

UNIVERSITY "OVIDIUS" - CONSTANTA

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Contemporary neopaganism. Fundamental landmarks

SUMMARY

COORDONATOR :

Prof. Univ. Dr. Pr. Gheorghe ISTODOR

Student - Doctorand

Pr. Drd. Nicu Adrian PĂTRĂȘCU

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Introduction

Contemporary man, affected by de-Christianisation and pseudo-religious syncretism, is more familiar with the traditions of indigenous peoples outside Europe than with his own spiritual heritage. The traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the tribal religions of Africa, the sophistication of Hindu faith and practice, and the recently revived Japanese Shinto tradition are widely recognized as authentic animistic traditions indigenous to their respective regions and underpinning much of contemporary neo-paganism. Likewise, certain indigenous European traditions, from the massive civilizations of Greece and Rome to the barely documented tribal systems of the Finns, British, and others on the northern fringes are experiencing a revival and resurgence in various neo-Pagan manifestations. The topicality of the proposed theme derives from the fact that these indigenous European and non-European traditions are undergoing renewal and transformation in a variety of neo-pagan movements.

The word "pagan" (with a small "p") is often used pejoratively to mean "simply uncivilized" or even "unchristian" (the two are generally assumed to be identical), just as the word "heathen" is used. Its literal meaning is 'rustic', 'of the country (pagus)'. As a religious term, it was first used by early Christians in the Roman Empire to refer to adherents of other (non-Jewish or non-Christian) religions, not, as was once thought, because the old religions were followed primarily by rural peasants, not by sophisticated urban freethinkers, but because Roman soldiers of the time used the word "pagan" in a contemptuous way for civilians or non-combatants. The early Christians, who considered themselves "soldiers of Christ," looked down on those who did not practice their religion as mere peasants, pagans. This usage does not seem to have persisted long outside the Christian community. In the 4th century, the word "pagan" returned closer to its original meaning and came to be used incessantly to refer to anyone who worshipped the spirit of a particular locality or pagus.

The name persisted long after its origin was forgotten and developed a new overlapping usage referring to the great classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, Persia, Carthage, etc. Early Christian writers composed apologetic writings "against the pagans", referring to philosophers and theologians such as Plato, Porphyry, Plutarch, Celsus and other predecessors or contemporaries. Much later, when classical literature re-emerged in the European Renaissance, the literati of the time wrote essays on pagan philosophy, and by the 19th century the use of the word had become almost synonymous with 'classical'. In the early 20th century, D. H. Lawrence's literary group, "The Pagans," was inspired by Greece and what he

later called the great ancient pagan vision, before the idea and concept of personhood made everything as small and close as it is now.

Lawrence's terminology has shades of more recent contemporary usage, with the word "pagan" being used again in its basic sense to refer to a religion that worships nature and seeks to bring human life into harmony with the great cycles embodied in the rhythm of the seasons.

Another meaning of the term "pagan", which we will use most often in our approach, refers to the original spiritual traditions of nature worship in general, and European ones in particular, which have been explicitly affirmed under this name by their contemporary followers. In this sense, pagan religions share the following characteristics:

- ✓ They are polytheistic and recognise a plurality of divine beings who may or may not be avatars or other aspects of an underlying unity/deity/trinity etc.
- ✓ I see nature as a theophany, a manifestation of divinity, not as its "fallen" creation.
- ✓ I recognize a divine feminine principle, called Goddess, as well as or instead of a divine masculine principle, God. (Throughout this book, we use the word "God" exclusively to refer to male divine principles, not to the divine source or divinity itself).

In this sense, all indigenous animist religions around the world are pagan and fulfil all three characteristics. Buddhism, which emerged from the original Hindu tradition, is a highly abstract belief system, concerned with what is beyond time and manifestation rather than the intervention of deities in the world. In its pure form, it retains little in common with its pagan parent. However, all three of the above characteristics modern paganism shares in various forms with the ancient religions of European peoples.

In recent years, contemporary secularized and de-Christianized man has drawn inspiration from ancient indigenous traditions as the basis of a new religion for the 21st century. This new religion, called neo-paganism or simply paganism, is, in the most general terms, a form of nature mysticism. It is a faith that sees the earth and all material things as a theophany, an outpouring of the divine presence, which is itself personified in the figure of the Great Goddess and her consort, the God or male principle of nature. These two principles are supposed to encompass all existence and all evolution. In a sense, this is a new religion for the New Age. Modern thought is represented by these two basic deities, whose influence is complementary rather than hierarchical or antagonistic. Contemporary Pagans tend to regard all gods and goddesses as personifications of these two deities, as opposed to the situation in antiquity, when many of the gods and goddesses of the time were usually regarded as truly

independent entities. In its most prevalent form, Neo-Paganism is a theology of polarity, rather than the polytheism of ancient European culture.

The necessity of the proposed theme is due to the fact that modern paganism is based on the old European tradition. It has brought its sacred sites, festivals and deities out of obscurity and reinterpreted them in a form that is intended to be a living continuation of their original function. Followers of certain movements within this religion, such as Druidism, Wicca and Asatru, seek to live the contemporary form of these older religions described or hinted at in ancient writings, as in Iceland, where Asatru is a legally established religion that draws its directives directly from the old Norse sagas and shapes its outlook in a form that is reminiscent of the past but appropriate for the 20th century. At the other end of the spectrum are many neo-paganists, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, who follow no structured path but profess a generally naturalistic, polytheistic and goddess-centred view that coincides with the general religious attitude.

The need for the theme also arises from identifying the reasons for the resurgence of paganism in modern Europe and America. The basic impetus seems to have been primarily the search for a religion that worshipped the goddess and thus gave women and men the dignity of beings bearing the 'features of the divine'. This was deemed necessary by women whose political emancipation, caused by de-Christianisation, was not accompanied by a corresponding evolution of their religious status. (Even in pagan and polytheistic Hinduism, the cult of Kali, the Great Mother, is now one of the fastest growing popular religions.)

Second, a greater reverence for the Earth has emerged in Europe and America. The 'green' environmental movement, very much in vogue today, goes hand in hand with a desire to pay attention to the inner laws of the physical world, its rhythms and 'spirit of place'. This has led to a renewed recognition of the value of understanding traditional skills and beliefs and their underlying philosophy, which is generally pagan. Finally, parallel to this development was the influence of Eastern pagan philosophies, which provided sophisticated justification for practices that might have been dismissed in earlier times as superstitious and unwarranted.

The revival of paganism thus seems to be part of a general process whereby humanity, long seen as abstracted from its environment by monotheistic religions and secular materialism, is returning to a more general context. This context is both physical, by reference to the material world understood as an essential part of life, and chronological, as seen in the modern quest for continuity with ancient philosophies. Ancient religions are often little known outside their academic field of specialization, and evidence for their continuity is often

misunderstood or misrepresented as "coincidence" or superstition. It is the evidence for such continuity that this book explores.

Our survey covers the neo-Pagan phenomenon that has its roots in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean, where the earliest written records are found, in the Roman Empire, in the so-called "Celtic fringe" of France, Great Britain and parts of the Netherlands, in Germany and Scandinavia today, and finally in Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic states and Russia, which (with the exception of Russia and the South Slavic states) appear most recently in the historical record. In this sense, Europe is a geographical entity divided roughly north and south by the Alps and east and west by the Prague meridian. After the Holy Roman Empire in the west and the Byzantine Empire in the east defined Christianity between them, Europe became a cultural unit and its original religious traditions faded into relative obscurity area by area. This vital but half-hidden European tradition has been resurrected in contemporary neo-Paganism.

I. Man's religiosity between revelation and imagination. Overview

According to Christian teaching, man is brought into existence by God through a special creative act (Genesis 1:25; Psalms 118:73), as a synthesis of the material and spiritual worlds. Man's religiousness is a theological given, man being a being created in the image of God, having the quality of person and nature, but also the duty to live in a relationship of communion with God and his fellow men. "Starting from the premise that the mystery of man cannot be explained independently of God, we must say that man finds the fulfilment and the freshness of his nature in Jesus Christ. For this reason, in order to speak of a Christian anthropology, we will have to find the place of man, the 'image of God', in the Christological discourse"¹.

In the Person of the Saviour Christ humanity is recapitulated with its religious foundation and receives, in Him and through Him, the inheritance of the kingdom of God. The Son of God, the incarnate Logos, is sent into the world to make man a sharer in communion with God in the divine-human person of Christ. "The Word of God incarnate is the Creator and Saviour of the world, and thus the centre in a double sense. As the eternal Logos of the Father, he is the ground and model, the meaning of human existence. As the

¹ Cristian Sonea, "Man, the Face of Christ and his sending into the world to preach the gospel", in *Studia Universitate, Babeş-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa*, Year LIII (2008), no. 1, p. 156

divine-human person, as the incarnate Logos, He is the archetype in whose image we were created, the partner and source of our dialogue with Him and with other human beings"² .

In the epistles of St. Paul, the anthropological discourse has a profound Christological content. "Thus, speaking to the Romans about the fruits of justification through faith in Jesus Christ and about the fact that through Christ came reconciliation following Adam's error, through which came death (Rom. 5:12), the Apostle calls the latter '*the image of him who was to come*' (Rom. 5:14). Therefore Adam, the man in whom all have sinned, is built in the image of him who was to come, Christ. He is not only the Coming One but also the One who was, for Christ "is the image of the unseen God, who was born first of all creation, because in him all things were made, things in heaven and on earth, things seen and unseen, whether thrones or rulers or beginners or masters. All things were made through Him and for Him. He is before all, and all things are established by Him. And He is the head of the body, of the Church; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that He might be first in all things (Col. 1:15-18)"³ .

In the above texts, St. Paul shows what the Saviour Christ means for man as a deeply religious being. This in itself is of great importance because it makes evident the Christological dimension of St Paul's anthropology. "This dimension of the term "image" is also manifested in the fundamental teaching of the Holy Apostle according to which man, in order to be whole, in order to be fulfilled, must bear the image of the heavenly man"⁴ .

Man finds his archetypal structure within the humanity deified by the incarnation of Christ and is renewed to knowledge "in the image of Him who built them" (Col. 3:10), becoming a new creature. Thus the old man dies with Christ, and is raised with him, living a hidden life with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-4).

Thus, according to the Apostle Paul, the inherent religiousness of man is based on the fact that he is the image of the image of God, that is, of Jesus Christ. Man was created in the image of Christ, was saved objectively in Christ, and with Him the Christian, whose life is Christ until death, will appear in glory on the last day.

The Holy Fathers link man's religiosity to Christology, to the quality of Christ - the image of God. The Apostolic Fathers, Origen, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint John Chrysostom and Simeon the New Theologian, all affirm that Christ is the image of God and man the image of Christ, that man

² *Go Forth in Peace. A Pastoral and Missionary Guidebook*, WCC, Geneva, 1982, p. 4

³ Cristian Sonea, "Man, the Image of Christ and his sending into the world to preach the gospel", p. 157

⁴ Panayotis Nellas, *The animal man in divinity*, Deisis Publishing House, Sibiu, 1996, p. 8

is the image of the image. "Over all he has fashioned... man, the greatest and most chosen being, the image of His icon"⁵ . "Therefore as St. Paul says, Adam "is the image of Him who was to come", (Rom. 5, 14) because the Logos, the Creator of all things prefigured in Him the icon of the salvation of the human race which was to come through the Son of Man"⁶ .

"Let it be understood that if God the Son, the one begotten, made man 'in the image of God', then we need make no distinction between the deity of the Father and the Son since Holy Scripture calls both the one and the other God, the One who made man and the One in whose image he was made"⁷ .

"From the very beginning man's nature was brought into the world in this way, so that through mind and will he might become a new creature, the judgment of the mind being given to us so that we might know Christ, the will, so that we might go towards him, and the remembrance, so that we might bear him in us, all this being ordained because he was the pattern after which all creatures were built. For it was not the old Adam who was the pattern for the new Adam, but the old Adam was taken after the image of the new."⁸

Thus, the Holy Fathers are aligned on the fact that the archetype of religious man is Christ and that by the fact that Adam "was created in the image of Christ" we understand that he was to attain the likeness of God⁹ . After the fall of the protoparians, this was no longer possible, but this changed, being realized and fulfilled in the New Adam by "*the entrance into the world of the firstborn*" (Heb. 1:6)¹⁰ .

St Maximus Confessor explicitly affirms this truth when he addresses Thalasius: "This is the great and hidden mystery; this is the happy goal for which all things were founded; this is the divine goal thought out before the beginning of things, which we define by saying that it is the final goal thought out before, for which all things are, and it for none. Towards this goal (towards the hypostatic union of divine and human nature, towards Christ), God brought into existence the beings of things"¹¹ .

⁵ St. Clement the Roman, *Epistle to the Corinthians*, in PSB vol. 1, ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1979, p. 63.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, Edited by Alexander Roberts, D. D. & James Donaldson, LL. D., p. 455

⁷ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in PSB vol. 30, ed. IBMBOR, 1998, p. 48

⁸ St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *On Life in Christ*, Ed. IBMBOR, Bucharest, 2001, p. 195-196

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Saint Maxim the Confessor, *Answers to Thalasius*, in *The Philokalia of the Holy Needs of Perfection*, vol. III, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p. 303.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 304

Thus, the inherent religiousness of man is revealed in Christ. In the Person of the Son of God the mystery of God and the mystery of man is revealed "*He has made known to us the mystery of his will*" (Eph. 1, 9; 3, 3, 9)¹² .

The above statements demand a real assumption of the missionary vocation which results from the religious character of man. We can even affirm that man's ontology is missionary. "By virtue of being built in the image of the Holy Trinity, man is a personal being open to communication and communion. He is created to reach out to others and to go beyond the natural in order to give a creative response to the divine call. Apostolic responsibility is founded Christologically through the revelation of the creation of man in the image of Christ. Christ is the Messenger par excellence, consequently every human being is sent into the world to fulfil God's will. His constitution is missionary or apostolic. Man's mission is done in the manner of Christ and in the light of the Holy Trinity"¹³ .

One of Jesus Christ's favorite terms for Himself was Son of Man, which indicates that the Son of God assumed all of humanity, with all that is material. Therefore for the one who is "the image of the Son of Man" the mission does not mean looking for one element or another of our materiality in order to be saved, but the transformation of the present time and of society and of all matter in a different way and according to a different dynamic¹⁴ . In this process man learns about himself that he is responsible for the whole of creation and that he has to fulfil an important mission towards it, that of reconciling it with himself and with God.

For an Orthodox Christian, religiosity implies active participation in the life of the Orthodox Church and respect for its teachings and practices. This may include participation in divine services (Holy Mass, feast services and other services), personal and communal prayer, study of Scripture and patristic writings, sharing in the Holy Sacraments (Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Confirmation, etc.), fasting, acts of charity and involvement in community life.

Orthodox religiosity is deeply linked to the Church's tradition and heritage, which includes the Holy Mass, the worship of holy icons, the practice of the prayer of the heart (the prayer of Jesus), the honouring of saints and the Virgin Mary and the observance of Church traditions and canons.

¹² Panayotis Nellas, *op.cit*, p. 8

¹³ Cristian Sonea, "Man, the Image of Christ and his sending into the world to preach the gospel", p. 159

¹⁴ Panayotis Nellas, *op.cit*, p. 8

For an Orthodox Christian, religiosity is not only an external activity, but also involves a personal and inner relationship with God. It is a search for holiness and union with God through Christ, and a guide to living a life full of love, virtue and repentance.

A Christian's religiosity also provides a framework for communion with other believers through participation in services and involvement in the life of the church community. It also promotes Christian values such as love, mercy, humility and unity.

Pseudo-religiosity refers to beliefs or practices that imitate or claim to be religions, but which do not fully or at all respect established religious principles and traditions. These practices can be considered "pseudo" because they are not based on a genuine faith or tradition, but rather on ideas or philosophies invented or reinterpreted by their leaders or founders.

Some examples of pseudo-religions may include:

- New Age beliefs, which involve a combination of spiritual and philosophical traditions, but have no established religious basis and do not follow conventional religious traditions.
- Destructive cults, which involve groups of people who follow a charismatic leader and adopt religious practices that emphasize mental and emotional control and manipulation of members.
- Conspiracy beliefs, which involve ideas and conspiracy theories about religion and spirituality, such as the idea that a secret organisation controls the world and that people must unite to fight it.

It is important to recognise that pseudo-religions can be harmful to individuals and society as they can promote dangerous ideas and manipulate people to achieve their own goals.

A common characteristic of all religions is to believe in and worship God. Christianity shows that God is the Creator of the world, everything is in the hands of God who controls the wind and the clouds and who rules life and death. God is so powerful that he is everywhere and never makes a mistake. All pseudo-religions "borrow" the concept of "God" from religions in general and Christianity in particular, and once it is used by pseudo-religions, they will manipulate, distort and change it. Thus, God is used by pseudo-religions to threaten and control believers¹⁵.

¹⁵ Z. M. Chen; X. L. Zhang, *The truth of pseudo religions*, Contemporary World Press, Beijing, 2001

Also, many times, God is substituted with pseudo-religious leaders. In Christianity, the leader and Head of the Church is the Saviour Christ and not a specific person; a clear distinction is made between man and God. The ultimate goal of the Christian is to attain God-likeness, not to be God himself. On the other hand, the leaders of pseudo-religions always claim that they are living gods, the "reincarnation of Jesus" and are "masters of the universe". It is easy to see that pseudo-religions are false religions that steal and distort the concept of God and are cloaked in "religious garb" to pretend to be religions.

Jim Jones, leader of the "Peoples Temple" is a living example who claims to be "God", "Father" and "Lord" of the believers¹⁶ ; former Japanese Aum cult leader Shoko Asahara claims to be the "Savior" of mankind¹⁷ ; Ji Sanbao, leader of the "Mentuhui" group claims to be the "Christ sent by God"¹⁸ ; Li Hongzhi claims that he is the "Mighty Lord" in the universe and is the "King of Kings"¹⁹ .

The leaders of all pseudo-religions claim to be gods in order to strengthen the foundation of the faith. However, their concept of "God" is stolen, plagiarized and replaced by that of traditional religions, so that an indisputable fact is that the concept of "God" is created by traditional religions. While Christianity believes in a God who is the creator of the world, the Saviour through the coming of the Son of God, the incarnate Logos and the Sanctifier through the impartation of saving grace, in pseudo-religions, divinity is "stolen" by their leaders. They completely manipulate the meanings of God and recklessly claim to be "God", "Savior", "Lord", "King of kings", etc.

"Religious feeling" is also distorted by pseudo-religions compared to that found in Christianity. Religious feeling refers to a Christian's experience of understanding divine revelation, participating in the worship of the church, partaking of the sacraments and experiencing an authentic religious atmosphere. Emotion arises on the basis of faith in God and religious faith and is a manifestation of the religious consciousness of believers, a reflection of religious consciousness in emotion and is an inner feeling or direct experience of believers towards God. The ways of expressing religious emotions are mainly the feeling of dependence, gratitude, guilt, shame, peace, satisfaction and sometimes fear. These emotions can be positive, such as admiration, gratitude, and others; they can also be negative and

¹⁶ Elizabeth Jean Nelson, *Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Ultimate Commitment*, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1980, p. 16.

¹⁷ Jonathan Matusitz, *Symbolism in Terrorism: Motivation, Communication, and Behavior*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Washington, 2014, p. 142.

¹⁸ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, Wiley, Hoboken, 2011

¹⁹ Norah Piehl, *Cults*, Greenhaven Publishing LLC, New York, 2012, p. 99

passive, such as fear, dependence, and others. In other words, religious feelings cause one to establish communication with God and strengthen a creature-Creator relationship.

From this perspective, pseudo-religions are interested in exploiting religious sentiments for their own ends. Living in a sometimes unfavourable natural environment, primitive mankind had to deal with powerful earthquakes, huge volcanic eruptions, raging floods and haunting beasts, which seriously threatened their survival and security and made them fearful. The fear faced by humans in general is not temporary, accidental and individual, but is frequent and repetitive. This fear is present even in the context of today's technological development. This fear of danger to life is an instinct deeply rooted in the human subconscious and comes from the need for all life to be protected.

Pseudo-religious leaders are well aware that people tend to worship a deity who will protect them from all the dangers of the world. Religious feelings play an essential and fundamental role in the formation and deepening of religious faith, the establishment, communication and strengthening of spirituality. In this context, pseudo-religious organisations arise that recruit believers by virtue of religious feelings to develop pseudo-religious organisations. One of the practices of pseudo-religions is the spread of terror, some of them claiming the destruction of the earth or the destruction of mankind in order to make people fear and seek protection from the leaders of these groups. On the other hand, they take the opportunity to claim and promise that they are gods and that only they can save mankind and that they can protect their believers through magical qualities and supernatural power, so as to trigger the addictive needs of the believers²⁰.

New religious movements have proliferated pseudo-religious sentiments as diverse as possible in contemporary society. "Today's young people in Romania, especially those with intellectual concerns, are tempted by the "offer" of the new religious and pseudo-religious movements, because they represent something new and exotic for them. The atheist upbringing received in the family has created certain reflexes and a certain reserve towards the Church and its teaching. At the same time, he perceives "traditional" in a pejorative sense, as something outdated and unacceptable. Consequently, the curiosity inherent in his age, the "incompatibility" of the Church's teaching with his education and convictions, coupled with a

²⁰ ZHANG Yu-ding, TAN Yu-xin, LIU Qi-zhen, "What Does Pseudo Religion Steal From Traditional Religion Psychologically", in *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, September 2017, Vol. 7, No. 9, pp. 1169-1176

certain native spiritual "thirst", particularly stimulate his temptation towards a new form of religiosity"²¹ .

The phenomenon of secularisation has been identified as directly responsible for some important social changes and transformations, the most significant of which are the *desacralisation of the world*, increasingly affirmed also by the social sciences and materialised by the rejection or reinterpretation of the role of religion, respectively by its marginalisation; *the splitting of reality into two distinct contrasting parts*, the religious and the non-religious; *a profound secularisation of society*, reflected in the autonomisation of the various social fields in relation to religious reality; an *increase in the supply of religious material* and the encouragement of free competition between the religious and the pseudo-religious²² .

Unable to replace Christ, "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6), with another absolute truth, secularism has led to a reinterpretation of the religious message and, implicitly, to an *explosion of sects and religious movements*, which are competing to demonstrate to contemporary man the purpose and meaning of life. Many of these pseudo-religious entities have sprung up in the secularised West, where *the reckless man*, ecstatic about the freedom and rights that post-post-modernism has given him, has invented his own God. The literature has already noted this shift from the conception of an impersonal God, understood as a force or *principle*, to an atheism that shows violent nuances and encourages the rapid mediatisation of any challenge to the existence of the Triune God²³ .

Individualism and religious indifferentism, secularism and globalization, the *commercialization of religious truth* and the affirmation of pseudo-religions are just some of the challenges and obstacles that today's Orthodox missionary must face and overcome. For each of these challenges, however, a solution, a guidance, a message that the Church can convey to post-post-modern man must be identified.

Religiosity refers to a person's spiritual commitment, beliefs, practices and experiences within the revealed faith. It is characterized by a deep and authentic relationship with the divine, respect for religious values and norms, and active involvement in religious rituals and community.

²¹ Nicolae Achimescu, *New Religious Movements*, Limes Publishing House, Cluj Napoca, 2002 , p. 8; Nicu Gavriluță, *Eastern Religious Movements*, Provopress Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006 , p. 44

²² Laurențiu TĂNASE, "Secularization and religious mutations in late modernity", in *Yearbook of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology "Patriarch Justinian"*, 2nd year (2002), Ed. University of Bucharest, pp. 256-257.

²³ Pr. David Pestroiu, "Repere misionare privind unitatea eclesială în fața proliferării ideologiilor doctrinare heterodoxe în modernitatea românezi tardizie", in *Anuarul Faculté de Teologie Ortodoxă "Justinian Patriarhul"*, year XVIII (2018), Bucharest, p. 41.

Pseudo-religiosity, on the other hand, refers to the appearance or simulation of religiosity in the absence of well-established religious traditions or within groups that adopt non-conventional practices or beliefs. Pseudo-religiosity may involve deception or manipulation, where leaders or founders may promote unjustified ideas, false utopias or emotional exploitation of adherents.

Religiosity is underpinned by Holy Scripture, teachings and traditions that are passed down through generations. It has a strong cultural and historical basis and can provide a coherent moral and spiritual structure for its practitioners. On the other hand, pseudo-religiosity may be characterised by the absence of a solid foundation, lack of spiritual authority or recognised tradition and may be more susceptible to slippage, abuse or distortion.

It is important to differentiate between authentic religiosity and pseudo-religiosity to ensure that we are engaged in practices and beliefs that are grounded, respectful and bring spiritual and moral value to our lives.

In a world increasingly dominated by the struggle for the accumulation of material goods, in which the temptation to consume has taken on the consistency and constancy of a commonplace, man is forced to conform to economic and material values - productivity, efficiency, consumption, goods; thus, man condemns himself to marginalisation and puts himself in the position of being repudiated by the social or professional community to which he belongs. In order to be like other people and like society, people in the global and postmodern world must first of all be economically efficient and productive, in order to have access to goods and services at a socially accepted minimum level. The man with the best social position will be the one who can convert his labour, creativity and intelligence into material goods and personal wealth - the unquestioned secular ideal of a world stuck on the horizontal plane of earthly existence. As an irony of history, out of the indestructible symbiosis of redemption and efficient labour, proclaimed by the English Puritan separatists of the late 16th century, only the idea of productivity quantified in profit remained for their postmodern descendants, abandoning not only the certainty of redemption but also the idea of soteriology.

Although access to and possession of material goods is capable of generating major satisfactions for individuals and their families and of conferring authority and prestige in society, life itself proves that wealth is not enough, that it "covers" only a part - the earthly, telestial, fallen part - of the human being. The rest, the spiritual dimension, remains "uncovered", abandoned, forgotten, because man prefers to forget his depth, his constant calling and his uninterrupted vocation to communion with divinity, at the cost of alienation.

This price can be very high, going so far as to create complete imbalance in individual existence.

Thus, the role of the Church against the pseudo-religious alienation of postmodernity remains a fact. It is the only institution capable of offering anti-alienation solutions to man, who needs them more than ever; only the Church can point towards authenticity and Truth, where man's search grows in balance. As a result, the Church - otherwise increasingly perceived as one of the institutions of global society - can make a comeback in contemporary times, pushing the reductionist limits imposed by postmodern secularism, once it assumes its condition as a minority and spiritually, morally, socially and culturally active diaspora in a pluralistic religious and ideological environment, in the spirit of the confessing and apologetic Christianity of the pre-Constantinian era.

II. Man - the crown of God's creation - between paganism and neo-paganism. Fundamental landmarks

If we want to explore why man is the crown of God's creation, we need to understand what a human being is. Two views of humanity are prevalent in our contemporary world.

This first view is materialistic. For the materialist, reality is only what can be perceived with our senses, either now or through potential future discoveries. Therefore, a human being is simply a biological life, an animal and an accident of evolution. It should be noted that scientific discoveries about the human being are not problematic for Orthodox Christians. The problem lies in reducing our view of the human person only to what has been discovered by the scientific method. Such a narrow view is clearly atheistic.

The second view is Platonist. Platonist and Neo-Platonist thought prevailed in Hellenistic and Hellenistic civilization before the advent of Christianity. On the one hand, it was part of the 'seed of the word', to quote St Justin Martyr, who prepared Roman civilisation for their evangelisation. However, many of the ancient heresies also found their roots in Greek philosophy. One of the central concepts of Platonic thought is dualism, which divides reality into spirit and matter.

Moreover, while spirit is good, matter is bad. As far as the human person is concerned - the soul is good and the body is bad. The body is seen as a prison of the soul. For this reason, in Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire you find extremes in moral behavior: either extreme hedonism or extreme asceticism. Both sides justified their behavior on the grounds that the body was entirely evil. Unfortunately, this dualism still prevails. One of the central

teachings of classical Protestantism is that when Adam and Eve sinned, their fall constituted a loss of both the image of God and the likeness in which they were created. Thus we find this idea of the total depravity of man. Mankind can do nothing but evil. Any goodness that is found in a person results from an irresistible grace bestowed by divinity. This line of thought also revived the pagan concept of fate - according to which events, even our salvation or damnation were predestined by God. Our salvation does not require our cooperation, but rather God has chosen some for salvation and others for damnation.

We can see that a person brought up with a classical Protestant understanding of the human person - either consciously or subconsciously, who is then educated in an environment dominated by atheistic materialism, will construct a very distorted view of the human person. Is it a surprise then that our contemporary society values wealth, power and pleasure above all else, and that cotemporary man is attracted to neo-paganism? Moreover, is it any surprise that we value human beings according to their perceived functionality? If our view of humanity is thus distorted, surely our ethics will be distorted as well. When this is the case, how can we relate to God and how can we not have a distorted understanding of God if our understanding of ourselves is so distorted?

The Orthodox Christian view of man begins with the Saviour Jesus Christ. In the Symbol of Faith, we confess that all things came into being or were made through Him. In the first chapter of Creation, when God creates, He "speaks", which symbolizes that God sends His Word, which is Jesus Christ. God's creation is good, and when man is created, God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth. Thus God made man; in the image of God he made him; male and female he made them." (Genesis 1:26-27).

In other words, through Jesus Christ, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God and given dominion over the earth and the rest of creation. What does it mean that we are created in the image and likeness of God? It is interesting to note that image is designated by *εἰκόνα*, from which the word icon is derived. Likeness in Greek is *όμοιόσιν*, which bears a resemblance to the word *όμοούσιον* (co-essential, consubstantial, "one in essence"). They do not mean exactly the same thing, but the terms are related.

St. Basil the Great, commenting on this, writes: "by our creation we have the first (image), and by our free choice we build the second (likeness). In our original structure co-originate and exists our becoming in the image of God. By free choice we are conformed to that which is after the likeness of God.... He made us with the power to become like God. And by giving us the power to become like God, let us be artisans of God's likeness, so that the

reward for this work is ours. I have what is in the image of God by being a rational being, but I become in the image of God by becoming a Christian. How do we become in the image and likeness of God? Through the Gospels. What is Christianity? Likeness to God as far as is possible for human nature. If you are shown that you are a Christian, hasten to become like God, put on Christ"²⁴ .

On the day man was made, we also read: "God saw all that he had made, and indeed it was very good". (Gen. 1:31) King David, contemplating God's creation of man, wonders, "What is man, that You think of him? Or the son of man, that You visit him? Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour, and set him over the works of Thy hands" (Ps. 8:4-6) St. Gregory the Theologian describes man as a noetic soul and the Image of God, a kind of second world, a new Angel, King of all on earth, but subject to the King above; earthly and heavenly; temporal yet immortal; visible yet noetic, "a living creature formed here and then moved elsewhere; and, to complete the mystery, divinized by his inclination to God. For to this, I think, tends that Light of Truth which we here possess only in measure, that we may both see and experience the splendour of God, which is worthy of Him who made us and will remake us again after a higher manner"²⁵ . In his work, *The Mystery of Faith*, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev writes: "Human beings are the crown of creation, the summit of the creative acts of the Holy Trinity"²⁶ .

In the second chapter of Genesis, we are told, "God made man of the dust of the earth and breathed into his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7) St. John of Damascus is firmly convinced that body and soul were formed at the same time. Such teaching is opposed to the Platonic philosophy which sees the body as a prison of the soul. The Vedic and Buddhist traditions, as well as Mormons, hold that the soul pre-exists the body. Thus reincarnation is a central belief for Hindus and Buddhists. However, the Orthodox Church has always rejected reincarnation because it denies a fundamental truth, namely that a human person is body and soul.

To summarize: as human persons, we are body and soul, created in the image and likeness of God, created good, created to rule the whole earth, created male and female, created with a free will, created with the command to be fruitful and multiply and with the command to be obedient to God. God lays down only one commandment, not to eat of the

²⁴ Saint Basil the Great, *On the Human Condition*, St Vladimirs Seminary Press, Yonkers, 2005, p. 44-45

²⁵ Saint Gregory the Theologian, *Oration 38: On the Theophany*, 11, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 7. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Christian Literature Publishing Co., Buffalo, 1894, p. 348

²⁶ Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith: An Introduction to the Teaching and Spirituality of the Orthodox Church*, Darton Longman & Todd Ltd, London, 2004, p. 58

fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Acts 2:17) He placed Adam in the garden, where he enjoyed immortality and harmony with God and creation. Eve comes from Adam so that he would not be alone and thus there was also total harmony within humanity. The Fathers teach us that God did not create man out of necessity, but out of His own goodness and love and so that we might share in His life.

Christ is the measure of all things, both divine and human. Since His Ascension, our human nature has been raised to the right hand of God the Father. This is clearly expressed in the hymns for the feast of the Ascension, one of which proclaims, "The Ascension of the Lord: 'Not having departed from the bosom of the Father, Most Holy Jesus, and having lived on earth as a man, today you have been taken up in glory from the Mount of Olives. And having exalted our fallen nature by your mercy, you have placed it with the Father. Therefore the heavenly ordinances of the bodiless were astonished at the wonder, and stood in awe and amazement. They were overwhelmed with trembling and magnified Your love for mankind'"²⁷ . God's purpose for mankind is seen in the union of our human nature with the divine Person of Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, by being raised to the right hand of the Father. St Athanasius the Great says that God became man so that we might be made gods. Likewise, all that Christ is by nature, we can also become by grace. Thus, St. Paul writes that our redemption in Christ took place so that we might receive the adoption of sons and thus be heirs of God through Christ. (Gal. 4:4-7)²⁸ .

The Saviour said, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full". (John 10:10) At Easter, we proclaim again and again that Christ has trampled death underfoot and given life even to those in the tombs. Death is the result of sin, as shown in the book of Acts (Acts 2:16-17). St. Paul writes: "As through one man sin entered into the world, and through sin death entered; and so death passed upon all men, because all have sinned". (Rom. 5:12) Linking death to sin, Scripture condemns murder and suicide and deplores death. What is according to God's will brings life.

The phrase "Man is the crown of God's creation" generally expresses the idea that man is considered the culmination of divine creation in our Orthodox teaching. It implies that man is the highest form of life created by God and is endowed with reason, conscience and free will.

²⁷ Vespers on the Feast of the Ascension, "Glory..." stihira to the Lord, I have cried.

²⁸ Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: "Theosis" in Scripture and Tradition*, Mount Thabor Publishing, Dalton, 2016, pp. 15-16

Man is considered to be created in the image and likeness of God and given dominion over creation. This statement underlines man's dignity and responsibility before the divinity and the world in which he lives, urging him to act consciously and morally.

Paganism refers to pseudo-religious practices inspired by ancient forms of European faith, such as those found in ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt and Celtic or Germanic countries, or other "indigenous" or "primitive" traditions. Paganism is a general label for a variety of individual personal traditions and religions, united by the concept of the sacredness of nature. Pagans may be pantheists, polytheists, duotheists or animists, but they are rarely monotheists in the sense of those found in Abrahamic religions.

Ancient "pagan" religion is complex and often simplified in the generally fragmentary works of its followers. It is known in most detail from archaeological data. A source book such as the second volume of Beard, North and Price 1998²⁹ , which translates numerous inscriptions and manuscript texts, is therefore essential. The most complete work by a Roman pagan on his own religion is Cicero's dialogue *On the Nature of the Gods*³⁰ .

Among the many works of Christian apologetics, a few can be highlighted: Justin's *Anonymous to Diognetus*, as an unusually poignant short statement; Justin's *First Apology*, as a succinct and influential early defense, with details of the Christian liturgy; Tatian's *To the Greeks*, as a blast against the dominant culture; Tertullian's *Apology*, as the most vigorous Latin polemic against traditional worship; and Augustine's *City of God*, as the culminating (though not the last) work in the ancient apologetic tradition. All are available online in out-of-copyright translations. None can be used without caution as a guide to traditional religion, but each sheds light on both Christian and pagan attitudes. Equally interesting, from a "pagan" philosophical perspective, are Porphyry's *On abstaining from the killing of animals*, which includes much on religion as well as vegetarianism, and the statement of a Neoplatonic spirituality in Iamblicus' *On the Mysteries*.

Paganism is an umbrella term for a number of traditions, often rooted in ancient European sources. These are related to the landscape and climate of their origin and have been reconstructed or recreated for the modern world using archaeological finds, folklore and any contemporary texts still in existence. Paganisms are often polytheistic or pantheistic and are frequently associated with encounters with the sacred in nature, though not in all cases. There is a convention of using Paganism with a capital P for contemporary "Western" paganism seen

²⁹ M. Beard, J. North; S. Price, *Religions of Rome*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998

³⁰ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De natura deorum/ On the nature of the gods*, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iasi, 2016

as a present-day religion, and paganism with a small p for the various traditions so labelled in the past. It is important to distinguish between paganism, as considered here, and other uses of the word, such as the use found in Abrahamic religions, with overtones of idolatry, immorality and meaningless rituals.

Sometimes "pagan" is used to mean any religion other than Judaism, Christianity or Islam. Paganisms include Druidism, Wicca, goddess spirituality, as well as those traditions that attempt to reconstruct ancient paganisms, such as modern paganism and Asatru (Nordic traditions), Religio-Romano (Roman), Hellenismos (Greek), Kemeticism (Egyptian) and contemporary forms of animism and shamanism. The following considers that Paganism, although based on elements of what is known about ancient Paganisms, is essentially of recent origin, recreated or reconstructed, rather than being the 'old religion' that predates Christianity, as is sometimes claimed.

Historians, notably Ronald Hutton, have shown that there is little or no evidence to support the idea of a continuing tradition that survived underground during the Christian centuries in Europe³¹. Furthermore, paganism is typical of a new form of contemporary religiosity, different from the format of traditional "religions" that have existed for thousands of years, particularly the concept of "religion" derived from Christianity. Thus, paganism is not centrally concerned with 'beliefs' or 'faith', except for some reconstructed pagan traditions, but is based on personal experience and a general view of life. There are aspects of old European traditions that would now be rejected, such as animal sacrifice.

As far as ancient paganism is concerned, this refers to the way of life of the pre-Christian Germanic-speaking peoples of most of northern and western Europe from the Iron Age until conversion; such as the Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Goths and Norse. These ancient pagan cultures have disappeared, so that today there are no pagan ethnics. The ways are slowly being rebuilt by small communities of enthusiasts from what can be known of the originals, and there may be living pagan communities again within a few generations. There is no list of doctrines to which one must assent, and Pagans may hold a variety of beliefs. It depends on the individual. This new form of religiosity has been described by Paul Heelas³² and others as the "spiritual revolution", a "subjective turn" from organized religion, external authorities, a theistic deity "out there" to a more loose form of spirituality that is personal and non-dogmatic. The individual can eclectically take elements from a variety of traditions and

³¹ Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014

³² Paul Heelas; Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2005

we sometimes hear Pagans speak, for example, of 'karma'. It could be described as 'i-religion', where 'i' stands for individual, interactive, information and internet.

Man is the highest form of life created by God and is endowed with reason, conscience and freedom. According to Christian teaching, man is created 'in the image and likeness of God' and has been given dominion over creation. This statement underlines man's dignity and responsibility before his Creator and the world in which he lives. It encourages man to use his intellectual and moral gifts to acquire salvation.

Orthodox teaching about man is in total contradiction with the neo-paganism so much promoted today. We have seen that neo-paganism refers to pseudo-spiritual groups and that it draws inspiration from pre-Christian pagan religious traditions and practices. These movements may include the worship of nature gods and goddesses, the connection with the cycles of nature and the revival of ancient traditions and mythologies.

The danger of neo-paganism for man seen as the crown of God's creation can take many forms

Potential for misinformation: Some neo-pagan movements may offer incorrect or distorted interpretations of historical traditions. This could lead to a misunderstanding of pre-Christian cultures and religions.

Impact on social and moral values: Because of their differences from Orthodoxy and the values of contemporary society, some non-Orthodox movements pose a threat to traditional or moral values.

Cultural risks: If non-pagan movements try to take over or misinterpret aspects of Christian cultural or religious traditions, this can lead to cultural conflicts and tensions.

Overestimation of personal spirituality: In some cases, people may be drawn to neopaganism in search of a spiritual connection, but this can also lead to overestimating or adhering to beliefs that are not grounded in reality or logic.

III. Current neo-paganism. General references

Neopaganism is a complex phenomenon. It has no known or uncontested starting point and no single founder or originator, but in the form recognised today, Neo-Paganism originated in 1940s Britain in the form of Gerald Gardner's Wicca. From this other Neo-Pagan traditions and other varieties of witchcraft derived.

Today's Neo-Paganism includes a variety of traditions such as Neo-Pagan witchcraft, Neo-Pagan Druidism, Asatru/Heathenism, Neo-Shamanism, "non-aligned" Paganism and

Wicca. However, the roots of Neo-Paganism can be found in the late 19th century, in academic developments such as Egyptology, the rise of tourism to sites of ancient civilisations such as Greece and Rome, the rise of occult/magical secret societies and literature. In the early 20th century societies such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn were founded. Influenced by Freemasonry's closely held secrecy and its claims to be the guardian of a powerful ancient secret, these societies began to popularize their own claims to ancient wisdom³³.

The term itself is, however, contested and has multiple uses. It is used by some scholars and practitioners to distinguish between ancient and contemporary paganism, or between interrupted (e.g. Asatru, Druidism) and uninterrupted or continuous religious traditions (e.g. Hinduism), indigenous peoples such as Australian Aborigines or Native Americans³⁴.

Neo-Paganism is contested by both academics and practitioners, the latter assuming that context makes it obvious whether they are talking about their contemporary practices or ancient Greco-Roman worship. The prefix "neo" is sometimes considered dangerous because it is easily associated with "neo-Nazi". It is also seen as a trivializing and disrespectful modifier. The term is particularly popular in North America and continental Europe, but is not in common use in the UK.

The term is applied in various ways to

1. the romantic revival of the pagan religions dominant in the classical ancient world, especially Egypt, Greece and Rome, whose interest was revived in the 19th century;
2. the indigenous peoples of Asia, Africa and the Americas;
3. the powerful rural myth of pre-World War I pastoral innocence embodied in the writings of Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter, for example;
4. a variety of contemporary traditions and practices that revere nature as sacred, animate or alive, draw inspiration from past pagan religions, use ritual and myth creatively, share a seasonal festival cycle, and tend to be polytheistic, pantheistic and/or dualistic rather than monotheistic, at least insofar as they accept the divine as both male and female and thus include both gods and goddesses in their pantheon.

Neo-pagan groups take many forms, from Wiccan cenacles to Druid groves, from pagan hearths to magical lodges, and entry can be through formal initiation rituals or informal groupings based on friendship. Some groups may practice magic, while others may not. Many

³³ *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, G. Harvey and C. Hardman, (eds), Thorsons, London, 1996

³⁴ J.E. Pearson, *A Popular Dictionary of Paganism*, RoudedgeCurzon, London, 2002

use rituals and almost all use myths, celebrating the eight seasonal festivals that together constitute a mythic-ritual cycle, usually called the Wheel of the Year.

These festivals are the so-called Celtic fire festivals or quarter days of the cross Imbolc/Candlemas (2 February), Beltane (30 April), Lughnasadh/Lammas (31 July) and Samhain/Hallowe'en (31 October), plus the Winter and Summer Solstices (21 December and 21 June) and the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes (21 March and 21 September).

These are the traditional dates for each festival, but they are not fixed; many groups often find it easier, for practical purposes of bringing everyone together, to work on a fixed date (usually the closest Friday or Saturday to the dates given), while smaller groups or people working alone may choose to wait for a particular sign of nature (e.g. the first snowfall for Imbolc) and celebrate on that day. In the southern hemisphere, festivals are reversed according to the seasons, celebrating the autumnal equinox, for example, while neopagans in the northern hemisphere celebrate the vernal equinox. Rites of passage have also developed to mark the birth of a new child, coming of age, marriage, aging and death, and initiation rites and rituals celebrating the phases of the moon are also popular in some Neopagan groups³⁵.

Neopaganism/witchcraft is a spiritual orientation and variety of ritual practices using reconstructed mythological structures and pre-Christian rituals, mainly from ancient European and Mediterranean sources. Using a wide variety of techniques, Neo-Pagans seek to rediscover, reinterpret, and reinvigorate the myths, symbols, and forms of ancient deities, with particular emphasis on the figures of the goddesses. Neo-Paganism is usually used as an umbrella term encompassing a wide range of beliefs and practices, including Wicca (witchcraft), Druidism, ceremonial magic and the like. Despite popular opinion, most Neo-Pagans do not repudiate Christianity; on the contrary, they emphasize elements of Christianity that have been borrowed from pre-Christian practices and borrow widely from many other world religions.

Neo-Pagans claim that their beliefs and practices stem from ancient sources. Specifically, most see the cult of the goddess as a rediscovery of folk practices that have persisted in rural Europe throughout the Christian era and into recent times. However, the current neo-pagan revival can only be firmly traced back to the events and trends of the mid-19th century. One source was the revival of occultism, which saw the flourishing of conspiracy theories involving mysterious brotherhoods such as the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians and the Illuminati, and later the emergence of new religious and ceremonial

³⁵ *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, Peter B. Clarke (ed.), Routledge, London, 2006, 436-438

mystical orders, from theosophy to spiritualism and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Another current was Romanticism, which, in the emerging industrial age, nostalgically sought a return to a simple pre-modern life. A third was the rise of modern anthropology, which brought earlier and less 'advanced' cultures to public attention.

One individual was pre-eminently responsible for bringing these disparate tendencies together in what is now known as neo-Paganism. Modern Paganism may have emerged without Gerald Gardner, but without his influence it would have been an entirely different phenomenon³⁶.

Gardner claimed to have been initiated into magical paganism at an early age by an elderly woman named Old Dorothy. With the help of Aleister Crowley and others, Gardner created a set of rituals and a simple interpretation of pre-Christian Celtic worship centered on the image of a great goddess. The new/old religion he called "Wicca". Practitioners of this religion, called witches, were believed to awaken ancient powers of pre-Christian deities ignored by the modern world. Gardner began teaching this religion in Britain in the 1920s. One of his initiates, the brilliant and eccentric Alexander Sanders, developed his own version of Gardner's philosophy. In turn, Sanders' students, Janet and Stewart Farrar, created a different style of practice. These three branches of Wicca - Gardnerian, Alexandrian and Farrarian - form the basis of what is often called 'Brit-Trad' Wicca. Brit-Trad "schools" and other variations on the theme began to infiltrate the United States in the 1960s, just as a new American market for alternative religions was emerging.

Neo-Paganism is a religious and spiritual movement that has its roots in human history but has been revived in the modern era. It is rooted in a variety of religious traditions, philosophies and ideologies, and the philosophical underpinnings of Neo-Paganism are often complex and eclectic. However, there are some common themes and philosophical elements that can be identified in the Neo-Pagan movement:

Neo-Paganism is characterised by an effort to recover and revitalise ancient religious and cultural traditions. This movement is based on the idea that the teachings and values of our ancestors are relevant and valuable and can provide a guide for contemporary life.

Many Neo-Pagan traditions place great emphasis on the connection with nature and the natural cycles of life. Appreciation and reverence for nature are often central to Neo-Pagan practices, and their philosophy can include environmentalism and environmental responsibility.

³⁶ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Witchcraft*, Thames and Hudson, 1980, London, pp. 148-155

Neo-Paganism is generally tolerant and open to religious and spiritual diversity. This movement often promotes the idea that there are many paths to spirituality and that each individual has the right to choose their own religious beliefs and practices.

Neopagan can see the sacred in everything, not only in gods and goddesses, but also in the elements of nature, in every living thing and in all aspects of daily life. This perspective can contribute to a greater awareness and respect for the world around us.

Neo-Paganism places a strong emphasis on the personal and direct experience of spirituality. Believers are encouraged to develop their own relationships with gods and goddesses and to adapt their religious practices to their individual needs and experiences.

The idea that our ancestors had access to profound wisdom and that we can learn from their teachings is often present in neo-paganism. This can include ancestor worship and the study of historical traditions.

Because Neo-Paganism is a diverse religious movement, believers are often taught to be tolerant and accepting of the religious and philosophical differences of others.

Neo-Paganism and New Age are two distinct spiritual movements, but they have some overlap and mutual influences in the contemporary spiritual world. Although there are overlaps between these two movements, they remain distinct and may have different approaches and spiritual philosophies. In addition, each has a diversity of practices and beliefs, and their adherents may have unique individual perspectives on their spirituality and spiritual quest.

Occult Neo-Paganism or Neo-Pagan occultism is a branch of the Neo-Pagan movement that combines elements of Neo-Pagan traditions with occult practices and concepts. It may include magic, astrology, Kabbalah, alchemy and other spiritual and esoteric practices. Here are some key aspects of occult neo-Paganism:

The practice of magic is central to occult neo-paganism. It can include ritual magic, the invocation of spiritual entities, the use of magical symbols and magical tools to influence or interact with the spiritual or material world.

Occult neo-paganism is often syncretic, i.e. it borrows elements from several religious and spiritual traditions. Practitioners may combine Neo-Pagan practices with concepts and techniques from occult traditions, such as Kabbalah or alchemy.

Symbols are of particular importance in occult neo-Paganism. They can be used to represent and channel spiritual energies, to perform magical rituals or to gain spiritual insight.

Occult Neo-Paganism is based on the idea that there is a secret or hidden knowledge that can be acquired through spiritual practices and initiations. Adherents may seek to access this knowledge to develop their spiritual abilities and gain deeper understanding.

Similar to other Neo-Pagan traditions, occult Neo-Paganism places an emphasis on the connection with nature and its cycles. Practitioners may see nature as a channel for spiritual powers and magic.

Occult neo-paganism often falls under the umbrella of esotericism, which refers to spiritual teachings and practices that are reserved for a small circle and not available to the general public. This can create a sense of exclusivity and mystery within the movement.

Occult neo-paganism is an extremely diverse movement, with a multitude of traditions and groups with different perspectives and practices. There is no single path or dogma in this movement, and practitioners are free to adapt and develop their own occult beliefs and practices.

IV. Neo-Paganism as pseudo-religiosity. Fundamental aspects

While in some instances rejecting modernity, paganism also embraces some modern pseudo-religious elements, such as its emphasis on individual freedom, use of information technology and environmental activism. Many Neo-Pagan traditions emphasise the inner divinity, often expressed in the language of modern psychological theories. Finally, many forms of contemporary paganism involve many critiques of traditional religions.

While definitions of paganism vary, the writings of a number of leading scholars in the field of pagan studies converge on a few points: the idea of divinity as wholly or partially immanent in the natural world (pantheism/panentheism), sometimes manifested through multiple deities (polytheism), and a romanticized understanding of nature³⁷.

While a definition of paganism as a pseudo-religious phenomenon characterized by polytheism, a sense of immanent divinity, and nature worship does not preclude adherence to non-Western religions per se, the term is generally applied to a genealogically related strand of Western traditions born out of a specific set of cultural trends that began to emerge prominently in the mid-20th century.

A different understanding is offered by religious studies scholar Michael York, who defines paganism as: 'an affirmation of an interactive and polymorphous sacred relationship of

³⁷ Ronald Hutton, *A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999; Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1984.

the individual or community to the tangible, sentient and non-empirical³⁸ . York argues that the set of pseudo-religions to which the term "paganism" is usually applied is only a subcategory of a global class of pseudo-religions that are very similar in essence, and argues for paganism as a world religion, which also encompasses indigenous traditions around the globe, such as Shintoism, indigenous American religions, and African tribal religions, as well as various Afro-Caribbean syncretistic religions and ancient paganism. York's ideas are partly a response to criticisms of contemporary paganism that the latter is "not a serious religion". York refutes such claims by attempting to demonstrate that paganism is a global phenomenon that provides meaning and existential guidance to people around the world and has done so since "the dawn of time"³⁹ .

While York's desire to treat contemporary paganism as a "serious religion" is certainly interesting, his analysis is still problematic. First, it is questionable whether broadening the category of paganism to the point of non-recognition, so as to include an extremely diverse range of pseudo-religions with very different cultural, historical and political contexts, is really useful for scholars trying to understand them⁴⁰ .

Second, the many scholars working within the academic field of Pagan Studies are certainly proof enough that Paganism can be treated as a serious "religion" without constructing a universalistic and somewhat Euro-centric definition that overlooks the significant differences between ancient Paganisms, contemporary polytheistic and/or animistic religions around the world, and contemporary Western Paganism.

Third, imposing the category of "pagan" on people who would not use it themselves is troubling, given the history of the term as a derogatory label used to designate the indigenous religions of colonized peoples⁴¹ .

Fourth, York's definition fails to grasp what distinguishes contemporary (Western) paganism, i.e. its essence as a distinctly modern religion, born of modern needs, drawing on cultural trends and historical currents specific to Western society .

Aleister Crowley once envied the rise of a pagan cult focused, among other things, on the polarity of sun and moon, male and female. The notion of polarity is particularly prevalent in the Wiccan tradition, but the negotiation of polarities is part of the heritage of paganism. As

³⁸ Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, New York University Press, New York, 2003, p. 157

³⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁰ Joanne Pearson, "The History and Development of Wicca and Paganism In *Belief Beyond Boundaries: Wicca, Celtic Spirituality and the New Age*", Ashgate, Burlington, 2002, pp. 15-54

⁴¹ Philip Shallcrass, "Druidry Today." In *Paganism Today: Wiccans, Druids, the Goddess and Ancient Earth Traditions for the Twenty-First Century*, HarperCollins, London, 1996, pp. 65-80.

studies in recent decades have seriously questioned the claims of some Pagans about the ancient lineages of their traditions, a challenge for contemporary Pagans is to maintain a sense of authenticity that is compatible with contemporary tastes and desires.

Reconciling tolerance, an important value for many Pagans, with the need to defend against the intolerance of others is a challenge in itself. As noted above, the very notion of polarity is contested, and Pagans are torn between the desire to sacralize the physical body and the need for a non-essentialist framework that can incorporate the experiences of those who do not fit into a traditional heterosexual structure. These challenges are likely to continue, and how Pagans choose to address them will have an impact on the future development of the "new and greater Pagan cult".

Neo-pagan practices. "Paganism is not just about beliefs, but also about stepping out of the rigors of everyday reality and into the vivid experiences of the magical and wild world."⁴²

There is a tendency, when we are interested in an unknown religion, to start by asking what its followers believe. However, many scholars of neo-paganism have observed that the movement is best understood by looking not at what its practitioners believe, but at what they do.

Neo-Paganism is first and foremost a religion of nature. Neopagans seek to deepen and strengthen their sense of connection with the natural world by spending time outdoors in the wilderness. They use religious ritual to express their connection to nature and to harmonise with it. These rituals are often consciously created rather than inherited from tradition.

The most common form of Neo-Pagan ritual is the celebration of the Wheel of the Year, the eight seasonal points that include the solstices and equinoxes and the points in between. Neo-Pagan ritual often begins with an invitation to participants to 'ground and centre'. The ritual may then follow a neo-Wiccan format, beginning with a practice called "Calling the Quarters", followed by an invocation of the Goddess and her consort. The ritual may then include other forms of neo-Wiccan practice, including breathing, meditation, prayer, invocations, chanting, incantations, dancing, drumming, pouring libations, fire offerings, enacting symbolic dramas, and sharing food and drink.

The mood of a Neo-Pagan ritual can range from meditation to celebration to ecstasy. Neo-Pagan rituals can be held indoors, in community centres or private homes, or outdoors, in public parks or on private land. Many Neopagans have personal altars where they meditate,

⁴² Karen Clark, *The Path of She Book of Sabbats: A Journey of Soul Across the Seasons*, SheBard Media Inc, Bellingham, 2015.

pray and perform rituals. They also express their religion by living an ethical lifestyle that embodies their values.

V. Missionary strategies on the fading of the non-opagan phenomenon

Addressing the blurring or changing of a religious or spiritual phenomenon, such as neo-paganism, should not involve coercion or manipulation, but rather open and respectful dialogue. Missionary strategies regarding the fading of neo-pagan phenomena need to consider several objectives.

Education and information: First of all it is important to really understand what neo-paganism is. Its history, traditions and beliefs need to be accurately studied in order to have a solid knowledge of the subject. Only then can Christian apologetics and combating the phenomenon be done with the desired results.

Dialogue and open communication: Neo-Paganism's adherents should be invited to dialogue in dedicated events, seminars or catechetical classes where Christian teachings and arguments are exposed that are far from what Neo-Paganism promotes.

Encouraging inter-religious dialogue: Events or meetings are needed where representatives of different religious and spiritual traditions can discuss and understand non-opagan practices.

Conclusions

Neo-paganism (increasingly known as modern paganism or contemporary paganism) is an umbrella term usually used to cover a wide range of loosely related movements. They have in common a revisiting of ancient paganism in Europe, Asia and the Near East and a sense of the legitimate continuation of these traditions in the modern world. It applies in particular to those movements that have presented themselves to the world in the 20th and 21st centuries in what can broadly be described as Western civilisation, frequently (but not exclusively) in response to a dominant Christian worldview.

Under this broad umbrella, we can find a variety of neo-pagan manifestations such as Wicca, Druidism, Gaia, Asatru, etc. The term "Wicca" may be used by some authors as a narrow category encompassing only certain genealogical lines of traditional British Wicca, and by others to include a much wider range of associated movements such as traditional witchcraft, eclectic witchcraft, Dianic Wicca and so on. Taken in its broadest sense, Wicca is

the most visible and influential current of paganism in the English-speaking world and has a significant presence in many non-English-speaking countries.

Other notable forms found under the umbrella of paganism include Druidism (as well as Celtic Reconstructionism), Germanic paganism (or Asatru or Odinism), Hellenism, Kemeticism, Native Slavic faith, ancient Baltic beliefs (Romuva, Dievturiba), Neo-Shamanism and many others. Some definitions explicitly link modern paganism in the Western world to Hinduism and Shintoism, while others may emphasise links with Kahuna, Voodoo, Santeria, Candomble or Yoruba religion.

This shifting list of possible components points to one of the deeper problems facing any study of paganism as a whole: the definitional parameters for inclusion, the basic exemplars of this category, and its peripheral edges.

Most of the neo-pagan movements can trace their intellectual roots back to Romanticism's reassessment of the "barbaric" pagan past. Notions of the 'noble savage' and the sanctity of the untamed wilderness were very important in determining the mindset of later movements. Many of the religious or esoteric movements of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century that had strong pagan themes were at the same time syncretistic or made universalist claims of primordial wisdom.

For example, we can trace the movement away from the semi-Christian universalism of groups such as Universal Bond in the early 20th century towards the more stridently non-Christian and distinctly Celtic religion of its successor, the Order of the Bards, Ovates and Druids. This presents a different kind of definitional problem when considering the history of groups whose current form clearly falls under the umbrella of neo-Paganism.

Some common themes can also be highlighted. Most visibly, almost all current forms of neo-paganism present themselves as nature religions. This may manifest itself in devotional worship of deities or spirits of the earth, sun, moon, thunder or other natural phenomena. It can also appear in a sense of sacred stewardship of nature or in trust-motivated environmental activism or lifestyle choices.

The theme of magic (or sorcery) is prevalent in those forms of paganism that are strongly indebted to the Western esoteric tradition (such as Wicca), while it may be narrower in scope in some groups rooted in specific ethnic traditions (such as runic magic in Germanic paganism) and quite marginal in others, such as the Slavic Native Faith.

Similarly, sexual freedom can be found as a primary concern in many Anglophone groups that developed their current forms in the 1960s and 1970s (most notably visible in Reclaiming Wicca or Dianic), but in others it can remain a lower-ranking concern, sometimes

limited to upholding a complementary equal value for traditionally framed genders. In some movements, acceptable sources of inspiration are limited to one's own ethnic heritage (tribal, regional, national, or sometimes racial), while in others a more eclectic range of source material is permitted, depending on its effectiveness in producing a desired effect (and these desired effects can range from "women's liberation" to "altered states of consciousness," depending on the group or individual).

The early neo-pagan movements of the 20th century received little journalistic or scholarly coverage during their period. Some initiatives, such as Franz Sattler's Adonism or Gleb Botkin's Church of Aphrodite, had their temporary local fame, but this fame faded as the post-World War II movements came to the fore and thus had little effect on their development.

The biggest media sensation was generated by those Germanic or pagan esoteric groups that supported Hitler's rise to power (although ironically, once Hitler came to power, many of these groups were actively suppressed by the Nazi authorities).

For much of today's English-speaking paganism, their history began completely independently of such developments in continental Europe, in the person of a retired British colonial administrator, Gerald Gardner. Gardner announced his form of witchcraft (later known as Wicca) to the world. After Gardner's death in 1962, the next generation of British wizards brought new developments to the movement. Interest in occultism and alternative religions was strong in the growing youth counterculture.

Although modern paganism has sometimes been described as a postmodern phenomenon, they have not abandoned the "grand narratives" of the past and therefore fit better into a model called late modernity. Pagans often maintain a questioning attitude towards these narratives and a sense of making their own lifestyle choices.

Locating the expression of these principles within the framework provided by Neo-Pagan language and symbolism is what it means to have a 'Neo-Pagan identity', which then centrally influences the participants' construction of themselves. The craft provides individuals with

a setting in which it is possible for them to reinterpret and re-evaluate themselves and their relationship to the worlds they subjectively experience, often giving them a sense of integration and belonging that they identify as absent from their lives up to that point.

Neo-Pagan spirituality is based on a personal, individual and non-prescriptive relationship with an immanent and omnipresent sense of the sacred. It explicitly accepts that spirituality is reflexive and constructed within the personal narrative of the individual, rather than presenting itself as something that exists 'outside' the practitioner as a 'code' or rigid set

of beliefs. It is congruent with the dominant cultural logic of pluralism because, in accepting the premise that spirituality is constructed by the individual's relationship to the sacred, it also accepts that it cannot have a fixed and true universal form.

The New Age and the current Pagan movements are two movements of spirituality that developed in the second half of the 20th century. The two are often identified as part of the same broader movement, but while they share various similarities, there are also clear distinctions between them. Both within themselves, however, are made up of disparate elements and disparate and loosely coordinated confederations of contrasting beliefs, techniques and practices. Neither is accountable to a central authority that would be able to speak officially on behalf of the movement. This lack of institutional stewardship is reflected in the absence of membership or codified requirements that allow for a functional understanding of the identity of members. Both New Age and neo-paganism are largely an ad hoc and ever-changing alliance of individuals and groups, congregations, customer service and various new religious movements that have a sectarian and neo-pagan dimension that is dangerous to contemporary man.

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