

Neopaganism—Part 1

By Dr. Norman Geisler

Neopaganism (Lit. “New-paganism”) is a revival of ancient paganism (cf. Mithraism). It is a form of polytheism that arose in the wake of the “death of God” movement. Neopaganism is also manifest in witchcraft (Wicca), occultism, and other religions that fit under the New Age umbrella.

Mark Satin has contrasted new paganism with primitive forms of the religion. Citing Andrea Dworkin, he noted that the “old religion”:

- celebrated sexuality, fertility, nature, and women’s place in it.
- worshiped a hairy, merry deity who loved music and dancing and good food.
- was nature- and woman-centered, with priestesses, wise women, midwives, goddesses, and sorceresses.
- had no dogma. Each priestess interpreted the religion in her own fashion.

Not all of this could be reestablished in New Age society, writes Satin, but neopagans could adapt nature- and woman-centeredness to fit new priorities. “Nature-centeredness has an obvious parallel in our growing recognition that the quality of our connection to the environment—both natural and people-made—has a lot to do with our spiritual health and spiritual growth” (Satin, 113-14).

Roots of Neopaganism.

Neopaganism is not a monolithic movement. It springs from the soil of paganism, Hinduism, Wicca, and, indirectly, atheism, and other systems. Modern atheism fertilized the soil out of which contemporary neopaganism grew. David Miller describes it as rising from the ashes of the “death of God” heralded by Thomas Altizer and others in the 1960s and 1970s. “The death of God gives rise to the rebirth of the gods,” according to Miller. When God died in modern culture, the ancient gods rose again. Monotheism was holding back paganism.

Ancient Polytheism. Of course, the main root of Neopaganism is ancient Greek and Roman polytheism. Miller noted that ancient polytheism remained underground or in the counter cultural tradition of the West throughout the 2000-year reign of monotheistic thought. This tradition may be behind recent interest in the occult, magic, extraterrestrial life, Eastern societies and religions, communes, new forms of multiple family life, and other alternative life-style meaning systems that seem so foreign (ibid., 11). He adds that, for racial-cultural traditions, Western Europeans still draw on gods and goddesses of ancient Greece (ibid., 6, 7, 60, 81).

Hinduism. Not all modern paganism comes from Greece. The revival of Buddhism and especially Hinduism, with its multi-millions of gods, also supports New Age religion and Neopaganism. Hinduism has infiltrated virtually every level of Western culture, tailored to fit Western humanism by teaching that each of us is a little god.

Witchcraft (Wicca) and Radical Feminism. Another stream is the religion of Wicca. This movement, popularly known as witchcraft, has a strong overlap with the feminist

movement. Wiccans have an abhorrence to monotheism. Feminist witch Margot Adler expresses this view. Adler refers to monotheism as one of the totalistic religious and political views that dominate society.

Occultism and Star Wars. George Lucas' *Star Wars* "religion of the Jedi" has roots in the Mexican sorcerer, Don Juan. Lucas biographer Dale Pollock notes that "Lucas' concept of the Force was heavily influenced by Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power*. This is an account of a supposed Mexican Indian sorcerer, Don Juan, who uses the phrase 'life force'" (Pollock, 10). The director of Lucas' movie, *The Empire Strikes Back*, Irvin Kershner, is a Zen Buddhist. He admitted of the film: "I want to introduce some Zen here because I don't want the kids to walk away just feeling that everything is shoot-'em-up, but there's also a little something to think about here in terms of yourself and your surroundings" (Kershner, 37). Whatever the source of the Force of *Star Wars*, it clearly is similar to the Force believed in by neopagan witches. Lucas himself referred to the force as a religion in the first movie of his *Star Wars* trilogy (Lucas, 37, 121, 145).

Characteristics of Neopaganism.

Obviously a variety of beliefs are practiced under the broad neopagan heading. There are some generally shared characteristics and beliefs that draw on polytheism, the occult, relativism, and pluralism.

Polytheism. Neopagans are free to worship any gods and goddesses, ancient or modern, from the East or West. Some worship Apollo and Diana. Author-philosopher Theodore Roszak (*Where the Wasteland Ends*) is an animist. He believes that "the statue and sacred grove were transparent windows... by which the witness was escorted through to sacred ground beyond and participated in the divine" (see Adler, 27). Most neopagans revive one of the Western forms of polytheism. The names of the gods may differ, but most often they are Celtic, Greek, or Latin.

Some neopagans debate about the ontological state of their "gods," assigning an idealistic or aesthetic role to them. But as one put it, "All these things are within the realm of possibility. It has been our nature to call these 'gods.'" God is an eternal being; so are we. Then in a sense, we, too, are god. Adler notes that there are two deities of most Wicca groups: The god is the lord of animals and of death and beyond; and the goddess has three aspects: Maiden, Mother, and Crone. Each of her aspects is symbolized by a phase of the moon. The Maiden is the waxing crescent, the Mother is the full moon, and the waning crescent is like the woman who is past childbearing. Adler suggests that neopagans might be considered "duotheists," though feminist witches are often monotheists, worshiping the goddess as the one god (*ibid.*, 35, 112). Neopagans sometimes describe themselves as monotheistic polytheists. Morgan McFarland, a Dallas witch, declared: "I see myself as monotheistic in believing in the Goddess, Creatrix, the Female Principle, but at the same time acknowledging that other gods and goddesses do exist through her as manifestations of her, facets of the whole" (*ibid.*, 36). By her own definition, the use of *monotheistic* here is misleading. She and other neopagans look to a many-faceted (polytheistic) manifestation of pantheism. Each manifestation, of course, is finite.

The Radical Feminist Connection. Neopaganism closely connects with radical feminism. Not all neopagans are feminists, nor are all feminists neopagan. Nonetheless, neopaganism has drawn many feminists. Adler describes the dynamics this way: "Many feminist Witchcraft covens have... attracted women from all walks of life. But even there,

most of these women have already been strengthened by the feminist movement, or by consciousness-raising groups, or by an important experience such as divorce, separation, or a homosexual encounter” (ibid., 37). One neopagan feminist said, “We have found that women working together are capable of conjuring their past and reawakening their old ascendancy.... This does not seem to happen when men are present... it seems that in mixed covens, no matter how ‘feminist’ the women are, a kind of competition begins to happen. Among the women alone, none of this occurs, and a great reciprocity develops, unlike anything I have seen before” (ibid., 124).

Some were witches before they were feminists. A neopagan from Los Angeles said her spiritual journey began when she observed her mother talking to the dead. “I saw her go into a trance and feel presences around her. She is an artist, and her art often reflects Sumerian influences.... She tells fortunes and can still the wind.” But the daughter, like the mother, found herself in the traditional role of wife and mother and felt limited and enslaved. While attempting suicide she had a vision that confirmed her occult beliefs. Her awareness as a witch and feminist perspective met in the attempt to liberate her womanhood from perceived oppression (ibid. 76-77).

One draw to witchcraft for women is that their gender has equal, and often superior, status. As far back as the 1890s, a social observer named Leland wrote that in times of intellectual rebellion against conservatism and hierarchy, there is a feminist struggle for superiority. He noted that in witchcraft the female is the primitive principle. “The perception of this [tyranny] drove vast numbers of the discontent into rebellion, and as they could not prevail by open warfare, they took their hatred out in a form of secret anarchy, which was, however, intimately blended with superstition and fragments of old tradition” (ibid., 59).

Occultism. Almost inevitably neopagans are involved in the occult. They believe in an impersonal force, energy, or power, into which they can tap to do supernormal things. Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars* is the classic model for this belief. Attempts to cast spells are another example.

Pluralism and Relativism. Neopagans are strongly pluralistic. Polytheism by its nature leaves room for more gods or goddesses. All forms of worship of whatever god one may choose are legitimate. Such belief rejects absolute truth in favor of an irrationalism in which opposites can both be true. Miller denies that any system operates “according to fixed concepts and categories” and that all are controlled by either-or categories of logic. He rejects the idea that something is true or false, beautiful or ugly, good or evil (ibid., 7).

Consistently, many neopagans flatly reject the idea of *The Witches’ Bible*, fuming at the word *the*. Modern pagans remain anti-authoritarian, taking pride in being “the most flexible and adaptable of religions,... perfectly willing to throw out dogmas” (Adler, ix, 126, 135). A neopagan “creed,” therefore, is an oxymoron. They are noncreedal by definition.

(to be continued)

(Excerpted from *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999)