



BEYOND THE BURNING TIMES: A PAGAN AND
CHRISTIAN IN DIALOGUE

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

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Review by William (Bill) Stewart

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Dialogue is something of a dirty word in many Christian circles and not without reason. There has been far too much pseudo-dialogue which fails to acknowledge real and fundamental differences between religions. By contrast, *Beyond the Burning Times* represents dialogue with integrity and without compromise. Compare, for instance, Gus diZerega's argument for religious pluralism versus Philip Johnson's argument that not respecting religious difference is actually dishonouring (see pp. 114-115, 121).

In my opinion this is a very important book for at least three reasons: (1) the Christian author practices Christian apologetics as dialogue not monologue; (2) Neo-Paganism is a rapidly growing New Religious

Movement (NRM) in the Western world (see p. 12); and (3) dialogue with Neo-Pagans is considered taboo by most evangelistic Christians ó Pagans are more often the *objects* of spiritual warfare rather than the *subjects* of apology and evangelism. Dialogue must not be a substitute for mission but I believe missional Christians will increasingly need to engage in this type of dialogue in order to gain a hearing in our multi-religious, post-Christendom world.

õNeo-Paganö, as opposed to traditional (Paleo-)Pagan religions (such as Australian Aboriginal or Native American religions, Shinto and Taoism), refers to those now diverse groups with origins either in the teachings of British esoteric enthusiast Gerald Gardner in the 1950s or in attempts to reconstruct ancient Norse, Celtic or Druidic religions. American Neo-Pagan Dr Gus diZerega is an Elder in the Gardnerian tradition of Wicca/Witchcraft (õAll Witches are Pagans but not all Pagans are Witchesö, Neo-Pagans say) and has also studied Native American spirituality and Afro-Brazilian Shamanism. He has a PhD in political science from the University of California-Berkeley and has taught for sixteen years at universities and colleges in the USA. He is a frequent speaker and writer on environmental issues, politics and religion. Previous books by diZerega include *Persuasion, Power and Polity* (2000) in the field of political science and *Pagans and Christians* (2001), as well as numerous academic and popular articles.

Australian Christian Philip Johnson is a leading authority on NRMs who has taught at the Presbyterian Theological College and Morling College, Sydney. The founder and CEO of Global Apologetics and Mission (GAM) and a founding editor of *Sacred Tribes Journal*, he has authored over 120 articles in Australian periodicals. Johnson is the co-author of several books including *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age* and *Beyond Prediction* (both 2001) and was a major contributor to *Encountering New Religious Movements* (2004). Johnson was also the



principal writer of *Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality in the Western World* by the "New and Alternative Spiritualities" issue group of the 2004 Lausanne Forum for World Evangelization.

Beyond the Burning Times is a catchy title designed to attract Neo-Pagans through its reference to the European and North American witch trials (the so-called "Burning Times") which reflects Neo-Pagan identification with the victims. It seeks to move Pagan-Christian relations beyond this barrier for Neo-Pagans. As a selling point is likely to be effective but personally speaking while I have previously accepted this identification I now have serious reservations about Christians accepting "the myth of the Burning Times" (Diane Purkiss in *The Witch in History*, 1996). While abominable, those events actually have no historical relationship to either contemporary Neo-Pagans or a pre-Christian matriarchal religion. The so-called "witches" who were victims of the witch craze would have considered themselves Christians.

This book is well documented (with "Endnotes" and "Further Reading", pp. 189-204, 205-208) but written for a general audience. It consists of six main chapters on (1) the nature of spirituality; (2) the Divine (3) nature; (4) humans and the Divine; (5) Jesus and spiritual authority; (6) Paganism, Christianity and the culture wars, respectively; together with introductions and conclusions by both diZerega and Johnson. It also includes "Responsive Thoughts" (pp. 168-182) by Lainie Petersen from Chicago, a onetime Neo-Gnostic priest who reverted to orthodox Christianity, and Don Frew of Berkeley, California, an Elder in various traditions of Wicca/Witchcraft. While I am certainly tempted to critique the views of the authors, especially diZerega's for obvious reasons, the scope of this review precludes criticism that would do them

justice. I will therefore limit myself mainly to summarising what I understand as some of their key points.

DiZerega emphasises that his is *one Pagan's interpretation* (p. 21) but generally indicates where he is not relating commonly held views. He describes Neo-Paganism as an Earth-centred spirituality. Practitioners focus on the immanent aspect of deity: *When clearly understood and apprehended, the world and everything in it is a manifestation of the Divine* (p. 153). The world, DiZerega says, is *enspirited* (p. 27). Neo-Pagans honour the *Sacred* in and through *Nature* which DiZerega believes is sentient. A ritual year based upon the seasonal cycles of Nature is at the heart of Neo-Pagan spiritual practice. He rejects views of deity as having personality or being gendered (not that Christians hold the latter view). Neo-Pagan religion is polytheistic but Pagans see their gods *not as creators of the universe, but rather as powers and forces with their own independent and conscious reality immersed within a context that is bigger than they are* (p. 27). Neo-Pagans prefer personal, mystical experience over abstract knowledge. Their beliefs are not text-centred. While texts are certainly used they are not considered divine revelations. They do not recognise any teachers as authoritative over individual experience. Neo-Pagans, DiZerega notes, do not have a principle of ultimate evil. Evil in the world is an expression of *disharmony*, like a musician out of tune with their orchestra. It is a consequence of *ignorance* not sin. Metaphysical and moral relativism are key tenets of Neo-Pagan belief. No religion, DiZerega believes, can deal fully with the spiritual in human life and therefore all are needed.

Johnson's presentation is clearly crafted towards a Neo-Pagan readership, and needs to read in this light. He describes Christianity as *Jesus-centred spirituality* (p. 33). Johnson observes that for Christians spirituality consists of *both beliefs and experiences*. Experiences cannot be taken as self-authenticating, he argues, emphasising the need for



spiritual discernment regarding that which is harmful. Johnson defends Christian belief in human sin evidenced by ðfractured and alienated relationshipsö (p. 65). But God's love and forgiveness, he says, restores human dignity rather than reinforcing human worthlessness. ðTruth is a Personö (pp. 140-141) and God's clearest revelation is in the life of Jesus. In Jesus God offers humans the possibility of renewal. ðThe experience of renewal Jesus offers involves living by divine priorities that lead us to value ourselves holistically and to become agents of blessing towards others (including non-human sentient life)ö (p. 111). Some Christian readers will expect greater mention of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, but I suspect Johnson would argue that this is to misinterpret the context of this introductory dialogue and its apologetic rather than evangelistic purpose (see pp. 14-16).

Johnson notes that Christianity affirms *both* the transcendence *and* immanence of God, but suggests that the recent cultural turn towards immanence exemplified by Neo-Paganism may represent a protest against modern Christian neglect of a biblical view of divine immanence. He also suggests the need for a ðfeeling intellectö (p. 35) in response to a perceived over emphasis on the cognitive aspects of faith since the Enlightenment. In the context of a new focus on the ðDivine feminineö in Western culture highlighted by diZerega (pp. 144-150), Johnson stresses a need for attention to biblical feminine and maternal similes for God. In these respects he asks: ðare there forgotten truths embedded within the Bible and the Christian tradition that God's Spirit is prompting us to rediscover?ö (p. 37).

The authors of *Beyond the Burning Times* find some common ground, although not always for the same reasons. Both diZerega and Johnson reject dualistic matter/spirit and sacred/secular divides and express

common concern over consumerism and environmental degradation. From the perspective of missional Christianity, I believe diZerega himself offers various pointers to future avenues for fruitful interaction, such as when he acknowledges ða profound truth in the Christian way, a truth much less emphasised by Pagans: the power of forgivenessö (p. 103).

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