

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

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The Lure of Paganism

Part 2

The Earth Goddess

by Bob DeWaay

“You shall fear only the Lord your God; and you shall worship Him, and swear by His name. You shall not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who surround you.” (Deuteronomy 6:13,14)

In the last issue I discussed the age-old tendency of God's people to be lured into the beliefs and practices of the pagans. I will now address the particular mode that pagan religion has taken in our day and how it presents dangers for God's people.

Several weeks ago, as I was in the midst of much reading and research for this article, I noticed that our local public broadcasting channel was airing a program entitled, “Goddess Remembered.” As I watched this programming (which was being used as a fund raiser for the station) I was shocked at how profoundly it confirmed what I had been reading. Overt, pagan, goddess worship is increasingly becoming popular and is unabashedly promoted as a needed replacement for Christianity.

“Goddess Remembered” is an enticing documentary of ancient goddess worship that was claimed to be the norm in pre-Christian times of supposed idyllic peace and well being. Ancient worship sites are visited, accompanied by an authoritative sounding narrative and hauntingly seductive music. Women were claimed to be predominant in prehistoric times before patriarchy and male oriented religions appeared that brought the wars and troubles of recorded history. The goddess was known by many different names, but she is now being rediscovered as witnessed by consciousness raising groups shown in the broadcast.

A second video was broadcast called “The Killing Times,” that portrays the witch killings of the Inquisition as the contribution of Christianity to history as experienced by women. Paul is labeled

“misogynist” (a hater of women) and the New Testament and subsequent expressions of Christianity indicted as having suppressed the true and noble religion of goddess worship and witchcraft and thus oppressed women. The music and narrative, accompanied by drawings of women being tortured and murdered, are hauntingly compelling. It is the most alluring apologetic for paganism I have ever witnessed. Obviously the managers of the public television channel (channel 2 in Minneapolis) assumed they would help their cause by this broadcast and showed little concern about offending Christians. They offered video tapes of the broadcast to those who pledged enough money.

I share this to illustrate how pagan and anti-Christian our society has become and to underscore the fact that paganism beckons each of us to its earthly house of worship. The whitewash of paganism and misrepresentation of the facts is hardly noticed in the midst of the finely produced video experience. For example, one of the ancient sites that was shown to commend the niceties of ancient, pagan wisdom and worship was a South American religious shrine that actually served as a place for child sacrifice. Viewers do not hear about that. To imply that ancient, pagan religions were noble minded, humanitarian, and ecologically enlightened and that Christianity came along to kill people and rape the environment is a colossal lie. Yet paganism has renewed popularity.

Paganism Defined

The term “pagan” has a broad range of meanings. It comes from a Latin word that originally meant “country dweller.” It was used to differentiate cultured, urban Romans from those who were not. However, meaning is determined by usage, not etymology and “pagan” has had a variety of usages that potentially could be confusing. For example, Harold Lindsell's book, The New Paganism, is about theological liberalism that he links to the philosophies of the Enlightenment.¹ These he sees as having their roots in ancient Greek philosophies.²

Exploring a different aspect of paganism, Christian writer David Burnett ex-

amines neo-paganism that has its roots in tribal nature religions.³ His book The Dawning of the Pagan Moon is an excellent resource for anyone wishing to better understand the current revival of paganism. He quotes Margot Alder, a feminist neo-pagan, who defines it: “I use Pagan to mean a member of a polytheistic nature religion, such as the ancient Greek, Roman, or Egyptian religions, or in anthropological terms, a member of one of the indigenous folk and tribal religions all over the world.”⁴ As we will see, this version of paganism is the one now culturally popular. People are looking to the ancient “gods” for hope and inspiration.

In its most general sense, Christians use the term “pagan” to describe anyone who is not Christian. Other times it can mean anyone who is not allied with one of the major world religions. In this article we will be concerned primarily with paganism as defined and discussed in Burnett's book — the earth goddess version.

Understanding the Issues

David Burnett's book is very well documented and serves as a good analysis of the history of paganism. He delineates some of the key issues that we need to understand. Burnett states, “There are three major tenets of the pagan belief system that are universally held by neopagans. These are, 1. The Earth goddess, 2. Polytheism, 3. The transpersonal nature of the human psyche.”⁵ I will explain how each of these is important in the emerging pagan world-view.

The Earth Goddess

Mother Earth is a theme that is familiar to most of us. That there is an earth goddess is a common supposition of numerous, ancient religions. The Bible warned Israel about an ancient earth goddess, Ashtaroth, “...*Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, served the Baals and the Ashtaroth, the gods of Aram, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab, the gods of the sons of Ammon, and the gods of the Philistines; thus they forsook the Lord and did not serve Him*” (**Judges 10:6**). The Greeks called the earth goddess Gaia and the Romans had the fertility goddess Diana.⁶ Gaia worship now is being promoted in America. Gaia is also gaining popularity as a serious principle of the meaning of the earth as alive, connected and spiritual.⁷ Currently, Gaia has become ancient, pagan, goddess worship merged

with modern, feminist, environmentalism to become an all-encompassing sense of connectedness with all things. Leading religious feminist Rosemary Radford Ruether writes,

Our kinship with all earth creatures is global, linking us to the whole living Gaia today. It also spans the ages, linking our material substance with all the beings that have gone before us on earth and even to the dust of exploding stars. We need new psalms and meditations to make this kinship vivid in our communal and personal devotions.⁸

This shows the importance of connectedness in the Gaia understanding. The goddess is important to many today because she is an alternative to the transcendent God of the Bible. The Earth Goddess is only immanent (close, or connected) and has no transcendence to the creation as does the God of the Bible.

Karen Weiss explains why she finds the goddess idea comforting: “Simply reading about the concept of a female aspect of the Prime Deity may arouse fear and anxiety in our guilt-ridden consciousness. Yet, when we can detach from our ideas of God as a punitive and jealous force and we take the risk of examining this principle of a feminine Creatress more deeply, many of us find a profound sense of relief and assurance.”⁹

She claims that the ancient “pagan” religions understood the benefit and importance of sensuality and eroticism in religious practice, but that the “myth” of “the bible of Judaeo-Christian male-dominated religion” created an unhealthy division between the sexes.¹⁰ The “myth” of the creation story of Adam and Eve is blamed for centuries of “misogynistic attitudes” and the devaluation of female sexuality. Yet there is a “solution,” — “She is the Goddess. She is awakening within many of us. She stirs deep inside, sending shivers and thrills of delight up the core of our being.”¹¹

Polytheism

Neo-paganism combines spirituality, sensuality, and an increased consciousness of oneness with nature in an alluring package that is experiencing record sales. Along with the Earth Goddess, paganism appeals to the modern consciousness with its polytheism. Once considered the domain of uneducated, tribal religions, polytheism is making a comeback in western civilization. This is happening for several reasons. One is the spiritual bank-

ruptcy of the materialistic world view. Once the Biblical foundations of our culture were rejected for secular humanism, the only realities to be accepted were material. This cannot speak to the age old religious and spiritual longings of human beings. A void was left that paganism would like to fill.

Many see the materialistic, technological approach to life as the cause of environmental degradation, a problem that causes many contemporary people much concern. They have wrongly assumed that Christianity was the cause of this, not aware of the fact that in practice Christianity was no longer the primary force behind western civilization. Yet, since it is commonly known that the Bible grants humans dominion over the rest of the creation (**Genesis 1:28**), many assert that this is the cause of the problem. Consider this example:

Many eco-feminists reject the spirituality of traditional Western Christianity, which is based on Greek and Hellenistic dualism, hierarchy of beings and an androcentric bias. Creation theology in this tradition put human beings, especially man, at the centre of the universe. Man has “dominion over” all other beings in the cosmos, and God has increasingly become the transcendental Other who has power over the whole universe. This God has been used by men colonizers as an ideological weapon for domination, exploitation and oppression.¹²

The answer to this problem? — “. . . the spirituality of indigenous people in Asia and Africa.”¹³

The belief in and worship of multiple gods is seen as the answer to the problems “caused” by the transcendent God of the Bible. Polytheism and nature religions are chosen because they “work” to solve the problems supposedly created by Judeo-Christian theism. The “gods” are tied up in nature and since not transcendent, they are deemed to be less likely to harm nature.

Another appeal of polytheism is that it “rings true” to many who have already accepted the culture’s prevailing pluralism. “Why shouldn’t people be free to choose any ‘god’ who works for them?” they reason. If everyone gets to choose, who is to say that certain choices are wrong? From this faulty reasoning, it is a short step to the notion that if many “gods” are chosen many gods are valid — thus we have polytheism.

Radical feminism helps drive polytheism since many religious feminists have opted for a goddess and traditional monotheism has none to offer. Beatrice Bruteau writes, “But the presence of the Goddess herself has never departed from her holy place in our consciousness, and now, as we enter what many feel to be a ‘new age,’ we sense that the Goddess is somehow making her way back to us. But in just what guise is so far unclear.”¹⁴ Merlin Stone has chronicled many goddesses from which to choose in two volumes entitled, Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood.¹⁵ In these volumes she describes more than one hundred goddesses from around the world and throughout history (recently renamed and reworked by feminists as “her-story”¹⁶), giving many names to the “oneness that lies behind all dualities.”¹⁷

There is a cultural urge to find out what we have been missing because of the dominance of Christianity and more recently secular humanism. Many moderns are attracted to the mystical, magical, unknown qualities of far away deities whose teachings and experiences have been hitherto hidden from most people in the West. Dissatisfaction and disillusionment are powerful incentives to try the unknown. Polytheism seems to open up unlimited possibilities.

Another factor in the popularity of neo-pagan polytheism is that contemporary theories of knowledge have cast doubt on any absolute system of truth. If truth cannot be known, then myth and history begin to merge into a system of universal uncertainty. Judaism and Christianity are based on God’s revelation of Himself in history. As history is deemed unknowable or unreliable by modern critics, it loses its superiority over myth. The ascendancy of myth has opened the floodgates for the magical, enchanting stories of the pagan gods. Christianity is practical, truthful and has moral content — qualities that many would just as soon do without.

Paganism and the Transpersonal Soul

The third characteristic of paganism described by David Burnett is the supposed transpersonal nature of the soul. This concept may seem obscure, but it is important to much neo-pagan thinking and writing. Another way of describing it is the connectedness of all things. Burnett’s research shows that the theories of Carl Jung lie behind the transpersonal soul.¹⁸ Burnett states, “Of all scholars, it

was Carl Jung who opened a totally new approach to the question "What is man?"¹⁹ Briefly, his notion of the collective unconscious suggests that all humans are unconsciously connected to all humanity. This collective unconsciousness is accessed through dreams and expressed through myths.²⁰ This world of magic, enchantment, and seemingly unlimited possibility is one that neo-pagans believe connects all humans, past and present.

They consider the soul transpersonal, that is not unique to the individual. Neither is the soul separate from the rest of the creation nor are humans uniquely created in the image of God. The following is an example of a view that ties the human soul to everything else, written by a United Church of Christ pastor:

The human being is that being in whom the universe, after some 15 billion years, has reached such a degree of complexity that the universe is now able to consciously reflect on itself, its meaning, who it is, where it came from, and what it is made of. "The human person is the sum total of 15 billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself" as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin noted a half century ago. The scientist looking through a telescope is literally the universe looking at itself . . . The worshiper singing praises to God is the universe celebrating the wonder of the divine Mystery whence it came and in which it exists.²¹

This view of human life is radically different from the one given in Genesis. Man in Genesis is presented as created in the image of God who eternally existed, not in any way contingent on anything. In Genesis, man was given rule over the nonhuman creation. Dowd goes on to say, "We humans are the means by which (are the place where) the universe can feel its stupendous beauty with conscious awareness. We are not separate beings on Earth so much as we are a mode of being or an expression of Earth."²² Thus, a transpersonal soul is asserted in direct contradiction to the teaching of the Bible.

This pagan thinking is supposed to elevate both humans and the earth, but in reality it degrades both. Humans are supposedly elevated by their connectedness to all things and lack of distinction even from God. However, this view of God does not describe the all powerful, all wise, transcendent God of

the Bible. This "god" is hardly distinguished from the creation (Dowd and others of his ilk promote panentheism, a baby step away from pantheism that equates God with the universe). He explains, "God is the *inner* dynamic guiding the process, the living reality revealed in and through creation."²³ The earth is considered not, "a planet with life on it, it is a living planet."²⁴ This idea, "is called the 'Gaia theory' named after the ancient Greek goddess who symbolized Mother Earth."²⁵ The Gaia hypothesis is credited to James Lovelock.

The Gaia Hypothesis and the Mother Goddess

It is supposed that Gaia is a self-propagating, evolving, living being, of which we are but expressions. Lovelock evidently did not take his theory as far as his New Age followers.²⁶ Vishal Mangalwadi rightly points out that the Gaia notion has been used by some who suppose that by making the earth a goddess, and as such the object of religious awe, people will stop abusing the environment.²⁷ Vishal, a native of India and brilliant Christian writer, reasons that making the earth a living being with its own mind could not possibly stop it from being exploited:

There is an obvious problem with this view: Is it in fact true that human beings tend not to exploit what they consider to be alive and mindful? We acknowledge forests, fetuses, children, 'lower' castes, women, 'blacks', employees, etc., to be very much alive; but does that, by itself, prevent us from abusing and exploiting them? Do we not exploit our mothers and even God? It needs no documentation to show that Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists, etc., have all been guilty, whether privately or institutionally, of exploiting what they believed to be divinity. Gods and goddesses are in fact much easier to exploit — they have no fundamental rights guaranteed by our constitutions.²⁸

Making the earth a goddess and us her subjects or part of her consciousness (the transpersonal soul) will not nor has not made humans better caretakers of the earth.

It does not make sense that the fallacious, pragmatic argument that worshipping the earth as our "Mother" will help the ecological cause. I often see bumper

stickers asserting that we ought to take care of "Mother," the supposed goddess who pagans think brought us into being. It is just as reasonable to assume that as a goddess "Mother" can take care of herself; as Gideon's father Josh said of Baal: "Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him? Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar" (**Judges 6:31**). People who worship the creation historically have not been prone to take better care of it.

Vishal Mangalwadi cites the example of the Christian missionary William Carey fighting to abolish the practice of *sati*, the burning of a man's widow on the funeral pyre, in India. Ironically it was practiced in a culture that strongly believed in the woman as a goddess:

For example, it was in Calcutta, the heart of the goddess cult in the Indian sub-continent, where two hundred years ago William Carey, the first Protestant missionary in India, started to fight against the evil of *sati* — widow burning — the ultimate denial of individuality to women in a culture which calls woman *devi* or goddess. Sadly, in his fight for women's rights Carey was pitched against the entire religious establishment of the goddess cult.²⁹

Vishal rightly contends that worship of the creation or deification of women will help neither women nor the environment.

Only Christian teaching that says that humans, male and female, are created in the image of God can give true meaning and dignity to human life. Individuality is very important to Christians because God loves each individual and Christ's atoning death for their sins is offered to individuals. Individuals will stand before God in judgment: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (**2Corinthians 5:10**). No such compelling motivation is found by those who believe their souls are merely non-individualistic expressions of the cosmic consciousness.

Vishal continues with his excellent example of William Carey:

Just as Carey believed that we cannot love the Father without respecting women who reflect his image, he was also convinced that we cannot worship the creator without

valuing his creation. Therefore, because of his “patriarchal” worldview, he became the first man to plead for the forest of India, and started a forestry programme in his seminary at Serampore. Worship of the goddess did not result in a concern for the environment in India.³⁰

The lure of paganism that is attracting so many offers ancient goddess worship as an answer to the concerns of modern individuals about the well being of the natural environment and the rights of women. However, those who promote this reworked pagan religion have to white-wash and misrepresent its history to sell it to unsuspecting people who think that it actually “works.”

Biblical Truth and Paganism

As I asserted in the last issue of this periodical, warnings in the Bible about the lure of paganism are addressed to God’s people. We are not above being tempted by these things. Unless we are able to know and articulate the Biblical positions on issues that confront us, the world’s thinking will influence us more than we imagine. Let us consider the three major beliefs of neo-paganism as compared to the teachings of the Bible.

The Earth Goddess? The Biblical account of Creation found in Genesis 1 & 2 shows that God created the earth. The earth has none of the essential attributes of deity: eternal existence, non-contingency, omniscience, omnipotence, nor transcendence. Neither does it have His moral attributes: truthfulness, love, justice, holiness, and goodness. The Bible teaches that not only has God created the earth, but He holds all things together: *“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together”* (**Colossians 1:16,17**).

God created and preserves the earth as a habitation for humans. As such it is amazingly and intricately suitable. This is called the “anthropic principle.” Yet pagans who notice this do not see the intelligent design of the Creator, but vainly suppose the earth has a consciousness of “her” own that purposely has evolved these life sustaining attributes without the help of an infinitely wise and

powerful, transcendent Creator. This vain notion cannot support the weight of its own hopes and expectations: that is that humans therefore will be motivated to be better caretakers. Vishal Mangalwadi points out,

But if the earth is to be revered as a goddess because of its amazing capacity to maintain its life-supporting temperature, water and air, in spite of the odds against it, including the laws of physics and chemistry, it is hard to imagine why we should see her as a goddess in distress in need of rescue. Would it not be more reasonable just to worship her and trust her to take care of both herself and us, who are no more than cells in her body? [according to goddess worshippers]³¹

Paul told us that the foolish speculations of the pagans who worship the creation are in spite of clear evidence seen in the creation of the attributes of the Creator (see **Romans 1:20-25**). The anthropic principle points us clearly to God the supernatural Creator.

Polytheism? The idea of many “gods,” none of whom have the essential attributes of deity, was common during Biblical times and firmly rejected by the inspired text. The “gods” are made with human hands (idols), are vainly imagined to exist when they do not, or are demons masquerading as gods. Consider what happened when Paul taught the truth: *“And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all”* (**Acts 19:26**). The prophets pronounced judgement on false gods: *“Thus you shall say to them, ‘The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens’”* (**Jeremiah 10:11**). Demonic forces of darkness inspire pagan worship: *“No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons”* (**1Corinthians 10:20**).

The Transpersonal Soul? The Bible teaches that each person is created in the image of God (**Genesis 1:26,27; Genesis 9:6; James 3:9**). Humans will be judged personally and as individuals; they are not recycled or reincarnated: *“And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment”* (**Hebrews 9:27**). Also, see **2Corinthians 10:5**

quoted earlier on this. The Bible gives dignity and purpose to human life. Since each human being is unique, we are each important to God as individuals: *“Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows”* (**Matthew 10:29-31**). This also shows that humans have a greater value than the rest of the creation, which pagans deny.

Conclusion

We have seen that the lure of paganism is a powerful influence in our day and have delineated many of the teachings of neo-paganism as a movement. We should not feel that the prevailing winds of darkness make the Gospel so unacceptable that it will no longer be effective or relevant in this environment. David Wells points out that the Biblical writers confronted paganism similar to what we face today and preached a message that was antithetical to that of the pagans:

Those who were trained by biblical revelation could not follow the path of the pagans, who established faith on their experience of nature and their intuitions regarding human nature. Their [the Biblical writers] faith was grounded solely in the objective and public nature of God’s Word. They stood alone among these ancient cultures, their faith distinctive and unique.”³²

The apostles turned the pagan world upside down with their powerful message of objective, absolute, Biblical truth. We have the same message and the Holy Spirit anointing us, so we should **confidently and steadfastly** confront the paganism of our time with the truth of the Gospel. We should expect that God will save many, snatching them as out of the fire (**Jude 1:23**).

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End Notes

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4. As quoted by David Burnett, *ibid.* 9.
5. *ibid.* 87.
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