

# How to Reach a Pagan Modern World

*Whether you call them pagans, New Agers, witches or idolaters, there is nothing new about calling modern-day pagans into the family of God. America is a pagan country. The fourth largest pagan population in the world is found in the U.S. This article takes a good look at the early Church and its outreach to paganism in their day and then outlines specific steps we can and should take to reach pagans in ours.*

by Bill Honsberger

According to the National Association of Evangelicals, America has the fourth largest pagan population in the world, and second only to Brazil in the number of missionaries that we receive from other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, other Christians see us differently than we see ourselves. Why this is and how this happened is not the focus of this article. My focus is on what we can and should do about this situation.

The Psychic Friends hotline brought in over \$100 million dollars last year, as one of many different psychic avenues. Wiccan groups like Covenant of the Goddess, have grown over 500% in the past ten years.<sup>2</sup> Movies are teaching young people about the circle of life—the world view of reincarnation, the relativising of morality, and the new gospel of “tolerance” have become bedrock foundations for a new generation. A collective yawn goes out across the country when it is revealed that the First Lady, Hillary Clinton, (someone who professes to be a Christian) spends time talking to the dead with New Age authority Jean Houston. We are a pagan culture. While this may be distressing for many American Christians, the fact is that it is the normative experience for Christians to be a hated minority among a larger pagan culture. America has been the excep-

tion for much of Christian history, not the rule. Since it is not a new phenomenon, it is possible for us to look into history and see if there may be examples of how the Christian Church has operated successfully in reaching pagans societies in the past.

## **God Reaching Out**

God has been in the business of reaching out to pagans for a long time. Whether you call them pagans, or New Agers or witches, or idolaters or whatever else, there is nothing new about calling them into the family of God. In the Old Testament you see the examples of Ruth, Rahab and others. In the New Testament you see Cornelius, Dionysius of Athens, and virtually all of the church at Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and so on. In all of these cases, God reached out and brought to himself those who had been hard core enemies of the true faith. Just as this was uncomfortable for many in the believing community in both the Old and the New Testament, the love of God was and is able to gather in those who oppose him. One could easily see the same reaction happening in the contemporary church. Most Christians want nothing to do with those who are Buddhist, Wiccan, Psychics, because of fear or disgust and maybe other motivations. Others say that there is no need to

witness to other religions because each group “comes to God in their own way.”<sup>3</sup> We, however, must be committed to the biblical certainty that only Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father but by him (John 14:6).<sup>4</sup> If we believe that God loves pagans as much as he loves us, and this is certainly what God says (John 3:16-17) then we must take the great commission imperative seriously and commit ourselves to reaching out to those who oppose the Lord.

## **Church Reaching Out**

There has been a concerted effort within the Christian community to reach out to pagans, and unfortunately, it has been largely a failure, although usually not recognized by the participants, at least as of yet. The belief seems to be that if we build impressive buildings, and offer up quality entertainment, that the pagans will be attracted to the Gospel. In this paradigm, the pastor serves as CEO, whose major focus must be on building the customer base of the corporation (church). The pastor must also be the community therapist, whose role is to gauge and assuage the “felt needs” of those within the consumer base, and do all he can to meet those needs. While this megachurch notion is possible and has had

the observable success of building some very impressive campuses in select locations, it is very hard to argue that this has had any effect on the larger pagan culture at all.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it seems very evident that since the advent of the mega-church mentality the culture has become overwhelmingly pagan. While I am not saying that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two, I can and do say that if this is the best we have, then the Church is in trouble.

I am not a pragmatist, but even if I were, I might have cause to ponder whether the methodology of the mega-church is working. One might glance over to the former heart of "Christendom," Europe, and see if the mega-church mentality will work. One might tour the impressive cathedrals, the beautiful works of art, and imposing repositories of billions of dollars of collective Christian history, and wonder why it is that they in effect are now wonderful tombs, fine museums, and are attended by less than 2% of the local population. If impressive buildings, or "Christian Malls over America," are the key to reaching pagan America, then why has it not worked in Europe? Even since the fall of the Berlin wall, when the initial outpouring into the churches seemed to be such a hopeful sign of great things to come for the church, the report is now that these churches are basically empty too. This is not to say that the Europeans are less "spiritual," because cults, psychics, vampires and all sorts of wickedness are on the move, marching through the towns. England now has several Hindu temples, and the soon to be head of the Anglican Church, Prince Charles, has his own personal Guru.<sup>6</sup> Believe it or not, there are more Muslims in England than Methodists. In less than a hundred years, the English church, once the sending source

of more missionaries than any other church, has less than two percent of its own population in attendance. Do we not see ourselves in this same light? I could go on, but I would rather emphasize what we can do is not only right by principal but also by precedent. This can be shown to work.

We find ourselves looking more like the church of the first century than we could have ever imagined. We now have a better understanding of what Paul must have felt when he entered Athens, with a god on every corner, and spare gods just to cover all the bases. As Chuck Colson noted a few years ago, we no longer live in Jerusalem, where everybody knew who God was, even those who did not believe. We now live in Athens, where you might get a hundred different answers to the question "Who is God?" How did the early church react? How did they effectively minister to their pagan world? How can we do the same?

### **The Early Church**

*Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 66-67) has a series of charts showing the spread of Christian churches during the first three centuries. From the beginning of the church until the end of the third century, the spread of Christianity is impressive. The church spread across northern Africa, up through Europe to Gaul and England and east through Asia minor. What is most interesting about this is that this was accomplished without the help of any of the things we modern Christians think are essential for reaching out to pagans. This was done without church buildings, because the first known church building was not seen until 250 A.D. This was also done without trying to compete with the

pagan world for entertainment. In that day, no one could compete with the pagans for impressive buildings and exciting entertainment. The ancient wonders of the world were religion in stone, all meant to convey the grandeur of the gods they represented. One could not help but be astonished when you came upon the Colossus of Rhodes, or the Temple of Artemis in Corinth. These buildings would be incredible in our day—let alone theirs. For entertainment, the pagans threw the best parties. The Coliseum and the Hippodrome were open daily. The mystery religion of the Eleusians, for one example, threw drunken orgies that lasted for weeks.<sup>7</sup> It is essential that we understand that the early church could not compete at this level. They did not have the funds, the freedom and most importantly, the inclination. Knowing this, how then did they evangelize and spread so quickly without reaching out to meet the "felt needs" of those early pagans? Let us examine what they did and why it worked.

Paul in Ephesians 4:15 tells us that we are to "speak the truth in love one to another." The early church spoke the truth and they did it in love. Let's look at both aspects. There are numerous recorded accounts of early church leaders and apologists, writing letters to the Emperor, the local governors and other officials. There are also a few recorded incidents where the pagan leaders were confronted in person.<sup>8</sup> What was this all about? The most despised thing by the early church was the games in the Coliseum. These were criticized for the slaughter of thousands of people and animals. The early church spoke out against slavery, abortion, and the mistreatment of the poor. They also spoke out against paganism in its religious elements; mystery religions, Gnostic groups, the emperor cult and so on.

The church did not worry about what was “politically incorrect,” and it often cost them a very high price. Fear of offense, which seems to paralyze so many modern Christians, did not appear to be a problem for the early church.

### **The Contemporary Church**

A fear of contemporary Christianity is antagonizing non-Christians by saying that there is only one way to heaven. Pluralism seems so polite, so pleasant and so tolerant, that many in the Church today advocate the inclusion of all faiths under one umbrella. But the early Church suffered under no such delusions. They spoke out against pagan beliefs of all sorts. The apostles spoke out often against false prophets and teachers, (I John, Jude, 2 Peter, Colossians, Galatians) and the first generations followed their example. Ireneus, in his *Against Heresies*, addressed many of the pagan beliefs that we still deal with today, such as reincarnation, Gnostic denigration of the material world and so on. Others such as Tertullian and Justin Martyr spoke out against paganism in all its forms. Pagans, such as the young Augustine, were often struck by the dramatic difference between biblical faith and the pagan pantheons. We must be as clear today. The gospel of pluralism is no gospel. It may make one a better dinner companion but it will not save anyone. By contrast, the early church was often willing to die for the exclusivistic claim of Jesus as Lord—not Caesar, nor anyone else.

### **Using Apologetics**

Another thing to consider when addressing or speaking the truth to pagans is the use of reason in apologetics/evangelism. One favorite technique with the Scriptures is that of

the *reductio ad absurdum* (reduce to the absurd). This means that you assume your opponents position and see where it leads. You can see an example of this in the mockery Isaiah uses when he writes concerning the pagan who, having cut down a tree, takes “half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, ‘Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.’ From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me, you are my

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god” (Isaiah 44:16-17). Isaiah notes and mocks the obvious; no “god” that I create, can save me! You also see this when Ezekiel meets with the pagans at Mt. Carmel. In I Kings 18:21 ff., Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal, the penultimate nature religion of the day. After noting that all their pleas and bloodletting has not brought forth Baal to challenge the prophet of the true God, Elijah shouts out, “Shout louder...surely he is a god. Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” The point is clear: if Baal was really God, then none of the theatrics or obscene rituals were really necessary.

You can also see this type of argumentation being used in the New Testament. When Jesus discussed the resurrection with the Sadducees, who denied it, he points out that the Sadducees themselves pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Since this is so, their own words belie their

position. God is not the God of the dead, but rather the God of the living (Mark 12:18-27)! Jesus does a similar thing in the same chapter of Mark, when he points out that the rabbis were teaching that the Messiah is the son of David, and yet David himself says that the Messiah is his Lord. The rabbi’s position is undermined by contrary evidence from within the rabbi’s own Scriptures.

In much the same way, we can use this type of argumentation in talking to pagans. For example, one can take the common belief of “Maya”—the notion that all of reality is but an illusion of the mind, and that even the mind itself is an illusion. The “true” reality is that all that exists is the same exact thing and that it is god. This is the heart of monistic pantheism; all is one and all is god. Many pagans in America are in what I call a “Christian hangover.” That is, they were raised within some form of Christianity and have left it for various reasons and are now pagans. They were Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and now are Buddhists, Hindus and Wiccans. Yet many of them have brought with them various Christians notions, such as caring for the poor, and the environment, etc. For example Marianne Williamson, author of *Return to Love* and many other books, is a proponent and teacher of a (spirit) “channeled” book called *A Course in Miracles*. She claims that this book was written by Jesus, who has come back to the world through this book, “to undo the damage done to the world for the last two thousand years.” What is this damage? The damage is that the Church has taught that people are separated from God because of their sin. The message of this new “Jesus” is that there is no such thing as sin, and that we cannot be separated from God because we are God!

But we ask: why does this not seem to be obvious, and why do our perceptions seem to be marked by so much apparent evil? Well, Williamson says we are living in a hallucination (her description of Maya!) and that all we see is merely the creation of our minds, which are really God's mind. In the meeting where I heard Williamson explain all this, she spoke for close to two hours about how all that exists is an illusion, and that freedom and enlightenment come when one discovers this. At the end of the meeting she took up a collection for AIDS patients! The irony is delicious: if I am an illusion, and the AIDS patients are an illusion and the disease is an illusion and money is an illusion, then the illusory collection is undermined.

Richard Gere does the same thing as a supporter of the Dalai Lama and of Tibetan nationalism. In an article a few years ago, Gere notes that all of reality is merely a function of the mind. This belief was taught him by the Tibetans. At the end of the article, however, he chastises the Chinese government for brutally murdering and destroying the Tibetan people.<sup>10</sup> One might ask, "Mr. Gere, if it is true that reality is merely a function of the mind, as taught to you by the Tibetan Buddhists, then why don't the Tibetans merely change their minds! Poof! No more Chinese." But this doesn't seem to have worked. Perhaps one could take the belief of reincarnation and see if that helps. The Tibetans believe in reincarnation and therefore should appreciate the conclusions that come from its teachings. If Gere were to take the fatalistic Eastern view of reincarnation, then he would know that all actions, or karma, are merely the byproduct of past actions. That is, the explanation for the hardship of the Tibetans today can only be explained by understanding that the Tibetans must have invaded Beijing in an earlier life. Of course this won't

justify Gere's complaint either, so perhaps we can look at the Western spin on reincarnation. Most Western views still emphasize that what people experience is the direct consequence of karma, but we experience this now for our personal growth, and by our personal choice—reincarnation with a happy face! If this is the case, then once again we must ask if perhaps the Tibetans shouldn't just grin and bear it, as their slaughter by the Chinese is something they chose for themselves and something which will help them "grow." Whichever way it goes, the validity of Gere's complaint against the Chinese is undone by his own beliefs.

The best part of all this is something much greater. We have a wonderful opportunity to witness to pagans, because they and we are created in the image of God. That is at least to say that they have moral notions and that this experience is a universal one. We find we can have common ground with people of pagan persuasion in the moral arena. However, since most, if not all, pagan groups deny the existence of absolute ethics, especially those of the Lord, then ethics must be purely relative, perhaps just emotions blurted out, or ethics have become the playground where the self is King, and where we can now play by whatever rules we like. But deeply understood, none of this gives us one reason to help AIDS patients or try to help the Tibetans. The grief that Williamson and Gere share are proof that their own beliefs cannot work.

The traditional response of Eastern religions is some sort of two-tiered notion of reality. The upper level is true reality, where monistic pantheism is true.<sup>11</sup> This is the "true" or higher level of consciousness. The lower level, where we all live in this world, is ultimately a false reality, but for some reason we must play by its

rules. This sets up the believer as a moment by moment hypocrite for living in a false reality and acting like it is real, while all the time believing that the world they live in is not real. Yet as one has stated, even Hindus look both ways before they cross the street! This just shows the inconsistency deeply imbedded within the religious consciousness of the pagan believer.

A further example of this futility can be shown through a conversation I had with a Theravada Buddhist. As a Buddhist of this type, Suddhacitto is deeply committed to atheism and non-violence. Behind all of reality is not God, but rather nothingness—Sunnata, the void. After reading his literature, I told him that I appreciated his stance of non-violence towards living things. But I wondered, as an atheist, how could he know that non-violence was right? And who says so? His answer was that nature teaches us the law of non-violence. I told him that was an interesting idea, but all one had to do was watch a David Attenborough video for five minutes, before you figured out that all nature consists of animals killing each other and making more little animals who kill each other. You can learn a lot from the created world, but you cannot learn non-violence! At that point Suddhacitto yelled at me, "Bill, you just think you need a personal God to teach you right from wrong!" "Exactly," I responded. You see, unlike most relativists, Suddhacitto did not want non-violence to be merely an option alongside of violence. He knows that in order to raise non-violence above the relativistic swamp, there must be something bigger than all our opinions to justify it. Being an atheist, however, he had discarded the possibility that God can ground all our moral certainties or uncer-

tainties. Then he had turned to nature, which is by definition bigger than all of us, but has the slight drawback of being completely unable to teach what he claimed it did.

### **Universal Hopes**

Williamson, Gere and Sukkacitto all share the same *basic desire*: to deal with the consequences of sin. They had experienced disease, war, violence and had been struck by the destructive power of unchecked sin. All desired to see that things could be better, that the situations might be made right. All of these emotions are a *direct denial* of the belief systems that all three hold. If everything is Maya, or merely a byproduct of your mind, or just the void, then there are no moral rights and wrongs, no evils to be rectified, and no clue as to what direction one goes to fix the situation. How can one shape an illusion? What direction can one go, and know that this is the right direction, if there is no "right?" Yet they all seem to instinctively know that wrong is being committed and want things to change. This again points back to the image of God, which as C.S. Lewis argues is universal in its scope. This fundamental feeling, is easy to deny in print, as many New Age leaders do,<sup>12</sup> but much harder to ignore in real life. This gives the Christian a perfect opportunity to present the true Creator of this very real world, introduce what He thinks of sin and evil, and take the New Age follower to the real solution for the problem of evil in this life, to Jesus the Messiah.

Secondly, the early Church acted within the context of love. The early Church was criticized by the pagans as a "slave religion," because so many slaves were becoming Christians. The Church cared for the poor in ways

that no edifice of stone could. They would help bury the dead of pagans; they would buy the freedom of pagan slaves; they would feed the pagans.<sup>13</sup> This was something people understood. What they could not understand was why the Christians would do this. It made no sense to the pagan mind to take care of others who were not your own immediate family. When Jesus gave the new commandment in John 13, he noted that all people

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would know who his disciples were by "their love for one another." By telling us to love our neighbor in Luke 10, in the Good Samaritan story, he pointed out that our neighbor is anyone we find in need. Together these two concepts provided an unbeatable combination.

### **Learning from Others**

Normally I am very reluctant to say that we can learn something from the pagans, but listen to what one famous pagan, Julian the Apostate, says about us. Julian was the last pagan emperor of Rome, from 360-361 A.D. Wanting to rebuild the grandeur of Rome, but unable to revitalize the pagan religions in the old fashioned way so many of his predecessors had (by slaughtering the Christians!), he funded pagan temples, education, and clergy. In a letter to his high priest in Galatia, he tells Arcasuis something about our own predecessors that we might need to

remember. He states:

Why do we not notice that it is their kindness to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead, and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism [i.e., Christianity]? I believe that we ought really and truly to practice every one of these virtues. And it is not enough for you alone to practice them, but so must all the priests in Galatia, without exception... In the second place admonish them that no priest may enter a theatre or trade that is base and not respectable... in every city establish hostels in order that strangers may profit by our generosity; I do not mean for our own people only, but for others also who are in need of money... for it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg and the impious Galileans [Christians] support both their own poor and ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.<sup>14</sup>

It is very fascinating that Julian has to order Arcasius to build hostels for travelers in need, and then has to emphasize that he wants them open for people other than their own. It seems so clear that the "secret" of the early Church was to simply do what Jesus told them to do—love each other, and even love their enemies. Why did this work and how can it apply to us today?

I think perhaps the clearest explanation is also the simplest; the reason this kind of love worked is that it spoke to the real needs of people. As Dr. Gordon Lewis stresses, apologetics and evangelism must seek for "common ground" with those involved with paganism. *The most common ground of all for human beings is our common alienation from God and from each other.* When the early Church loved people in the simple, yet profound way that they did, they "spoke" a language that the pagans had no counterpoint for. The essence of New Age paganism is narcissic in all its

forms. The self is ultimate and autonomous, with all else being part of Maya—the illusion. This focus on self and self only, under the guise of “spiritual development,” by definition excludes the care for others, and undermines the ultimate idealism often parroted by contemporary leaders within New Age ranks. Why care for the environment if the world is an illusion? Why love your neighbor if all is an illusion? New Age author Joseph Campbell, in the PBS series entitled “The Power of Myth,” explains his version of the commandment to love your neighbor, not as a command to think of others, as seen by Christ’s disciples throughout church history. Rather, he says that the command to love others as yourself is based upon the notion that to love others as yourself is to know that when you do so you are really loving yourself. Why? Because you are your neighbor. This is the logical extension of monistic pantheism. If all is one and all is God, then all distinctions break down into “Maya.” In response, one could note that for paganism, loving a rock in the same way as one ought to reach out to help the poor, is one and the same thing. Rocks and poor people are both part of the illusion so they are the same.

Within this foundation is the heart of the complaint made by Julian. We must imitate the Christians caring for others. Historically this didn’t work, and *this is because the pagan beliefs systematically undermine the concern for the other*. By contrast, Christians are commanded to think of serving other people as a way of serving Jesus. The “benchmark” for the success of the Church in following Jesus, is not our buildings, but rather our reaching out to the very people he reached out to—the poor, the sick, the weak, the orphans and the widows,

While nothing I have said here is original, it is intended as a correction

to the Church in America today. I meet too many people who formerly sat in Christian churches of one sort or another, who are now thoroughly pagan. I also meet too many Christians in churches, who know nothing of their own faith, and yet seem fascinated by Wicca, channeling (communication with supernatural entities), and other varieties of paganism. We must speak the truth in love within our own ranks, and also to the larger community of people involved with the so called “new” religious movements. The good news is that we do not have to reinvent the wheel, nor seek out the latest thing from some marketer. Instead we need to be reminded of God’s word to our predecessors in the faith and remember how well God’s methods work when applied and practiced in reaching out to a pagan world.

### Endnotes

1. The source for this material is a booklet entitled, *America—The New Mission Field*, published by the National Association of Evangelicals. Edited by James D. Leggett, January 1996.
2. The direct statement of this is from Phyllis Culrot, then leader of the Covenant of The Goddess, given in her talk at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, 1993. The rest of these types of statements are culled from *Newsweek*, *New Age Journal*, and numerous other sources.
3. The best example of this is found in John Hick’s *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). The issue is also discussed in *More than One Way* edited by Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1995).
4. All biblical quotations are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1978).
5. This analysis is deeply dependent on the writings (whether they like it or not!) of David Wells in his two books, *No Place for Truth*, and *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993 and 1994 respectively). Also gleaned from George Barna’s *What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), Os Guinness’s *No God but God* and numerous other books, articles and conversations.
6. Taken from article in *USA Today*, July 12, 1991 and other sources.
7. Much of this is taken from *The Golden Bough*, by James Frazer (Avenel, NJ: Random House Company, 1993 edition).
8. For information concerning the early church fathers, see *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), *Christianity through the Centuries* by Earle Cairns (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), and *Church History in Plain Language* by Bruce L. Shelley (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1982).
9. *Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishing Co., 1992 and *A Course in Miracles* edited by Ken Wapnick (published by the Foundation for Inner Peace and Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1975).
10. Taken from an article entitled “Gere Says Reality is Function of Mind,” *Associated Press*, date unknown.
11. The most well known Hindu Philosopher who argued this way was Shankara (circa 820 A.D.) Quoted in *Commentary on Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*, IV, 4, 6 quoted in Elliot Deutsch *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu, HI: The University Press of Hawaii, 1969). Thanks to Dr. Doug Groothuis for this reference.)
12. For example see *The Fireside Treasury of Light* edited by Mary Olsen Kelly (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990). *For the Love of God* edited by Benjamin Shield and Richard Carlson (San Rafael, CA: New World Library, 1990). *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* by Matthew Fox (San Francisco, CA: Harper/Collins Publishers, 1988). *Science of Being and Art of Living* by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (New York, NY: Signet Books, 1968) and too many others to list here.
13. See the same historical references listed in (8).
14. See *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 137-138.

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of  
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