

# **Ecofeminism, Neopaganism, and the Gaia Movement in the Postmodern Age**

**Michael Werner**

THE DEVELOPMENT of new religious practices out of the liberal religious movement can be seen as part of a larger philosophical and historical paradigm. The last twenty years have been characterized by the domination of the postmodern world view that offers both new challenges and opportunities for humanism. Our voice may be uniquely suited to curb the excesses while integrating the worthy attributes.

## **Modernism**

The Enlightenment brought about the empowerment of individuals through the powers of the mind. The modernist world view started seeing the world as knowable, universal, objective, and in many cases having absolute truths. Positivist philosophy saw knowledge as a rational and scientific enterprise. The question of how to live one's life was answered with the same rational and scientific methodology.

In the modernist view, progress was no longer left to fate or "God's will," but became a historical human project. A better social order could be developed as we uncovered our common human nature and applied science to human problems. A technocratic kind of utopian underlies this secular modernist vision.

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## Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a philosophical and cultural paradigm that is characterized by neoromantic, relativist and antifoundational beliefs, and is generally contrasted to modernist views. Originally these were academic views, but they now permeate general culture. They comprise a complex set of discoveries, attitudes, perspectives, and awarenesses. Let's look at some of these.

## Protest Movements

Rousseau challenged the Enlightenment rationalist view with the romantic perspective that appreciated the prescientific culture. The romantic view was carried into this century primarily by writers. D.H. Lawrence, for example, called the quintessential Enlightenment progressive, and Benjamin Franklin, a monster because of his overly ordered, rationalist life. In philosophy, Nietzsche denounced the use of reason and argued that it was mainly a "will to power." Our emotions are more to be trusted than reason. Language, as reason's secret conspirator, creates false abstractions and distinctions thereby distorting reality.

The Dionysian/Appollonian split was reinforced by intuitionists like Bergson, the Eastern philosophers, and eventually the existentialists, who argued that our subjective experience is all we really know before any "essence" is known (if there is any). Overall reality is best experienced outside language in experiential ways.

Marxists have argued that reason has historically been used to rationalize the use of power and domination. The "iron cage" of rational thinking leads to utopian thinking, bureaucracy, oppression, exploitation, a consumption-mad society, and a nonpersonal abstract outlook justified by rationalizations. They argue that the promise of the Enlightenment has not been fulfilled.

The linguistic turn in philosophy states that there is no neutral reality - no one reality - it all depends on the person, the culture and the language. Feminists have been effective in showing how language is used as a source of domination.

Ultimately, Postmodernists propose that there are no transcultural, transhistorical, universal truths. Reality, they argue, is amorphous and only based on interpretation and the

stories we tell ourselves. Even science is presented as only mob psychology with no objective truth or commitment to progress.

The Table at the end is a list modeled after one by Hassan that contrasts some of the paradigmatic differences of modernism and postmodernism. Note the postmodernist mind starts with the particular while the modernist looks for universals. We can also look at how the intuitive is contrasted with the cognitive. Community and supportive behavior can be contrasted with individualist, confrontational methods. Inner directed human potential programs take precedence over outer directed social action programs.

### Religious Directions

The past twenty years has seen the dominance of the postmodernist viewpoint as people have become disaffected with the alienated modernist society. The human potential movement has shown millions how experiential approaches can illuminate their lives when they drop all rational pretenses. Religiously, many have found that a cold secular rationality was not fulfilling in their lives. Listen to what Margot Adler author of the popular neopagan book, *Drawing down the Moon* has to say.

Religion had no place in my childhood world. I was brought up in a family of agnostics and atheists. Still, feeling that there was some dimension lacking in their lives, I embarked on a quasi-religious search as a teenager.

She eventually found more meaning in an experiential religion while still holding a naturalist world view. Her case is not unique, but actually, from what I have seen it is the more typical path to the postmodernist forms of religion.

### Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is an outgrowth of the feminist and environmental movement, but at heart is only one variant of postmodernist world view. The following are some of the main premises:

1. It rejects traditional religion's "God the father" as promoting and sustaining woman's domination and exploitation.

2. It seeks a metaphorical model with which woman can identify.
3. It rejects technocratic, rational, powerladen, modernist methods.
4. It seeks approaches that are intuitive, holistic, nurturing, and nondogmatic.
5. It seeks to raise individual's consciousness by telling stories that are explicitly metaphoric in nature.
6. It uses ritual, spirituality, symbolism, and an overall experiential approach rather than an intellectual one.
7. Its focus is on immanence rather than transcendence.

The Goddess image is a powerful one "summing up" all of these aspirations. The movement does not have a hierarchical structure. In many cases the individuals are atheists in that they reject a belief in the supernatural, but do not reject a use of ritual, language, and a metaphorical use of the Goddess image.

There is increasing emphasis on the intellectual justification by historical analysis of the Aegean cultures of pre-Hellanic Greece particularly the Mycenaen civilization of Crete from 3000 to 1500 B.C. Rituals are primarily borrowed from Native American sources. Remember this is primarily for consciousness raising purposes. Those who take the stories, language and metaphors literally are looked on tolerantly, since the end, i.e. a more humane and caring society, is justified. In addition, postmodern epistemological relativism demands it.

Theoretical feminist thinkers have long had a love/hate relationship with postmodernism. The antiintellectual focus in feminism has always used postmodern authors as its source. Yet, when relativist deconstruction is applied to their own foundation of beliefs, these same authors argue for universals.

#### The Gaia Hypothesis

A bold scientific hypothesis was made in 1979 by J.E. Lovelock. The Gaia hypothesis states that the earth's climate and surface environment are controlled by the plants, animals, and microorganisms that inhabit it. This is a serious scientific theory supported by another eminent scientist, Lynn Margulis. Using a liberal definition of life, one could even say that the earth itself is a living creature.

Scientifically, the debate centers around the extent that life influences the global environment. Does it merely influence, does it modify, or does it actually control the atmosphere and even the earth's crust? This is an ongoing debate.

Where the hypothesis enters the religious realm is when these ideas are extended to the following:

1. Is the earth a self sustaining giant *symbiotic* organism?
2. Evolution would work for us all together.
3. Gaia, i.e. earth, may have consciousness, will, and intention.
4. Gaia is the actual earth Goddess nurturing all life on earth. Therefore ecofeminism is intellectually justified.

Even though Lovelock and Margulis disavow themselves from the theological interpretations, a cult of Gaia is emerging and blending with ecofeminism and neopaganism.

### Neopaganism

Neopaganism goes by many names such as Wicca, paganism, the Old Religion, Witchcraft, and the Craft. The following are some of the central neopagan characteristics:

1. A high degree of ritual.
2. The goal to eliminate our estrangement to nature.
3. The whole world as holy.
4. The use of shamanism, and gnostic traditions.
5. Polytheism, loosely defined.
6. The Enlightenment as negation of our dark, Dionysian side.
7. No absolutes; nothing is evil; reality is multiple and diverse.
8. Magic as mere consciousness raising. Tarot cards, palmistry, faith healing, and astrology are all accepted as experiential, therapeutic methods to develop insights into our subconscious archetypes.

The focus on postmodernist methodology is obvious. Much of religion serves as a form of experiential therapy. Starhawk says, "The thought forms of immanence are imbedded in context." It is important to point out that there are serious deceptions concerning how magic is portrayed as consciousness

raising, and how strongly many ultimately believe in the magic as a paranormal truth.

#### A Humanist Response

As I earlier proposed, these religious forms are expected theological outgrowths of the larger postmodern culture. We humanists should analyze our position in this cultural context. Firstly, many of the neopagans, and ecofeminists like Margot Adler who espouse some of our humanist tenets, became experientially inclined as a reaction to modernist cultural tendencies of the more rationalistic, scientific positivists amongst us. Neither the modernist nor the postmodernist "styles" of humanism can be regarded as healthy. They represent reactionary and unbalanced positions.

I don't see the neopagan, Gaia, and ecofeminist movements as serious longterm threats to humanism. What I do see is variations on the theme in new cults and in mainstream religion. Humanism, in my view, should study these from the goal of determining what it is that is touching people and motivating them with the naturalist ideas they hold. Humanism can be that integrative force that bridges the reactionary polarization between modernist and postmodernist views. In particular the experiential, intuitive components of humanism need a closer inspection and development.

Table  
Comparison of Modernism and Postmodernism  
in Liberal Religious Practice

	<u>Modernism</u>	<u>Postmodernism</u>
	Universal	Particular
	Cognitive	Experiential
	Individualistic	Communitarian
	Progressive	No Progress
	Becoming	Being
	Elitism	Egalitarianism
	Truth	Truths/No truth
	Uniformity	Diversity
	Outer Directed	Inner Directed
	Transcendence	Immanence
	Content	Context
	Ethics of Words	Words as Metaphors
	Principles	Openness
Skeptical	Confrontation	Supportive Behavior
	Evidence	Intuition
	Hierarchy	Anarchy
	Creation	Deconstruction
	Utopian	Heterotopian
	Phallic	Androgynous
	Ethics	Aesthetics
	Centralization	Decentralization
	Design	Chance
	Melting Pot	Salad Bowl
	Selection	Combination
	God the father	Goddess/Holy Ghost

By Michael Wemer; modeled after Hassan (1985, 123-4)

Recommended Reading:

- Margot Adler, *DrawingDown the Moon*, (Beacon Press, 1979)  
 Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, (Harper, 1979)  
 Lawrence E. Joseph, *Gaia*, (St. Martins, 1990)  
 Elinor Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess*, (Harper & Row, 1989)