

Sacred Tribes

Journal of Christian Missions to New Religious Movements

Volume 2 / Issue 2
Winter / Spring 2004

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Abstract

Western society, far from being secular, is increasingly religious. While Christianity has been in decline, the emergence of new religious movements suggests the continued search for a religious identity. Paganism is but one of the avenues in this search and represents a postmodern response to the apparent lapse in western Christianity. It is essential for the engagement of different religious views to first understand those views. This study represents initial research in understanding Paganism phenomenologically. Further research is currently ongoing.

A POSTMODERN COUNTER-CULTURE MOVEMENT: THE RESURGENCE OF PAGANISM IN WESTERN SOCIETY

Introduction

It has long been thought that Western Europe is post-Christian and secular. However, recent critique of the secularization thesis has given cause to look at Western Europe as having never been Christianized.¹ Peter Berger defines the secularization thesis as the idea that, “Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.”² However, Berger, once a proponent of the thesis, emphasizes that this assumption is wrong. “To be sure, modernization has had some secularizing effects, more in some places than in others. But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization.”³

Religious indicators in Western Europe suggest that religious belief has remained strong and may in fact be increasing; nevertheless, participation in religious institutions remains low.⁴ While Berger describes the West European situation as more of “a

¹See Rodney Stark and Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Truth? A Reply to Bruce,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, no. 4 (1995); Rodney Stark, “Efforts to Christianize Europe, 400-2000,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 16, no. 1 (2001).

²Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

³*Ibid.*, 3.

⁴Religion II, International Social Survey Program, (Cologne, Germany: Zentralarchiv Fuer Empirische Sozialforschung, 1998).

shift in the institutional location of religion,”⁵ Grace Davie suggests that the situation can be understood as “believing without belonging.”⁶ In spite of the perceived affiliations that more than sixty percent have with a Christian church, attendance in services is at an all time low. These “statistical Christians,” according to W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, continue to be on the roll of the church, but “their lives are controlled by non-Christian convictions.”⁷ He saw that it is among these statistical Christians that we find Pagans.⁸

William Edgar commented that, “We are beginning to realize that Christianity is not being replaced by materialism, but by a sort of neo-Paganism.”⁹ Rodney Stark indicates the evidence “leads to the conclusion that secularization will not usher in a post-religious era. Instead, it will repeatedly lead to a resupply of vigorous otherworldly religious organizations by prompting revival.”¹⁰ This revival is primarily focused in religious movements that make a strong stance against secularization. Loren Wilkinson’s assessment is that secularization has produced an inner *Angst* resulting in a search for meaning instead of

⁵Berger, “Desecularization of the World,” 10.

⁶See Grace Davie, “Europe: The Exception that Proves the Rule?,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 65-84.

⁷W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, “Evangelism among Europe’s Neo-Pagans,” *International Review of Mission* 66, no. 4 (1977): 350.

⁸Ibid.

⁹William Edgar, “New Right -- Old Paganism: Anatomy of a French Movement,” *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 37, no. 4 (1983): 307.

¹⁰Rodney Stark, “Church and Sect,” in *The Sacred in a Secular Age: Toward Revision in the Scientific Study of Religion*, ed. Phillip E. Hammond (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 146; quoted in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 213.

a modern society that has no need of religion. This inner *Angst* has precipitated a resurgence of Paganism.¹¹

The purpose of this essay is to examine Paganism in its contemporary expression. In so doing, the essay will first attempt a definition of Paganism. Then it will look at its mythic identity and at how it responds to ultimate questions. Finally, the essay will suggest that an evangelical recovery of history and an understanding of *missio Dei* from the Old Testament might present a historically informed avenue to developing an encounter with resurgent Paganism.

Understanding Paganism/Neo-Paganism

Lesslie Newbigin suggests that the rise of new religious movements, whether Christian or pre-Christian, is concentrated in a specific demographic of society: young people.¹² In relation to his undergraduate students, Paul Heelas sees a shift to witchcraft, earth goddesses and shamanism, “I think that it is fair to say that paganism has become the key resource for those (increasing numbers) who have counter-cultural concerns.”¹³ Wilkinson sees Paganism as a response to the disenchantment of the world brought on by modernity. He writes,

¹¹Loren Wilkinson, “Circles and the Cross: Reflections on Neo-Paganism, Postmodernity, and Celtic Christianity,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 22 (1998): 28-29.

¹²Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 213.

¹³Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 88.

It is not so surprising, then, that in the contemporary longing for an escape from the modern (which is manifested most dramatically in the cities), many are turning to the ancient religions of the countryside, and arguing that Christianity has little to offer those concerned with the cycle of nature.¹⁴

Contemporary Paganism has risen in a post-Christian context from pre-Christian traditions. Having been integrated into the church during the Middle Ages, many Pagan beliefs and traditions were never completely extinguished. In one sense, it is incorrect to talk of a resurgence of Paganism; however, since the turn of the twentieth century Paganism has increasingly gained a voice in the academy and popular culture. Stating de Benoist's position Edgar writes, "Paganism has never been very far away from us, both in history and in the sub-conscious mind, as well as in ritual, in literature, and so forth."¹⁵

Defining Contemporary Paganism

The terms "Pagan" and "neo-Pagan" were once thought of pejoratively; however, they are increasingly looked upon as a term of endearment.¹⁶ Those adherents to pre-Christian European traditional religions in one form or another are proud to be pagan or neo-pagan and do not shy away from using the terms. As understood by them, the term means

an individual whose interest in the religious sphere lies in patterns of belief which are non-orthodox and non-traditional in Western society and which

¹⁴Wilkinson, "Circles and the Cross," 30.

¹⁵Edgar, "New Right -- Old Paganism," 308.

¹⁶Ibid., 30-31.

more specifically pre-date Western society's dominant belief system as represented, for example, by Christianity or Judaism.¹⁷

Pagan has the contemporary understanding that relates its belief systems to pre-Christian mystery religions. Etymologically derived from the Latin *paganus*, meaning one who lives in the country, the term's original usage described anyone who worshipped local spirits.¹⁸ However, the resurgence of Paganism, while reviving the positive aspects of ancient forms, is a contemporary expression of ancient belief systems.¹⁹

According to Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, both neo-Paganism and Paganism share three common characteristics:

They are polytheistic, recognising a plurality of divine beings, which may or may not be avatars or other aspects of an underlying unity/duality/trinity etc.

They view Nature as a theophany, a manifestation of divinity, not as a "fallen" creation of the latter.

They recognise the female divine principle, called the Goddess (with a capital "G", to distinguish her from the many particular goddesses), as well as, or instead of, the male divine principle, the God.²⁰

Pagan, therefore, describes a religion that is a nature-venerating theophany personified in the great goddess and the god.

Neo-Paganism, on the other hand, does not necessarily represent a structured belief system. Furthermore, Jones and Pennick point out that "neo-pagan" is a term generally

¹⁷Quoted in Wilkinson, "Circles and the Cross," 31.

¹⁸Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.

¹⁹Ibid. "Followers of specific paths within it such as Druidry, Wicca, and Ásatrú aim to live a contemporary form of those older religions which are described or hinted at in ancient writings . . ."

²⁰Ibid., 2.

used by American commentators for all contemporary practices related to paganism of any form.²¹ This essay focuses primarily on the contemporary expression of Paganism in its structured belief systems and therefore Pagan/Paganism will be employed in the discussion.

To further delimit the terms paganism and neo-paganism it must be noted that they are not a part of the New Age movement. While there are similarities between these religious belief systems, Heelas argues that the New Age movement is a product of modernity.²² Paganism, on the other hand, appears to be is a product of postmodernity.²³ York suggests that even though New Age and paganism are sometimes difficult to distinguish, there are two salient differences. First, New Age pursues a “transcendent metaphysical reality,” whereas paganism pursues an “immanent locus of deity.” Second, New Age self-identifies as an innovative religious orientation and paganism self-identifies as historically continuous with past traditions.²⁴

Pagan Postmodern Mythic Identity

Pagans look at the Christian era as one of destruction and futility. To them, Christianity has been an oppressive force that has stifled the position of women and

²¹Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 216. Cf. Carl E. Braaten, “The Gospel for a Neopagan Culture,” in *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism*, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 7-8.

²²Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, 3.

²³See Wilkinson, “Circles and the Cross.”

²⁴Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-pagan Movements* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 2.

disregarded the environment. Thus, Jones and Pennick assert that the impetus for the resurgence of Paganism has been a response to the desire to put humanity back in a general context. That context is one that is physical and chronological: physical in the sense that the natural world is an indispensable part of life and chronological in the sense of continuity with ancient philosophies.²⁵ It is to that chronological context we now turn.

Christina Oakley, editor of *Pagan Dawn*, a Wiccan publication, and a holder of a doctorate in medieval history, asserts that there is no evidence to suggest a unified pre-Christian religion in Europe. Consequently, she asserts that it is incorrect for contemporary Pagans to claim a single surviving ancient European religious history. Instead, it is more accurate to speak of ancient systems of varying beliefs that survived in the subconscious of their adherents who called themselves Christians.²⁶

Those special people who believed in their local spirits, who cultivated psychic or magic powers, who told and retold their ancient myths, who cast spells and performed divinations, who dressed in animal skins – almost all considered themselves Christian once Christianity had arrived and established itself, although in rural areas this may have amounted to no more than a nominal Christianity.²⁷

Accordingly, Pagan religions in contemporary Europe are devoid of historically verifiable origin myths. Nonetheless, origin myths exist and help Pagans with a sense of identity as they transmit an awareness of traditions that have continuity with the

²⁵Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 3.

²⁶Christina Oakley, “Druids and Witches: History, Archetype and Identity,” in *The Druid Renaissance: The Voice of Druidry Today*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm (London: Thorsons, 1996), 278.

²⁷*Ibid.*

ancestors. Wilkinson suggests that the veracity of these myths are inconsequential and a characteristic of the “postmodern conviction that we need to find (or create) stories to live by.”²⁸ He continues,

True, there is a human need for story. But both the neopagans and radical feminists alike are quick to say: “It doesn’t really matter whether a useful history [dominated either by magic or by matriarchy] really happened. Too fine a concern for fact and truth is a modern, patriarchal hangup anyway. The important thing is to find stories which nourish us now.”²⁹

Postmodern ideology has been described as a “hunger for means of social maintenance, continuity, intergenerational traditioning, historical awareness, freedom from the repressions of modernity.”³⁰ Contemporary Paganism uniquely expresses this ideology, not only in its origin myths, but also in its answers to ultimate questions. Jones and Pennick assert that Paganism offers a “possible religious philosophy for a pluralistic, multicultural society.”³¹

Pagan Response to Ultimate Questions

In developing an understanding of Paganism the question of how Pagans make sense out of life must be addressed. Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw and Tite Tienou suggest a framework for understanding how folk religions address these issues. Here, four

²⁸Loren Wilkinson, “Saving Celtic Christianity,” *Christianity Today* (Ap 24, 2000): 83.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 83-84.

³⁰Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 38.

³¹Jones and Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, 220.

existential areas that are foundational in the belief systems of folk religions will be examined.³²

The Meaning of Life and Death

To Pagans, human beings are a part of nature and hence Paganism is monistic in its view of humanity. Selena Fox articulated the essence of this view when she wrote, “The Rocks, the Animals, the Plants, the Elements, and Stars are my relatives. Other humans are my sisters and brothers Planet Earth is my home. I am part of this large family of Nature, not the master of it.”³³ So, it follows that in its monism humanity is divine and consequently divinity is thought of as immanent rather than transcendent. As such, children are born holy and are morally and ethically neutral.³⁴

There seems to be no emphasis in contemporary Paganism on a cosmic history in regards to the origin of humanity. Ancient Pagan myths suggest that the world was created out of chaos and given order. Humanity was then created by the union of the divinities. However, contemporary Paganism seems to leave this question unanswered. What is of more importance to Pagans is the responsibility of humanity to live harmoniously with nature in a continuation of the way the ancestors lived. Fox notes, “I see circles of

³²See Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 95-197.

³³Selena Fox, “I am Pagan” (accessed 1 April, 2002); available from www.circlesanctuary.org/aboutpagan/IAmPagan.html

³⁴Isaac Bonewits, “What neo-Pagans Believe,” v. 5.6 (accessed 1 April, 2002); available from www.neopagan.net/neo-Pagansbelieve.html).

change and renewal not only within my own life's journey, but in my heritage. I see my life as a circle that connects with the life circles of my ancestors. They are part of me and my life."³⁵

Death is looked upon as rite of passage leading to rebirth by way of the Otherworld. It is a natural event in nature and Pagans explain it as a part of the cycle of birth, and death. This idea gives continuity of the human experience with nature. Since nature is divine and feminine, emphasizing its life-giving and birth-giving attributes, it predisposes people to deal with death.³⁶ Nature's life-cycle enables the Pagan to understand that death is not the end.

There are at least three ways Pagans look at the afterlife. First, some Pagans view death as the final step in the existence of the living. Here the view is that there is nothing after death. The person simply ceases to exist. However, just as a tree, for example, might die it continues to live due to the life-giving properties inherent in the tree. So also the deceased's body is returned to the land and its life-giving properties continue to facilitate new life.³⁷ Graham Harvey summarizes that, "In a Nature-venerating tradition the return of Nature-given nutrients to the Earth by the dead body is worth celebrating."³⁸

³⁵Fox, "I am Pagan"

³⁶Graham Harvey, "Death and Remembrance in Modern Paganism," in *Ritual and Remembrance: Responses to Death in Human Societies*, ed. Jon Davis (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 111-115.

³⁷Graham Harvey, "Handfasting, Funerals and Other Druid Rites of Passage," in *The Druid Renaissance: The Voice of Druidry Today*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm (London: Thorsons, 1996), 215.

³⁸Harvey, "Death and Remembrance in Modern Paganism," 117.

A second way that Pagans look at the afterlife is reincarnation. After death the deceased is translated into a community of the Otherworld and awaits reincarnation. While there the deceased joins the ancestors and rests until he/she is ready to return. According to Harvey, this tradition has roots in the Arthurian legend where King Arthur is at rest in Avalon awaiting an opportune time to return.³⁹ Just as nature is renewed in the spring so exists the possibility of rebirth.

A third way that the afterlife is conceived is in transmigration where the deceased waits to join with another living being, not necessarily human. Transmigration, according to Harvey, explains the “flashes of insight some Pagans claim to have when they visit ancient sacred places if some sort of ancestral spirit is waiting there to act as tour-guide from the Otherworld.”⁴⁰ Transmigration is the classical ancient Pagan view of what happens after death.

The rite of passage of death is as much for the dead as for the living. It enables those who remain to express loss and search for new ways to relate to the dead. The festival of Samhain (1 November) is the primary way for the living to relate to the dead. The festival celebrates the dead by inviting them, whether ancestor, fairies or divinities to celebrate with those living who are present. This is possible due to the idea that the veil separating the Otherworld from this world is thin like no other time during the year.⁴¹ In a

³⁹Harvey, “Handfasting, Funerals and Other Druid Rites of Passage,” 215.

⁴⁰Harvey, “Death and Remembrance in Modern Paganism,” 117.

⁴¹Ibid., 112.

different sense, Samhain prepares the living for death as they anticipate what the living will do after they are departed.⁴²

The answer that Paganism offers to questions of those who are left behind is summarized well by Harvey,

Paganism claims to honour both that which benefits humanity and that which harms us, that which is giving birth and that which is taking life. This is not an easy thing and no Pagan says that it is, but it is part of honouring Nature or the Earth as the primary manifestation of the Goddess or Life.⁴³

Human Well-Being and Misfortune

Pagans believe that human beings are meant to live life full of “joy, love, pleasure, beauty and humor.” In this sense it is hedonistic. However, this hedonism is balanced with ideas of acceptance and respect for other viewpoints. To Pagans, ethics and morality are based on “joy, love, self-esteem, mutual respect, the avoidance of harm to ourselves and others – human or nonhuman – and the increase of public benefit.” It is within the abilities of human beings to solve personal and public problems in order to create a better world. This is all achieved through “the carefully planned alteration of our ‘normal’ (culturally defined and limited) states of consciousness.”⁴⁴

Magic is employed to deal with personal misfortune as well as the misfortune of others. It appears that its use is focused on maintaining well-being rather than on bringing

⁴²Harvey, “Handfasting, Funerals and Other Druid Rites of Passage,” 214.

⁴³Harvey, “Death and Remembrance in Modern Paganism,” 111.

⁴⁴Bonewits, “What neo-Pagans Believe,” v. 5.6,

harm to others; an expression that is rather different from the perception of ancient practices.

Fox writes,

When I do magic in rituals, before I raise and direct energy, I seek always to look at the larger picture of which my needs are just a part. I endeavor to work for the best for all as well as to help myself. When problems come my way, I seek to understand their cause and messages as part of my finding a solution. In doing healing work, I seek to address the underlying spiritual causes of disease, rather than only focusing on relief of its symptoms.⁴⁵

Guidance and the Unknown

Guidance is obtained in Paganism through divination primarily at the festivals associated with the changing seasons. There are eight community festivals celebrated by Pagans during the course of the year beginning with Samhain. These eight festivals are divided into two sets of four. The first set of four are the solar feasts and occur at midwinter (21 December) and midsummer (21 June) as well as at the time of the equinoxes (21 March and 21 September). The second set of four festivals, the Fire Feasts, made up for the agricultural climate of Northern Europe (1 May – May Day; 1 August – Lammastide; 1 November – Samhain; 1 February – the Feast of the Candles). Thus, according to Chris Turner, the Solar Feasts are predominately spiritual and the Fire Feasts are primarily pastoral.⁴⁶

Working together with the eight festivals, the astrological charts play a significant role in the guidance of humanity. This guidance is not necessarily answering the

⁴⁵Fox, "I am Pagan"

⁴⁶Chris Turner, "The Sacred Calendar," in *The Druid Renaissance: The Voice of Druidry Today*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm (London: Thorsons, 1996), 160-162.

question of what one should do with one's life. Rather, this guidance is to assist the individual to unite with nature on life's journey. Madeleine Johnson writes of the significance of astrology,

The most valuable use of starlore is as a tool for development; to heal, to integrate and to make whole by bringing ourselves back into touch with that which we have lost over centuries of increasing separation and alienation from nature. If we can connect with the seasonal cycles and the festivals and the energies of sun and moon, and discover that they are within ourselves, we begin the path back to integration and wholeness. That is the only creed we need. As we become aware of our place within the whole, we learn the value both of ourselves and of the whole, and in such awareness we find a growing eagerness to serve and work for all.⁴⁷

Right and Wrong

Pagans have no concept of good versus evil in its understanding of the divine. Consequently, there are no retributive actions taken by the divine in the form of a final judgment at death. The afterlife is open to all without condition. Therefore, a belief in "what goes around comes around" as found in nature determines the ethical choice made by Pagans. Isaac Bonewits states that, "The emphasis is, or should be, on reaffirming our commitment to our ideals, not on punishing ourselves or others for past behavior (though we still have to clean up our messes and avoid making new ones)."⁴⁸ To Pagans, it is difficult to offend the

⁴⁷Madeleine Johnson, "Caer Arianrhod – The Festivals and the Stars," in *The Druid Renaissance: The Voice of Druidry Today*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm (London: Thorsons, 1996), 200.

⁴⁸Bonewits, "What neo-Pagans Believe," v. 5.6.

deities short of ecocide or genocide. The deities are capable of defending their own honor without the assistance of others judging the actions of so-called blasphemers or heretics.⁴⁹

Having developed a foundational understanding of Pagan beliefs regarding existential questions confronting all humans, a turn to the formulation of an evangelical Christian response is in order.

Looking to Our Ancestors for Encountering Paganism

In formulating a response to Paganism the objective in this essay is not to provide a Christian theological counter response to the foundational understandings of Paganism nor will it develop a unique missiological response. Those responses have been made quite satisfactorily by Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou⁵⁰ as well as Philip Steyne in their agendas for encountering of folk religions.⁵¹ Similarly, this essay will not look at how the church should respond to the criticism offered by Paganism. Newbigin, after his return from missionary service to a pastorate in England, began to work on what this author sees as an ecclesiological response to Paganism in Europe that was more resistant to the gospel than what he discovered in India.⁵² An attempt here will be made to develop a historical avenue via our ancestors in order to engage Paganism. In the end, a theological, ecclesiological,

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰See Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion*.

⁵¹Philip M. Steyne, *God's of Power* (Columbia, S. C.: Columbia International University, 1996).

⁵²See Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), in particular chapters 7, 9 and 13.

missiological and historical synthesis can achieve a more than adequate response to resurgent Paganism.

A Historical Avenue

Any movement toward a future missiological agenda would be deficient if it did not include history. Two contemporary theologians have suggested that Christianity must recover the past in order to adequately understand its identity and address the issues of the present. Thomas Oden suggests that Protestant Christianity must recover the apostolic consensus that “repeatedly challenged and transformed emerging modernities.”⁵³ Kwame Bediako proposes that a look at the first two centuries for an example of how Christianity developed its identity might address the issue of resurgent African Traditional Religions.⁵⁴ Whether or not evangelicals recognize continuity with the early and medieval church, the fact is that evangelicalism shares in the whole history of the church. For the purpose of this essay, however, a look at the early church is merited since it confronted and was confronted by a contemporary Paganism of its day. By looking at this era in the history of the church a contemporary encounter with a Paganism that is identified with the past can be better informed. In other words, history can inform our missiology in order that mistakes are not repeated.

⁵³Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 163.

⁵⁴Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

Encountering Paganism in the Era of the Apostolic Fathers

The period of the Apostolic Fathers (roughly 95-300 A.D.) provides a framework to address Paganism with a theology formulated in an environment influenced not only by Plato and the Gnostics, but Buddha and Zoroaster⁵⁵ as well as Druidry.⁵⁶ There were several common themes that emerged in the apologists' defense of Christianity. They argued for the superiority of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is the true creator. They argued for the high ethical and moral standards in the teachings of Christ and that their high morality improved society.⁵⁷ They were concerned for society as exhibited in their prayers for its well-being.⁵⁸

To these apologists, a significant proof for the superiority of Christianity was its antiquity.⁵⁹ They argued, in spite of the relatively recent knowledge of the person of Christ, that Christianity fulfilled the law of Moses and the promises of the prophets. In fact, they argued that the religion of Moses predated Plato by 800 years and Homer by 400. To them, the greater antiquity of Christianity explained the similarities of the writings and traditions of ancient Pagans with it as they borrowed stories and applied them to their own

⁵⁵W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 316.

⁵⁶See Johannes Knudsen, "Celtic Christianity," *Dialog* 22 (1983): 57; he suggests that Ireneaus' heritage was Galatian which is ethnically related to the Celts.

⁵⁷Gerald Bray, "Explaining Christianity to Pagans: The Second Century Apologists," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 15-17.

⁵⁸Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51.

⁵⁹Bray, "Explaining Christianity to Pagans," 11.

myths and heroes. Christ himself also proved the veracity of their claims. The fact that he performed miracles testified to the trustworthiness of the Christian religion.⁶⁰ Ireneaus sums up the apologetical conclusion of this era well, “All of these handed down to us that there is one God, maker of heaven and earth, proclaimed by the Law and Prophets, and one Christ the Son of God.”⁶¹

Encountering Paganism in the Era of “Celtic” Christianity

David Cornick suggests that the answer to the postmodern search for meaning might be found in Celtic Christianity:

We who are the heirs of pollution and the misuse of creation long for an intimate closeness with the natural world. We who are the heirs of post-Enlightenment dualism and its demeaning of the spiritual long for an integrative experience of sacred and secular We who are the heirs of the “cheap grace” of a Christian establishment . . . long for a faith which costs. We who are the heirs of ecclesiastical division and the bureaucratic structures of the modern church long for the pure air of days when Aidan tramped the Northumbrian hills gossiping the gospel. All this and more we see in the Celtic Church.⁶²

Celtic Christianity could provide the necessary response to undertake a Christian encounter with Paganism. The Celtic Christians, growing out of a cultural context of Paganism, were passionate for sharing the gospel; they provide models of acculturation and examples of

⁶⁰Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 52.

⁶¹Ireneaus, as quoted in Eugene Heideman, “Syncretism, Contextualization, Orthodoxy, and Heresy,” *Missiology: An International Review* 25, no. 1 (1997): 45.

⁶²David Cornick, “Iona, Glastonbury and Anfield: Aspects of a Common Tradition?,” *Expository Times* 109 (1997): 47. Pagans are quick to assert that a Celtic church never existed. See Ronald Hutton, “Introduction – Who Possesses the Past?,” in *The Druid Renaissance: The Voice of Druidry Today*, ed. Philip Carr-Gomm (London: Thorsons, 1996), 17-38.

contextualization, while maintaining what was believed everywhere, always and by all. They demonstrated the value of the cultures of social others while maintaining Christian distinctives.⁶³

Celtic Christianity gives us an example of re-evangelization of a one-time “converted” West overrun by the invasion of social others.⁶⁴ It also provides us an example of Christian missions unadulterated by a theology influenced with a political agenda and with an egalitarian view of humanity⁶⁵ and an environmental consciousness that what God had created was good. In so doing, it presents a holistic view of the gospel incorporating the goodness of creation and the goodness of man created as *imago Dei*. All this without the backing of a formal religious hierarchy or state finances.⁶⁶ It was a movement of regular people who desired “Christ in the eye of all who see me, Christ in the ear of all who hear me.”⁶⁷

⁶³See Tomas O’ Fiaich, “Irish Monks on the Continent,” in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 101-139; R. P. C. Hanson, “The Mission of Saint Patrick,” in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 22-44.

⁶⁴See George Hunter, III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. Despite his pejorative use of the term “new barbarians” instead of the more acceptable use of “neo-Pagans” (see Wilkinson, “Circles and the Cross,” 28-47) Hunter gives an interesting viewpoint that should be taken into consideration by missionaries in Western Europe.

⁶⁵Gilbert Markus argues that Celtic Christianity was not as egalitarian as the popular view suggests. According to Markus, Irish legal texts show that women were subject to men. Similarly, “they [women] could not be trusted not to lead men astray.” See Markus, “The End of Celtic Christianity,” *Epworth Review* 24 (July 1997): 45-55.

⁶⁶Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Colonialism and Missions: Progressive Separation,” *Journal of Church and State* 7 (1965): 331.

⁶⁷From “Saint Patrick’s Breastplate,” in *Celtic Spirituality*, ed. Oliver Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 120.

Analysis of a Historical Avenue

The methods of engaging Paganism in the early church ranged from continuity to discontinuity with their cultures and beliefs. These two eras those of the Apostolic Fathers and of Celtic Christianity provide an encounter with Paganism that can inform a contemporary missiological agenda. Hiedeman summarizes the message of the Apostolic Fathers:

It is always the text of the One God, Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is being received from previous generations of believers which is being re-contextualized so that in obedience a text appropriate to that culture and to the universal church can emerge.⁶⁸

The Apostolic Fathers appealed to antiquity and God's encounter with diverse people throughout history. The Celtic Christians appealed to the goodness of God's creation, both man and nature. These issues point to the activity of the one, true God in his creation. In other words, the Apostolic Fathers and Celtic Christians point us to the need to recover *missio Dei* in a historical context; the context of the Old Testament.

A Recovery of *Missio Dei* in Genesis 1-3

According to David Bosch, mission is an attribute of God rather than an activity of the church. His very nature is missionary.⁶⁹ His interaction in human history must therefore be characterized by mission. Bosch states,

⁶⁸Eugene Heideman, "Syncretism, Contextualization, Orthodoxy, and Heresy," *Missiology: An International Review* 25, no. 1 (1997): 45.

⁶⁹David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Missions*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate.⁷⁰

The OT provides several examples of God’s missionary activity not only toward Israel, but also toward the nations. Bosch states, “. . . if there is a ‘missionary’ in the Old Testament, it is God himself who will, as his eschatological deed *par excellence*, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant people.”⁷¹ God is a sending God not only in the New Testament, but also the Old. The Hebrew word commonly translated “send” *šālah?* is almost always translated *apostellō* in the LXX. More than one hundred times the word refers to God as the subject, the one who is acting.⁷²

God’s missionary activity in the OT progresses from creation to the Fall until the return from captivity.⁷³ Since space does not permit a complete investigation, this essay will look at God’s missionary activity in the creation and the Fall. It is here that we see the validity of the Apostolic Fathers’ appeal to antiquity as well as the Celtic Christians appeal to creation’s goodness. It is the story of the one, true God who interacted and continues to interact personally with his creation.

⁷⁰Ibid., 392.

⁷¹Ibid., 19.

⁷²Ferris L. McDaniel, “Mission in the Old Testament,” in *Mission in the New Testament*, ed. William J. Larkin Jr. and Joel F. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 11.

⁷³Lo Zhenfang, “What is the Center of the Bible?,” *Ching Feng* 25, no. 2 (1982): 104-109.

Creation

The creation account affords us the opportunity to see God sending his Son and Holy Spirit in the first recorded act of *missio Dei*. The Apostle Paul testified, “For by him [the Son] all things were created, both in heaven and on earth . . .” (Col 1:13a).

Similarly, the Apostle John wrote, “All things came into being through him [the Son], and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:2). Likewise, the Holy Spirit invaded space and time to participate in *missio Dei* (Gen 1:2). The psalmist wrote, “You send forth your Spirit, they are created” (Ps 104:30a).

God’s missionary activity continued with the creation of man in his image. It is here that we see the fullness of the Godhead at work on *imago Dei*, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness . . .” (Gen 1:26a). Commenting on creation, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) wrote, “In this way, God the Word, Wisdom, Power was the Creator of human nature, not motivated by necessity to create man, but by virtue of his love for this being that he formed. The light must not be unseen, glory to not remain without witness, goodness to not be without another person to enjoy it”⁷⁴ God desired for his goodness in creation to be experienced by man and, thus, he intervened in history.

Fall of Man

The account of the fall of man affords another opportunity to see God’s missionary activity. In the midst of man’s shame and alienation God calls out to him,

⁷⁴Dumitru Staniloae, *Teologia Dogmatica Orthodoxa*, vol. 1, (Bucharest: Institutul Biblic si de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane, 1991), 232. Translation mine.

“Where are you?” He covers man’s shame in an act of incomplete redemption, yet of possible atonement until the fullness of time that is foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15 (Eph 1:10a). John Chrysostom (c. 349-407) wrote, “The fullness of time was the Son’s appearing . . . Just then he offered this gracious dispensation – to ensure that creation should not have come into being for nothing or in vain.”⁷⁵ What is striking in the account of the fall is God’s continued relationship with man and man’s continued care of God’s creation. *Missio Dei* is apparent at the Fall.

The OT idea of *missio Dei* offers a point of departure as an encounter of Paganism is considered. In OT *missio Dei* there is a rootedness to Christian identity in antiquity; there is a celebration of creation’s goodness that is endowed by its creator’s personal involvement. It seems that it might be here that Christianity can recover a sense of continuity with antiquity and an integrity that was lost in its oppression of social others as well as in its wedding with modernity.

Conclusion

This essay has examined aspects of beliefs and identity in the resurgence of Paganism in Western Europe. It developed an understanding of Pagan belief as a postmodern search for identity as well as a search for answers to ultimate questions. And here it concluded with suggesting an avenue for encountering Paganism. In the end, it is an inadequate avenue. While it is historical, it needs a theological, ecclesiological and

⁷⁵John Chrysostom, Homily on Ephesians 1.1.10.

missiological avenue for a holistic approach to encountering Paganism. In such a recovery, *missio Dei* might offer a needed balance of history, theology and missional ecclesiology.

God's care for man and the rest of creation suggests the need for man to care about his relationship with God and for his creation. This is offered simply as another aspect in developing an encounter with contemporary Paganism.

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