

BOOK REVIEW

of

Peter Jones,

Capturing The Pagan Mind: Paul's Blueprint for Thinking and Living in the New Global Culture,
Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003.

December 2016

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

The very suggestion that there is paganism in the United States of America may be shocking to some, and it may be that paganism is still a minority religion in America, yet it has had enormous growth in the past few decades and will likely continue to grow. This is the contention of Peter Jones, who has studied and written on this topic for decades.

Peter Jones was born in Liverpool, England, who shared a school desk with John Lennon for some five years. He attended the University of Wales, then Gordon Divinity School near Boston, then obtaining a Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School, and then a Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. He taught New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in California for some eleven years, and is now Executive Director of truthXchange. A more detailed biographical sketch may be found on the following web page: [truthXchange Peter Jones.](#)

Peter Jones has authored a number of books related to paganism in America, not only documenting its rise, but also analyzing how it got started, how it has grown, what it is based upon, and the similarity between it and the paganism of the ancient Roman Empire. *The Other Worldview: Exposing Christianity's Greatest Threat*, Kirkdale Press, 2015, gives somewhat of an overview. *One or Two: Seeing a World of Difference*, Main Entry Editions, 2010, focuses on Romans Chapter 1. Pagan religion, and virtually all non-Christian religions, view reality as all of one essence, whereas Christianity makes a clear distinction between God and everything else, i.e. two. *Pagans in the Pews: How the New Spirituality is Invading Your Home, Church and Community*, Regal, 2001, is endorsed by Jay Adams, Christian Booksellers Association, Edmund Clowney, Bruce Demarest, George Grant, Jack Hayford, Michael Horton, Michael Law, John MacArthur, Paige Patterson, R. C. Sproul, and others. This book discusses the new spirituality in America and its pagan roots, and also the apostasy that has taken place in many churches. *The God of Sex: How Spirituality Defines Your Sexuality*, Main Entry Editions, 2006, discusses sexuality according to the pagan view of

God, and sexuality according to the Biblical worldview.

But the book by Peter Jones that I would like to focus on here is *Capturing The Pagan Mind: Paul's Blueprint for Thinking and Living in the New Global Culture*, Broadman & Holman, 2003. This is not, as you see from the above, his most recent book, but it is one that I am especially fascinated by. This book is divided into two parts, ancient Rome, and Paul's full Gospel message.

The Roman Empire that the early church found itself in had many successes and advantages, but some profound negative characteristics as well. Part One of Peter Jones' book gives a penetrating overview of the Roman Empire. It did provide many good things, like roads of such quality that some are still used in Europe today, peace, a good legal system, unity, magnificent buildings, baths, running water, sewers, public entertainments, etc. But it also brought much control and loss of freedom. If you were out of step with Rome, it could be brutal in applying its power to put down any lack of conformity. The price was high for Roman peace and prosperity. As it conquered nations, it absorbed their religions and integrated them into the Roman pantheon. As long as one agreed with Rome's unified paganism, including recognizing the Emperor as divine, one would have no problems religiously. But if one declared Jesus is Lord, especially in an exclusionary sense, one would be out of conformity with Roman civilization and open to its brutality. Jones suggests that this is the direction that American society is moving.

Part Two of Peter Jones' book gives a very interesting presentation of the message that Paul preached and taught in the pagan Roman Empire. I think that perhaps many of us have somewhat missed this message because we are far removed from the Roman Empire. Paul's teaching is not limited to our sinfulness and need of a Savior, while he does indeed cover those important topics, he starts with creation, then moves on to the fall, discusses the Old Testament law and the prophets, presents Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, who is God

incarnate, how this God-man died for our sins and has set us free to know and worship God, and goes on to the New Heavens and the New Earth. What is good in what follows is from Peter Jones, but I have put my own spin on it and take responsibility for any errors in judgment or theology.

Paul, in Romans, Chapter 1, presents God as the Creator and everything else as the creation, that is, created by God. This is not, in Peter Jones' mind, a small distinction. He calls this distinction "twoism," the basic concept of reality as having two parts: God the Creator, and all of creation, the physical universe and all spiritual beings other than Himself. The key idea being that God is not part of the universe; He is transcendent. In paganism, all of reality is one, which Peter Jones calls "oneism." In paganism we and God are part of the same essence, as is everything else. That is why some New Age adherents think that they are God. It is also why some adherents of Eastern religions think of merging back into God at some point, ceasing to exist as an individual. Paul's presentation, for example in Romans chapter 1, is that God is the Creator of all things, and we are part of His creation, and that, at some level, we all know it, from the evidence of the creation itself and our own conscience, and that we owe Him worship and obedience.

The primary reason we do not readily acknowledge God as the Creator, worship Him, and obey Him, is because we are alienated from Him, and choose to live, and think we can live, autonomous lives apart from Him. This alienation from God we have inherited from our ancestors dating all of the way back to the Garden of Eden. This is, of course, in sharp contrast to the teachings of paganism, and to the creation-myth of our culture. Paganism and our culture in general holds to a creation (although not really creation, but rather just a beginnings) story that we, as a species, have been evolving upwards by natural (physics, chemistry, and biology) means for an almost inconceivable time, and we will continue to evolve in intelligence and goodness and wisdom through these same natural means. Now there is a good deal of variation upon this theme, but with no scientific evidence to support any of it. The reason for embracing it is not evidence, but rather as Paul teaches, most (all apart from the grace of God) would rather worship creation than the Creator.

Because of God's love for His creatures, and for His creation in general, God Himself condescended to be born as a human being into this world, in accordance with prophecies given centuries earlier

promising a coming Messiah, resulting in God Incarnate. This incarnation is not easy to grasp, as Paul, and the New Testament in general, teach that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man. Jesus Christ became incarnate in order to continue the work of undoing the harm that the fall caused. The first Adam caused the partial ruin of God's very good creation; the second Adam (Jesus Christ), in order to undo that partial ruin needed to be fully human and live a fully righteous and obedient life, but He also needed to be fully God to accomplish that, and have the power and authority to redeem the lives of others. His finished work, applied by the Holy Spirit, could justify many such that they may be born from above unto God.

That finished work of Jesus Christ, mentioned above, could accomplish the justification of others by Jesus Christ, since He is fully human and able to bear the sins of other human beings, and since He is also fully God, His worth can serve vicariously for the many. God is merciful, but He is also just. He cannot ignore sin. By His stripes we are healed.

"Paul's message to pagans, ancient and modern, is stunning -- *Utopia is coming, and I have seen it*. While 'no eye has seen nor ear heard what God has prepared' for future utopian life, Paul has seen the resurrected Jesus and from the revelation of the Spirit, understands something of that reality. Nothing in pagan philosophy or spirituality prepared Paul's world for such an announcement." (Jones, p. 181) At the risk of being accused of "pie in the sky" faith, "Ours is a religion whose center of gravity lies beyond the grave in the world to come. . . . the thirst for the world to come was of the very substance of the religion of [Paul's] heart. He felt deeply that the believer's destiny and God's purposes with reference to him transcend all limits of what this earthly life can possibly bring or possibly contain." (Geerhardus Vos, quoted by Jones, p. 183) The full Gospel message is way more than repentance and forgiveness, as important as they are, but includes much more that must be declared to pagans and unbelievers of our day: "new birth, adoption, redemption, justification, sanctification, baptism in the Spirit, and glorification are not primarily descriptions of the present state of believers. They are categories of the future, transformed universe that made its first appearance when God raised the physical body of Jesus from the dead." (Jones, p. 189) This is a message not only of personal faith, but that is intellectually rigorous and challenging, and has the power to confront our increasingly pagan society.