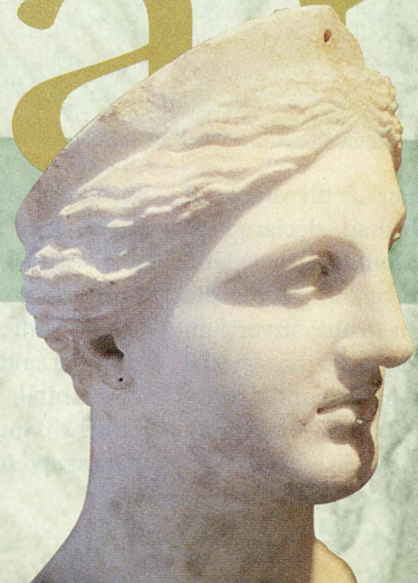


B Y R O B E R T A . W E A T H E R S

Pagan

Thought
Processes



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: JAMES McLEMORE/ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (10/25/19)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BOB SCHATZ/ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (12/20/15)

TIN THE FALL OF 2000, the members of Pleasant Valley Unitarian-Universalist Church in Garland, Texas, decided to make their worship more “pagan.” Rather than worship one particular deity, they expanded their focus to include various “gods and goddesses.” They also added the practice of lighting candles to herald the elements (earth, air, fire, and water), hoping that would help their worship become “more earth-centered.” Sermons shifted accordingly, focusing on more natural themes, such as gardening.¹

Is this “pagan” religion a new fad? Not at all. Pagan worship, characterized by reverence for the elements of nature, has existed for thousands of years. In fact, paganism conflicted with Christianity as soon as the earliest Christians began to evangelize their neighbors. This conflict was motivated by the striking differences in their worldviews.

Our worldview is the way we think about the world around us and interpret the events we experience. All people see and experience the same world, but not everyone interprets it the same way. Furthermore, these thought processes motivate our choices and behavior. Various influences impact our thought processes, but the most powerful influence on our worldview is our religion.

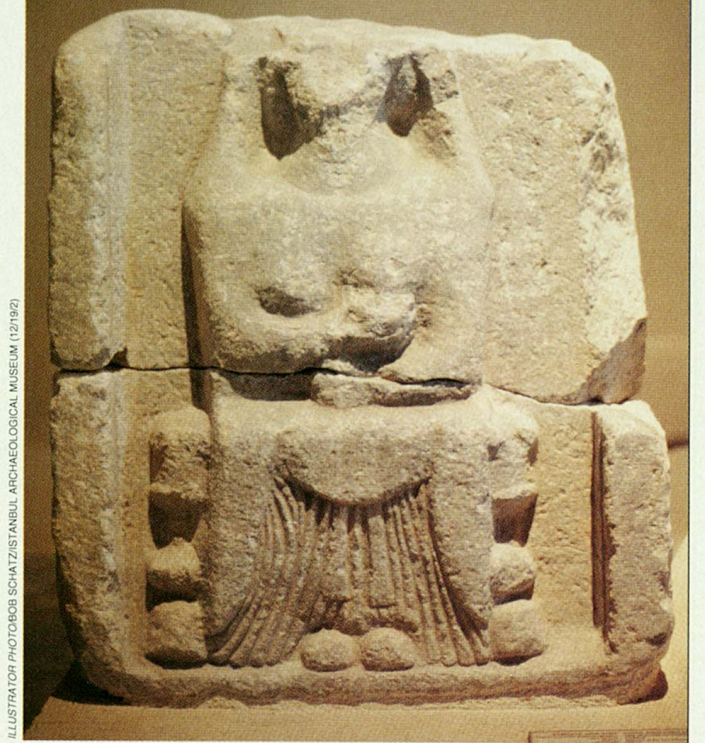
The Pagan Worldview

For centuries, pagans have believed that the events of life are determined by fate and governed by the forces of nature. The ancient Greeks embraced this worldview. They believed that human beings had no free will. Therefore, they assigned divine status to the forces of nature and sought to develop beneficial “relationships” with these gods and goddesses. So, like today’s pagans, the Greeks focused their worship on the elements of nature. They wanted to appease these deities and manipulate them, hoping to gain for themselves a better life.²

But Christians taught a new worldview. They preached that God was intimate and personal, as demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Life was directed by God, not dictated by fate. When Paul and his associates evangelized Greek cities, they faced the daunting challenge of witnessing for Christ in a culture saturated with the pagan worldview. Ephesus was such a city.

Paganism in Ephesus

Pagan thought processes dominated Ephesian culture. Central to the Ephesians’ pagan worship was the goddess Artemis, called Diana by the Romans. The Greeks believed that Artemis was a child of Zeus, born from his union with the goddess Leto. Revered as the mother goddess of the earth, Artemis was first worshiped as the goddess of the hunt and the protectress of wildlife, but over time she became associated with fertility. In the Artemis fertility cult, adherents practiced sacred prostitution in the temple built in her honor, striving to manipulate the powers of the goddess. By the time Paul evangelized Ephesus, the temple of Artemis was an imposing structure. It was four times as



Above: A votive stele dedicated to the mother goddess Cybele. Dates from the 6th cent. B.C.

Left: Marble bust of Hermes, protector of travelers. The sacred milestones on the roads were erected in the name of the god Hermes.

Lower left: Marble head of Artemis. Hellenistic; from the late 3rd century B.C. Artemis was the goddess of fertility at Ephesus. The Romans called her Diana.

large as the Parthenon in Athens and honored as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Her likeness, a multi-breasted statue believed by the Greeks to have fallen from the divine realm, met worshipers entering the temple (see Acts 19:35).³

Paul encountered stiff opposition in Ephesus when his preaching began to win converts for Christ away from the Artemis cult. According to Acts 19:23-41, a silversmith named Demetrius incited a riot against Paul. He crafted statues of the goddess and sold them to people for their homes. The defection of worshipers from paganism to Christ threatened his business, so he decided to persecute Paul. His effort failed, however, when the city clerk dismissed his charges based on the overwhelmingly popular view of the Ephesians that no other religion could ever dethrone Artemis!

Two Worldviews Clash

Ironically, Demetrius was closer to the truth than the city clerk. Ephesians who followed Christ would have to turn away from their worship of Artemis. The two represented incompatible worldviews. Paul taught that this incompatibility originated in the religious person’s thought processes. He told the Ephesian Christians that they would have to abandon their pagan worldview in favor of a Christian worldview and lifestyle.

LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Ephesians 4:17-32

Throughout Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he instructed them in this exchange of thought processes. For instance, in the passage that begins with Ephesians 4:17, Paul insisted that the way pagans "live" is an expression of the "futility of their thinking" (NIV). The term translated "futility" refers to something empty or meaningless. These meaningless thought processes were the trademark of unbelievers, who tried to fill the void of God's absence with exuberant idolatry (compare Rom. 1:21). This condition "darkened" their "understanding," resulting in spiritual blackout (Eph. 4:18) and a complete lack of moral "sensitivity." These pagans, Paul added, demonstrated their "ignorance" by participating in unholy lifestyles, as they would "indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more" (v. 19, NIV). Clearly, Paul believed that

the corrupting influence of sin had generated the unholy thought processes that characterized paganism, culminating in the debauchery exhibited in the cult of Artemis.

Left: Marble statue of Zeus.
Below: The turreted headdress on Tyche, the goddess of good fortune.



However, the Ephesians were able to know Christ because, before they tried to change their behavior, they had accepted God's truth in their minds. They had exchanged their pagan worldview for the new, Christian worldview. Consequently, Paul taught, they had been "made new in the attitude of [their] minds" (vv. 20-23, NIV). The word translated "attitude" is literally "spirit." Our worldview germinates from our spirit, which in turn motivates our actions. Just as sinful actions depict a spirit corrupted by sin and separated from Christ, a life of holiness indicates that a person's spirit has been made new in Christ (v. 24). If our thought processes have been purified in Christ, our lifestyle will manifest God's holiness.

Paul listed areas of conduct in which the believer's lifestyle should reflect a spirit renewed by Christ. For example, he instructed a Christian should abandon lies, purge the sinful anger, and relinquish the tendency to steal. Words should edify other Christians and please God. All believers should strive for healthy relationships, which includes the practice of forgiveness, kindness, and compassion (vv. 25-32).⁴ Paul considered such behavior a choice, and Christians are to choose to act according to their new worldview.

Are You Practicing a Christian Worldview?

The pagan worldview was a formidable obstacle in the first century. That worldview is still advocated today. But so are many other worldviews that are equally incompatible with the Christian worldview. Just as with Paul and the Ephesian believers, today's Christians should abandon all other thought processes in favor of a Christian worldview. We should be easily distinguished by our worldview. If your actions are determined by your thought processes, can your neighbors, relatives, and friends tell by your behavior that you are guided by a Christian worldview? **B**

¹Kim Horner, "Going Pagan? No Stretch for Dallas Area Church," *The Greenville News* (Saturday, January 13, 2001), 68.

²L. Russ Bush, *A Handbook for Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 161.

³Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 161; F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 287.

⁴Kyle Snodgrass, *The New International Version Application Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 228-52; F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 354-65.

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