

Jesus in the Land of Spirits and *Utu*

Nicola Hoggard Creegan

Abstract: Both a Maori spiritual and cultural renaissance, and a growth of neopaganism increasingly influence the New Zealand spiritual landscape. Both are relatively unconcerned with “salvation” and with promises of heaven, but are nevertheless committed to a world in which the natural and supernatural are interpenetrating. Thus Christian theology frequently does not speak to the vital concerns of the pagan world. This article examines whether there are contemporary understandings of the work and person of Christ that do make sense within these allied contexts, and which encounter the deep longings of that world. Two approaches to Christ and the gospels now emerging may be effective in this context, and may help to critique the contemporary meshing of Christianity and violence. First is the Christ of Colossians – the one in whom all things hang together – and second is to be found in intrinsic atonement theories.

BOTH A MAORI SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL RENAISSANCE, and a growth of neopaganism (feminist and wiccan) increasingly influence the New Zealand spiritual landscape. Yet for neither, for somewhat different reasons, is there any observed need or concern for “salvation” and promises of heaven: Maori because at death all spirits are believed to journey on to another life; neopagans because many of them emphasise spirituality in this life, and the finite nature of human existence, or forms of reincarnation. Nevertheless both spiritualities are committed to a world in which the natural and supernatural are interpenetrating, and in which nature mediates the transcendent. Right living requires that humans must recognise and acknowledge this natural order and achieve harmony with it, and within it. Thus Christian theology which divides people into the saved and the unsaved, and promises salvation for the former in the next life, by means of belief in an extrinsic atonement or abstract historical incarnation, does not speak to the vital concerns of the pagan world. Similarly, to neopagans, Christian faith is anachronistic, anti-nature and violent.

In this article I propose to examine whether there are contemporary understandings of the work and person of Christ – other than the exemplarism of classic liberalism – that do make sense within these allied contexts. Where the gospel was attractive and transforming for Maori was in its message of peace, in countering *utu*¹. Can Jesus be seen as the divine showing of the moral order of the universe – in resisting *utu* and bringing death out of life? As the inauguration of a new kingdom in which forgiveness and atonement are made possible by Christ and repeated by those who follow? Similarly Jesus may make more sense to neopagans in terms of the christology of the Letter to the Colossians – as the one in whom all things hang together (Col 1:15-17) – than in terms of an individual saviour. The christology of Colossians, wisdom, and the kingdom of God are all motifs consistent with an imminent impressing of supernatural existence, and in turn, these understandings inform and challenge, and sometimes deepen notions of Christian atonement.

Why attempt a dialogue between the pagan and the Christian? Neopaganism has become a part of the context in which we live in New Zealand, and hence is the cultural and religious life-world in which the gospel might be relevant. Secondly, historically it might be interesting and informative for the present to understand at what level Maori may have responded to, or failed to respond to nineteenth century Christian teaching. Thirdly, in the end, the dialogue itself may be enlightening for understandings of atonement, christology, theology of nature, and eschatology. Christian theology now, as in previous eras, is understood in part as it defines itself in dialogue with its alternatives or detractors.

SALVATION, NATURE AND *UTU*

When I first returned to New Zealand after a long sojourn outside the country I had a number of conversations with a Maori religious leader. Although he was a very conservative Christian his version of pre-contact Maori belief was that Maori had not felt in need of salvation.² Emotions and beliefs surrounding death in Maoridom are obviously complex, and perhaps inscrutable for the outsider. Death is a crossing

1. *Utu*, in Maori is roughly translated as justice – a justice requiring reciprocation, whether good or bad, depending on the circumstances. In many contexts it has come to stand for the justice of revenge.

2. Bronwyn Elsmore tells a similar story: “the underlying traditional beliefs of the Maori on these things were more similar to Hebraic than to Christian teachings. The concept of judgment after death or at a day of judgment, with its consequences of reward or punishment, as introduced by the missionaries, was formerly quite alien to the New Zealanders.” Bronwyn Elsmore, *Te Kohititanga Marama: New Moon, New World: The Religion of Matenga Tamati* (Auckland: Reed, 1998) 56.

of a boundary, a tragedy, but does not pose the same existential problem as it may for pakeha.³ At the same time I had read and been impressed by C. K. Stead's novel, *The Singing Whakapapa*,⁴ incorporating as it does, the faction of Tarore, and her father's renunciation of utu after her brutal death; and of the subsequent conversion of the Rotorua tribes under Te Ruaparaha's son, when they had access to Tarore's stolen Gospel of Luke.⁵ Salvation may not have been attractive, but the possibility of peace perhaps was.

Adding to my contextual ponderings has been my contact with, and awareness of the extent of various forms of formal and informal neopaganism in this country. As a Christian theologian, I find myself often in conversation with spiritual people where I have almost no point of contact with their spirituality, or the constructed spiritualities of individuals who may be visited with visions and dreams. These are people for whom crop circles and dowsing rods are accepted gifts or unproblematic phenomena, and who possess some form of inner knowing, but for whom Christ and the Christian gospel are increasingly obscurantist. There seems to be no connection between the neopagan's endless spiritual curiosity, as it can be accessed here and now in nature and in the self, and the religion of Christ; the story of the first century Christ incarnate, and of the establishment church is of no more than passing concern.

Indeed both forms of paganism also have in common a connection to divinity or transcendence through nature, and an inherent respect for the forces and powers and fecundity of nature. Thus in paganism nature may inadvertently be abused, but not in the cavalier fashion of

3. In spite of universal Maori belief in an afterlife, Anne Salmond describes death for Maori as "an ultimate defeat, expressed in images of crashing trees and shattered canoes" and as "a crisis, like battle and birth, a crossing point". See Anne Salmond, "Te Ao Tawhito", *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 87/1 (1978) 7, 25.

4. C. K. Stead, *The Singing Whakapapa* (Auckland and London: Penguin, 1994). *Whaka-papa* in Maori means genealogy, or family history.

5. More historical accounts of the well known story of Tarore are hard to find. Peter Lineham tell how Tarore was forced to move with her tribe which was engaged in warfare with another in late 1836. She was murdered as she camped at Wairere Falls in the Kaimai ranges in October, 1836. They were set upon by a group of Ngāti Whakaue hapū and Tarore was killed by Paora te Uata, and her copy of the Gospel of Luke taken back to Rotorua, where a released slave read the book to Uata. The story continues that Uata was converted, and sought the forgiveness of Tarore's father – also a Christian. Thus *utu*, and an escalation of violence, was prevented. The same biblical fragment later influenced the infamous Te Ruaparaha's son, Katu. Lineham sees this as an example of the power of the Scriptures to convert Maori without the need for a European mediator. What is interesting here is that the gospel was capable of influencing Maori without interpretation – interesting too that the message they received was one of peace. See Peter J. Lineham, *Bible & Society: A Sesquicentennial History of the Bible Society in New Zealand* (Wellington: Bible Society Press/Daphne Braswell, 1996).

more recent European record. Both historic Maori – long before Lynn White – and neopagans take critical note of the lack of care of nature and participation in nature shown by Christians.⁶

Thirdly, for both pagan groups, division of people into those who are saved and unsaved is pernicious. For Maori this is because, while there are distinctions of status here on earth, everyone passes on to the after-life through death. Present day pagans are also very much against dualisms of all kinds. Sometimes any emphasis on life after death is associated with an unnecessary division of the world. Says Kathryn Rountree,

This emphasis on the holistic, cyclic nature of life is frequently contrasted with the dualistic Christian worldview, which one contributor...claimed “divides the cosmos into two halves – the good, active, pure, light of the heavenly father and the evil, passive, impure dark of the earthly mother”.⁷

On the whole pagans exhibit a variety of beliefs about life after death, some being ambivalent or agnostic about a further life, others preferring to emphasise the finitude of this present life, not always seeking for a completion beyond death. Still others believe strongly in reincarnation, and claim to have “seen” or “known” glimpses of their previous lives.

Nevertheless, this neopagan renaissance is in another way only a part of a larger spiritual movement which has also touched Christian theology. This might be referred to as the widening and deepening and unifying of the spiritual landscape as we emerge out of a modernist worldview. There is an attempt to retain and retool the skills of theological analysis and biblical scholarship in a world that is much more observant of all manner of spiritual realities, and for whom only certain kinds of explanation make sense. Where science might once have run counter to such a worldview, this is no longer always the case. In physics the development of string theory, even more than quantum theory, describes a universe barely understood by its advocates, involving eleven dimensions and the notion of parallel universes; unintuitive it may be, yet we can be sure that the world is *at least* as

6. Elsmore says, “A general feeling among the Maori was that the new religion of Christianity failed in its appreciation of the *holistic nature of the universe – God was removed from the creation*” (my emphasis). See Elsmore, *Te Kohititanga Marama*, 82. For the classic statement critiquing Christianity on ecological grounds, see Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, *Science* 155/3767 (1967); reprinted in John Barr (ed.), *The Environmental Handbook* (London: Ballantine, 1971) 3-16.

7. Kathryn Rountree, *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess: Feminist Ritual-Makers in New Zealand* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004) 123.

strange as this theory suggests.⁸ In most other disciplines there has been recognition, at the very least, that there are varieties of ways of knowing; the old modernist certainty has been laid to rest.

In biblical studies and theology the radical rethinking of the spiritual landscape has included an openness to biblical realities like healing and dreaming, previously ignored. There is also a new reflection on the reasons for, and efficacy of Jesus' death, on atonement theory, and on the various ways in which Christian faith and scientific realities can be harmonised. Both science and faith have been broadened and deepened in the process. It is this conversation which will be discussed below as forming the basis of a connection with the pagan world.

If Christianity is to speak within a pagan world, as it once did, it will be within a context which encounters the deep longings of that world. In so doing, however, it may uncover and speak to needs unknown to that world, as it may have done to the Rotorua tribes of the late 1830s. A rendering of the Christ story that does make sense in this pagan context, however, might also unmask the incoherence of the contemporary world where the meshing of gospel and violence is common. Two approaches to Christ and the gospels now emerging are helpful in this context: the first a theology of nature and end times, the second a particular understanding of the meaning of Christ's life and death.

THE NEW HEAVENS AND THE NEW EARTH

The Christ of much of the evangelical Christian world has been the personal Saviour of the world, who appeared once in human form and will come again to bring that world to destruction and judgment and finality. This is the ecologically insensitive world of the *Left Behind* series, a world that dramatises and welcomes the long awaited "rapture" in which Christians will be miraculously lifted out of this present world at the second coming, to greet Jesus in the heavenlies; the world that is left behind will be a place of judgment, of burning and of conflagration, while the faithful will be resurrected with Jesus in a new heaven and a new earth.⁹ This model of the end times is oblivious to nature, as doomed to destruction; it welcomes impending conflagration as a sign of the end. Even less evangelical renderings of Christ, however, have failed to link creation and salvation theology. More generally this indifference to the natural and to the body extends back in

8. Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Norton, 1999).

9. For a description of the *Left Behind* books by Timothy LaHaye, and their political ramifications, see Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

time, and has roots in the early church asceticism of various persuasions. For many reasons Christian theology departed from nature as a source. Even in the early church, David Lindberg argues, "Few Christians regarded study of the natural world as of more than secondary, perhaps even tertiary, importance. Next to salvation and the development of basic Christian doctrine it was decidedly insignificant."¹⁰

Darwin and evolution made it easier to ignore design arguments based on nature, like those of William Paley, and instead to focus on defending the authority and historicity of Scripture, and the accompanying salvation drama which the reformation had brought to the fore. Salvation after all was still a good story, and its complexities made for good theological discussion, immune to rationalist and scientific interpretations. Nature was eclipsed as a theological source.¹¹ The same tendency of Christian theology to deny nature has been critiqued by feminist theology of recent decades as being also implicitly anti-female. This critique is also the common assumption of many who have left the church, or have been disenchanted with it, as Rountree suggests:

The traditional Christian theological position in which God transcends all of his creation has led to the view that the earth, our bodies, and carnal finite life are to be despised and ultimately transcended. The denial of death is, paradoxically, our culture's failure to affirm this life on this earth in these bodies.¹²

Contemporary theology, however, has found a new appreciation for the ancient linking of redemption and creation: for the Christ of Colossians and the Prologue to John as the one in whom all things hang together (Col 1:15-20; John 1:1-18). The insight that Christ is both creator and redeemer has been of vital importance in the science/faith interface. Indeed, one of the reasons there has been ongoing conflict between science and theology in recent years is that the theology of nature/creation has been eclipsed in modernity by a withdrawal to an abstract narrative of salvation alone. In contrast, paganism of various kinds turns to nature to intuit the whole sphere of spiritual reality that surrounds us, and in which we are embedded. This emphasis is true also of Maori, as Michael Shirres maintains:

10. David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Early Church", in Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1986) 40.

11. Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Losing and Finding Creation in the Christian Tradition", in Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 10-11.

12. See Rountree, *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess*, 130-31.

According to the Maori model of the universe, the world of the *atua* [gods] is *not separated absolutely from the world of everyday activities*, from the secular world. Rather, the two worlds are closely linked, all activities in the everyday world being seen as coming under the influence of the spiritual powers.... The Maori does not, and never has accepted the mechanistic view of the universe which regards it as a closed system...into which nothing can impinge from without. The Maori conceives of it as at least a two-world system in which *the material proceeds from the spiritual, and the spiritual... interpenetrates the material physical world* (my emphasis).¹³

Thus while Maori may have responded well to the nature theology of a St Patrick or St Francis, or a Hildegard of Bingen, they were fated to receive instead the highly modernist theology of nineteenth century British evangelicals, a theology that was to become more rational and salvation-centred in reaction to Darwinian ideas, and with the increase of liberalism.

If, with respect to historic Maori belief and that of the contemporary pagan, we ask what is the connection between their beliefs and Christ, at least some of the answer may be found in Colossians. Here we are faced with the surprising identity between the principle of the universe, the one in whom all things hang together, and the historic Christ/redeemer:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1: 15-19).

Pagans may believe in varieties of nature-mediated non-human powers or vital forces. Likewise, if for the Christian Christ is both the principle/form/logos/intelligence/wisdom of the universe and the incarnate redeemer, we might expect that nature would be understood similarly, as a place constantly upheld by divinity, God-breathed, and divinely impregnated; certainly nature is not in this view the dull flat mechanism of much of modernity. We have always allowed that nature has powers – of gravity, electromagnetism, strong and weak forces – but we are unwilling to grant that it has powers which are not understood.

Here there is a parallel. Pagans are interested in various manifestations of power and of naturally occurring spirit or force or mana, and

13. Michael P. Shirres, *Te Tangata: The Human Person* (Auckland: Accent, 1997) 26.

in the various interconnections between this visible world and the invisible spiritual realm.¹⁴ In spite of the frequent biblical references to angels and messengers, Christians have always been wary of these powers, especially in women. Since the Reformation, however, protestant Christians have taken Christ's supremacy over all powers as reason to ignore or discourage *any* such knowledge or interest. Where they have been rediscovered, is not in nature, but in the powers of principalities associated with human institutions and nations.¹⁵ The charismatic movement, with its tales of visions and angels has also broken this reformation/modernist emphasis to some extent. Yet Scripture is resplendent with enigmatic hints of other realities, in the spirits and visions and dreams of the First Testament, and in the visits of angels and magi in the Second. It was this spirit filled world to which Maori responded enthusiastically, even to the extent, at times, of calling themselves Jews.¹⁶

Colossians and the Prologue to John do help to tie the two emphases together. In Colossians there is pronounced affirmation that creation and redemption are tied stories, rather than alternatives, one juxtaposed or eclipsed by the other. Christ is the wisdom, the organising principle, the centre in whom all hangs together. This places Christ in a position where he transcends reality and history but also lies within it, pointing toward nature as God's concern, equally with salvation. In this perspective nature becomes a mirror of God, even as Christ is the perfect image of God; the two in fact are but facets of each other. And, together with Romans 8, Colossians expresses the vision of all creation, though beautifully ordered and resplendent with life, nevertheless groaning as it awaits a time of release from the subjection to decay (Rom 8:19-22). Thus the whole universe, including those aspects we refer to as nature, not only matters to God, but follows the pattern and markings of divinity, and holds within itself the promise of perfection, now only glimpsed.

For both nineteenth century Maori and twenty first century neopagan the Christian eschatological emphasis on life after death, at the expense of justice and peace and harmony with nature here and now, appears to be accompanied by an indifference to issues of ecology and of social responsibility. It is also true that, although the *Left Behind* series has

14. Kathryn Rountree describes how New Zealand witches tend to emphasise the emerging spirituality of discovering strength from within the self, rather than transcendent spirituality; see *Embracing the Witch and the Goddess*, 128.

15. See, for example, Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

16. Elsmore says of this: "As was general among the Maori in this period, the belief was present that they were descended from the ancient Israelites." Bronwyn Elsmore, *Mana from Heaven: A Century of Maori Prophets in New Zealand* (Tauranga: Moana, 1989) 228.

galvanised the imagination of millions in the late twentieth to early twenty first century, with its Armageddon drama and highly polarised fight between good and evil, this has not been the first time in Christian history that faith has been lived in expectation of the end. Yet the future-based premillennialism so popular in evangelical churches is particularly difficult to reconcile with ecological responsibility, and with connection to nature. For many premillennialists, the earth as we know it will be destroyed; hence why care for it? Certainly for them it is not the place to discover the will of God.

There is, however, an “emerging” eschatological vision which is shared in its general outline by a wide cross section of theologians and faithful Christians. It runs quite counter to the grain of the *Left Behind*. More realist, and less other-worldly than much mainstream Christian moralism, it is also more consistent with the immanence implied by Colossians.¹⁷ Rather than embracing a vision of an earth destroyed in fire and war, to be replaced by God’s new creation, this scriptural vision insists that the new heavens and the new earth will be here on earth, albeit a transformed earth. In this eschatological vision, continuities as well as discontinuities with the present are important.

There has been a renewed interest in the eschatology of Revelation 21. Humanity’s future will be worked out in a New Jerusalem come to earth, though in a world that is changed irrevocably. This is an eschatological vision which does not at all detract from a realistic account of God’s final action in or through nature to bring all things to a close, but affirms the wonder and mystery of this universe. Many now believe that the seeds of the universe’s final destiny lie already dormant within it, much as the Christ who will finally bring peace has already entered into human history.¹⁸ The universe after all has gone through extraordinary transformations in the past, like the light renaissance which brought the stars to light around nine hundred million years after the Big Bang. The clear theological message of such a vision is that the earth does matter, and also that we are a part of it; our fate and the earth’s are common. God, in this view, has not created in order to destroy and discard the world.

The understanding of nature in this way, as the domain of God and of Spirit, and perhaps indeed of spiritual powers whose effect we do not understand and only partially apprehend, forms a point of contact with the worldview of paganism of every kind. We are accustomed, indeed,

17. See, for example, Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001).

18. See Wesley J. Wildman, “The Divine Action Project, 1988-2003”, *Theology and Science* 2/1 (2004) 31-75, see p. 38.

to think of the powers we do understand a little as somehow neutral and autonomous. Paganism may bring an awareness of the life-force of nature, and of the powers of nature, at a time when we most need to be informed again of nature's creative God-breathed life-form. Christians are beginning to realise that stewardship is the very least of our responsibilities towards nature. Participation in nature would be closer to the norm reflected in Scripture, especially the First Testament, and some level of participation may well be required to rekindle the religious impulse both scientism and extrinsic salvation based theology have severed. Participation in nature may reignite deep human longings, allowing us to know and recognise God in a natural world whose exquisite balance is imperilled. Both the Maori and the neo-pagan perspective may help to inform us of this danger, and of the multiple constructions of reality we have imposed on the natural in order to control and manipulate it. They offer a model of life in which spirit and matter are more intertwined, of living respectfully within nature's bounds.

Thus, in spite of the mechanistic science of the last hundred and fifty years, theories that seem to attribute more power and vitalism to the natural world itself may not in the end be wrong.¹⁹ This new vision, while it resonates with pagan concerns, critiques a church culture that has long ignored nature. It also invites an affirmation in Christ of transcendence beyond nature as well as within it.

NEW ATONEMENT THEORIES

Within the evangelical world, where the penal theory of atonement has been a core belief, it is nevertheless an increasingly contested one, as it has been for feminist theology for much longer. What is critiqued is not so much the pure Anselmian doctrine of satisfaction, as the later modulations; not so much the isolated references to substitution, propitiation, or appeasement of God's wrath, all of which are biblical, as much as the tight Calvinist package in which they are woven together. Christ has been offered as a substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of fallen humanity to the Father, to appease his wrath. Individual believers appropriate this work on their behalf by faith. Thus some payment has been made from Christ to God, and credited to us – an extrinsic work not necessarily changing anything except our status before God. Feminists critiqued this theory as advocating cosmic child abuse – of the Father towards the Son. It appears to rupture the Trinity, and can be

19. See, for example, Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

read as condoning destructive and vengeful wrath; it eclipses the love of God, and places the full point of the incarnation only in the dying on the cross, rather than in the life of Christ. Penal theories of atonement do not emphasise the connection to Christ, nor to God – only that the legal position has been changed. In evangelical life and practice they have eclipsed the richness of the biblical images, and intimations of corporate connection to God within Christ, substituting a rational system in its place.²⁰

In this context it is interesting to note that for both groups – historic Maori, and contemporary neopagan, extrinsic theories of atonement do not work. God, or at least transcendence, *must* be experienced more directly and more inwardly than penal theories – also very popular among nineteenth century missionaries – would allow. Thus the contemporary theological ponderings on atonement seem to coincide with the pagan critique of core Christian doctrine. Indeed the penal theory of the atonement with its emphasis on extrinsic exchange may have been an unhelpful metaphor – giving Maori what they felt they did not need, inviting divisions between them, alienating them from their cultural and mythical identity, and giving them a sense of utilitarian exchange. Neopagans also deride the idea of an extrinsic connection to God as being inauthentic, when transcendence is so present in nature, in their thoughts and minds and experience, and so accessible to all.

The second movement of interest in contemporary theology is the critique of the penal atonement theory from a realist/orthodox perspective. This work is being done by some Mennonites, by anthropological theologians such as René Girard, and by the radical orthodoxy movement, and in particular the work of John Milbank.²¹ These form a cluster of theologies that have re-examined the penal theory of the atonement, and indeed the theory that God the Father willed and secretly arranged the death of Christ as a cosmic sacrifice on our behalf, and that we come to appropriate this not by internalising a way of life, or by inner transformation, but by belief. Milbank is one of many writers who see problems with the old abstractions of incarnation and atonement as the lenses through which the First Testament is read.

I have already indicated why I cannot accept a debasedly “cultic” approach: it seems to say to people, you must accept as a primary

20. For new evangelical approaches, see Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

21. See James G. Williams (ed.), *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroad/Herder, 1996); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

“datum” a basic proposition that God became incarnate, and in addition that his death by violence made atonement for our sins.²²

He goes on to ask how belief in the incarnation alone can make any difference to our lives, or to our picture of God. This critique, however, unlike those of classical liberalism, does not in any way give up a unique objectivity to Jesus and his life and death, but evaluates older models as being rationalistic, encouraging violence, and as lacking any holistic overall understanding of how we might really appropriate this redemption in a world that is manifestly not redeemed.²³

In these analyses there is a strong parallel to pagan concerns. Certainly the cycles of revenge and violence that now threaten human and other life on this planet, and certainly threaten anarchy remain a problem for all. There is almost universal admiration for those few brave acts of forgiveness and reconciliation that go against this grain. One thinks of figures such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, and, in a Maori context, of the forgiveness of Tarore’s killer on the part of her father. In the contemporary social context, at the more personal level, restorative justice is seen to work where incarceration and rehabilitation of the offender do not. It is as though there is a secret to peace, and it is not separable from acts of reconciliation involving risk and suffering. “In Jesus”, says Milbank, “we see the perfect ‘shape’ of forgiveness, and this inaugurates a new form of association which aims to be based on such a practice.”²⁴

Milbank goes on to point out that the gospels, which are obviously a mix of narrative and meta-narrative, are by no means straight history, nor is Christ ever portrayed like a character in a novel. The gospel writers have to resort to metaphors to explain his existence, and in fact he acts as a hinge of sorts between one mode of discourse and another. Jesus, then, is important as the founder of a new era or kingdom – though not in the exemplarist way of liberal theology. As someone who lived the life he did, exposing and resisting the powers that bring to human society the endless cycles of violence, his death – as Girard has also argued – was virtually inevitable. Most importantly, though, Milbank then develops the frequent references in gospels and epistles to believers’ imitation and continuation of Jesus’ atoning and suffering life. This is the continuity between Jesus and ourselves, which marks the old era from the new. “Our empowerment”, says Milbank, following Col 1:24, “by Christ both to forgive and to suffer, seems to stretch as far as a

22. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 148.

23. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 147.

24. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 164.

continuing ability to make atonement.”²⁵ This understanding goes some way towards explaining how the Maori were able to grasp so quickly the power of the gospel over *utu*, in spite of whatever else they had been taught, and sometimes, as in the case of the Rotorua tribes associated with Tarore, despite a lack of any missionary teaching at all. It also underlines how the association of violence with faith remains to this day a travesty of that same gospel.

The nineteenth century Maori were diverse and confused in response to what seemed to them very often two religions – that of the First Testament, in which they found calls to retaliation, and that of the New, with its ethic of passive resistance. Not surprisingly Maoris responded to the mythical and supernatural world of the former, sometimes calling themselves “Jews” in respect of this world, and in resistance to missionary endeavours. But in a few instances there was also an acting out of the motifs of love, passive resistance, suffering and atonement. These came out of a deep internalising of the gospel and are a pattern of response for all manner of Christians today.

CONCLUSION

Paganism cannot, of course, be reduced to Christian faith, nor vice versa. But the two worlds can be brought into closer proximity, allowing dialogue. In fact, many of the pagan critiques of Christian faith are internally recognised problems and theological opportunities as well. Contemporary pagans often reject all dualisms, including that of this life and the next, and implicitly or explicitly reject all meta-narratives. Believing that we find meaning within the story, and that this story extends beyond individual life, however, is ancient and ubiquitous. A closer examination of Christian theology in dialogue with pagan concerns shows that although dualisms are alive and well in some Christian communities, there is a deeper holism, and a deeper mystery of salvation emerging out of self-giving that can begin to address larger intractable problems of hatred and revenge. Christians also have a vision of the natural world as bearing the marks and magic of divinity, and hope for a future peace which encompasses all.

25. Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 151.