



Retracing journeys



Rather than avoiding Pagans, **Steve Hollinghurst** (*above*) engages with them in discussion. His approach begins with two principles; an assumption that God is at work in contemporary Pagans and that the first thing we need to do is listen to them and get to know them

As Christianity spread across Asia and Europe churches were increasingly planted amongst Pagan rather than Jewish communities. This left permanent effects on the practice of Christian faith as Christian missionaries found ways of making the Christian message connect with the culture and beliefs of the Pagan communities they were amongst. The main Christian festival is called Easter after a Saxon goddess of spring time and fertility Oestre, after whom the hormone oestrogen is also named. The biblical accounts of Easter came from the Jewish context of the Passover festival. Those taking the Christian faith to the Saxons placed its message of new life in Christ within the Pagan context of new life at spring time as a way of talking about the new creation in Christ. Similarly many of the sites of churches and especially saints' wells had been sacred places to the Pagans just as they would be to the Christian converts who were their descendants. What we call Celtic Christianity was the result of a similar approach by missionary monks amongst the people of northern and western Britain and Brittany.

ancient Christian missionary with Western Pagans today

All of this was carrying on the tradition started by St Paul as he took the Christian message out of the synagogues and into the Greek and Roman Pagan market places of the Roman Empire. So in Athens in Acts chapter 17 we find Paul firstly discovering the beliefs of the local populace by visiting their temples and by discussing religion and philosophy in the market place. We see the fruits of this when he addresses the leaders in the Areopagus. Firstly we see him making positive reference to their being very religious and referring to the statue to an unknown god as a way of introducing the idea that he will make this god known to them. He goes on to say that the God of the universe does not live in temples.

Pagan background

This was in part an insight from his Jewish religious background. The first Jews came from a Pagan background and discovered the God of the universe against the back drop of surrounding Pagan nations who saw different aspects of life as governed by many gods. The Jewish insight was that one God was behind all these. This was expressed in the Jewish language for God by using the language applied to the Pagan deities to speak about him. So God creates the world out of Chaos, rides the storm clouds and walks on the waters like Baal. He is depicted as the Ancient of Days with white beard seated on a heavenly throne like El. He enables the crops to grow and gives children to those who have none like Ashtoreth. In doing this the insights of those Pagan faiths into the nature of God are affirmed, but the idea of many gods is also criticised and replaced with the belief in one God. The God of the universe therefore does not live in temples and cannot be worshipped through statues and idols.

Preparing the way for Jesus

Paul however, has also become aware of a similar debate in Greek religion with some suggesting that Zeus is not just one god among many but that he is in fact the true creator God. That is why



Exchange of views at a 'Mind and Spirit' Fair

Paul chooses to quote from two poems by Euripides that are both in praise of Zeus as the one creator God, but apply them to the unknown God that has become known in the death and resurrection of Christ. Similar debates raised by Greek philosophy would lead another early missionary, Justin Martyr, to refer to the Greek philosophers as 'schoolmasters for Christ'. The idea was that insights from Greek religion and philosophy could be seen as preparing the way for Jesus to be understood and followed as building on those ideas rather than as sweeping them away. The same thing is happening in the use of the imagery of the Logos as Jesus in the opening chapter of John's Gospel. It is this tradition that is then taken out among the different Pagan peoples of Europe and Asia.

Finding an opening for the Gospel

From the first to roughly the eighth century the churches of Asia and Europe possessed distinct cultural characteristics. This reflected the way local missionaries had used the religion and culture they found as an opening for the Gospel and formed

churches with those who came to Christ based on that mission approach. This however, began to change as Christendom became established as a continuation of the Roman Empire and Roman models started to be expected to be the norm in all Christian countries. In Britain this led to tensions between the Celtic Church and a Roman Saxon Church culminating in the Synod of Whitby which brought the British Church under Roman control and led to an erosion of the distinctive characteristics of Celtic Christianity.

This tendency to conformity to Rome was further strengthened by the creation of the Holy Roman Emperor in the year 800, after which Christian mission went increasingly hand in hand with military conquest. Instead of Christianity coming through monks working within foreign cultures it was imposed by conquest as part of being absorbed into the culture of the Holy Roman Empire. This situation continued, with some exceptions, on into the colonial period with the export of Protestant state Churches alongside the Roman Catholic.

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With the fading of Christendom, Christianity finds itself again witnessing within a foreign cultural landscape. One of the features of this is the rise of contemporary forms of Paganism. Some of these relate to local pre-Christian religions; others in our increasingly global culture to forms borrowed from other places. Many are best understood as new religious expressions inspired by ancient Paganism rather than revivals of those ancient faiths. In our multi-cultural societies contemporary Paganism is only a part of our context, but it is an important one due to its attractiveness to those seeking a faith relevant to their lives with a concern for ecology, rebuilding community and an equal place for male and female. We will need to recover that early Christian approach to Paganism as part of our mission in this post-Christendom context.

Listening to Pagans

This approach to evangelism will begin with two principles; an assumption that God is at work in contemporary Pagans and that the first thing we need to do is listen to them and get to know them. A popular misconception is that Pagans are the same as Satanists. Talking to them will quickly dispel this mistake. Ignorance and fear are the two main barriers to sharing the Christian faith amongst Pagans in western society. This doesn't mean we will agree with everything Pagans believe or support everything they do. Part of the challenge of working in any cross-cultural situation is one of discernment and this is often especially difficult when dealing with

different spiritualities where not everything is God at work but sometimes evil spiritual forces instead. We need to be wise to this, but also to realise how easy it is to label that which is different as evil without understanding or discernment. In building relationships with Pagans we need to get to a place where differences and similarities are shared as between friends seeking what is spiritual and good even when there is significant disagreement.

Pagans in most walks of life

There are Pagans now in most walks of life and you may find you know some already. Many also hold open ceremonies to mark major Pagan festivals. I have attended many of these, openly as a Christian seeking to learn and to start with as an onlooker, wanting to be careful not to be part of anything I could not see as compatible with my faith. Over time I have come to understand that many of these festivals are celebrations of the seasons and nature and find I can share much of it, whilst removing myself from the very few elements that involve spiritual beings. On the whole contemporary Pagans do not worship or placate gods, unlike some of their ancient ancestors, but view them as ways of speaking about nature so such festivals are not as such acts of worship. From my experience attending such events and talking in the pub afterwards is where relationships can be built. There are also online forums and other events where Christians and Pagans can share faith. An important thing to bear in mind in all such meetings is that many Pagans are aware of a 1000 years of animosity and sometimes persecution by Christians and so, whilst some are welcoming, others may be defensive. We need not to be defensive in return but prepared to admit the failings of some who have acted in the name of Christianity in ways that cannot be justified.

Christians have much to learn

As it did for the Celtic Christians this growing relationship will lead us to understand those places where we wish to affirm Pagan belief and practice, and practice is usually more important than doctrine for Pagans. In some areas many Pagans hold more liberal attitudes than has been traditional for Christians, but they often hold high moral standards with regard to family and community, non-violence, service to others, caring for the environment, simplicity of life and justice for the poor. Indeed in some of these Christians have much to learn from them. In others I believe the power of Christ over sin

and death offers a way forward for Pagans as it does for all people.

Finding powerful new language

Most importantly it will help us find new language to express faith so it speaks powerfully. Unless we can do this, we all too often we end up like foreign tourists and think that by speaking slower and louder we can overcome the language barrier. Indeed new approaches to worship and spirituality will emerge. Some of these may involve a recovery of early Christian traditions. The saint's wells and holy places that were part of Christianity's engagement with ancient Paganism and the land have often been abandoned; I think part of our contemporary mission will be a recovery of many of these. Indeed I think we need to recover a tradition in which Pagan deities were replaced by saints who bore their characteristics and Christian sites and festivals that reflected the Pagan relationship with nature whilst aligning this to the God from whom all things come. Indeed the land was converted as much as the people. New approaches, particularly those geared to modern technology and communication will also be needed. In all of this a new expression of Christianity will come to be expressed very much in the Celtic and early church model.

Opening ourselves to this journey of discovery requires some courage and a gentle confidence in Christ and above all a belief that God is still able to disciple all peoples whatever their culture and belief. 

Suggestions for further exploration

What do Pagans Believe? Graham Harvey (Granta, 2007) – a well researched book by a Pagan academic.

New Age Paganism and Christian Mission Steve Hollinghurst (Grove, 2002) – a further exploration of mission and contemporary spirituality.

Mission-Shaped Evangelism Steve Hollinghurst (Canterbury Press, 2010) – a wider exploration of cross-cultural mission in the church's history and today.

about the writer

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