

# THIS TIME WILL NOT BE THE SAME

J. Budziszewski

*First Things* 241 (March, 2014), pp. 24-25

God willing, the new evangelization will happen, but let us not imagine that this time will be like the first time. The old evangelization proclaimed the Good News among pagan, pre-Christian peoples to whom it came as something new. Nothing like that had been done before. But nothing like our task has been done before either.

Re-evangelizing is not evangelizing as though for the first time again; the very fact of past proclamation makes re-proclamation different. For we proclaim the Gospel to a neo-pagan, post-Christian people to whom it does not come as new. The old world had not yet felt the caress of grace; our world, once brushed, now flinches from its touch.

Is re-evangelization completely and radically different from evangelization? No. The same Christ knocks at the door of the same human heart, though a heart with a different history. Is it more difficult? In some ways. Easier? In some ways. But different.

Here is one great difference: The pagan made excuses for transgressing the moral law. By contrast, the neo-pagan pretends, when it suits him, that there is no morality, or perhaps that each of us has a morality of his own. Since they had the Law and the Prophets, it comes as no surprise that the Jews took morality for granted. But to a great degree, and despite their sordid transgressions, so did the pagans.

Not that skepticism was unknown among them: “What is truth?” Pilate asked, not waiting for the answer. Yet consider all the pagan errors to which St. Paul alludes in his epistles: Was relativism one of them? No. He could omit it then; he could not have omitted it today.

Related to that first great difference is another. The pagan wanted to be forgiven, but he did not know how to find absolution. To him the Gospel came as a message of release. But the neo-pagan does not want to hear that he needs to be forgiven, and so to him the Gospel comes as a message of guilt.

This inversion seems incredible, because the neo-pagan certainly feels the weight of his sins. But he thinks the way to have peace is not to have the weight lifted, but to learn not to take it seriously. Hearing Christ's promise of forgiveness, he thinks "All those guilty Christians!" Having chosen to view the freest people as the most burdened, he naturally views the most burdened as the freest. "Everyone has done things he regrets. Everyone lies. Get over it!"

The pagan was raised differently. He was brought up in the ways and the atmosphere of paganism, and in order to be converted, he had to be removed from both. By contrast, though the neo-pagan has probably also been taught pagan ways, he may have been brought up in an atmosphere of Christian sentiment. Consequently he regards the Gospel not as the story of true God become man, but as a sentimental fable for children. Even Christian sentiments are difficult to take seriously apart from the actual life of grace.

Then too, the pagan was likely to be exposed to the Gospel either all at once or not at all. The neo-pagan has been exposed to just enough spores to develop an allergic reaction. Perhaps he was baptized as a child, but never seriously taught the faith. Perhaps his parents became angry with the Church and stopped taking him.

The pagan suffered the burden of a pagan childhood, but he was spared the burden of an interrupted Christian childhood. Whereas he had never been immersed in the waters of faith, all too often the neo-pagan has been dipped in them, but then pulled out.

Not only was the pagan devoid of nostalgia for a Christian past, he was also unencumbered by the anger of guilt for rejecting it. The neo-pagan is susceptible to both the nostalgia and the anger, and he may even feel both at once.

I once met an atheist with a chip on his shoulder who boasted of the "fun" he had "ruining all the Catholic kids" at the Catholic college where he had taught. Yet after a few glasses of wine he said that he was "very religious," and that he had recently joined a church choir from sheer love for the great old hymns. At turns, he was nostalgic for something good he had left behind, and belligerent because he had no good reason for having left it.

Because the Gospel was new to him, the pagan needed to learn it from the beginning. The neo-pagan is in a very different position; he needs to unlearn things he has learned about the Gospel which happen to be untrue. We see a trivial

symptom of the problem in the great number of people who think a little drummer boy was supposed to have accompanied the shepherds, a notion which makes the Christmas narrative seem most implausible to anyone more than ten years of age.

But non-existent drummer boys are the least of the problems. The neo-pagan is likely to have entirely mistaken views of what Christians believe about creation, fall, and redemption—about God, man, and the relation between God and man.

One thing may seem to be unchanged: Now as then, the non-believer hails Caesar, not Christ, as Lord. But whereas the pagan reproached Christians for doubting distinctively ancient illusions, for example the eternal destiny of the Empire of Rome, the neo-pagan is more likely to reproach them for doubting distinctively modern illusions, for example the idea that by technology and social engineering, we can devise a world in which nobody needs to be good.

In one way the pagan was less deluded, for he could hardly fail to know that he was an idolater. His idols were visible and touchable. They were carved from physical substances like wood and stone. The neo-pagan is much less likely to know that he is an idolater; if faith concerns things not seen, then in a sense he is more faithful, for his idols are invisible and untouchable. They are woven of sensations, wishes, and ideas, like pleasure, success, and the future. Even his magazines have names like *Self*. Perhaps visible idols were always masks for invisible idols, but in our day the masks have come off.

The pagan world was unfamiliar with Christian ideas. By contrast, the neo-pagan world is brimming with them. The makers of that world have even appropriated some of them—but have emptied them of Christian meaning.

For example, the neo-pagan may have a high view of what he calls faith, hope, and love, virtues undreamt among the pagans—yet he is likely to use the term “faith” for clinging to the illusions of a barren life, “hope” for sheer worldly optimism, and “love” for desire or sentiment without sacrifice or commitment of the will. Another example of such emptying is the way some neo-pagans accept the Christian view that history has meaning and direction, but purge God from the story so that it becomes a bland tale of “progress” toward whatever they want the world to have more of. Pagans didn’t believe in progress, but in endlessly repeated recurrence.

Nor must we overlook another profound difference. If the pagan was at all inclined to admit that his nation had ever done wrong, he had no one else to blame. But the neo-pagan can blame his culture’s sins on Christianity. The trial of Galileo,

the plunder of the American indigenes, the Spanish Inquisition—they were all the Christians' fault.

Surely these things were gravely evil, though if neo-pagans were consistent, they would set the thousands killed by Christian inquisitions against the millions killed by atheistic inquisitions. Yet it is easy to see why they don't. Christian offences are easier to invoke, because the Church admits them, and they are also more scandalous, just because of the Gospel of love.

In spite of the sins of Christians, one might expect the memory of the influence of the Gospel to favor its re-proclamation. After all, the pagan world had never experienced the revivifying effect of grace, but the neo-pagan world has. Consider just the Gospel's high views of conscience and of the dignity of the human person, and how these have transformed Western culture. Surely all this cannot be overlooked!

No, but the neo-pagan takes for granted all the good that his culture has inherited from Christendom. In his view, certain things simply got better: That is just how history goes, or at least how it went. If he assigns anything the credit, he assigns it not to grace, but to such things as science, capitalism, and "enlightenment."

He expects the stream to keep on flowing without the spring. When it does begin to dry up, he may be vaguely uneasy, but he does not fully grasp what he is seeing. Why doesn't he? Because his ideas of dry and wet are changing too. It isn't just that the neo-pagan world around him is losing respect for the sacredness of the conscience and the dignity of the human person; he is a part of that world, and he is losing respect for them too. They seem so unimportant. Why do Christians obsess over them?

Finally, the pagan knew he was not a Christian. By contrast, a certain kind of neo-pagan may think that he is one. This oddity is perhaps the most challenging difference between evangelization and re-evangelization. In the ancient world, the people who needed to be evangelized were outside the walls of the Church; today they include thousands who are inside, but who think just like those who are outside. When the Gospel is proclaimed, they complain.

A pew is a difficult mission field. It is hard for the shepherds to bring home the sheep if they think they are already in the fold. But that is a story for another day.