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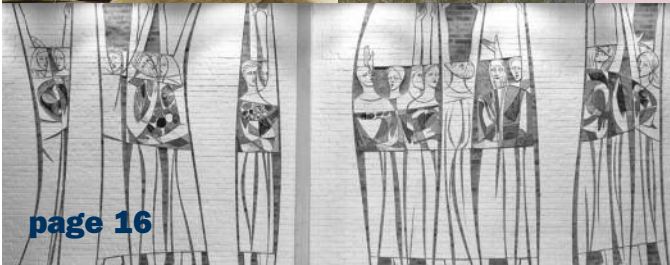
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FEATURES

4 I Am a Christian

By Professor James G. Bushur, Assistant Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

In communion with Christ our identity is fundamentally altered. Here we are Christians—not because we merely act, speak, or think like Jesus—but because Christ Himself lives within us. At Christ’s altar our families and ethnicities are forgotten; our careers, economic status, as well as every other earthly association, must be left behind.

6 Christ and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism

By the Rev. Larry A. Nichols, Pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Smithfield, Rhode Island

Christ in a pagan world is not about the past. It is about a very real present. This is true because our culture is filled with cults, the occult, neo-paganism, Wicca, the New Age Movement, etc.

8 The Quest for Experiencing the Divine: The Rise and Effect of Eastern Religions

By Dr. Naomichi Masaki, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Supervisor of the Master of Sacred Theology (S.T.M.) Program at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana

While the joy in the forgiveness of our sins remains firm because of the Lord’s gifts in baptism, the world into which we are placed each day is ever changing. As the “mainline” churches continue to decline in membership “spirituality,” the impulse to seek communion with the Divine is thriving.

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Christ

Mark's Gospel starts with the words, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). While Matthew and Luke tell of the birth narratives of Jesus, and John begins with the divine account of Jesus as the Word made flesh, Mark's Gospel alone introduces Jesus to a Gentile and a pagan world. Mark tells these Gentiles at the outset that Jesus is the beginning of the *evangelicon*—"good news." This word eventually came to be translated into English as "Gospel."

When I was asked to write this article on the theme of "Christ in a Pagan World," I thought immediately of Christianity's beginnings. "Paganism, after all, addresses the ancient world," as I used to think. "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," as Mark writes, presents to us divinely inspired words addressed to a world that knew no ultimate truth and was most certainly a world filled with much less than good news. The message of Mark was directed to unbelieving pagans, a world populated with mystery religions, fertility cults, emperor worship, numerous forms of idolatry, and various forms of occult practice.

Christianity went on to transform society in the Middle Ages and a Christian ethos would emerge and flourish. Dr. Alvin Schmidt, in his outstanding book *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids:

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Zondervan, 2001), outlines in chapter after chapter how Christianity transformed society. He speaks of how Christianity introduced a moral code to sex and marriage; elevated the status of women; advanced the cause of charity and compassion; introduced hospitals and took leading roles in human care;

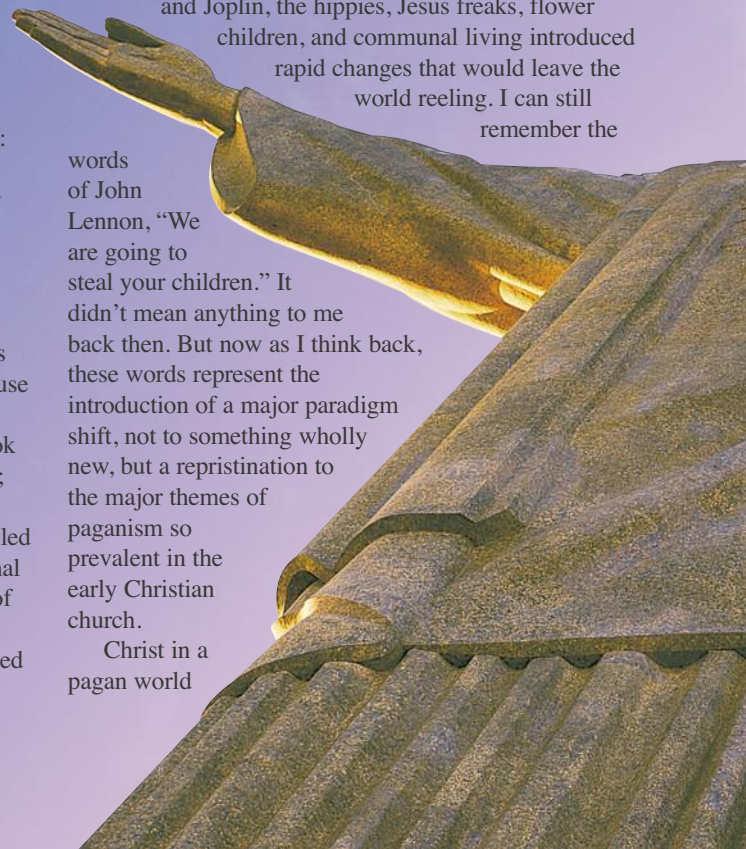
assumed a leading role in founding educational institutions, private schools, colleges, and universities; led in the advance of scientific knowledge; was foundational in law and jurisprudence; led the way to the abolition of slavery in America; and contributed great advances in music, art, and literature. Christianity indeed transformed a pagan world.

That was then! What of today? We are now living in the early 21st century. Up through the mid 1960s one could argue plausibly that Christianity and its influence was still the dominant religious paradigm in popular American culture. Even amongst non-churchgoers Christian themes were dominant cultural motifs. For example, while in no way did Hollywood present the Gospel of Christ, during this time it did not go out of its way to challenge, deny, or declare an all out culture war against it as is the case today. The pervasive moralism of popular shows like *Leave It to Beaver* presented a world where Dad and Mom were married for life, slept in separate beds (at least on television), and in the end the viewer generally related to and agreed with whatever discipline they meted out to Wally and Beaver and thought that this was the way that life ought to be lived.

Speaking of the 1960s, I remember before I was ten years old having to leave early on Sunday mornings in order to find a seat as churches were packed back then. Christianity certainly was still the dominant motif of the culture. The countercultural revolution of the middle part of the 60s, the Viet Nam War, assassinations of two Kennedys, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, the Kent State slayings, the Woodstock era, the death of Hendrix and Joplin, the hippies, Jesus freaks, flower children, and communal living introduced rapid changes that would leave the world reeling. I can still remember the

words of John Lennon, "We are going to steal your children." It didn't mean anything to me back then. But now as I think back, these words represent the introduction of a major paradigm shift, not to something wholly new, but a repristation to the major themes of paganism so prevalent in the early Christian church.

Christ in a pagan world



and the Challenge of Neo-Paganism

By the Rev. Larry A. Nichols

is not about the past. It is about a very real present. This is true because our culture is filled with cults, the occult, neo-paganism, Wicca, the New Age Movement, etc. and I have written extensively on these themes. But the reality of Christ in a pagan world today became painfully obvious to me in my early years as a pastor. I was on my way to a hospital visit in the early morning hours. I stopped at a restaurant for breakfast. My waitress was in her early twenties. She immediately asked me about “the white thing” I was wearing around my neck. The following represents the conversation as I best remember it:

“I am a Christian minister,” I responded.

“What is a minister?”

“Have you ever heard of Jesus?” I asked.

“No, who is Jesus?”

[I was incredulous!] “You have never heard of Jesus Christ?”

“No I really have not!”

“Really?” Now my mind was rushing for some common reference. “Have you ever seen a building with a cross on it?” I asked.

“Come to think of it, I have,” she said.

“Ok, have you ever seen a cross on a building with a body on it?”

“Yes, and I always thought that this was something horrible and cruel.”

“Well the person on that cross is Jesus,” I told her. “I want to tell you something about who Jesus is and what He did for you.” I pulled out my pocket New Testament

and turned to John

3:16. Now most Christians know this passage by heart, but I wanted to read it to her with her looking at the very words on the page. I started to read “For

God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . .” As I read these words I heard a noise. I looked up. She was sobbing.

“Does this Jesus really love me and did God do that for me?”

I’m not making this up.

This conversation really took place. My point for relating it is that this is not as anecdotal as it seems. Many young people are no longer tuned in to Christianity. I spend a good deal of time on Luther’s explanation to the Second Commandment in Catechism: “We should not use witchcraft . . .” along with other parts of the Lutheran Confessions as

an opportunity to teach extensively about the world of the occult and how we as Christians are to assess it.

In my latest book, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Cults, Sects, and World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), I note the difference between spirituality and religion. Almost without exception, young people today distinguish between the two. Spirituality is a good thing while religion, especially organized forms of it, are out. Whether it be the Kabbalah, an Ouija Board, or personal meditation with New Age crystals, this constitutes a multi-cultural spirituality. But the corporate gathering around the liturgy of Word and Sacrament, which clearly presents the Gospel of Christ, constitutes a chokehold on the “liberation” one can experience with personal tailor-made homespun spiritualities. This thought process creates a challenge to the church today to

continue to proclaim to the neo-pagan culture

around us the words of Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” For many, Jesus Christ can indeed be a new beginning.

The Rev. Larry A. Nichols serves as Pastor of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Smithfield, Rhode Island.

A challenge to the church today (is) to continue to proclaim to the neo-pagan culture around us the words of Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” For many, Jesus Christ can indeed be a new beginning.
