
Oberon Zell-Ravenheart (1942– ) claims to have been the first to articulate the Gaea or Gaia Thesis and the first to have employed the term ‘Pagan’. While some might dispute this, Zell did co-found the Church of All Worlds (CAW) in 1968 – making it most likely the first legally incorporated pagan institution. Moreover, his journal *Green Egg* has been legendary, and through it and beyond, Zell has become a leading and seminal influence for the contemporary pagan movement. True enough, James Lovelock (1919–2022) began considering the idea of the earth as a self-adjusting community as early as 1965 (Lovelock 1965) and articulated this concept of the planet as a self-regulating system evolving the balance between the biosphere, atmosphere and lithosphere (Lovelock and Griffin 1969) – building in part on the preceding works of the geologist James Hutton (1726–1797), the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the psychologist Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), the mineralist Vladimir Vernadsky (1863–1945) and the environmental ethicist Aldo Leopold (1887–1948). It was the novelist William Golding who suggested to Lovelock the Greek name Gaia for his 1972 hypothesis that regards terrestrial synergy as a deliberate self-regulating interaction maintained by living organisms with their inorganic environment (Lovelock 1972).1 The Gaia principle has been additionally developed by the microbiologist Lynn Margulis (1938–2011), but Zell at virtually the same time takes the underlying concept further by understanding the biosphere of the earth as being itself conscious, a single self-aware living superorganism. This originally occurred for him with his ‘TheaGenesis’ vision on 7 September 1970, and in *Green Egg* 5.40 (1 July 1971) he explicitly affirms that ‘Gaea is a single living organism’. Influenced by Teilhard de Chardin’s concept of emerging planetary consciousness (the ‘Omega Point’) and Robert Heinlein’s 1961 *Stranger in a Strange Land* with its notions of ‘Immanent Divinity (“Thou Art God”), Pantheism (“all that groks is God”); Sacraments (water sharing); Priestesses; sexuality as divine union; social and ritual nudity; intimate extended families as a basis for community; and open, loving relationships without jealousy’ (Zell 2022: xxii), he came to the realisation that his life’s mission is ‘to be a catalyst for the coalescence of consciousness’ (Zell 2022: xxiii).

Zell’s assertion concerning Gaea’s principle of coherency as a self-aware regulatory mechanism has been criticised by some in not being ‘scientific nor scientifically verifiable or even subject to scientific evidence’. Likewise, Lovelock has been

disparaged by various scientists such as the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins who dismisses the notion of a teleological ecosystem existing between the biotic and abiotic worlds. But in his writings and most recently his *GaiaGenesis: Conception and Birth of the Living Earth* (2022), Zell makes clear his interest in science and the validity of its methodology. True enough, Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis has been ridiculed as ‘some kind of neo-Pagan New Age religion’ (Zell 2022: 87) but Lovelock rejects the idea that his hypothesis concerning planetary self-regulation includes the notion of it being purposeful. And while the same may not be said of Zell, he openly acknowledges his pagan spirituality but adds in connection to the ancient spiritual belief or Perennial Philosophy that all life or all consciousness is interconnected that:

We Pagans also tend to believe in evolution, natural selection, climate change, gravity, quantum physics, germ theory, vaccinations, the theory of relativity, the heliocentric model of the solar system, and that the Earth is 4.6 billion years old and spherical. … [We Pagans] believe in all these things that science supports!

Indeed, it seems to us that Paganism should be considered the rational, sensible, scientifically-validated religion…. (Zell 2022: xvii)

Zell’s obsessive interest in science has allowed him to reject the Protestantism of his parents. He considers the anti-science bias of Christianity as a meaningless superstition. He also claims that ‘we only speak of belief in the absence of knowledge’ – perhaps reminiscent to A. C. Grayling’s ‘Faith is a commitment to belief contrary to evidence and reason’ (Zell 2022: 100; Grayling 2007: 15).

According to Zell, the chief difference between Lovelock and himself is the former’s approach from the outside in, i.e., from atmospheric biochemistry and systems analysis, and his own inside out direction focusing initially on microbiology, embryology, and palaeontology (2022: 40). For Zell, the living structure of the earth is the macrocosmic equivalent of what occurs within each of us on a cellular level. Admittedly this is not science per se, but it expresses an imaginative perception of at least a metaphorical reality. Moreover, he plausibly counters Richard Dawkins’ insistence that the earth could not be a living organism because it does not reproduce. ‘Not yet!’ is Zell’s response, though he also says that he believes that as part of the primary function of a technological species’ evolution ‘humanity has evolved specifically to become the agents of Gaia’s reproduction’ (2022: 130–32). He has here the colonisation of space in mind, but even without that he ridicules Dawkins’ contention which precludes a childless human being from being a living organism. Instead, in the face of ecological insanity, the population explosion and the perpetual threat of nuclear holocaust, he calls for ‘humanity awakening to a full sense of our function and responsibility as a vital organ in the larger body of the planetary Biosphere’ (Zell 2022: 119).

Perhaps the core of Zell’s spiritual philosophy and/or paganism is the following:

From the Cambrian Explosion to now, the biosphere of Earth has evolved as a single organism, with the same DNA and same protoplasm, infinitely divided and subdivided through mitosis. Exactly the way a single fertilized cell (*zygote*) divides and subdivides into an embryo, fetus, and human being, comprising trillions of cells, all remaining entangled as one single meta-organism, all with the same protoplasm and DNA. (Zell 2022: 78)
The telluric aspect of Zell’s paganism or the neopagan movement he ‘kicked off’ is profound. Gus diZerega argues that there are two forms of paganism: ‘a broad category [that] is very old and diverse, and historically, largely reflected [in] its patriarchal cultural context’ and NeoPaganism which emphasises ‘the Divine Feminine in Her principle [sic.] role as a Goddess or perhaps a triple goddess of Mother, Maiden, and Crone’. The latter stresses a reestablishment of feminine values, and diZerega sees it as an initial outgrowth from both British Traditional and Gardnerian Wicca. Personally, I tend to see Wicca and contemporary witchcraft more as the midwife to present-day Western paganism – especially through its Freemasonic and gnostic origins and its inclination toward conceiving its pantheistic Goddess as akin to ‘Yahweh in a dress’ (York 2019: 207f). By contrast, but with some caveats, Zell’s CAW appears more centrally to promote a religious materiality in contrast to transcendental exaltations and acosmic universalisms. Moreover, and as I likewise understand (e.g., York 2003: 8–65), Zell comprehends paganism as encompassing:

the entire emerging movement of Nature-based and revivalist pre-Christian religions, including not only Witchcraft as European shamanism, but also Egyptian, Greek, Norse, Druidic, Hindu, and various indigenous shamanic or tribal traditions, such as Polynesian, Native American, African, etc. (Zell 2022: xxv, 307)

Consequently, the predominant features of telluric or geocentric paganism include animism, pantheism, polytheism, immanentism, nature worship, numinoseness, magic, organicism, fetishism, idolatry, and even humanism. Despite Grayling’s assertion with regard to atheism, ‘that a more appropriate term is “naturalist”, denoting one who takes it that the universe is a natural realm, governed by nature’s laws’, he also states that ‘this properly implies that there is nothing supernatural in the universe’. Nevertheless, as Zell’s CAW, Fred Adams’ Feraferia and Isaac Bonetwits’ Ár nDraiocht Féin among others reveal, non-secular humanisms are also to be found within the pagan umbrella. Zell himself appears to be happy with the consideration of faeries, nymphs, devas, elementals and the like. So, it may be safe to say that among the different kinds of pagans, we have not only the secular humanists but also the geocentrics, the feminists, the animists, the preternaturalists, and even the gnostics if not also monists and various theists – frequently as overlapping if not always competing identities.


3. The caveats relate to Zell’s identification of the Anima Mundi with Plato’s concept of the ‘World Soul’ as well as his unclear consideration of the Neoplatonist notion of the world’s ensoulment, i.e., as something separate (e.g., 2022: 50f). Related would be his reference to the Qabalistic Tree of Life as representing the underlying structure of the universe and ‘the path by which Divinity [again as something separate] descends into the material world, and by which we can ascend to unity with the Divine’ (2022: 79, my emphasis). On page 64, the Jungian hypnotherapist Iona Miller refers to ‘Soul [as] the middle world between gross materiality and the spiritual world’. For the distinction between paganism and gnosticism as theological ideal types, vide York (2003: 157ff). Fellowship of Isis archpriest and British Druid Order archdruid Steve Wilson (1955–2017) described the Sephirot as an ‘upside down tree’ (York 2019: 137).
Zell’s *GaeaGenesis* is structured into five parts or Cantos. The first is historical and covers the development of the consideration of the earth as a living being from Hesiod through medieval alchemical understandings to Lovelock and others. The book’s second section basically comprises reprints of Zell’s *Green Egg* ‘TheaGenesis’ articles along with various additional commentaries and feedback. Canto III is an exploration of the theological implications of the Gaean paradigm presented in the previous sections concerning the Great Mother Goddess and sundry gods and goddesses. Once again, the majority are reproduction of Zell’s earlier articles. Canto IV covers significant geological and historical turning points (e.g., Thera’s eruption, the rise of monotheistic religions, and the resurgence of contemporary paganism. The final section is devoted to the emergence of planetary consciousness and humanity’s future role. Throughout the book Zell’s writing is clear and concise. Some of the extra contributions (e.g., by Iona Miller; Carlos Castaneda) are decidedly New Age in an unconvincing sense that may weaken the overall impact for some readers.

Despite any overall impressiveness and agreement with what Zell says, as a mythologist and mythographer, I have a difficulty with his presentation of the primordial parents as mother Gaia and father sun-god (Zell 2022: 34, 91). This modification of Hesiod’s *Theogony* myth does not take into account the Greek poet’s incorporation of the Levantine Sucession Myth that has obscured the earlier and original (Proto-)Indo-European understanding of the Earth as the parthenogenetic mother of the sky-father/embodiment of light through whom the sun becomes her grandchild (York 1995: 371 et passim). Zell appears to dismiss ‘Zeus [as] no real improvement over Yahweh’ (Zell 2022: 34f). He does, however, subscribe to Joseph Campbell’s suggestion ‘that the Earth viewed as a whole, with no national boundaries, might be the symbol for a new planetary mythology’ (Zell 2022: 347; see also Campbell 1988: 32). The Blue Marble image of Earth first taken on 7 December 1972 is certainly a stimulus for an already ancient and valid myth that stresses the very ability of Ge / Dèmètêr / Semelê / Zemes mate / Zemlya / Zamyâd / *Dhghem / *Ghôem / *Ghemos to produce her diametrically opposite but fully complementary (and in this case, masculine) offspring (Zeus patêr / Dyaus pitar / Iuppiter / *Tiwaz / Tyr / Dievs / *Dyêus). In this recoverable mythical metaphor, it is Earth who gives birth to luminescence/light/enlightenment.

Beyond the modification of myth, however, Zell also has succumbed to the contemporary pagan misunderstanding that ‘pagan’ refers originally to a ‘country dweller’ essentially with the implication of ‘country bumpkin’ as the last to be converted to Christianity. But as Pierre Chuvin has convincingly deciphered, the term *paganus* as ‘peasant’ is a later development (Chuvin 1990: 8ff). Originally the pagani were ‘people of the place’ who preserved their local traditions, and these earliest pagan localities were actually urban districts akin to the city ward.

The only other complaint I have stems from my wish in Zell’s otherwise excellent book for a more complete Index than is furnished in his Appendix K. Otherwise, *GaeaGenesis* is a fascinating, important and prolifically pictorially entertaining argument based on ‘Mother Earth [being] humanity’s oldest and most universal archetype of Divinity’ (Zell 2022: 55). Some Abrahamists may disagree, but Zell’s contention that earth is ‘our only life-support system’ (Zell 2022: 91) remains one that would be difficult against which to argue. Whether the ‘Gaia Thesis’, *GaeaGenesis* or Theagenesis paradigm is or at least can be scientifically validated is a secondary consideration when scrutinised next to what science is telling us currently and increasingly about global warming, industrial pollution and population explosion. Oberon Zell must be applauded in his life’s effort to lay a path for future generations through the evolutionary steps that humanity must now take to learn to live
in balance with the planet’. And for this vital direction, he adds that ‘science must come to balance with Spirit’ (Zell 2022: 69).

References

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Michael York
Cherry Hill Seminary
Professor Emeritus Bath Spa University
and University of Wales Trinity Saint David
exchange@michaelyork.co.uk