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# The Re-paganization of the West: A Glimpse of the Future

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Reporting in the November 4, 2004 edition of The Times of London, Midgley announced the results of a major research project conducted in Great Britain. According to the data assembled in this report, England is returning to its pagan roots.

If that seems unlikely, just consider the fact that only 7.9 percent of the British population attends church with any regularity. On the European continent, those percentages are generally much lower, with rates of churchgoing in Scandinavian nations running less than three percent.

The research was conducted by a team of British sociologists who looked at the small village of Kendal in Cumbria as a laboratory. As it happens, the statistics on religious participation in Kendal mirror almost precisely the national statistics in Great Britain. Led by sociologist Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, the researchers found that organized Christianity will be eclipsed by New Age spirituality within the next generation, if current trends continue. Their new book, *The Spiritual Revolution*, documents this incredible transformation of Great Britain—a reversion of a largely Christianized culture to its pagan roots.

As Midgley explains, "Study after study appears to prove that people are increasingly losing faith in the church and the Bible and turning instead to mysticism in guises ranging from astrology to reiki and holistic healing. The Government, significantly, said this week that older people should be offered t'ai chi classes on the NHS [National Health Service] to promote their physical and mental well-being."

Professor Heelas, a well-known specialist on the New Age movement, describes the trend toward new forms of paganism as a response to larger cultural shifts. "It's a shift away from (the idea of) a hierarchical all-knowing institution and a move towards (having) the freedom to grow and develop as a unique person rather than going to church and being led."

Beyond this, Heelas argues that the idea of life after death is receding in the minds of most modern persons. With Heaven gone from the horizon, individuals must find full satisfaction in this life. "A lot of the comfort of religion is in postponement—a better life after death," Heelas explains. "But belief in Heaven is collapsing, so people believe it is more important to know themselves and make themselves better people now."

The self stands at the very center of the New Age worldview, and an unembarrassed focus on the self is the driving force behind much of the new paganism. In an earlier work, *The New Age Movement*, Heelas described New Age philosophies as "the celebration of the self." Most famously, this unapologetic worship of the self was illustrated by the New Age ramblings of actress Shirley MacLaine, who simply declared: "I am God. I am God. I am God."

This is the inevitable result of the increasingly therapeutic worldview that marks the postmodern age. In a very real sense, humanistic psychology has become for the culture the direct route to repaganization. A focus on the centrality of the self has always been essential to the framework of humanistic psychology. As expressed by Carl Rogers, among the most influential of modern psychologists, "Experience for me is the highest authority." Of course, that experience was mediated through nothing more authoritative than himself.

Accordingly, many modern persons are, as Roy Wallis explains, "epistemological individualists," trusting only their own individualistic concept of "truth." As Heelas summarizes, "The New Age shows what 'religion' looks like when it is organized in terms of what is taken to be the authority of the Self."

This individualistic redefinition of religion is evident in the Kendal study. Residents of Kendal revealed a weakening of commitment to traditional Christianity—especially the Church of England—and a general willingness to reconceptualize religion in terms of self-esteem. As one woman explained her discovery of the New Age movement: "A one-hour service on a Sunday? It's not really enough time to address your self-esteem issues, is it? I didn't find any help in the churches. I found it in a 12-step program. That was the start of my personal journey."

Julie Wise, a 44-year-old mother of two, explained that she left the Church of England because she no longer found her childhood faith meaningful. She explained that she discovered t'ai chi while visiting the city of Manchester. "It was like divine intervention," she related. "It was one of the most beautiful, meaningful things I had ever seen." As the researchers now report, Julie has become "an Infinite T'ai Chi practitioner" who performs "soul readings" as a way of seeing new patterns of life and releasing new energies. As if Anglicanism was not sufficiently mired in trouble already, the researchers report that Victor de Waal, a former Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, is a regular visitor to a New Age center located in the town of Dent. "I don't see it as an alternative; I see it as deepening one's faith," the former dean explained. He went on to argue that his dabbling in the New Age was in no way inconsistent with his Christian commitments, because the "spirituality" he now practiced is "not committed to a particular tradition," but open to all.

One of the fascinating aspects of this new study is the extent to which the researchers indicate that a desire to avoid particularistic truth claims lies at the heart of New Age appeal. Elizabeth Forder, who leads the spirituality center at Dent, describes this aspect of the movement: "We are not affiliated to any religion and there is no belief system imposed on anybody here. I was brought up a Christian, but it held no real meaning for me. I would class myself as a universalist, believing that all religions offer the same end. At its simplest, meditation is giving the body and mind a very deep level of rest, freeing us to be ourselves."

As sociologist Steve Bruce explains, the New Age worldview "solves the problem of cultural pluralism." This new model of "spirituality" offers meaning without doctrine, transcendence without dogma, and religious experience without any particular religious commitment. In other words, it is perfectly suited for those who have been drinking deeply from the wells of postmodernism and have accepted the basic worldview of humanistic psychology.

Writing just a few years ago, William Bloom, one of the major figures behind the rise of the new spirituality in Britain, spoke of the widening popularity of New Age consciousness. "Twenty-five years ago, when I first became involved in New Age thinking, it was distinctly embarrassing to talk locally about it. It was like being a vegetarian at a rugby club dinner . . . . Twenty-five years later, the movement is growing in strength and is in many ways an established part of contemporary culture . . . . Cherie Blair wears a pendant to ward off bad vibes in her final days of pregnancy. Prince Charles talks to plants. Oprah Winfrey leads a television revolution in which anyone and everyone can talk about their innermost secrets and seek instant healing."

Not all are going along with this, of course. Pastor Brian Maiden of Parr Street Evangelical Church in Kendal told Carol Midgley, "The people of Britain have been inoculated with a dead, mild form of Christianity, which has given them resistance to the real thing. It has been diluted with human philosophy. People want to be told what to do and how to do it. Often they don't realize that's what they want until they hear it."

Responding to the self-centered worldview of New Age spirituality, Maiden corrected the misrepresentations of Christianity made by so many in the movement. "Christianity isn't about us trying to make ourselves better people," the pastor explained. "It is about God trying to do something for us 2,000 years ago which redeemed people."

As for his church: “The message here is traditional Protestantism,” he retorted. “We teach the message of the Gospels and that there will be a Judgment.”

Well, hats off to Pastor Maiden, whose bold and courageous ministry offers the only ray of light found in this picture. He knows the difference between biblical Christianity and the narcissistic worldview of New Age spirituality.

Clearly, Pastor Maiden is bucking the trend even as he holds fast to the historic Christian faith. In so doing, he and his church now serve as a missionary outpost in the midst of a land quickly becoming repaganized in the early years of the twenty-first century.

The wide scale rejection of Christianity and the eager embrace of humanistic psychology and the new religion of the self marks a turning point in Western culture and serves as a wake up call to the Christian church.

We must now realize that, in this increasingly paganized age, our Christian task is to talk about God and tell persons of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, knowing that many of these people now believe that they are gods.

Visitors to Britain love to visit Stonehenge and other ancient monuments to the nation’s pagan past. Tragically enough, the old paganisms are now resurgent, as a tepid and compromising Christianity is in retreat. Don’t think it can’t happen here.

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