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remember to take our bearings from Scripture. Let us remember, as we journey on, to sound the biblical canon—to the glory of God.

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Circles and the Cross: Reflections on Neo-paganism, Postmodernity, and Celtic Christianity

Loren Wilkinson

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This original and challenging article was first presented to a graduate seminar at King's College, University of London, England in May 1996. The author shows why contemporary paganism offers an alternative worldview and practice to an increasing number of people who are disenchanted with Christianity's perceived inability to relate the human quest to the world of nature. Further, he shows the interconnectedness of the neopagan spirituality to post modernity. The symbol of the Celtic Cross answers the aspirations of the pagan circle, yet transcends it and offers a transforming alternative way. Editor

> *. . . as often as men become Pagans again, the Landlord again sends them pictures and stirs up sweet desire and so leads them back to Mother Kirk even as he led the actual Pagans long ago. There is, indeed, no other way. . . . That is the definition of a Pagan—a man so travelling that if all goes well he arrives at Mother Kirk's chair and is carried over this gorge. . . .*
> C.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*

I THE POSTMODERN ATTRACTION TO NEO-PAGANISM

Paganism is on the rise. Evidences of this pagan revival are not hard to find. We see it for example, in feminist interest in 'Gaia', the 'great goddess' of the Earth; in renewed interest in a wide range of 'native spiritualities'; and (especially) in pursuit of the spiritual experience of 'nature'. Consider, for example, 'Pacific Spirit Park' in Vancouver, the thousand acres of dripping ferns, firs and cedars which surround UBC—and Regent College—and which are described at nearly every approach with a sign announcing the entrance to 'a ground for our becoming one with nature'. We see it also behind much of a current wave of fascination with the Celtic—in myth, music and visual art.

Such things are regularly labelled 'pagan' by people who disapprove of them. What is perhaps more significant is the number of persons, publications, and organizations who proudly and approvingly apply that name 'pagan'—or more commonly, *neo-pagan*, to themselves. There are regions in North America (Vancouver is one) where more people would call themselves 'neo-pagan' than Christian. Nor is the phenomenon limited to North

America. A recent Internet listing turned up 115 Neo-pagan publications in Britain and Ireland alone.

'Neo-pagan' is a curious term, for it combines the prefix for 'new' with a word which can hardly be heard apart from its echoes of the old: 'paganism' is from the past. How then can there be a new paganism? The same paradox of old and new occurs, with a different spin, in another recently-coined word, 'postmodern'. And in fact, a consideration of 'postmodernity' sheds considerable light on 'neo-paganism'.

'Modern' has for over a century meant that which is newest and most up-to-date. (The Latin root of the word means 'just now'.) Implicit in the word has been the notion of progress: the assumption that we have emerged from the darkness of ignorance and superstition into the increasing light of reason. Thus the apparent perversity of the term 'postmodern': why would anyone want to go beyond (hence the 'post-') this sunlit world of rational understanding and control?

An answer lies in one of the corollaries of modernity. Almost inseparable from its assumptions about rationality and control has been its consequence of increasing secularization: the conviction that one of the 'superstitions' which the modern era must abandon is any notion of a real, personal, Creator God—and along with it, any sense of transcendent purpose or meaning to human life, individual or collective. So, despite the fact that—ironically—much of the original impetus for modernity came from Protestant Christianity, its result has been a kind of practical atheism. Increasingly we live our lives as though there were no God: meaning and purpose are up to us.

The personal result has been a kind of inner *Angst*. As the scope of human possibilities has broadened (at least in the technologically and economically wealthy western world) its depth of meaning has thinned almost to vanishing. Like a revolving sign, seen end-on, meaning disappears. Such 'depthlessness' is the consequence of modern life, and it has also become the reluctant premise of the postmodern search for alternatives to the Modern. And it is in such a search that 'neo-paganism' has surfaced for many as an attractive alternative.

For many centuries the word 'pagan' has had, in the Christian world, a double connotation. Because it has always been used to describe those who were not Christian, it has carried a distinct taint of wickedness and idolatry. More subtly, because the pagans were, in the European world, those who followed the 'old' gods before their conversion, the word has an archaic ring. To be pagan was to be old-fashioned, behind the times. And in that hint of archaism something of the original meaning—and the current attraction—of paganism can be seen, A pagan was literally a peasant and a 'rustic': a country-dweller in the urban Roman world. And, as history developed, the two meanings were connected. For good strategic reasons, Christianity first grew largely in the urban centres. Paul (unlike Jesus) rarely preached in the country. The New Testament was written mainly to city-dwellers. The peasants in the countryside were seldom the first to become Christians; the old folk and 'pagan' religions hung on longer there than in the city, so country-dwellers were 'pagan' in both senses of the world: peasants and idolaters.

It is not so surprising, then, that in the contemporary longing for an escape from the modern (which is manifested most dramatically in the cities), many are turning to the ancient religions of the countryside, and arguing that Christianity has little to offer those concerned with the cycles of nature. Thus the word 'pagan' is being used positively for the first time in many centuries—not by Christian 'post-pagans' who see paganism as an evil darkness, but by pagan 'post-Christians' who see the Christian era itself as destructive and futile. That is why many people regard paganism as a source of hope and healing and proudly call themselves 'neo-pagans'.

The Celtic revival draws on this post-modern fascination with the pagan. It is the British equivalent of North American fascination with 'native spirituality' (and, perhaps, of Australian interest in the aboriginal), for it seems to offer a possibility of going back behind the whole nightmare to a world which is not only pre-modern but pre-Christian, and which offers promise of personal, societal, and environmental wholeness. While being cautious about its faddishness, Christians need to take this Celtic revival seriously—if only because (ironically) the greatest flowering of Celtic culture was under the influence of Christianity. More important is the fact that in the remnants of Celtic Christian culture retrieved from the fringes of Britain we still glimpse possibilities of a trinitarian transformation of culture which are perhaps unique in Christian history, and which hold great promise for our own postmodern times. That transformation can be summed up by reflecting on some of the rich meaning of the 'Celtic cross': the Christian cross providing both a centre and a context for a circle. And the circle is a prime pagan—and neo-pagan—symbol. To see why this is so, we need to look in greater detail at the current resurgence of interest in paganism.

II THE CONTENT OF CONTEMPORARY NEO-PAGANISM

Today we can hear the voice of neo-paganism in hundreds of little publications. But a central clearing house and meeting place for the movement is the Internet. On one level this neo-pagan flourishing on the high-tech Internet is ironic, given the anti-modern stance of neo-paganism (it is not the first of the ironies of neo-paganism—nor of the Internet). However, at another level—given the genuinely pluralist, and anarchic nature of the Internet—it is not surprising. The very language surrounding 'The Net' ('world-wide web', 'web-weaving', 'sites', and 'nodes') is eerily suggestive of some neo-pagan themes, not the least of which is the central image of weaving, as in the ancient phrase 'weaving a spell' or, more suggestively, in the connection between 'wicca', the preferred word for magic, and 'wicker' (another kind of 'web'). But perhaps a greater congruence between neo-pagan themes and the Internet is that it contributes powerfully to a deep neo-pagan and postmodern theme: the idea that we can 'create our own reality'. And the reality so created is ghostly and gnostic in its subjectivity and in its ultimate denial of the inconvenience of a reality outside the self. At the computer terminal (or inside one's 'sacred circle') it is far easier to sustain the illusion that 'I am divine' than in a world of physically present Others.

The well-designed Neo-Paganism 'Home Page' on the 'World-Wide-Web' introduces itself in these words:

> For the benefit of our new readers, it is worthwhile repeating our definition of the term 'neo-pagan'. A neo-pagan is an individual whose interest in the religious sphere lies in patterns of belief which are non-orthodox and non-traditional in Western society and which more specifically pre-date Western society's dominant belief systems as represented, for example, by Christianity or Judaism.[1]

Several things are worth noting in this self-definition. The first is the deliberate appropriation of the term 'neo-pagan'. And though some in the movement argue for dropping the 'neo-,' it is an honest, and necessary, prefix. For the central defining element in neo-paganism is (as this definition makes very clear) the fact that it is 'non-orthodox' and 'non-traditional'—that it 'predate[s] Western society's dominant belief systems'.

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from neo-pagan sources are taken from Internet searches under 'Neo-Paganism' in March and April of 1996.

Oddly, nothing in this definition gives any content to neo-paganism beyond what it is not. And the most specific thing which it is 'not' is Jewish or Christian.

There is, of course, a positive content to neo-paganism, though it can hardly be expounded today apart from the Christianity against which it is defined. Selena Fox, who describes herself as 'a practising pagan priestess' provides a remarkably lucid and irenic statement of neo-pagan belief in a carefully-written apologia (also on the Internet) called, 'I am a Pagan'. It is too long to reproduce here, but I will attempt to give its flavour with some quotes and commentary. Fox begins:

> I am Pagan. I celebrate the changing seasons, the turning of the Wheel of the Year. I celebrate with singing, dancing, feasting, rituals, and in Other ways. I celebrate each turn of the Wheel with personal spiritual practices and by taking part in community festivals.

Fox then lists these principle Pagan festivals, all with northern European roots: *Samhain* (Halloween), a time for honouring the dead, and 'the Wiccan and Celtic spiritual New Year'; '*Yule*, the Winter Solstice . . . a festival of peace and a celebration of waxing solar light'; *Candlemas*, or (in America, 'Groundhog's Day') . . . a 'preparation for spring and new growth'; the *Spring Equinox* corresponding roughly with Easter, and the celebration of new life; *Beltane*, Mayday, "a festival of fertility and pleasure"; *Summer Solstice* "a time to celebrate Pagan culture"; *Lammas*, in early August, a festival of the first fruits; *Fall Equinox*, "the time of thanksgiving for all the harvests . . . reaped during the growing time. . . . And at *Samhain*, this wheel of the year starts again."

For each of these festivals, Fox lists appropriate activities, most having to do with growth, planting and harvest. But she follows this list of the annual festivals by pointing out that the vegetation cycles of the outer year have an inner counterpart:

> I am Pagan. I also honor the seasons of life within my life's journey's: beginnings, growth, fruition, harvest, endings, rest, and beginnings again. Life is a Circle with many cycles. With every Ending comes a new Beginning. Within Death there is the promise of Rebirth . . . I see circles of change and renewal not only within my own life's journey, but in my heritage. I see my life as a circle that connects with the life circles of my ancestors. They are part of me and of my life.

Fox describes magic as "part of my spirituality," and defines it as an "essential consciousness change." In her words: "I create my own reality with my thoughts, feelings, and actions." She describes also, in a much-repeated pagan maxim a kind of Wiccan "golden rule"; "I seek to abide by the Wiccan Rede: 'And it Harm None, Do What You Will.' "

She goes on to explain that the "Triple Goddess of the Moon" is particularly important for her magic: "I activate beginnings in the Waxing, energize manifestations at the Full, and I know that my Circles are part of a great web of Circles that meet at these times around Planet Earth."

She then explains her understanding of "the divine":

> I embrace Pantheism, acknowledging that the Divine is everywhere and in everything. I honor the Divine that is within the oak trees in the forest, in the herbs in the garden, in the wild birds singing in the trees, in the rock outcroppings on the hillside, in myself, and yes, even in "things" such as my car, cameras, and computers. I understand that everything with a physical body has a spiritual body, too. The physical and spiritual are deeply intertwined, not separate, in this world of form. I honor the interconnectedness of Creator and Creation. . . . I know that Divinity has many facets and I experience this through a variety of Goddesses, Gods, and other spiritual forms. I also honor Divine Oneness, the Unity of All.

Worship, for Pagans, says Fox, "takes the form of Divine communion with Nature . . . worship and rituals can be anywhere since my sacred circle is portable."

She affirms the ancient idea of the unity of the universe (macrocosm) and the personal (microscosm):

> I am Pagan, I attune myself to the four elements of Nature, Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and to the fifth element, Spirit, which is the spiritual force that connects all. I see these Elements in Nature, the Earth in the soil and rocks; the oceans, rain, and other waters on the planet; and the Spirit as Divine Unity. I also see these Elements as aspects of Self; my physical body and physiology is my Earth: my intellect and thoughts my Air, my will and actions my Fire; my emotions and feelings my Water, and my Inner Self, my Soul, is my Spirit. I endeavor to keep myself healthy and in balance in all these parts of Self. I work toward a restoring of balance of the Elements in the environment.

Having declared her belief in the correlation between her "elements" and those in nature, she concludes with an eloquent statement of concern for the way those elements, inner and outer, are being polluted:

> I am Pagan. I hear the cries of Mother Earth who is upset with the harm being done to the environment by humankind. I am dismayed by the pollution of the air, the soil, and the waters, and by the domination games being played by nations with the fire of nuclear missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. I also am concerned about spiritual pollution of the Planet, selfishness, hatred, greed for money and power, addiction, violence, despair. Yet as I perceive these problems, I also perceive cleansing and healing happening on Planet Earth at this time. I know that I can help in at least a small way to bring the Planet into greater balance by seeking balance in my own life, by being a catalyst for restoring balance in the lives of others, and by working for a better environment. I know that my attitudes and my way of living can make a difference. I endeavor to be a channel for healing and balance. I make the practice of environmental responsibility a personal part of my daily life. I endeavor to live in harmony with the other members of the family of nature.

III CIRCLES IN PAGANISM

The main features of neo-paganism—as it is described here, and in many similar statements—can be summed up in terms of the three different meanings of its most prominent metaphor, the circle. The circle, a universal symbol, is intended as a kind of corrective to the linearity, of modern (and Christian) thinking.

Corrective to Linearity

Most obviously, the circle is an image of the cycle, and it is used widely to express our experience of the connectedness of things. Consider, for example, the widely used 'recycling' logo: three arrows curving into a circle. Nature works in cycles. The sun rises and sets; the moon waxes and wanes; tides rise and fall and the seasons return, year after year, with seedtime and harvest, wet and dry, thus providing the progression of solar, harvest, and fertility festivals which (as neo-pagans are quick to point out) provide some of the original framework for the Christian year. The study of ecology shows that the systems of living things on the earth form a sort of complex fountain through which the elements are lifted, broken down and re-used in an inexhaustible cycle.

Primitive and pagan peoples, it is argued, were aware of these cycles and lived within them. Modern civilization however, increasingly stepped outside the cycles of nature, or bent them into its own ideas of linear progress. Fruit and fibre from the wild cycles of natural abundance have become nothing but raw material to feed the engines of the

human economy. In place of a cycling system, modernity has established a one-way process of extraction, production, and waste, in which the natural world is regarded as a storehouse of raw materials and a sink for wastes. Modernity has largely detached itself from nature, creating an increasingly artificial environment in which one can live with little concern for location in place or time.

The ultimate source of this cycle-denying modernity, in which everything is involved with everything else, is, it is often argued, Judaeo-Christian theism's notion of a transcendent, patriarchal God who created the universe for his own purposes, created 'man' in his image, and regards the whole of creation as nothing but a backdrop to the unfolding human story. Nature recycles, and is connected; Christianity and modernity don't. Therefore, the reasoning goes, we ought to live in harmony with nature: which, for many people fed up with secular modernity, means turning back not to Christianity, with its linear story—but further back, to paganism and its endless circles.

Oneness in Identity

The second thing suggested by the circle in neo-pagan usage is oneness: inclusiveness, unity. Neo-paganism clearly draws on what Aldous Huxley called 'the perennial philosophy' of monism. To quote Fox: 'I honor Divine Oneness, the Unity of All.' All is one, and all is divine. The individual person also is a manifestation of the divine, so one of the goals of personal life is to tune one's self to the divinity in things and in the self. Modernity, following Christianity (so the pagan criticism goes) sees only human beings as related to the divine 'made in God's image' and thus elevates the human and regards the rest of nature as mere instrument or raw material for human ends.

Self at the Centre

The third significance of the circle in neo-pagan thought comes from the magical practice of drawing a 'sacred circle', with the self at the centre. In a sense, of course, all persons are the centre of circles carried with them always. Spatially, that personal circle is the horizon; more metaphorically, it is the fact that each of us lives (to some degree) in a private world. We never have direct access to another mind. The radical nature of that individuality has surfaced in the postmodern affirmation of pluralism, and the value of each person's story, as opposed toan overarching 'meta-narrative', which is always seen to be restrictive.

But the 'magic circle' in neo-paganism is always for the purposes of using power. And ultimately in neo-paganism (as elsewhere in modernity) this affirmation of individual autonomy works against the attempts to recover a sense of wholeness and interconnection, for it contradicts the affirmation of the independent nature of the complex other to which the self is connected. This failure is particularly obvious when we look at the *practice* of neo-paganism.

The darker possibilities of neo-pagan practice are illustrated very well in an interview (also on the Internet) with Hadrian, an Australian practitioner of magic who calls himself a hybrid 'Yogi, Magus, and Pagan'. When the interviewer points out that Hadrian seems to like the 'dark side' of paganism he replies:

> I don't like the dark side of Paganism, I love it. . . . I love power. Possibly, for many Pagans, including myself, power is more easily felt when it manifests negatively. . . . I believe people intuitively know there is power in the dark side of Paganism. If they like or love power, they will be drawn to it.

And later, when Hadrian is asked about his preferred 'path' of yoga he, answers that he prefers 'the way of devotion'—which he defines as 'the eternal relationship between a

human and divinity or, put in another way, *the discovery of one's own divinity*' (emphasis mine).

Here two meanings of the circle are casually merged: the pantheist/monist circle, which says that all is one and divine, and the private, pragmatic circle which says that I am divine, creator of the only reality I need live by.

Hadrian's blunt admission that he is drawn to paganism because of the power it promises focuses on an irreconcilable problem in neo-paganism—one which extends across a wide range of 'postmodern' approaches to life. That problem is the impossibility of reconciling, on the one hand, the affirmation that the path of health is to live in harmony with the divine cycles manifest in nature, with, on the other hand, the idea that I can 'create my own reality'. Either there is a reality *outside the self* to which one must be conformed—or there is not, and the world is simply an extension of myself, waiting to be brought under the influence of my power.

This tendency in neo-paganism for the circle of the self to cancel out the circles of interconnectedness and oneness reflects the fact of a long, modern development of 'the self' outside any relationship to a personal God. In a pre-Cartesian era it was perhaps possible that reflection on the cycles of nature would point to a God who was other than those cycles. But nearly four centuries of an explicitly secular culture, based on the assumption 'I think, therefore I am' has precluded that possibility. Cartesians make poor pagans. It is all but impossible to go back through the Cartesian door, to become *less* of a thinking self. Instead, the self-as-divine becomes its own lonely and voracious world.

This deep flaw in neo-pagan thought—its tendency for the circle of the self to be expanded in such a way as to threaten the circles of wholeness and relationship—is the surfacing of a human reality never mentioned in neo-pagan thought: the reality of sin. Not far beneath Hadrian's fascination with power, his concern to 'discover his own divinity' is the ancient lie, 'you shall be like God'. Nor is it far beneath Selena Fox's concern to create her own reality in accordance with the rule, 'and it harm none, do what you will'. The sad commentary of history is that when the self is at the centre of the circle, and the only rule is 'what I will', a kind of hell on earth will result. It is time, therefore, to bring the neo-pagan picture into the light of Christian revelation.

IV THE CROSS AND THE CIRCLE: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO NEO-PAGANISM

From a Christian standpoint we can neither completely accept, nor completely reject, these neo-pagan meanings of the circle.

Responses in Scripture

Let us consider first the biblical treatment of the circle as an image of the cyclic interconnectedness of things. On the one hand, the biblical writers had a deep sense of the relationship and interdependence of all creatures and their environment. The cyclic nature of that interdependence is given striking affirmation in the Noah story, in God's words following the flood: 'While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease' (Gen. 8:22). The interdependence of things is described with great power, in Psalm 104, which recasts the Genesis 1 seven-day creation story into the present tense, picturing a wide variety of living things—grass, cedars, storks, conies, mountain goats, lions, and human beings—each in relationship with other creatures which support them. But in both of these accounts there is a crucial difference from the pagan understanding of inter-relationship. In the Hebrew understanding, the cycles of the earth are sustained by a God who, though deeply involved

with creation, is *other* than creation. Indeed here lies the chief difference between 'nature', a pagan concept, and the biblical idea of 'creation'. Ultimately 'nature' in the pagan view is self-contained and self-perpetuating, an endless round. Creation, on the other hand, is inexhaustible because it is sustained by a relationship with a giver who is beyond it. 'You send forth your spirit, they are created. . . .'

Some sort of life-giving relationship to the divine is assumed as common knowledge in the biblical world. Paul's sermons to the world of old paganism take it as a starting point. The Book of Acts records only two such sermons—at Lystra in Lycaonia in Asia minor (Acts 14:14–18), and the better-known Areopagus address at Athens (Acts 17:22–31). In both cases the listeners were familiar with the world of Greek polytheism, but only in the Lycaonian milieu is it likely that the gods retained much of their older association with natural cycles. (The paganism of Athens seems largely to have become philosophy.) But in Asia Minor, around Lystra and Derbe, the writer of Acts records that for some time Paul and Barnabas had been preaching in 'the country', and thus to 'pagans' in both senses of the word—i.e., to peasants, farmers, country folk. And though the words recorded for us were delivered in the city of Lystra, they bear evidence of Paul's recent experience in the countryside. He recalls the people to 'the living God who made heaven and earth', and assures them that they already know something of this God, who '. . . has not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heavens and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy' (Acts 14:17).

Thus Paul is quick to root the Christian gospel in the same knowledge of the earth's cyclic fruitfulness which contemporary neo-pagans call divine (assuming this, however, to be a non-Christian insight).

Paul's audience in cosmopolitan and world-weary Athens was probably much further removed from direct experience of agriculture than it was at Lystra (though probably much nearer to it than most moderns!). And his words about the divine bounty are correspondingly more generalized. It is God who 'gives all men life and breath and everything else' (Acts 17:25). As a result of these gifts, Paul says, people ought to '. . . seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each of us' (v. 27). Paul sums up this affirmation of God's closeness by citing, approvingly, a Stoic text: 'In him we live and move and have our being' (v. 28).

It is clear from these passages that Paul wishes to see the Christian message not as a complete negation of pagan religion, but as a fulfilment of the best of it, the decisive answer to the questions which it asks. Such a strategy is evident in his use of the altar inscription 'To an Unknown God': '. . . what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you' (v. 23).

On the other hand, Paul is clear that worshipping the divine in the cycles of nature is a great mistake. At Lystra, Paul begs the people to 'turn from these worthless things'—i.e., the attempt through sacrifice to live in harmony with a divine nature—to the God who made them. In Romans 8:20 Paul refers to the 'futility' of creation, perhaps referring to its endless repetition. That futility is evoked very well in another Old Testament picture of the cycles of nature, in Ecclesiates 1:

> The sun rises and the sun sets and
> hurries back to where it rises.
> The wind blows to the south
> and turns to the north;
> round and round it goes. . . .
> All streams flow into the sea,
> yet the sea is never full.

> To the place the streams come from,
> there they return again.

These are admirable insights into the operation of 'nature'. But when it is viewed simply as 'nature'—that is, without reference to a Creator, the preacher concludes: 'All things are wearisome', and sums up the appreciation of nature with the judgement 'Meaningless, meaningless. . . . Everything is meaningless'.

This is also the conclusion of the monist religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism. If the cycles of nature are all there is, then they are ultimately a weariness, and the path of wisdom is to seek to escape them: Hence both the belief in reincarnation (which makes human spiritual life part of that same endless cycling) and the desire for salvation as escape from the futility of life's endless circles. It is no accident that the circle is also the image for zero, nothing.

And yet, though the cycles of nature are ultimately empty, they are still the physical source of our life and sustenance. Therefore we cannot afford to ignore, degrade, or replace them, as modernity tends to do. But how can we affirm both our enmeshment in the cycles of nature *and* the closeness of the Creator God, without lapsing into a sub-Christian neo-paganism?

Responses to the Cycles of Nature

One response, represented by Process theology and 'creation spirituality' is sometimes called 'panentheism'. And though that term *can* be used in an orthodox and fully Christian way (for there is a sense in which all things are 'in God') most of those who use it of themselves—like Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry—seem to intend a more Hegelian sense of an incomplete, wholly immanent God, emerging from the process into human consciousness.

The church's attempt to come to terms with the cycles of nature is met much more commonly by links between the Christian year and the pagan year, at Christmas and (especially) at Easter, in an analogy between the return of vegetative life and the resurrection of Jesus. Such links cannot be ignored—but the analogy between the death and resurrection of nature and the death and resurrection of Jesus must be affirmed very carefully. It is easy to understand why many thoughtful Christians avoid it at all cost.

Thomas Torrance, for example, in *Space, Time and Resurrection* repudiates this analogy in the strongest terms. He acknowledges that:

> an idea of resurrection is certainly found very widely in Semitic and Hellenic thought, as is the notion of a dying and rising god, or the divinity immanent in the processes of nature who is reborn with every seasonal change from winter to spring and whose divine life becomes manifest in the resurrection of nature.[2]

However, he continues:

> Against all this the Scriptures, and not least the Old Testament, are sharply opposed. Resurrection has nothing at all to do with any dying or rising god and his cosmic rebirth. It must be admitted, however, that this heathen notion has invaded the Christian Church, probably through the syncretistic ideas that developed in early Mediterranean Christianity and is still constantly reflected in hymns and sermons about the springing up of new life. . . .[3]

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[2] Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976), p. 27.

[3] Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 27.

He quotes one verse from a hymn to illustrate these pagan incursions; I quote from another, 'Now the Green Blade Riseth' quite popular today, powerful in both its tune and its words:

Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain;
Wheat that in the dark earth many days hath lain.
Love lives again, that with the dead has been,
Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.

Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain.
He that for three days in the grave has lain.
Quick from the dead my risen Lord is seen;
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

One way to sing this hymn is to think of the resurrection of Jesus as (at most) an instance of the power of a good example, a kind of 'resurrection in our hearts'. (Thus it is commonplace today for many clergy to affirm their belief in 'the Risen Lord', but to make plain that this was not a 'resuscitated corpse', and express unconcern if bones found in a box in Palestine were indeed the bones of Jesus.) In contrast to this kind of reduction of the meaning of the resurrection, Torrance goes on to develop the central thesis of his book. In his words, the resurrection of Jesus

> is a creative event within the creation, an abruptly divine act within history, a decisive deed completely setting at nought all cyclic processes, putting an end to the futility to which they are shut up but opening and straightening them out in a movement towards consummation.[4]

If the only way to relate the cycles of nature and the resurrection is to see the latter as a symbolic instance of the former, then Torrance's judgement on all such hymns is correct. By contrast, he relates the cycles and the cross by assuming that the cross and resurrection break and cancel the cycles which are such an important part of pagan (and neo-pagan) awareness—for a circle 'opened and straightened' is no longer a circle.

Such a way, however, seems inadequate. On the most obvious level, we are still supported by the cycles of death, decay, birth and nourishment. Biblically, we still rest in the promise of Genesis 8: 'While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.' Attempts to shortcut or ignore those cycles only diminish the earth's fruitfulness and our understanding of it. And the glimpses of *shalom* that we are given in Scripture give no sense that those cycles are to be abrogated. It is, however, a mistake to see the resurrection of Jesus according to the pattern of the risen grain: 'Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.' Torrance is right to reject such a reduction of the heart of the gospel as a special case in a natural process.

[4] Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 27.

But there is another possibility: what if the springing of the seed from death is an instance in the created world of the divine gift which underlies all creation, 'the word without which nothing was made'?

We must recognize that the analogy between the death and resurrection of the seed, and the death and resurrection of Jesus, is not fanciful or arbitrary: it is given to us by Jesus himself. At a key passage in John's gospel, Jesus says of his coming death and resurrection 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' The words are spoken in answer to 'some Greeks . . . who went up to worship at the feast'. It is the only time Scripture records Jesus' words to Greeks, a fact of considerable importance in this discussion of paganism.

Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, in his King's College, London lectures on ecology, points out that the Hebrews rested their confidence in the God who was faithful in history, the God who spoke through the prophets. The Greeks, on the other hand, rested their confidence in a kind of developed paganism: 'Nature offered to the Greek the sense of security he needed, through the regular movement of the stars, the cyclical repetition of the seasons. . . .'[5]

It is thus highly significant for our understanding of the *meaning* of the cycles of nature that Jesus speaks these words about his own death and resurrection—as a seed dying, decaying, bearing fruit—*to representatives of the Greek world*. It is as though he were saying (as Paul said later in Lycaonia and Athens): here and only here, can the God whom you ignorantly worship be seen and known. This becomes even clearer if one understands Jesus' words here in light of the great prologue of the Gospel, where the one who now speaks to the Greeks is described, in the technical terminology of Greek philosophy, as the source, the *logos*, of all those cycling regularities in nature which had so intrigued the Greek mind: 'Without him nothing was made that has been made.'

When we consider these two passages together we can make a somewhat different assessment of the relationship of the Christian gospel to the cycles of nature. It is not so much that they are 'straightened out' and broken; rather, their endless repetition is given a particular centre (the incarnation of Jesus) and a transcendent reference in God. It is not so much that the death and resurrection of Jesus is one more example of the vegetative cycles of nature; it is rather that this cyclical abundance in nature is itself an example, a hint, of the costly divine gift at the heart of creation, 'the lamb slain before the foundation of the world. . . .' Seen in this way, hymns like 'Now the Green Blade Riseth' can be sung with a tremendous meaning: it is the crucified and risen Jesus who helps us understand the risen grain, not the other way round. As Kallistos Ware put it in his introduction to Orthodox theology: 'It has been truly said that there was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted outside Jerusalem.'[6]

The Circle as Pantheism

With this as background, we can deal more briefly with the second neo-pagan meaning of the circle: that is, as an icon of wholeness, oneness, pantheism. On the one hand Scripture is clear that creation is not divine: the worship of Creator instead of Creation is never presented as anything other than a great mistake. On the other, as we have seen, Scripture

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[5] John Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology I', *King's Theological Review* (1989), p. 2.

[6] Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1979), p. 83.

is equally clear, that (in Paul's words at Athens) 'he is not far from each one of us'. The confident attempt (which we saw in the Selena Fox neo-pagan credo) to honour the divine in the self, in others, and in the cycles of nature is doomed, as we saw, by the tendency simply to regard the self as God. It is *relationship* with God (not identity with God) which he offers to men and women, and into which, through Christ and in the Spirit, we are invited.

Nevertheless, the pagan confusion of Creator and Creation is a response (much deeper than that of most moderns) to the *message character* of creation, which speaks of the closeness of God. For example, in Psalm 19 and Romans 1, creation is portrayed as full of information (though it is wordless) about the Creator. If the modern mistake is to ignore both the message in creation, and the God of which the message speaks, the pagan mistake is to hear the message (in this respect neo-pagans are closer to the truth than most moderns, including many Christians) but to confuse creation with Creator. Thus they miss the possibility of full relationship with both, in the futile quest for 'oneness' with nature and the divine.

Neo-paganism grasps at the mysterious closeness-in-difference of Creator and creation. The challenge for the Christian is, in God's Spirit, to see this closeness through Christ. And the New Testament gives much guidance here, in a variety of passages which link Christ and creation. Of all these 'cosmic Christology passages', the longest and richest is in Colossians 1:17: 'By him all things were created . . . in him all things hold together. . . . God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Col 1:17–20).

The passage, like the whole gospel, places the cross at the very centre of 'all things' (a phrase which is repeated five times in the passage). It clearly is cosmic and creational in its scope, and includes the cycling of nature, the rhythm of the seasons and the year which neo-pagans try to honour. All of those things 'hold together' in Christ. What can this mean? Certainly not that 'all things' are a kind of veil for the divine, a sort of mask of God, as in paganism. God *is* present in the 'all things' of creation: not because they are divine, but because it is the nature of the triune God to be always giving, always loving, always expending himself in what he has made. Without God the giver nothing would *be*. In this sense there is a cross at the centre of the circle of creation, and of each created thing.

Something like this was intended by Irenaeus, very early in the history of Christian theology, when he wrote, against a heresy which bore many similarities to contemporary neo-paganism:

> For the Creator of the world is truly the Word of God . . . who in an invisible manner contains all things created, and is inherent in the entire creation . . . and therefore He came to His own in a visible manner, and was made flesh, and hung upon the tree, that He might sum up all things in Himself. . . .[7]

Hans Urs von Balthasar describing Irenaeus' understanding of the atonement, explicitly evokes the image of the cross and the circle when he writes: 'The cross-beams are the world's center', defining 'any kind of existence in the world'[8].

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[7] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies, the Ante-Nicene Father, Volume I*, (*The Apostolic Fathers; Justin Martyr; Irenaeus*) Translations of *The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 1867 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), V. xviii. 3, pp. 546–547.

[8] In *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies*, selected and with an introduction by Hans Urs von Balthasar (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 13.

Thus a Christian understanding must reject not God's *closeness* to creation—but his *identity* with creation. Things are maintained in their created distinctness at the cost of God's love, a love evident in the intimacy of the Incarnation, and the suffering of the cross.

Redemption thus does not, as in so many theologies of the atonement, leave creation behind. This tendency to limit the work of Christ to an inward human experience which leaves creation untouched is a distinctly modern mistake. It is that distancing of God from creation (an effective forgetting of the triune nature of God) which lies behind these various late modern attempts to bring 'the spiritual', the 'sacred', and 'the divine' into daily experience. Of such attempts, neo-paganism is a prime example.

The Circle as the Self

We turn now to that third pagan understanding of the circle, in which the conscious human self is placed at the centre of his or her small universe. We have already seen how, in neo-paganism, this is all too likely to expand into a kind of solipsism which excludes the other, making the self into a little god.

On the other hand this neo-pagan belief takes seriously the unique human place in creation. In the Christian understanding, the uniqueness of humanity is the ability to *choose* to respond to God—that is, to be a *person* in relationship. Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed this idea powerfully in a meditation on the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola. He recognizes that all things, in their very creatureliness, speak of the creator, and thus have the 'message character' described in Psalm 19:

> The creation does praise God. . . . The sun and the stars shining glorify God. . . . They glorify God, *but they do not know it*. . . . This then is poor praise. . . . Nevertheless what they can *they always do*. But *A*MIDST THEM ALL IS MAN. . . . Man was created, like the rest then, to praise, reverence and serve God; to give him glory. He does so, even by his being, beyond all visible creatures. . . . But man can know God, *can mean to give him glory.* This then was why he was made, to give God glory and to mean to give it.[9]

John Zizioulas, in his lectures on 'The Preservation of Creation', comes to a similar conclusion which, like Hopkins, he expresses in terms of the idea of freedom. Of all creatures, human beings are unique in their desire and ability not simply to discover things about creation, but to go beyond it, in the making of their own little world. This ability to make our own world is a very dangerous one. yet no alternative scheme for human action (whether it is in the idea of 'stewardship' in the environmental movement—or the egocentric love of power we saw emerging in neo-paganism) can simply ignore this distinctive of free human self-hood. Our place in creation lies *through* our human freedom and creativity, not denial of it. Zizioulas develops this truth in terms of the long Eastern Orthodox tradition of man as a priest of creation. In his words:

> By taking the world into his hands and creatively integrating it and by referring it to God, Man liberates creation from its limitations and lets it truly be. Thus, in being the Priest of creation man is also a creator, and perhaps we may say that in all of his truly creative activities there is hidden a para-priestly character.[10]

Zizioulas develops this idea in terms of the sacraments, echoing Alexander Schmemann who, in his profound meditation on the Lord's Supper, *For the Life of the*

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[9] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S.J. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 239.

[10] John Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology III', *King's Theological Review* (1990), p. 5.

World, put it succinctly: 'Man is the priest of a cosmic sacrament, receiving the world from God and, offering it back to God in thankfulness.' Kallistos Ware expands on the same idea:

> Made in the divine image, microcosm and mediator, man is priest and king of the creation. Consciously and with deliberate purpose, he can do two things that the animals can do only unconsciously and instinctively. First, *Man is able to bless and praise God for the world*. . . . Secondly, besides blessing and praising God for the world, man is also able to *reshape and alter the world.*

The Symbol of the Celtic Cross

I have organized this essay around a sort of theological geometry: that is, the various meanings given to the figure of the circle by neo-paganism, and the way a Christian understanding both affirms and counters those meanings. I have suggested that the image of the cross intersecting the circle is a good visual way of seeing the relationship of Christianity and paganism. There is a danger here in this kind of discussion of the cross as a symbol. Emil Brunner observed that any one who uses the cross as an aesthetic device has not understood it. I am not forgetting that the cross is an instrument of torture, defeat and death, so much as I am reflecting on the fact that the one so tortured, defeated and killed is also the *logos* of God, the creator in whom all things consist. It is enormously illuminating to consider the circles of creation within the larger framework of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ.

First, with regard to the circle as an image of cyclic interconnectedness: The Christian gospel does not so much negate the cycles of creation as it gives them a centre and a purpose, connecting them with that which is beyond and before creation. In the pagan form of the crossed circle, the mandala, a cross is always contained by the circle. (It is sobering to recall here also that symbol which was used as a dark attempt to reduce Christianity to paganism: the broken cross of the Nazi swastika is a cross cut off from transcendence, turning into a circle.)

Here it will be good to return to a consideration of what has come to be called the 'Celtic cross'. In that familiar symbol there is indeed a circle—but the arms extend outside it gesturing outward beyond creation and history—while at the same time being centred in creation and history. Thus John's prologue sketches the relationship of the incarnate Christ, specific in place and time (like the cross-hairs of a target) to the eternal purposes of God. Put another way, the cross reveals the centre of the new creation: which is new not in that it cancels and undoes the old, but that it restores meaning and purpose to those cycles of creation which would be futile without the self-giving love of God.

Second, with regard to the circle as an image of the oneness of God, creation, and humanity, and thus an emblem of pantheism, all as God: The Christian understanding says that God is near to each thing; all things hold together in God, they have their full meaning and completion in God—yet they are preserved in their distinct separateness. God's willingness to allow a thing to *be*, totally dependent for its being on him, yet free and separate from God, is love. God is indeed close to each thing: not in the homogenized pantheistic sense, but in his willingness to hold each thing in being despite the evil which that thing may do at ultimate cost to the Creator himself. The cross, the suffering of God for and in creation thus is in a sense at the core and centre of each created thing.

Third, with regard to the *circle* as a picture of the freedom and creativity of human 'worldmaking': The circle of our selfhood has for sinful human beings been not only the arena of our freedom, creativity, and uniqueness; it has also become a voracious and devouring circle, a kind of inner 'black hole' with Hell at its centre. The only place we see proper human selfhood is in Christ. The pattern is drawn by Paul in Philippians 2: 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit . . . look not only to your own interests but

to the interests of others.' This is impossible for us; we see it only in Christ, equal with God beyond all worlds, but known in the self-emptying death on a cross. Again, the cross is at the centre of the circle: in this case the circle of our selfhood. In this pattern of empathy and relationship, centred on the gift and suffering of Christ the Creator, we are able to be, through Christ, a 'priest of creation': bringing all things into the circle of our world, but not leaving them there: giving them back, rather, in praise, thanks and fulfilment, to their creator.

V THE SIGNIFICANCE FOR NEO-PAGANISM OF CELTIC CHRISTIANITY

As I have already suggested, a great deal of theological insight is captured in the symbol of the 'Celtic cross': the Christian cross giving both a centre and a context to the circle which represents the pagan perception of the wholeness and interconnectedness of creation. The early and abiding prominence of that symbol on the fringes of Britain (especially in Ireland) is alone enough to encourage closer study of the tradition it represents. Such a study cannot even be summarized here: the origins, nature, history and influence of Celtic Christianity have become a contentious arena. Nevertheless, I close with several reasons Christians in these postmodern, neo-pagan times might well pay cautious but humble attention to the traditions of Celtic Christianity.

1. Celtic Christianity took root, flourished, and reached its greatest vigour in the same period in which Roman civilization (which certainly brought the Christian seed to Britain in the first place) was in decline. Thus, whereas the rest of western Christendom (Augustine is the best example) laid the foundations of European civilization on a kind of Roman-Christian aggregate, Celtic Christianity, while no less Christian, was subtly but significantly different. (The same point can be made, of course, about the development of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, with which Celtic Christianity shares intriguing similarities—and differences.) In particular, the pagan Celtic culture was not so much replaced as transformed. The historian James Bulloch, in a series of lectures on Celtic Christianity given many years ago at Iona, sums up the point very well.

> . . . elsewhere the advance of the Church was almost invariably accompanied by the adoption, however imperfectly, by the converted nation of that Romanised culture which accompanied the faith of the Church. In the Celtic west, on the contrary, the culture which took shape . . . was not an imperfect inheritance from the dying empire so much as a development of that already existing among the Celts. Strengthened and transformed, it was yet a straightforward growth from native roots rather than a graft.[11]

If it is the case that modernity has its roots particularly in Roman Christianity (via its Protestant transformations), these differences of emphasis in the Celtic tradition are worth pursuing in the current search for alternatives to the modern.

2. Celtic Christianity seems to have been much more open to affirm the goodness of the created world as a gift of God, and to respect plants, animals, rocks and sea as fellow creatures. This is evident in countless saints' tales—but also in the rich tradition of Celtic prayer and blessing. Consider for example this magnificent stanza from what is probably the most familiar piece of 'Celtic Christianity' the hymn 'St. Patrick's Breastplate' (probably not indeed by St. Patrick, but certainly from the early Celtic Christian tradition):

I	bind	unto		myself	today
The	virtues	of	the	starlit	heaven,
The	glorious		sun's	life-giving	ray,

[11] James Bulloch, *The Life of the Celtic Church* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1963), pp. 235–6.

The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks
The stable earth, the deep salt sea,
Around the old eternal rocks.

Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, in their introduction to a new anthology called *Celtic Christian Spirituality*, speak of:

> . . . a persistent emphasis . . . upon the place of nature within the Christian revelation. . . . The Celtic Christian recognition of the place of nature, and refusal to set up sharp oppositions between the worlds of grace and humanity and the natural realm, is undoubtedly of great importance to those who seek to restore a more positive and responsible relation between human beings and the environment in our own day.[12]

3. A third point—and one which in fact may underlie all the others—is that Celtic Christianity is deeply, centrally Trinitarian. This is perhaps the most important of the 'subtle' differences from the rest of Christendom, and one of the resemblances to Eastern Orthodoxy. Unlike Augustine (who tended to treat the Trinity as a problem to be solved about a God whose most obvious characteristic was a kind of neo-platonic unity), Celtic Christianity was exuberant in its affirmation of 'the sacred three'. Consider the opening of St. Patrick's Breastplate. 'I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity.' Ian Bradley puts this emphasis well, in the context of a reflection on other aspects of Celtic culture:

> The interweaving of the themes of intimacy and mystery in the Celtic Christian consciousness of God produced a strong stress on the doctrine of the Trinity. Much contemporary Western Christianity has become at best binitarian, worshipping Father and Son without any real sense of the Holy Spirit, if not almost unitarian. The Celts, like Eastern Orthodox Christians, had a real sense of the three persons within the Godhead and of their relationship with each other without falling into the heresy of tritheism which proclaims the existence of three separate gods. Their pagan past almost certainly helped them to grasp the idea of the Trinity and the mystery of God who is both one in three and three in one.[13]

Bradley goes on to relate this trinitarian insight both to the Celtic understanding of the family, and to the remarkable flowering of Celtic Christian visual art:

> The Celts saw the Trinity as a family ... for them it showed the love that lay at the very heart of the Godhead and the sanctity of family and community ties. Each social unit, be it family, clan, or tribe, was seen as an icon of the Trinity, just as the hearth-stone in each home was seen as an altar. The intertwining ribbons of the celtic knot represented in simple and graphic terms the doctrine of *perichoresis*—the mutual interpenetration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[14]

4. Another reason for taking Celtic Christianity seriously today is that it contains a large, rich amount of material in which the values we listed above—a closeness of God and creation, an emphasis on community, on personality, on interrelationship, and above

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[12] Oliver Davies and Fiona Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 20. Medieval and Modern Sources (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 20.

[13] Ian Bradley, *The Celtic Way* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1993), p. 43.

[14] Bradley, *The Celtic Way*, p. 44.

all, on the Trinity—is central. Some of these seem to be part of an unbroken Celtic Christian tradition—most notably Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*, consisting of prayers and blessings collected from the outer Hebrides a century ago. Many others are a contemporary mining of the same rich vein: for example, the prayers and devotional writings of David Adams, and, most recently the devotional guides prepared by the Northumbrian community, published as *Celtic Daily Prayer* and *Celtic Nightly Prayer*.

5. Finally, it is important to recognize the contribution which the Celtic Christian vision has made to twentieth-century artists and writers. Some of these deal with explicitly Celtic material, such as George MacKay Brown, Edwin Muir, R.S. Thomas, and David Jones. I think it likely as well that the rich vein of Christian fantasy in the twentieth century—particularly in the works of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien—has Celtic Christian roots, through a variety of sources, but most notably in the highlander George MacDonald, where it was not quite suppressed by two centuries of John Knox's Calvinism. We should mention as well the fascination with Celtic visual art. The Celtic cross remains a symbol which cannot be emptied of meaning. More subtly (as Ian Bradley notes above) the fascination with knot-work, interlacing, interconnection, can be seen as a kind of meditation on distinctness-in-relationship, characteristic of the created world but rooted ultimately in the Trinity.

H.J. Massingham was probably claiming too much when he wrote, half a century ago in *The Tree of Life* that, had Celtic Christianity not been so thoroughly assimilated, the 'fissure between Christianity and nature, widening through the centuries, would not have cracked the unity of western man's attitude to the universe'. Nevertheless his words point to the value of thinking seriously about these glimpses of a Celtic culture transformed by the Christian gospel. For we live today in the collapsing structure of a modernity built upon that fissured foundation: whence 'postmodernity'.

Neo-paganism is an ultimately futile attempt to escape that ruin by a return to nature as the pagan Celts are thought to have perceived it. It is an important task for Christians to show that while nature is not divine, there is no 'fissure between Christianity and nature'[15]. For this task a rich resource may be found in Celtic Christianity: that vision summed up by the image of the circles of creation given their true centre and meaning by the cross on which was crucified Jesus, the Word made flesh, 'in whom all things hold together'.

Only through that cross may contemporary neo-pagans find the centre that they seek.

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In Search of Post-modern Salvation

R. Daniel Shaw

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[15] H.J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1943), p. 40.