowering. Consequently, in this vast interplay between pagan, human, natural, artistic, cultural and civilized – between paganism, humanity, nature, art, culture and civilization, there can be no unmitigated rejection of the things we as humans make. True enough, we can make some better things than others, we can make things better, and we can also produce harmful and deleterious things. Certainly in the historical course of our march across this planet, we have made mistakes. We have produced weapons of mass destruction, we have engendered crusades, and we have mis-gardened when we should have had healthy crops and inspiring parks. But we must not consequently throw the baby out with the bathwater; we must instead recognize what have been our mistakes and seek to remedy them.

It is in the light of this understanding that this book centers on the notion of idolatry. The idol is essentially a work of art; it is human-made – or at least that which is traditionally condemned are the man-made figures that are worshipped. But because of its corpo-spirituality, its valuing of the physical in addition to any consideration of the ethereal or transcendental, I contend that paganism rejects the bias that has traditionally rejected idolatry. By focusing on the idolatrous, I seek in the pages that follow to elucidate the rationale and innovation that is paganism, to question the engrained iconoclastic sympathy and mind-set that has prevailed since the demise of classical paganism, and to reveal the importance of both the fashioned idol and unfashioned nature in pagan worship. Consequently, in seeking to discern a pagan and humanistic ethic, after this present ‘Overview’ (Chap. 1), in Chap. 2 this book examines the arguments both for and against idolatry. While our final endeavor is to elucidate some set of guidelines for a life that is oriented by pagan understandings of the world, nature and/or the cosmos and the mutual relationships between environment and both humanity and the miraculous, I shall ground this challenge in idolatry because I feel, and hope to convey in the next chapter, that there is a centrality of ‘idol worship’ to paganism or nature religion or both in terms of both tolerance and corpo-spirituality in which each allows – if not also encourages – the other.

## **Ethics**

Without doubt, ethics represent the greatest quagmire of life. They have occupied a constant portion of human thought throughout its history, and we are perhaps no closer toward a viable understanding of just what exactly they are – let alone toward

any sort of definitive answers that ethical study and reflection aim to supply. In what is to follow, I wish to take the reader with me in a journey of investigation and discovery. This expedition may at times appear to meander, but I appeal to the reader to trust the process to the degree that a narrative text of exploration is an adventure for both the author and, hopefully, his audience alike. In the present section of this chapter, I focus on a brief survey of morality, the distinction between its relevant types of investigation and the notions of both evil and value. There are two branches to ethical inquiry: (1) the development of a code or set of principles by which to live, and (2) meta-ethics, that is, ethical theory that investigates either how people ought to behave, or what is the good life? While classical thinkers tended to assume that if one knows what the good life is, he or she will automatically live accordingly, we now know that this is not necessarily the case and that the two questions concerning the good life and correct behavior are not inevitably the same.

Meta-ethics is a tool toward the formulation of normative ethics – the development of a moral code to guide us in decisions concerning right and wrong (such as the use of the planet, taking a human life, etc.) Any investigation into a *pagan* ethics is an attempt to discern principles that shape or ought to shape a pagan's life (such as honor, virtue, pleasure, etc.) In general, meta-ethics are not a primary concern for most pagans who instead seek to locate the guiding norms of life as it is lived and directly experienced. In a sense, meta-ethics represent the *metaphysics* of ethics. They are nevertheless important to paganism inasmuch as they have been a significant part of pagan thought's historic development as well as its philosophic reflection, and to this end I wish to sketch out briefly the terminology, schools of thought and issues of debate that have been articulated as part of the more reflective aspect of ethical argument.

In the endeavor to understand the terms 'good', 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong', some of the greatest minds that have addressed the fundamental issues have, in fact, been pagan thinkers: Democritus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Diogenes of Sinope, Zeno of Citium and Marcus Aurelius. The schools of the pre-Socratics, Platonism, Eudaimonism, Stoicism, Cyrenaicism, Epicureanism and Cynicism also belong to the variety and permutations of pagan ethical thought. Beyond the classical world, there have been important Chinese contributions through Confucianism and Taoism. While these last constitute a detailed area of their own that is beyond the present book's immediate coverage, they may nevertheless be understood as broadly part of pagan ethics themselves.

Even beyond the pagan world or worlds, however, such Church fathers as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have played important roles in the development of ethical thought itself. Later milestones of one sort or another have been achieved by Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677), David Hume (1711–1776), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and John Dewey (1859–1952) among others. More contemporary offerings in the meta-ethical field are to be found in the likes of George Santayana (1863–1952), G.E. (George Edward) Moore (1873–1958), Moritz Schlick (1882–1936), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Emmanuel Levinas

(1906–1995), A.J. (Alfred Jules) Ayer (1910–1989), Albert Camus (1913–1960), Jürgen Habermas (b.1929), etc. But finally, in dove-tailing the meta-ethical back to the normative in terms of a pagan perspective, there are important elucidations to be found in the underlying ethical and axial formulations of such peoples as the Kemetics, Vedics, Greeks, Romans, Germanics, Celts, Shintoists, Afro-Latins, Amerindians and shamanists. These various groups are the focus of Chap. 15. Among the contemporary Western pagan developments, further considerations might include both the ecological biases of deep pagans and the Wiccan Rede as well as the ‘an it harm none’ high-choice ethics vis-à-vis the ‘do what you will’ best-choice ethics.

## *Evil*

Evil is not a pagan concept *per se*, and contemporary Western pagans frequently discount it as, like Satan, a Christian or Abrahamic invention. As part of the inquiry into ethics – both pagan and universal, I wish here to present briefly some of the different perspectives on what evil is. Foremost, evil is defined in opposition to good. As the negative of goodness, it may be a force in its own right – as we see in dualistic Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and even in Christianity, or simply as a privation – the absence of the good, such as Augustine understood. But Augustine also argued, as did Avicenna, that evil is largely perspectival rather than an entity or power. If one looks at it from within a wider context, it may no longer be seen as a negative but instead as something functionally positive. For Leibnitz, there is a metaphysical type of evil, while Schelling holds that evil is a first principle of the universe – traced to what is even antecedent to God and ultimately balanced or disproportionately mitigated by God’s love. In a way, Schelling is adhering to a Neo-platonic position that insists evil is an automatic aspect of the mind-matter dualism in which the corporeal is the furthest emanation from pure spirit and evil is its intrinsic concomitant.

Buddhism,<sup>9</sup> on the other hand, understands evil as the unavoidable product of desire. Eliminate desire, and evil ceases as well. Differently, but still related, the neo-Confucian philosopher Chang Tsai (1020–1077) argues that it is the violation of human equilibrium through excess that results in evil. This is a formulation of what is known as the Doctrine of the Golden Mean. In the West, this doctrine originates with Aristotle. The Greek philosopher holds that virtue lies in the successful navigation between opposite extremes. Like Chang Tsai, excess (as well as, in Aristotle’s case, deficiency) is the root of imbalance and the lack or loss of virtue. The Buddhist ‘Middle Way’ is similar, but the goal of freedom from desire is not harmony or happiness but nirvana or oblivion.

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<sup>9</sup>See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3047291.stm> (accessed 19 April 2011) that claims Buddhists are happier than non-Buddhists.



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