

The footprints of God and the face of Dionysius

Introduction

As a student in the U.K. in the 1960s I was involved in animal welfare and environmental campaigns. There were few of us. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* had been written but was not widely known (at least in the U.K.), and the term 'environment' had not yet become a stock term in the public vocabulary.

I have found extraordinary the growth of public awareness and concern since those days. To be sure, it needs to spread more widely and grow more vigorous yet; and it needs to translate into political will. And meanwhile environmental problems are becoming more and more serious.

Christians are called to environmental concern not just as a matter of prudence but as responsible stewards of God's creation. More still, we are called to share God's own delight in creation; and to delight in God as creation evokes in us wonder at the huge mystery of God's ways.

I've no doubt that this remains today our most important calling as Christians, with regard to the environment. And yet we must sow discernment. For the environmental cause can get linked with distortions which are ultimately of a spiritual nature. In what follows I explore these. On the one hand, we must honour better God's creation, and we must certainly not indiscriminately dismiss enthusiasm for the environment as spiritually distorted. On the other hand, we must be aware of the danger of distortion.

What is neo-paganism?

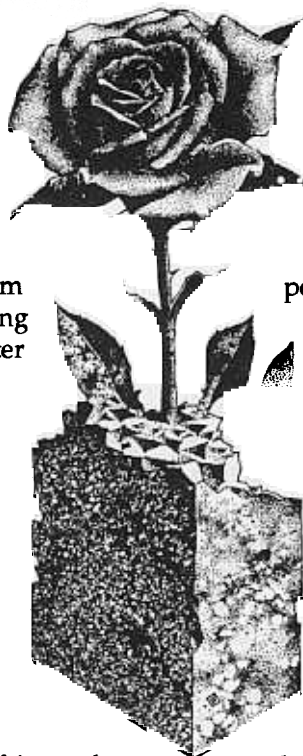
My eight year old son once said to me "Dad, don't you think the world would be a better place without human

beings?" When I asked him why, he said that the world of nature was nice on its own, but human beings spoil it. I knew what he meant. But what do you make of a young boy, from a Christian family, thinking the world might be a better place without human beings – presumably himself included?

A Massey student wrote in the campus newspaper a while ago about the poor in India. He remarked with some impatience "Aren't human beings part of the environment too? Don't they deserve our concern too, like the dolphins and whales?"

Perhaps these remarks raise only matters of passing concern. After all, it is surely understandable if in our passion to affirm what we have in the past neglected in the environment, we overlook, for a moment, some of the demands made upon us by our own humankind? The moment will pass, and our concerns will become more balanced.

Or will they? There is another possibility – that nature's moment may be hijacked by a mix of false ideology and perverse impulse which sets us on a rather different road – one which points *away* from a proper



delight in God, ourselves and our environment. One that involves a wrong exaltation of 'nature'. The way that we call pagan.

In order to tune into this possibility we must see the connections between modern environmental concern and a host of other elements in modern western culture. These include on the one hand the popularity of alternative, holistic therapies, physical exercise, healthy eating, and self-care in general. On the other hand is our awareness of ethical issues raised

by, for example, genetic engineering (what does it mean, if anything, wrongly to 'play God?') and the growth of intellectual property rights (what does it mean, if anything, wrongly to privatise God's creation?).

So what is involved in the wrong, pagan exaltation of 'nature'? Firstly, we now hold nature in primary regard – to be worshipped and feared as that upon which we depend utterly. But we ourselves are *excluded* from this which has our primary regard. We become problematic to ourselves. Secondly, we now seek a way out of our painful exclusion from our primary regard by seeking to be *absorbed into* the realm of nature. I shall rely on this as a tentative definition for paganism.

Max Champion describes modern paganism, or neo-paganism, as follows:

Neo-paganism is an all-embracing philosophy of life in which nature is worshipped and

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where the goal of life is to fulfil the possibilities of human nature in harmony with the energies inherent in nature itself. Great stress is placed on fertility, sensuality and pleasure, to create a thoroughgoing vitalism which seeks the intensification of life rather than its transformation. God is identified with nature and human beings are defined almost entirely in terms of their ability to realise their own physical and spiritual potential. God is not the Creator and Sustainer of nature, and human beings are not ungodly people redeemed by God's grace.¹

The best introduction to neo-paganism I know is an article written back in 1977 by Visser 'T. Hooft, then President of the World Council of Churches, and called 'Evangelism among Europe's Neo-Pagans'.²

How serious a matter would be a real flowering of paganism? According to some, very serious indeed. Listen to John Williams:

If 'nature' bears a Godlike face, that face is the face of humanity. Which is just what one would expect if human beings truly are made in the imago dei, the image of God ... Nature is not divine. It is the creation of God, not a god or goddess. When treated as divine, the superficially benign face of nature is revealed for what it is. Invariably, human sacrifice is demanded. The worshippers of Ashtaroth and Baal did it. The Aztecs did it. The devotees of the eerie nature religion informing Nazism did it. Not surprisingly, the 'deep ecologists' recommend it ...³

Williams quotes one author as writing "Massive human diebacks would be good. It is our duty to cause them. It is our species' duty, relative to the whole, to eliminate ninety percent of our numbers."

Williams describes the ideological face of paganism. Paganism also finds expression in our impulsive life. Here we see the face of the pagan Greek God Dionysius – violent, sensual, anarchic, ecstatic. Angela Tilby discerns his contours on today's television screen:

... the television world is a world alive to paganism. I don't mean the benign, liberal-minded paganism of so-called

ecofeminists and post-Christians, who want to save the world by invoking the Great Goddess, but the paganism that resides in Western ways of seeing, in our visual culture, from Greek sculpture to Madonna. This paganism is part of our culture ... the culture of the theatre and the hippodrome ... Television is where we play out our most potent fantasies of power, sex and violence.⁴

The paganism I have been describing may seem to you far removed from your own delight in, and respect for, nature. And maybe it is. Maybe you are nowhere near being pagan. In which case, if someone else thinks you are, they may need telling, lifting a phrase from Australian evangelist John Smith, "You've been sniffing too

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much cement." And yet paganism is around, it is potent in its attraction and we ignore it at our peril.

A theological framework

Having got the flavour of paganism, so to speak, let's now construct a theological framework for our thinking.

We are summoned to live in proper relation (both in our hearts and our thinking) to God, with ourselves, and to our world.

This relation may become distorted in one way or another. In each case the distortion may find ideological and impulsive expression.

Let me describe three possible distortions. **In the first place** we, humankind, may become centred upon ourselves as an end in ourselves, treating the environment merely as a means to our own ends. We use it how we like. We get involved in a wrong exploitation of the natural world.

On the face of it this attitude is too human-centred, and needs to be

corrected by giving more weight to nature. However, equally it is not human-centred enough: it is too narrow in its practical understanding of humanity. We need to start again with God. When weight is given to God, both humanity and creation are seen in their true light. And starting rather with God does not detract from humanity; on the contrary, it affirms it most truly.

In the second place we may become centred upon creation as an end in itself – an end which we serve. It is not our place to interfere with nature – who are we to do this? Here we get involved in a wrong exaltation of the natural world.

On the face of it this attitude is too environment-centred, and needs to be corrected by giving more weight to humanity. However, equally it is not environment-centred enough: it imposes on the natural world a meaning projected onto it (wrongly) by humankind. By starting again with God, we release nature to be itself, and to be as such the free gift of God to us – something to be both treated responsibly and enjoyed in wonder.

In the third place we may become centred upon God as the end of human life and of creation – but in a particular way: We oppose God to human life and to creation, making these merely a means to God's end. We order creation, and order our own lives, according to what God dictates.

On the face of it this attitude is, as we would have to put it, too 'God'-centred. It asks to be corrected by giving more weight to humanity and to creation in their own right. But the truth is that this attitude is not God-centred enough: it imposes on God a meaning projected onto God by humankind. According to the Franciscan St Bonaventure, when we start more truly with God, we know God in three ways: we know God in himself; we know the image of God in humankind; and we know the footprints of God in nature. God is immanent as well as transcendent. This is the truth so deep in the souls of Christians in the Celtic tradition

and in the Eastern Orthodox churches. It is a valuable corrective to ideas of a God remote from creation who, as a human projection, is neither immanent nor for that matter truly transcendent.

I have expressed repeatedly, ambivalence towards any idea of 'balancing' the demands of humanity and nature against each other. To let God into the picture is to start with God, and this means letting go any idea of humankind or of nature as themselves starting-points to be balanced, and allowing God to form a different and new horizon to live in.

From exploitation to celebration

Let me focus in again on my main theme, the wrong exaltation of nature. In our modern world this originates partly in a true movement away from its opposite, namely, the wrong exploitation of nature. This exploitation is in turn associated with a wider culture of modernity in which we find ourselves alienated from each other, from ourselves, and from the natural world. Against this background, we can find God speaking to us in a special way through nature. God speaks to us through nature not just in one way but many, including:

Self-forgetful attention

In nature we meet a reality which beckons us, which draws out of us a deep attentiveness. Whether it is a busy insect or a vast landscape which captures us, we forget ourselves, and in the process we are cleansed, refreshed and renewed.

Respect and wonder

The whole realm of nature in all its subtle complexity and interdependence evokes in us a sense of respect, even of reverence. Where we had always thought of ourselves as pioneers bringing order to hostile, chaotic nature, now we see in nature a wonder to be marvelled at – and appreciated with respect. This world reflects the wonderful ways of God.

The givenness of the natural world

We hear so much today about the need for us to choose and pursue our life goals. It's all in our hands. Nature offers us another world – one to which we belong, a world of given life, including the life we have ourselves been given. Nature speaks of the self-giving, the gracefulness of God, and of the paramount need for us to be receptive.

'Signs' of spiritual realities

The material things of nature speak to us of things spiritual. Food and drink, healing, air, warming sunshine and the shelter of shade – each speaks to us of our spiritual sustenance. The natural environment speaks to us of God our spiritual environment.

Our involvement in husbandry

Where we have spent our lives making products and throwing them away, nature calls us to tend and attend as responsible gardeners and shepherds. We walk around that which has its own life, nurturing, enhancing and guarding it. So too we attend to God's life in those around us ...

"Nature speaks of the self-giving, the gracefulness of God, and of the paramount need for us to be receptive."

More on the pagan distortion

In these and other ways God speaks to us in our encounter with nature. Yet each can get distorted into a false, pagan exaltation of nature.

I leave the reader to recognise the potential for distortion in each of the above. I want now to highlight three important sources in modern western culture which can feed, with distortion, into paganism.

(1) The first is the western ROMANTIC HERITAGE. Christians have varied in their response to Ro-

manticism. Among poets, for example, Wordsworth and Milton experienced nature spiritually; whereas Gerard Manley Hopkins felt himself seduced by nature, and experienced his feelings towards the natural world as a form of temptation. Today Anne-Wilson Schaeff speaks, in a way which would have sounded strange not long ago, of 'Romance Addiction'. To do justice to this topic would require far more space than is available here, but I believe the issue of a Christian response to Romanticism in general is as important today as that of a Christian response to the Enlightenment itself.

(2) The second potential source of paganism today lies in the campaign for ENVIRONMENTAL 'RIGHTS'. Here in New Zealand there are already many people concerned for the environment in general; and there is the beginning of an animal welfare protest movement. Neville Gregory, newly appointed Professor of Animal Welfare at Massey University, emphasises that animal welfare campaigners are already a potent political force in Europe and a potential threat to New Zealand markets there.

In an age where moral language is suspect, the language of rights offers a way of expressing the requirement that we show regard towards someone or something irrespective of whether we happen to *feel* such regard. Yet, we realise increasingly today, the

language of rights is easily abused. In particular, because fighting for rights brings a sense of identity and purpose, people may adopt a crusade for this reason alone – to acquire a self-image which brings blessed relief from feelings of worthlessness, anonymity, and aimlessness. In this case they are exploiting the language of rights to their own personal ends. And they will use it indiscriminately for this purpose.

Most of us would find indiscriminate use of the language of rights, justice and prejudice in the following:

'To avoid injustice, all individuals ought to be treated equally, regard-

less of race, gender, age, religion, or species ... Animal liberation requires the abolition of the use of animals in science, the end of commercial animal agriculture and a ban on hunting for sport.' (italics mine)⁵

'What it all boils down to is prejudice. If we can be prejudiced against a person of a different colour, then what about something that's furry, four-legged, that doesn't speak our language?'⁶ (said by the owner of dogs, unpopular with his neighbours).

(3) The third potential cultural source of paganism today is self-absorption or NARCISSISM. Despairing of the world around us we turn to ourselves for comfort. Treated by medical technology as impersonal biochemical systems, we turn to fantasies of Godlike personal wholeness. In our eyes we secretly become, paradoxically, at once childlike and Godlike. Childlike: we become the centre of our universe, demanding unqualified attention and the unqualified fulfilment of our felt needs, in a state of utter dependence, absorbed into mother nature. Godlike: we see ourselves as in control and able freely to secure what we need.

But of course the world does not meet our needs, and the desert into which God leads us, if we are not transformed, produces in us only rage and shame. When exercise and diet do not produce health, when beauty does not produce happiness, we only feel worse about ourselves. The pagan intensification of life easily leads us more deeply into the vortex of disillusionment with ourselves and the world.

Closing comments on paganism

Two facts about paganism especially need to be acknowledged. Firstly, nature is not to blame, so to speak, for paganism. Paganism has its origins in us, not in nature, and indeed paganism distorts nature. The pagan attitude can show equally in our attitude towards the 'second nature' of human culture. Jacques Ellul writes of this. Darrell Fasching expresses

Ellul's views:

The artificial environment of the technological society has replaced nature as that all-encompassing environment of life-creating and life-destroying powers upon which we experience ourselves as absolutely dependent for existence. Hence technological society unconsciously evokes from us the religious emotions of fascinations and dread which nature once did. Now as then, such emotions seduce us into total surrender to those powers which seem to govern our destiny ...⁷

Secondly, while on the surface paganism is about, as Champion writes, the 'intensification of life', underneath it is fed by despair of life. Paganism is not about self-affirmation but about despair of ourselves and of the world.

Little less than the angels

Which brings us back to the beginning, and to my son's suggestion that the world would be a better place without human beings.

We need to understand that of all the delightful things in the natural world, in God's eyes we are the most delightful. This is how Thomas Traherne speaks first of the created world and then of himself:

O what love must that needs be, that prepared such a palace! Attended with what power! With what wisdom illuminated! Abounding with what zeal! And how glorious must the King be, that could out of nothing erect such a curious, so great, and so beautiful a fabric! It was glorious while new: and is as new as it was glorious.

But this is small. What O my Lord, could I desire to be which thou hast not made me! If thou hast expressed thy love in furnishing the house, how gloriously doth it shine in the possessor! ... what creature could I desire to be which I am not made? Since God is the most glorious of all beings, and the most blessed, couldst thou wish any more than to be His Image! ... What creature, what being, what thing more glorious could there be!⁸

But what of our guilt, our exploitation of each other and of the palace in which we are set? Let

George MacDonald have the last word:

What makes me evil and miserable is that the thing spoiled in me is the image of the perfect. No, no! Nothing can make it that I am not a child of God. If one say 'Look at the animals: God made them: you do not call them the children of God!' I answer, 'But I am to blame: they are not to blame! I cling fast to my blame: it is the seal of my childhood ... Ah, I would not lose my blame! In my blame lies my hope!⁹ ■

Endnotes

1. Max Champion, 'Pluralism and Christianity', *The Auburn Report*, Vol. 5, No. 2, April 1993.*
 2. W. Visser 'T Hooft, 'Evangelism among Europe's Neo-Pagans', *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 66 (4), 1977.*
 3. John Williams, in *Religion and Liberty*, Acton Institute.
 4. Angela Tilby, 'Like the Appearance of Lamps ...', *Theology*, Vol. 97, No. 779, Sept/Oct 1994.
 5. Letter to the Editor, *Guardian Weekly*.
 6. Staff writer in a local U.S. newspaper.
 7. Darrell J. Fasching, 'Theologian of Culture', *Cross Currents*, 35 (1), Spring 1985.*
 8. Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, First Century, 65-67.
 9. George MacDonald, 'Abba, Father!', *Unspoken Sermons* (Second Series). Quoted in C. S. Lewis (ed); *George MacDonald, An Anthology*, 1946.
- * These articles are available through ACCESS, 8A Peart View, Auckland 1005.

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