

Neo-paganism and Environmental Ethics  
by Bob DeWaay

Introduction

Does neo-pagan polytheism provide an adequate basis for environmental ethics? Those, such as eco-feminists, who propose a re-introduction of ancient polytheism and particularly earth goddess worship claim that traditional, Western theism has caused the destruction of the environment due to its placing man in dominion over the rest of the creation. Their solution is a neo-pagan understanding that sees the inter-connectedness of all things and an understanding of the earth as the mother goddess, sometimes called Gaia. I will show that this proposed basis for environmental ethics fails at all three levels of ethical analysis.

I. Meta-ethical Analysis of Neo-paganism

A. The Need for a Basis for Ethics.

It is necessary to ask if a given approach to ethics has an adequate basis. It is not adequate, for example, to simply decide that certain environmental positions must be achieved, and then simply adapt whatever religious perspective seems most fitting to this *a priori* environmental goal. More fundamental questions must be asked: How do we know that a particular environmental ethic is good? Does the newly chosen religious position have any validity other than to justify our personally chosen environmental ethic?

B. The Need for a Basis for Ethics.

Neo-pagans<sup>1</sup> routinely adduce the need for immanence and connectedness in ones spirituality in order to correct the supposed destruction of the environment that they deem caused by the Judeo-Christian understanding of a transcendent God who created humans in His image

and gave them dominion over the earth. Rosemary Radford Ruether claims that the Biblical creation story was borrowed from the Babylonians, changed to make the male God pre-eminent, and turn the “primal Mother” into formless “stuff.”<sup>2</sup> She then asserts that Christianity synthesized the Hebrew account and Greek science to come up with the idea of God creating *ex nihilo*.<sup>3</sup> She writes, “But Christian philosophical theology objected to this [her idea that the Hebrew creation account did not teach creation out of nothing] possibility of the eternal co-existence of ‘Matter,’ since it suggests a source of being parallel to God. This challenged God's absolute sovereignty.”<sup>4</sup>

However, Ruether has no way of proving the eternal existence of matter or validating the ancient myths she draws upon. The idea of gods and goddesses whose ontological status is highly questionable has little to commend it. Pagan deities lack the essential qualities of deity, therefore either do not exist or are lesser beings than the true God. For example, God is eternal and non-contingent. Traditional paganism did not view their “gods” in this way. They fought with each other, could be eliminated, and had many undesirable characteristics. There can only be one being with the essential qualities of deity.

### C. “Gods” Created in the Image of Fallen Humankind.

Clearly pagan “gods” are created in the image of fallen humankind. Any student of mythology knows the sad exploits of the immoral and fickle pagan gods. They showed little concern for the well-being of humans or the earth. They demanded child sacrifice, wrecked havoc upon their sorry constituents for no discernable reason, and demanded constant placation from humans who could never figure out what the “gods” really wanted. As the church fathers pointed out to the Romans, the gods are worse than most people. This being the case, how can they prove any ethic, much less an environmental one. If there is no transcendent, creator, then there is no revealed absolute, and no ultimate judge to whom we are accountable. With no

absolutes and no judge, why should we feel compelled to follow any particular ethical prescription, including an environmental one?

#### D. No Transcendent God Means no Absolute Ethic.

Consider Michael Dowd's perspective, "It is important to note here that at no point in time during the past four and a half billion years, the age of our solar system, did anyone come from the outside and put anything on the planet. God is the *inner* dynamic guiding the process, the living reality revealed in the through creation."<sup>5</sup> This means there can be no external, transcendent deity to speak to us or judge us. So how do we know what we ought to do? Dowd's idea is that we are the consciousness of the earth. "The human person is the sum total of 15 billion years of unbroken evolution now thinking about itself."<sup>6</sup> In this case, we have the collective consciousness of all humans to guide us. But does this collective consciousness provide a uniform, unambiguous environmental ethic? The confusion and strong differences of opinions that exist show us that it does not. No absolute, environmental ethic finds its basis in the supposed mind of the universe expressing itself in universal human consciousness. Clearly this meta-ethical system has no way to invalidate the consciousness of people who consider humankind to have a right to indiscriminate use of all natural resources. Surely those who have these thoughts are also part of the supposed "earth thinking about itself."

This leaves us with no basis for adjudicating rival ethical claims. Neo-paganism with its earth goddesses, Gaia, panentheism, and other immanent versions of religion have not shown how they have a meta-ethical basis for their own prescriptions. Most neo-pagans also rely heavily on the idea of evolution.<sup>7</sup> But this yields no absolute ethic. Kenneth O. Gangel comments on the results of belief in evolution: "There is no destiny. There is no purpose. There is no significance. And therefore there are no laws, no duty, and no morality."<sup>8</sup>

## II. Prescriptive Ethics of Neo-pagans

### A. The Supposed “Need” to Reject Biblical Theism to Save the Environment.

Lacking a solid, meta-ethical foundation has not stopped neo-pagans from formulating ethical prescriptions. The first of these is the supposed need to jettison the idea of a transcendent Creator and adopt a non-dualistic (meaning there is no ontological distinction between the Creator and the creation) understanding of the universe. Matthew Fox writes, “There can be no respect for our place in the environment and the environment's place in us without a spirituality that teaches us reverence for the cosmos in which we find ourselves. The reigning spirituality of patriarchal culture of the West has not been friendly to the environment. . .”<sup>9</sup> Fox's antidote? — “But there is another tradition of spirituality in the West. That tradition, the creation-centered one, considers the environment itself to be a divine womb, holy, worthy of reverence and respect. We are in divinity and the divinity is in us according to this tradition — and by ‘we’ I do not mean merely the two-legged ones but the entire universe. . .”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to elaborate six needed themes for “ecological consciousness” which include such things as “cosmic consciousness, a theology of panentheism, [and] the motherhood of God and the human vocation to co-create the cosmos.”<sup>11</sup>

### B. Neo-pagans Propose an Identification of the “Self” with the Universe

Joanna Macy in an essay entitled, *The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action*, sees non-dualistic religion, particularly Buddhism, as the means to stave off certain ecological annihilation.<sup>12</sup> After declaring a planetary crisis, she touts Buddhism's idea of a

“*bodhisattva -- an `awakening being`*”<sup>13</sup> as the way to transcending the boundaries of “self” to become an ecological self. The result is to have a sense of self that is connected with the whole. “It can change the way that the self is experienced through a spontaneous process of ever-widening identification. It launches one on a process of self-realization, where the self-to-be-realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of the phenomenal world.”<sup>14</sup>

What is interesting about this approach to environmental ethics, is that it supposedly requires no virtue. The idea is that if we see ourselves as the whole, not individual persons, then we will simply operate in a mode in which we will not harm ourselves by nature — since self is the environment. “Please note: Virtue is not required for the emergence of the ecological self! This shift in identification is essential to our survival at this point in our history precisely because it can serve in lieu of ethics and morality.”<sup>15</sup>

The self-contradiction of this position is evident. It is presupposed that taking care of the environment is good. Then, we are told that we ought to choose to<sup>16</sup> develop this ecological self by adopting this religious and philosophical outlook. Yet there is supposedly no need for ethics or morality. Is it wrong to not care about the environment, not be concerned if the planet is about to perish, and not develop the ecological self? If so, then there is an ethic after all.

### C. Neo-paganism Proposes the Rejection of Humankind’s Dominion

The major prescription neo-pagans agree upon is the need to abandon the Biblical idea of the uniqueness of human life as created in God’s image, and particularly the teaching of humankind’s place of dominion over other the earth. Jim Mason identifies dominion as a key problem.<sup>17</sup> His prescription is the adoption of paganism “updated” with science: “My own view is that the primal worldview, updated by a scientific understanding of the living world, offers the

best hope for a human spirituality. . . With dominionism out of the way, we could enjoy a deep sense of kinship with the other animals, which would give us a deep sense of belonging to our living world.”<sup>18</sup>

Neo-paganism is called “panentheism” by many of its proponents. This view of reality hopes for a raised consciousness and cooperation among humans to ward off supposed certain environmental destruction. However, it cannot provide a means to assure this cooperation. Norman Geisler asks, “[H]ow can the panentheistic god achieve a better world through human cooperation when most men are totally unaware of such a god or his purposes?”<sup>19</sup>

### III. Descriptive Analysis

#### A. Paganism Has not Historically Resulted in a Better Environment.

Neo-pagans have graphically described the “horrible” environmental situation in the “Christian” West. However, their idea that pagan societies treat the environment better can be shown to be without merit. One merely needs to observe the situation around the world.

Consider the astute observations of Ruth and Vishal Mangalwadi, natives of India: “Today, there is a naive and mistaken notion in the West that our environmental crisis is a result of the human desire to have dominion over creation. . . . The environmental mess in India, which is far worse than in the industrialized West, is a clear indication that the worship of nature damages creation more than do our attempts to manage it.”<sup>20</sup>

#### B. Christians, Not Atheists or Polytheistic Pagans Have a Better Environmental Record

The environmental record of socialist countries who historically denied the Biblical doctrines of creation and dominion is also appalling. Interestingly, many neo-pagan,

environmental extremists see more government control as a good thing. Ronald Nash points out, “Since the primary agent of environmental activism is big government, it is interesting to ask why so many environmentalists ignore the abominable environmental record of socialist states—the epitome of big and coercive government.”<sup>21</sup> Neo-pagan environmentalists seem loath to face the obvious fact that those who hold and practice their beliefs take worse care of the environment than the ones they vilify!

Vishal Mangalwadi uses irony to point out the foolishness of the pagan position: “Therefore, because of his ‘patriarchal’ world-view, he [William Carey] became the first man to plead for the forests of India, and started a forestry programme in his seminary at Serapore. Worship of the goddess did not result in a concern for the environment in India.”<sup>22</sup> Paganism did not help the environment in the past, nor will it now.

### Conclusion

Neo-paganism provides no meta-ethical basis for establishing an absolute ethic, it fails to give valid, workable prescriptions for solving environmental problems, and has failed the environment where it has been practiced. Conversely, the Biblical teaching of creation by the transcendent Creator gives a basis for moral absolutes, and therefore can and does provide workable and working environmental ethics.

## End Notes

1. I use this term inclusively, since many names are used of this rather amorphous movement, such as eco-feminism, wicca, goddess cults of various descriptions, or more technical terms such as panentheism. They have in common the notion of immanent spirituality and God(s) or Goddess(es) who are not transcendent in the sense understood by Christian Theism.

2. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God, An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 19.

3. Ibid., 26.

4. Ibid.

5. Michael Dowd, *Earthspirit: A Handbook for Nurturing and Ecological Christianity* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1991), 18.

6. Ibid. 17, unfootnoted quotation attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

7. Ibid. 13, Dowd has a section entitled, "Our New Evolutionary Cosmology." His idea is that the universe evolved and eventually developed self-consciousness.

8. Kenneth O. Gangel, "Moral Entropy, Creation, and the Battle for the Mind," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137, no. 546 (April/June 1980): 164.

9. Matthew Fox, *Wrestling with the Prophets; Essays on Creation Spirituality and Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 76.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 78.

12. Joanna Macy, "The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action" in *Sacred Interconnections, Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*, ed. David Ray Griffin (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 35-48.

13. Ibid., 43.

14. Ibid., 45.

15. Ibid., 46.

16. Ibid., She tells her readers that this it is a choice to develop the ecological self.

17. Jim Mason, *An Unnatural Order, Uncovering the Roots of our Dominion of Nature and Each Other* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 28-32.

18. Ibid., 298.

19. Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 210.

20. Ruth & Vishal Mangalwadi, *William Carey, A Tribute by an Indian Woman* (New Delhi, India: Good Books, 1993), 63.

21. Calvin B DeWitt and Ronald Nash, “Point-Counterpoint: The Christian and Environmental Issues” *The Christian Research Journal* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 45.

22. Vishal Mangalwadi, *When the New Age Gets Old — Looking for a Greater Spirituality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsityPress, 1992), 134.

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