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Evangelism Among Europe's Neo-pagans

W. A. Visser 'T. Hooft

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This refreshing and prophetic article written seventeen years ago by a highly respected theologian and ecumenical churchman exposes the falseness of the theory of 'religionlessness of the secularized man'. The author traces the history of neo-paganism in Europe, analyzes its theological and philosophical roots in terms of impersonal cosmic monism, life force and the identity of God with nature. He asks why theologians and ecumenical consultations have largely ignored the issue. His exposure of the eros versus agape love debate is even more relevant today for us living before sex saturated media. Visser 'T. Hooft concludes that the evangelization of neo-pagan Europe must be given the highest priority among the tasks of the Church.

Editor

In the discussions concerning the evangelistic task of the European churches we have given far too little attention to the considerable growth of non-Christian religious movements. We have described, analyzed, x-rayed the post-Christian secularized representative of the so-called without religion. I do not deny that type of human being exists and that we must seek to find ways to reach him with the Christian message. But I believe that there is another type of European, no less representative of the large body of people, who is no longer in regular contact with the churches and that this type is specifically religious.

EUROPEAN PAGANISM TODAY

Is it right to call them 'neo-pagans'? I do so with some hesitation because I **P. 336** realize that the word pagan is nowadays considered an unfriendly or anachronistic expression. But it is still the best word to characterize the non-Christian who holds a religious conviction and who must therefore not be classified with atheists. Though it is possible, although not certain, that it originally meant country-people as distinguished from city-people, it has by no means always carried a flavour of inferiority. Goethe who cannot possibly be suspected of lack of self-respect, described himself in his correspondence with Jacobi and Lavater as a pagan. C. G. Jung who had a great admiration for the non-Christian religions uses the interesting term, Europe's 'internal pagans', which he distinguishes from the external pagans to which Christian missions bring the gospel.

Where are these European neo-pagans to be found? How many are they? We will not find the answer in the official statistics. On the contrary. Those statistics generally give the impression that with the exception of the small number of Jews and a larger number of non-Christian immigrants and foreign workers, nearly all West Europeans are Christians. Thus in the last World Christian Handbook (1976) the total Christian community in Sweden is listed at 7,500,000 in a population of 7,630,000. Switzerland is supposed to have 5,190,000 Christians in a population of 5,420,000, The two Germanies together have 72 million Christians in a population of 75 million. Lucky Europe with such brilliant statistics! Compare those with the percentage of Christians in the USA which remains vastly below this marvellous record. (7 out of 10 US citizens are related to a church according to a 1977 Gallup poll.)

Now it is clear that there is something wrong with this picture. These statistics contain even greater lies than statistics generally do. The best explanation is in the story of the Edinburgh professor who, at the time of the negotiations between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, declared that he was vehemently opposed to union between the two churches. His friends said: 'But you have always told us that you were an atheist, so why do you care?' He answered: 'I am an atheist, but a Presbyterian atheist.'

That is not simply a silly story, for it reflects a very widespread phenomenon which has not yet been sufficiently analyzed. Goethe called himself, as we saw, a pagan and '*ein dezidierter nicht-Christ*' (a determined non-Christian) identified himself with Protestantism and spoke of 'we Protestants'. And we have, of course, today the shocking example of the conflict in Ulster which is generally described as a conflict between Catholics and Protestants, but which continues in spite of the leaders of the historical churches and is therefore a fight between bad Catholics and bad Protestants. Similarly, there are in Europe large masses of what we may call statistical Christians who for one reason or another continue to be counted as church members though, in fact, their lives are controlled by non-Christian convictions. It is among these that we find the neo-pagans. Ernst Troeltsch in his '*Soziallehren*', written in 1911, speaks of the '*heimliche Religion der Gebildeten*' (the [p. 337](#) secret religion of the intellectuals). According to him this is immanentist, pantheistic spiritualism which has turned its back on the ecclesiastical tradition of salvation based on the specific and unique revelation. 'Secret' this religion could be called because it did not take public institutional form and its adherents remained generally members of Christian churches.

Again worker priests in France have come to the conclusion that religion in so far as it exists among the masses is for the most part 'primitive paganism with some Christian survivals'. So, while the statistics continue to present a Christian Europe, serious diagnosis tells us that Europe is now largely a '*pays de mission*', and the thinking of the church leaders is still, consciously or unconsciously, dominated by the 'Corpus Christianum' concept.

The masses outside the churches are considered lapsed Christians who need to be 'recalled' to an active participation in church life. Wichern defined the 'Innere Mission' as the renewal or winning back of the masses in Christendom that have fallen under the power of sin. Even in the terminology used in evangelism it becomes clear that most evangelists take for granted that their audience has learned at home or in Sunday school the meaning of the main biblical concepts. I have heard a world-famous evangelist speaking for an hour on repentance without ever explaining in words which an outsider could understand, what repentance really means.

Now there is surely need for an evangelism of revival and renewal. There are millions of lapsed Christians who need to hear anew what the gospel offers them. But there are today in Europe even more millions who are not adequately described as lapsed Christians, because they have in fact turned to another religion.

But is it really possible for men and women who are the products of an old Christian civilization to return to paganism? Van Leeuwen in his well-known book *Christianity and World History* has denied this. His thesis is that secularization is irreversible: 'Once the ontocratic (pagan, primitive, naturalistic) pattern of the pagan religions has been disrupted fundamentally, there can be no returning to a pre-Christian situation.'

National socialism was an attempt to restore paganism. 'The fact that it failed shows that the way back to the pre-Christian religious pattern has become impossible' (p. 333).

This thesis seemed to confirm the theory about the religion-less period which Bonhoeffer had developed in his letters from prison and also the sociological theory concerning the fourth man who was supposed to be post-bourgeois, post-Christian and

post-religious. So, in the discussions concerning evangelism, attention was concentrated on the modern secular man who had no use for religion in any shape or form, and the emergence of neo-paganism was considered an irrelevant phenomenon which could not last long.

But in recent years this whole diagnosis of our European situation has become much less convincing. Hoekendijk with his sharp eyes noted already in 1952 that there was not only a process of secularization, [p. 338](#) but also a process of sacralization, the growth of a mystical, diffused religiosity and that it was therefore by no means certain that the fourth man would be post-religious. M. M. Thomas, looking at Europe from the outside, wrote in his critique of van Leeuwen's book: 'It may be difficult for the West to return to the cosmic monism of paganism. But it is not impossible.' It is also interesting that Joseph Smolik, writing from the perspective of the East European situation, says that he cannot accept the theory of the religionlessness of secularized man.

In one of his most penetrating studies of the European and, more particularly, the German situation, which appeared precisely at the time of the victory of national socialism in Germany, and which remained therefore virtually unknown for a long time (*'Sozialistische Entscheidung'*), Paul Tillich described the great forces in European life. There was the pressure of ontocracy which he called the *'Ursprungsmythische Mächte'*, the primitive sub-structure of life: blood, race, nation, soil. The power of this ontocracy had been resisted by the prophetic Jewish tradition. And in the rationalistic movement culminating in the 18th century Enlightenment, the attempt had been made to suppress these primitive forces. In modern technology, technocracy and capitalism, reason had won a great victory, but we are nowadays witnessing a tremendous reaction against this bourgeois rationalism. There has arisen a political romanticism which preaches the return to the original vital realities.

Tillich made it clear that, while the absolutizing of the original elements of life could lead only to a total collapse of civilization, the underestimation of these forces was also dangerous. A true socialism would have to give a very real place to them. Tillich also made the important point that political romanticism could take either a conservative or a revolutionary form. It could try to restore the ancient structures, but it could also seek to start from scratch in the building of a society based on the expression of instinctive life rather than on the sovereignty of reason. Now it seems to me that Tillich has implicitly rejected *'avant la lettre'* van Leeuwen's thesis that after the time of secularization, paganism is no longer a possible option. The ontocratic forces may be driven back, even forced to go into hiding, but they do not disappear and make their come-back as soon as the occasion offers itself. It is therefore an illusion to think that the defeat of national socialism proves the impotence of neo-paganism. For what is striking about the Hitler period in Germany is precisely that it was possible for an essentially neo-pagan ideology to reduce to submission a nation of thinkers, scientists, poets and technicians. Its defeat had to come from the outside. All our Western nations should consider this as a tremendous warning.

It is, of course, true that post-secular paganism is not quite the same as pre-secular paganism. The post-secular form does not have the naïveté, the simplicity, the tolerance of the ancient paganism. The modern form is self-conscious, convulsive, intolerant and aggressive. This can be illustrated by the development [p. 339](#) of paganism in Western Europe. I will not try to include Eastern Europe in this little survey, because its religious and ideological history differs in important respects from that of Western Europe.

NEO-PAGANISM IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

Paganism is far more deeply rooted in European history than is generally realized. We have innumerable church histories and histories of Christian thought in Europe. We have histories of atheism and materialism. But we have no histories of paganism in Europe.

What would be the main chapters in such a history? It would begin by raising the question of in how far, in the early Middle Ages, Europe was really christianized. Is Jung right when he says that Christianity in Europe is like a cathedral built on the foundations of a pagan temple and that the Christian message has not really reached the deeper regions of the soul of European man? Our historian would look into the theory of gnostic influence in the religion of the Cathares and of the literature of the troubadours. He would describe the ambiguous character of philosophy in the Renaissance as it drank at the same time at Christian and pagan sources. One of the first influential modern pagans is Giordano Bruno, whose traces we find in Italy, France, Switzerland, England, Germany and Bohemia. For him God is the world-soul, not the Creator. God can take on innumerable forms and names. The Hebrews in the desert were quite right in adoring the golden calf. Bruno was burnt in Rome in 1600. Julius Caesar Vannini, who had similar ideas and was also condemned to death by the Inquisition, had the nerve to publish a book with the provocative title: *'De admirandis Naturae, reginae deaeque mortalium arcanis'*, and the book was published in 1616 with the permission of the Sorbonne. So it is not astonishing that Johannes Kepler, the pioneer of modern astronomy, put the new religious approach in this way to an opponent who defended orthodoxy: *'Tibi Deus in naturam venit, mihi natura ad divinitatem aspirat'*. The starting point has become nature, not the revelation in Christ.

Our historian would describe how after a period of relative calm at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century there comes what Paul Hazard has called: *'La Crise de la Conscience Européenne'*. Spinoza died in 1677. He had not dared to publish his main work, the *'Ethica'*, but it was published soon after his death. Here we have a consistent, impressive conception of life which has quite consciously broken with the whole Judeo-Christian tradition. It is not surprising that he is officially cursed by the Jewish synagogue and that his books are forbidden by the Christian magistrate. But it is not right to call him an atheist. Voltaire wrote about him that he

*Marchant à pas comptés, s'approcha du Grand Etre
Pardonne-moi, dit-il, en lui parlant tout bas,
Mais je pense, entre nous, que vous n'existez pas.*

(A little Jew, with measured steps approached the Almighty's Throne p. 340
Excuse me for a word not meant for outside ears:
I don't think you exist, he said in softest tone.)

In fact, Spinoza was a deeply religious man. But his religion has little to do with the Bible. His God is the impersonal God whose activity coincides wholly with the activity of nature. *'Deus sive Natura'*. So any specific action or revelation of God is excluded. He says the idea 'that God should have taken on human nature seems to me as absurd as to say that a circle has taken on the nature of a quadrangle'. For the time being, very few thinkers dare to go as far as Spinoza. But there is a general tendency to question the old certainties. As other religions become better known, as the deadlock between the Christian confessions becomes a problem for many, the question arises whether there is not a 'natural religion' behind and in all the historical religions, and the 'deists' in England, the rationalists in France, the *Aufklärungs*-thinkers in Germany seek to define that universal religion over against traditional Christianity with its specific revelation and its claim of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

In the eighteenth century, most of this new thinking is intellectualistic, but in the later years of the century, when the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau reaches all European countries, natural religion becomes a matter of feeling and experience. While Rousseau uses Christian terminology, his concern is not with the content of the Christian gospel, but with the insights arising from the inner light. The Savoy vicar tells 'Emile' to listen to the voice of nature and not to the voices of men. And so when Goethe describes in Faust the spiritual adventure of European man, he lets him confess his faith in words which carry an echo of both Spinoza and Rousseau:

*'Nenn's Glück! Herz! Liebe! Gott!
Ich habe keinen Namen
Dafür! Gefühl ist alles;
Name ist Schall und Rauch
Umnebelnd Himmelsglut!'*

(A name is only noise and smoke, obscuring the heavenly glow)

Now it is clear that Christianity has ceased to be the one representative religion of Europe. There is another religion, in some ways more representative because its adherents are writers, philosophers and teachers, and this religion is a cosmic monism which has clear affinity to pre-Christian paganism.

The great poets mourn for the ancient gods. Since Christianity became victorious, the world has become empty, nature has lost its glamour. Schiller sings about the gods of Greece:

*'Ja, sie kehrten heim, und alles Schöne,
Alles Hohe nahmen sie mit fort,
Alle Farben, alle Lebenstöne,
Und uns blieb nur das entseelte Wort.'*

And Shelley in "Hellas" has the same complaint:

The Powers of earth and air
Fled from the folding-star of Bethlehem:
Apollo, Pan and Love,
And even Olympian Jove
grew weak, for killing truth had glared on them.
Our hills and seas and streams
Dispeopled of their dreams
Their waters turned to blood, their dew to tears
Wailed for the golden years. p. 341

But Shelley hopes that the old gods will come back:

The world's great age begins anew
The golden years return ...
Another Athens shall arise.

It is striking that so many of the leaders of thought of the time reject the Christian heritage of Europe so easily. The impressive exception is Friedrich Hölderlin. For he experienced the dichotomy between Christianity and paganism as a conflict in his own soul. No one could be more enamoured by the glory that was Greece. He feels also that his generation has lost touch with the ancient gods and with nature. *'Hin nach Hellas schaue das Volk'* (Let the people look at Hellas). But he cannot forget that he has met Jesus who

remains 'der Einzige', the unique being. He wonders whether Dionysos may not be a brother of Christ, but interrupts himself by confessing that he feels reluctant to compare Jesus, 'the jewel of the house', with the 'wordly men', that is the gods of this world. Hölderlin's last poems do not give a definite answer to his fundamental problem, but they show how he struggled to the last to hold on to the two great components of European history. And it is probable that the acuteness of this struggle had a great deal to do with the development of his illness.

Now that the fences are down, paganism presents itself in many different forms. But the super-pagan is the inventor of the super-man. It is quite wrong to think of Nietzsche as the enemy of religion. It is true that he announces the death of God, but this means the death of the traditional Christian God. Nietzsche really wants to be the founder of the new religion. He has hoped that the new Dionysian era which he described in his '*Geburt der Tragödie*' as 'a rebirth of hellenic antiquity', would be inaugurated through the musical dramatic art of Richard Wagner, but when Wagner proved inconsistent he concocted his own religion. The *Zarathustra* is clearly a countergospel. Nietzsche does not, however, succeed in liberating himself from Christianity. Every new work is a violent altercation with the picture, or rather caricature, of Christianity that he has in mind. And the last word is: 'Have you understood me? It is Dionysos against the crucified.'

So much for the history of paganism in Europe. I think that it shows clearly that there has not only been a process of secularization, but at the same time one of paganization. Ernest Renan was right when he said: '*Les dieux ne s'en vont que pour faire place à d'autres*].' (The gods go away only to make place for other gods.)

And what about our time? We have discovered that paganism does not necessarily express itself in poetic dreams, but may become an explosive and destructive ideology appealing to the masses. If one reads Hitler's conversations, one finds that he was quite consciously religious. But what a religion! A bit of pantheism, a bit of rationalism, a great deal of primitive superstition about blood, soil and race, and a real hatred against the God of Israel and the Christian Church. He considers it as his mission to make Western Europe 'judenfrei' (free of Jews). And as to the place of Christianity, Julian the Apostate, he says, was p. 342 really Julian the Faithful, and it was Constantine the Great who was the traitor. I do not imply that paganism must necessarily lead to such barbaric consequences. But I underline that since this acute paganization did succeed for a time in the heart of Europe, it is folly to say anywhere in Western Europe 'it cannot happen here', or 'it cannot happen again'. It *can* happen, though it may take other forms. It could be a paganism of the left. Are not the anarchistic movements finally based on a fanatic vitalism? Bakounin spoke already of the 'eternal spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the incomprehensible and eternally creative source of life'.

European culture had become a debate between three forces: Christianity, scientific rationalism and neo-pagan vitalism. For a long time it had seemed that scientific rationalism would take the lead. But recently the picture has changed. The atomic threat, the terrible pollution, the lack of meaningful perspective which the technocratic civilization has brought, has led to the growth of a new irrationalism. The counter-culture is not really a counter-culture, for it is eclectic and has picked up important elements of the earlier period. Nietzsche has become again a favoured guide. And the laypreachers of paganism, in the period between the world wars, D. H. Lawrence and Herman Hesse, are more widely read than ever before. Lawrence whom F. R. Leavis calls 'still the greatest writer of our own phase of civilization', has consistently sought to replace Christianity by a life-affirming or, as he called it, 'dark religion'. It is hard to find in modern literature more explicit and, one might say, 'orthodox' pagan writings than *The Plumed Serpent* with its proclamation of the excellence of ancient Mexican religion or *The Man Who Died* with

its sacrilegious treatment of the death of Christ and the new life he finds through the love of a priestess of Isis. Hermann Hesse has become the most widely read German writer. His message is clearly neo-gnostic. Thus in *Demian* one of the teachers of Sinclair explains that Abraxas (name of gnostic deity) is to be preferred to Jehovah. Hesse has also contributed to the tremendous popularity of Eastern religions. Through Schopenhauer, theosophy and anthroposophy, Eastern spirituality had penetrated in the West, but it is only in our day that it reaches larger circles, particularly among the young. Its attraction is not only its exotic quality. It is what the neo-pagans had been looking for, 'religion without revelation' (Huxley), in which the distinctions between God, man and nature tend to disappear.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES

Now what have been the various attitudes of Christians to the neo-pagans? One attitude has been to annex as many of them as possible, to say that what they meant was really Christian or almost Christian. If one may adopt a well-known saying, the idea was 'if you cannot get rid of them, accept them as church members or at least as sympathisers'. A case in point is the article on Goethe in the very authoritative German Encyclopedia RGG (first edition) which declares that **P. 343** Goethe is the first consistent representative of the Christianity of the future. This is not new since a German professor of theology published long ago an anthology of Goethe's religious poetry with the subtitle: 'short summary of theology presented on the basis of Goethe's poetical works, for theologians, students of theology and educated laymen' (see Hagenbach, *Vorlesungen*, Sechster Teil, p. 273). A more recent example is to be found in Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God*, where he quotes a typical passage from the *Plumed Serpent*, D. H. Lawrence's re-statement of the primitive Mexican paganism, and says that this comes near to what he (the bishop) has been saying. Even if the God is very different, there is a way through here to the transcendent in a world without religion. Lawrence would have been astonished to hear this and might well have asked what on earth he would have to write in order to be recognized not as a secret ally of Christianity, but as an honest-to-goodness adherent of a radically different, pagan religion.

The quotation from Robinson is specially interesting in that it illustrates the confusion created by the concept of religion. It is almost a *communis opinio* that any kind of religion is better than agnosticism or atheism and that vis-à-vis the increasingly secularized world all religions are allies. Neo-paganism must, therefore, be handled with care. But this is quite contrary to the biblical way of thinking. For in the Old and New Testament the true God and the other gods have nothing in common. At this point, van Leeuwen is right in his strong insistence that the historic mission of Israel and, following Israel, of the Christian Church is to challenge the gods, to de-sacralize life and so to make the way free for the meeting with the one God who demands exclusive faithfulness. It is time that we take neo-paganism seriously. So far that has not happened to any great extent. Some of our best books concerning the presentation of the Christian faith to the modern world—such as the symposium 'The common Christian faith' or Hans Küng's *Being a Christian* pay much attention to modern atheism but very little to modern neo-paganism. Similarly, in the ecumenical discussion concerning evangelism and dialogue, the subject is not given the place it deserves. Most recently, at Chiang Mai, the important theological consultation on 'Dialogue in Community' had sections on relations with Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus, traditional religions and ideologies, but no section on neo-paganism.

To take neo-paganism seriously means then neither to annex it nor to explain it away nor to ignore it. It means to confront it as a serious alternative to Christianity. We need more thorough studies of the growth, the extent, the nature of neo-paganism, such as

Miskotte¹ and Jean Brun² have given us. We should pray for more sensitive Christocentric discernment as to the true distinction between Christianity and paganism. We should ask ourselves how far the implicit and [p. 344](#) explicit neo-pagan criticism or even condemnation of the churches is justified. We should admit that we Christians have not sufficiently 'tested the spirits, to see whether they are of God' ([1 John 4:1](#)). And all this without any triumphalism, for the growth of neo-paganism in the midst of our Christian civilization is really a terrible judgement on the churches.

UNDERSTANDING OUR EVANGELISTIC TASK

What should be the main theses of an evangelistic approach to the neo-pagan? There is time to mention only some of the most important.

1. The impersonal monism

Neo-paganism appears generally in the form of a monism in which the relation between man and the divine is not that between T and 'Thou', but between T and 'It'. The question which we must raise is then: Is God the sum total or ground of all existence about which we can only meditate, or is God our Creator who calls us and to whom we may respond in the interpersonal relation of prayer? We owe a great deal to Martin Buber, the 100th anniversary of whose birth will be celebrated next February. For he has helped us to get rid of the strange inferiority complex which characterized so much Christian thought, namely that it was somehow unworthy of God to speak of him in personal terms. Buber as a faithful interpreter of the Torah shows that it is the tremendous contribution of Israel to have held on to the revelation of the God who speaks, who acts, who judges, who loves, who saves over against all the various ancient religions in which man is confronted by dark unknown powers. An impersonal monism is a radically insufficient answer to the quest for the meaningful life, for the human person, threatened by the de-personalizing forces of urbanization and technocracy, needs to be helped to become a person, not to be absorbed in an impersonal universe.

2. Religious relativism

Neo-paganism believes that God reveals himself in many ways, but does not accept that any particular event in history is a fully authoritative and decisive revelation of God. The question that we must raise is whether revelation everywhere does not mean that we are nowhere quite sure of meeting God.

At this point the conflict between Christianity and neo-paganism is most acute. For the neo-pagan is not alone in protesting against the particularism and apparent narrowness of the Christian position. The relativism which goes along with the history of religions and of cultures and the demand for tolerance seem to strengthen the neo-pagan conception and make the Christian appear as a curious survivor of less enlightened days. But it is quite essential that the Christian witness should be very clear at this point. That God has spoken in many and various ways to the fathers by the prophets, but finally through a Son ([Heb. 1:1](#)), that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself ([2 Cor. 5:19](#)), that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ([John 1:14](#)), these statements are not pious exaggerations, but essential expressions [p. 345](#) of the Christian faith. And while it may seem that here lies the weakness of Christianity, its un-modernity, its Achilles heel, it

¹ *Edda en Thora, Wenn die Götter schweigen.*

² *Le Retour de Dionysos.*

should not be forgotten that in the world of 1900 years ago for which this insistence on a once-for-all revelation in history was also foolishness, it was precisely the news that God had acted in history that was received as good news.

3. The worship of nature

Neo-paganism identifies God and nature. We are invited to return to that communion with nature which characterized the primitive religions and which was abolished by Christianity. But we must raise the question whether a surrender to nature, as in the fertility-religions, has not dehumanized man and whether the great battle of the Old Testament prophets against Baalism or the Astartes was not a true battle for his liberation and emancipation.

Now that in a world full of pollution and threatened by the irresponsible use of nuclear energy the question of man's relation to nature has become acute again, there arises a strong movement of protest against the exploitation and neglect of our natural environment. The ecological enthusiasm has strong religious overtones. It turns easily to neo-paganism because there is a rumour about that it is the fault of the biblical religion that the Western world has acted so irresponsibly in its attitude to nature. That rumour (strongly supported by the famous article of Lynne White on 'Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 1967) is based on a misunderstanding. It is certainly not true that in the Bible nature is ignored or despised. For, as the nature psalms, the book of Job and other passages show, nature is honoured as it is created by God and is the theatre of his glory. The prophets and the New Testament writers warn against the worship of nature. But it is true that Christians have often lived and acted as if nature had nothing to do with the divine economy and have therefore become exploiters rather than stewards of nature.

In order to enter into a positive relation with nature, we should rediscover the biblical doctrine of creation and develop its implications. A return to the worship of nature as divine in itself would be a tremendous retrogression. In the critical period in Germany when the national-socialist ideology was being developed, Thomas Mann made a famous speech in which he said that if one realized how hard had been the struggle to leave behind the orgiastic worship of nature and the sexual and religious ecstasy of the Moloch-Baal-Astarte cults for a more spiritual adoration, a process of thousands of years in which Israel rendered this world-historical service, then one can only be surprised about the lightheartedness with which such a process of spiritual liberation is denied today. In this respect the Christian and the humanist are allies against a return to primitivism.

4. Vitalism

Neo-paganism is a thorough-going vitalism which seeks the intensification of life rather than its transformation. But we must raise the [p. 346](#) question whether life which has become an end in itself so that 'the purpose of living is to live' (Aldous Huxley) has any meaning and is truly human. Over against the worship of the life-force as such, we point to the gospel which speaks of the 'Prince of Life' ([Acts 3:15](#), 'Author of Life' in RSV) who has come to bring the abundant life ([John 10:11](#)) but it is a new life, the entrance to which is a fundamental change of direction, a 'repentance unto life' ([Acts 11:18](#)).

It is strange that in a generation in which the sense of social justice and of the solidarity of mankind is strongly developed, we find so much naive faith in the goodness and reliability of uncontrolled and unbridled life force. For such a faith can produce only a society in which the most vital will dominate and which will oscillate between explosions of vitalism from the right such as fascism, and those from the left such as anarchism.

When the neo-pagans attack Christianity as a life-denying faith and preach their gospel of the affirmation of life, we must admit that in many expressions of Christianity the negation has been more audible than the affirmation. But we must go on to make it very clear that the new life in Christ is truly abundant and does not destroy, but transforms and orients the original life force in us.

5. Rehabilitation of Eros

Neo-paganism demands the rehabilitation and emancipation of Eros which has been suppressed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. But we must ask whether Eros itself is a reliable guide for the creation of deep and permanent human relations.

The modern protest against the disqualification of Eros in the tradition of the church and in various forms of moralism is not without justification. In Christian theology and teaching, Eros has seldom been treated as a normal and basic constituent element of human existence, but as a dangerous and evil force. This was, of course, due to the fact that in the ancient pagan world Eros had been the object of worship, and the nature of eros-love was essentially different from the nature of agape-love, the love characteristic of the Christian life. Now in our day, Eros takes its revenge. Eros refuses to be ignored any longer. Some declare that the time has come to combine religion and eroticism, since 'both have the same aim: They want to change man and seek his rebirth' (Walter Schubart). Others are convinced that in order to serve Eros we must reject the God of the Bible. In this situation the message of the Christian Church is lacking in clarity. We know that Eros must not be allowed to be in sole charge of human relations. For Eros is finally self-seeking and so its victories are often Pyrrhic; the victor does not reap any fruit of his victory. Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence's friend and himself an apostle of Eros, spoke a true word when he said of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that it was 'a beautiful, but inexpressibly sad book'. The qualification applies even more to the literature by lesser writers of the pan-erotic school.

It is, then, clear that Eros needs Agape. The very best we have in our tradition concerning the relations between men and women is inspired by Agape, very especially the definite [p. 347](#) commitment of two human beings to each other as faithful partners for life. But we have not yet done our homework on the question of what can and must be the place of Eros in the lives of men and women who want to be instruments of the Godgiven Agape. The debate between Anders Nygren, Karl Barth, Denis de Rougemont and others on Eros and Agape has not led to any conclusion that we can use in our evangelistic approach. Until we have a clear word on this deeper issue, we cannot deal helpfully with the acute moral issues of our time. One wonders why this crucial issue has not been taken more seriously at the ecumenical level.

6. Life without hope

Neo-paganism is a religion without a definite, well-grounded hope. Where there is only the concept of infinity, but no meeting with God, only an abstract omnipotence, but not the omnipotence of the qualities of this one God, there is no centre of time, there is no beginning and no end and we live in an unlimited freedom without orientation and in unmeasurable loneliness (Miskotte). And this absence of a clear ground for hope is all the more tragic since the present generation has had to take leave of so many illusions concerning the future of mankind.

CONCLUSION

So the evangelistic message to the neo-pagans must show that, according to the Old and New Testament, the people of God are the people on the way to the great fulfilment, the people who have a wonderful future to look forward to, a messianic people which does not despair about the state of the world because it knows that this world is in the hands of the God who says: 'I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save' ([Isaiah 46:4](#)).

In closing I would make two remarks. The first is that evangelization of Europe's neo-pagans is so urgent, so difficult that it ought to have the highest priority among the tasks of the church. How many of our theologians are working in this field? How many pastors? Far too few. What courses concerning neopaganism are given in our theological faculties and in our lay training institutes?

My second remark is that we are now in a situation in which for many Europeans, especially the younger ones, a meeting with the gospel comes as a new discovery. They thought they knew it, but they find that it is vastly more relevant than they thought. Let us hope that in a Europe which has become mission territory, the churches may become in the best sense 'younger' churches.

The late Dr. Visser 'T. Hooft, formerly General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, delivered this address to the West European Consultation on Evangelism sponsored by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Frankfurt-Main, Germany, September 1977. p. 348

The Gospel as Truth in a Secular Society

The Three Levels of Mission in New Zealand

Harold Turner

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The author explores the importance of the surface cultures of individual behaviour and social customs and the deep culture of foundation truths and the interaction between them for evangelism in New Zealand society. He illustrates his thesis from the rise and fall of Marxism.

Editor

Christian missions have been part of New Zealand's history in the modern period, initially as missions to the Maori people. After these missions became Maori churches, crosscultural concern was redirected into foreign missions. New Zealand personnel eventually served in every continent of the world. For a small country we have a notable record. Besides denominational mission agencies, the list of independent missionary societies or local representatives of overseas societies runs into many scores.