



PAGANS AND EVANGELICALS IN DIALOGUE

Philip Johnson and Gus diZerega (with contributions by Don Frew and Laine Petersen); edited by John W. Morehead; Oxford: Lion, 2008, 208 pp.

ISBN 978 0 7459 52727

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Most Christians would be surprised to learn that Pagans—people who reject monotheism and worship the gods—make up one-fourth of the world's population. This is the plausible estimate made by co-author Gus diZerega in an important new book that doesn't just talk about inter-religious dialogue but actually does it, and does it well.

Most Christians, especially evangelicals, would also be surprised to see that Pagans can show sophisticated understanding of Christian faith and also express appreciation for much of what they find in it. Most Pagans, on the other hand, would be surprised to discover that a Christian theologian—an evangelical at that—shows respect for their tradition and acknowledges it contains truth.

These are just a few of the many virtues of *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue*. In it Australian evangelical theologian Philip Johnson and American "Wiccan Gardnerian" Gus diZerega pull off what most Christians and Pagans consider impossible—they engage in respectful dialogue where each listens and learns from the other, but without submerging difference or

condescending to least-common-denominator, happy-clappy back-slapping.

The two religious thinkers square off on six topics: the nature of spirituality, the divine nature, the human relationship to the divine, Jesus and spiritual authority, and Paganism, Christianity and the culture wars. At the end of the book former-pagan-now-evangelical Lainie Petersen and pagan high priest Don Frew both give brief responses to the dialogue.

Those familiar with these traditions will not be surprised by what is said to be the distinctive character of each: Pagans are described as emphasizing immanence of the sacred, practice rather than belief, disparate spirits but ultimate oneness, nature as direct manifestation of the divine, radical religious pluralism, Jesus as one of many spiritual teachers, and the feminine character of nature and the divine. Christians are depicted as stressing transcendence as well as immanence, the Trinity, God encompassing both genders, nature and humans as fallen creation, the reality of evil, the uniqueness of Jesus, and revelation as fact.

While the authors claim not to be doing apologetics or trying to convert, they nevertheless do what *apologia* demands they both give reasons for what they believe. In a word, each *testifies*. Each thinker explains why he thinks his tradition is coherent. Thus they are indeed engaged in apologetics, which in the best sense is bearing witness to what we have seen and heard. In other words, this is the way the best apologetics is done in dialogical manner and with the utmost respect given to one's dialogue partner. This is also the best way we try to demonstrate the authenticity of our tradition to those outside it.

Good apologetics and dialogue are also conducted with honesty. These interlocutors demonstrate that by being willing to criticize their



own traditions: diZerega, for example, acknowledges evil (human sacrifice) in Aztec and Carthaginian Pagan religions, and Johnson points to sexism in the Christian tradition.

There may have been other examples of Pagan-Christian dialogue in the past, but this is probably the most sensitive and competent. It also contains some helpful new insights. For example, while diZerega suggests obliquely that his appeal to experience for authenticity (our deities comeö during the rites) must be supplemented by an examination of moral practice in the lives of adherents, Johnson warns of the possibility that some spirits are ödarkö and therefore need to be tested more rigorously. He tells of King Saul in the Bible who had a gift of prophecy and several times fell into ecstatic trance. Yet his spiritual experiences, while authentic, did not keep him from becoming a wicked person. Johnson's section on truth and revelation in the person of the historical Jesus is succinct but luminous.

DiZerega's chapter on spiritual authority contains a perceptive discussion of hermeneutics. He uses the distinction between *logos* and *mythos* to explain how modern science has taught us to look only at surface appearances in the physical world for truth, with the result that religious people looking at sacred texts cannot get beyond the surface text to see deeper meaning. He describes faith in a way that can help Christians today (öFrom the standpoint of *mythos*, faith can mean a confidence in the deeper meaning of events despite surface appearances because we have personally encountered or intuited that meaningö), and makes a suggestion that is actually a keen observation about the Reformation tradition. He says the Reformation focused so much on *logos* (the discursively rational) that it lost touch with *mythos* (deep symbolism in both story and rite). This helps explain why Luther and

Calvin rejected a good bit of the 1500-year-old typological tradition in its reading of the Bible, and why as a consequence so much of Protestantism has degenerated into variations of rationalism.

But I hope this is not the last book on Pagan-Christian dialogue. For the best inter-religious dialogue is based on deep respect, which means exploring the *deepest* differences in an atmosphere of civility. While this book does get at *some* of those deep differences—such as monotheism, fallenness, transcendence and the uniqueness of Jesus—it gives short shrift to others. For example, God's relationship to gender is touched on but largely skirted. While diZerega says the divine is feminine, and Johnson replies that the Christian God *includes* the feminine, there is no concerted attention given to why the Bible presents God in largely male terms. Or why Pagans deny the normativity of heterosexuality and Christians affirm it. The underlying assumption in diZerega and even in (Christian) Petersen's response is that sexual differences are either arbitrary or irrelevant—yet Christianity has a long tradition saying quite the opposite. In an era when sexuality's relationship to the divine is so pressing, this discussion between Pagans and Christians needs to begin.

Both major authors and respondents seem to agree that all hierarchy is destructive and non-existent in the divine. Mentions of past and present hierarchies are followed by appeals to the subversion of hierarchy in the best of the traditions, both Christian and pagan. But there is no analysis of this presupposition. Is ultimate reality truly devoid of hierarchy? Is hierarchy always pernicious? Most people for most of history have not thought so. Have they all been wrong?

Another book would make further progress by bringing to bear more philosophical expertise. Perhaps if diZerega, for example, had examined more of the history of philosophical debates on monism versus dualism



(such as those by Hindu philosophers, whom he would call Pagans), his metaphysics would not have appeared incoherent. He says that all is ultimately One, which has no individuality or personality. This means, both linguistically and philosophically, that the One is impersonal. Yet at the same time he says the One is not impersonal because *ōitō* contains the persons of deities and humans. Therefore *ōitō* is a Thou, in Martin Buber's parlance. But we cannot have it both ways—the One, which is ultimate reality, is either a person or it is not. If it is all that exists, which DiZerega does indeed suggest, then it perforce *cannot* be personal, for a person is defined, at least in part, by its distinction from what is not that person. But if the One is everything that exists, there are finally no distinctions in that One, and thus it cannot be personal.

There is further incoherence in his discussion of evil. While claiming there is no superior argument, from the Christian or Pagan side, he seems to resort, at the end of the day, to love. The *ōSource of Allō* is *ōperfect love,ō* and therefore we must trust—in a way that sounds remarkably Christian—that somehow suffering is for the best. Christians will nod in bemused agreement. But there remains the question—how can the Source of All, which we are told has no individuality or personality, be capable of love?

There are other minor mistakes. Johnson reports that Mary Daly says God is male, when in reality Mary Daly is the radical feminist who angrily denounced such *ōblasphemy.ō* DiZerega claims that for virtually all religions the Ultimate Source *ōis all good, loving, beautiful and true,ō* but philosophical Hindus and philosophical Buddhists, not to mention Jains and others, all deny the existence of personhood in ultimate reality and therefore the impossibility of love and beauty there. And a book on the *ōburning timesō* when Christians burned Pagan witches ought to plant

a stake in the midst of the decades-old dispute over how many witches were really burned. Estimates range from nine million to several thousand. How many were there? Every life is precious, but the rhetorical power changes considerably when we move from thousands to millions.

These are all minor criticisms to make of a path breaking volume that is refreshingly well-written, engaging and insightful. Every Christian and Pagan interested in relating to religious others should read and learn with great profit from this book.