

Formation of Consecrated Persons in the Face of Neo-paganism in the Modern World

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In his 2024 address to the Columban Associations in Italy, Pope Francis highlighted the challenge of neo-paganism in the contemporary world. The Roman Pontiff's voice reinforced the Church's warnings on the growing challenge of neo-paganism in the 21st century. The Church particularly emphasizes the vital role of consecrated persons in addressing the challenge. The formation of consecrated persons for the modern world is highly crucial and must be such that can properly address and effectively counter the influences of neo-paganism. It is only by equipping consecrated persons with quality and holistic formation, initial and ongoing formation, that they will be able to rise up to the task of neo-paganism in their various apostolates and places of evangelization. The paper examines the crucial role of consecrated persons' formation in addressing the challenge of neo-paganism in the contemporary world. It explores the concept of formation, the rise of neo-paganism, the Church's response, and the centrality of consecrated persons in this context.

Keywords: consecrated persons, formation, modern world, neo-paganism

Introduction

The life consecrated through the profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to His honour, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory. (Can. 573 §1)

In these words, the documents of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* 42-44; *Christus Domini* 33; *Perfectae Caritatis* 1), and then the Code of Canon Law affirm the principal and essential theological elements of the religious life, as: the consecration of life through the profession of the evangelical counsels; the following of Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit; the total dedication to God, who is loved above all things, with resultant effects, such as: the dedication by a new and special title to the honour of God, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world; the striving for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God; and, the function of an outstanding/luminous sign in the Church, which foretells the heavenly glory

It is a special way of following Christ through vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It is a way of life that is rooted in the Gospel and is characterized by a deep commitment to serving God, the Church, and humanity

through various ministries. Consecrated life is not just a personal choice but a call from God to serve Him and humanity in a unique, dedicated and in various ministries: education, healthcare, social work, etc.

While consecrated life has always been a vital part of the Church, today it faces a new challenge: the rise of neo-paganism.

Resurgence of Neo-paganism

Paganism is a concept that embraces a wide range of spiritual beliefs and practices that honor nature and pre-Christian deities. Neo-paganism, equally known as Modern Paganism, draws inspiration from the ancient cultures and traditions. Neo-paganism is a religious movement that traces its origin in the United States since the 1960s, with its roots going back to mid-19th century Europe. It was born from a conscious striving to eliminate certain elements of traditional Western monotheism, including dualistic thinking and sexual puritanism, as attempts to revive what their founders thought were the best aspects of ancient pagan ways, blended with modern humanistic and pluralistic ideals (Halstead, 2015). It is a product of the American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

Neo-paganism is a diverse movement that revives pre-Christian spiritual beliefs and practices. It has gained global appeal as an alternative to established religions, emphasizing a more personal and experiential spirituality. In Africa and Nigeria, Neo-paganism has a specific appeal due to factors such as dissatisfaction with aspects of organized religion, a desire to reconnect with ancestral traditions and cultural heritage, and growing environmentalism that resonates with some Neo-pagan nature-centric beliefs. It is partly a reaction to a materialistic, consumerist, and individualistic society. It's important to remember that the rise of Neo-paganism is a complex phenomenon with multiple contributing factors.

Neo-paganism is a broad concept encompassing various movements that revive spiritual beliefs and practices that predate Christianity. It's diverse, with some focusing on specific historical religions, like Egyptian or Norse traditions, while others create eclectic blends.

Some other authors (Okafor, 2020) describe Neo-paganism as paganism (with polytheistic tendencies) with a new face and a new style. They hold it to be a modernization of the pagan cult and practices to render them attractive to modern people particularly the youths. They are associated with materialism and consumerism. For them, Neo-paganism is associated with the modern revival of paganism, and the adherents of this "new" religion or their practitioners do so for various reasons. The reasons range from the search for security, spiritual powers, relationship with the transcendental world and material benefits to existential problems, and above all the inability of the Church in her mission and worship to provide enough meaning and motivation for strong religious commitment.

Allurements of Neo-paganism

The rise of Neo-Paganism is likely a complex phenomenon with multiple contributing factors.

Resonance with African spirituality. Neo-paganism resonates with African spirituality in several ways. In many African cultures, ancestor veneration is central, similar to Neo-pagan emphasis on honoring past generations. Traditional African religions also show deep respect for nature spirits and deities, mirroring Neo-pagan reverence for the natural world. For example, in some traditions in Nigeria, there are various nature spirits and deities that are revered and honored. The concept of "life-force" or "chi" (orisa, obong) in some African traditions also connects with Neo-pagan ideas of a universal energy or web of life.

i. Ancestral veneration: This highlights the centrality of ancestor veneration in many African cultures, where respect and offerings are given to deceased family members. This practice shares similarities with Neo-pagan

emphasis on honoring past generations and seeking guidance from ancestors. This is though similar to the Catholics interpretation of all Saints day on November 1.

ii. Nature spirits and deities: This discusses the deep respect for nature spirits and deities found in traditional African religions. This reverence for the natural world as imbued with spirits mirrors a core tenet of Neo-pagan beliefs. Briefly showcase examples of these spirits or deities from specific Nigerian traditions.

iii. Life-force connection: It notes the concept of “life-force” or “chi” present in some African traditions. This concept, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living things, may connect with Neo-pagan ideas of a universal energy or web of life.

Fulfilling desires for connection. Neo-paganism offers a sense of belonging to a community focused on shared beliefs and practices, appealing to Nigerians seeking a stronger spiritual connection. The emphasis on personal rituals and connection with deities in Neo-paganism can also resonate with a desire for a more personalized spiritual experience. Additionally, Neo-pagan focus on nature worship can provide solace and a sense of grounding for those feeling disconnected from the natural world.

i. Community and belonging: Neo-paganism offers a sense of belonging to a community focused on shared beliefs and practices. This aspect may hold appeal for Nigerians seeking a stronger spiritual connection, particularly those who feel disconnected from mainstream religious communities.

ii. Personalized spiritual experience: Here the emphasis is on personal rituals and connection with deities in Neo-paganism. This focus may resonate with a desire for a more personalized spiritual experience compared to some established religions with rigid structures or rituals.

iii. Nature worship and solace: Here, Neo-pagan focus on nature worship can provide solace and a sense of grounding for those feeling disconnected from the natural world. This connection with nature can be particularly appealing in urban environments.

Addressing social and economic challenges. Neo-paganism’s emphasis on self-reliance and personal power may resonate with Nigerians facing social and economic hardships. This focus on individual agency can offer a sense of control over one’s destiny. Specific Neo-pagan practices or beliefs that promote self-empowerment can also be appealing. Furthermore, Neo-paganism may be seen as a cheaper alternative to established religions with financial requirements.

i. Self-reliance and empowerment: Neo-pagan emphasis on self-reliance and personal power may resonate with Nigerians facing social and economic hardships. This focus on individual agency may offer a sense of control over one’s destiny, appealing to those struggling with poverty or unemployment.

ii. Controlling one’s destiny: Here, Neo-paganism may offer a sense of control over one’s destiny, appealing to those struggling with poverty or unemployment. Here, one finds specific Neo-pagan practices or beliefs that promote self-empowerment.

iii. Cost-effective alternative: There is also the potential for Neo-paganism to be seen as a cheaper alternative to established religions with financial requirements, such as tithes or offerings. This could be a factor for some Nigerians seeking a spiritual path without the financial burden.

Challenges of Neo-paganism for Consecrated Life

Undermining the Centrality of God

Neo-pagan practices can overshadow the centrality of the Christian God in consecrated life. Its rituals focused on outcomes can also differ from Christian emphasis on building a relationship with God. And its moral

relativism can challenge the absolute moral values of consecrated life.

i. Shift in focus: Neo-pagan practices that emphasize nature worship or veneration of multiple deities can overshadow the centrality of the Christian God in consecrated life.

ii. Ritual vs. relationship: Neo-pagan rituals may focus on achieving specific outcomes, contrasting with the Christian emphasis on building a personal relationship with God through prayer and sacraments.

iii. Moral relativism: Neo-pagan perspectives that promote situational ethics can challenge the consecrated life's commitment to absolute moral values based on Christian teachings.

Contradiction With Core Values

Neo-paganism's emphasis on material success can clash with the vow of poverty. Its perspectives on sexuality may contradict the vow of chastity. The focus on individual autonomy in Neo-paganism can also create tension with the vow of obedience.

i. Poverty: Neo-pagan emphasis on achieving personal desires and material success can clash with the vow of poverty, which calls for detachment from material possessions and living a simple life.

ii. Chastity: Neo-pagan perspectives on sexuality that may be more permissive can contradict the vow of chastity, which emphasizes celibacy or chastity for the sake of deeper commitment to God.

iii. Obedience: The focus on individual autonomy and interpretation within Neo-paganism can create tension with the vow of obedience, which involves submitting to the will of God through one's religious superiors and the Church's teachings.

Confusion and Disillusionment

Neo-pagan ideas can create confusion for those discerning a call to consecrated life. Exposure to Neo-pagan beliefs can lead to questioning the core tenets of the Christian faith, potentially causing disillusionment.

i. Discernment challenges: The presence of Neo-pagan ideas can create confusion for individuals discerning a call to consecrated life who may struggle to differentiate between a true calling and personal desires misinterpreted as a spiritual vocation.

ii. Loss of identity: Exposure to Neo-pagan beliefs can lead to questioning the core tenets of the Christian faith, potentially causing disillusionment for those already in consecrated life.

iii. Competing spiritualities: The co-existence of Neo-pagan practices and Christian traditions can lead to a sense of fragmentation or cherry-picking beliefs, hindering the development of a strong and coherent spiritual life for the consecrated person.

Church's Response to Neo-paganism

The Catholic Church strongly condemns various neo-pagan practices as they conflict with fundamental Catholic doctrine in several ways:

i. Rejection of the sovereignty of God: Practices like magic, sorcery, divination, and astrology attempt to manipulate or control supernatural forces, rather than submitting to the sovereignty of God. This is a grave offense against the virtue of religion, which demands that we honor, respect, and fear God alone (cf. CCC 2116-2117).¹

ii. Violation of human dignity: Many Neo-pagan practices, such as the exploitation of others through traditional cures or the selling of women and children, are direct violations of human dignity. The Church teaches

¹ CCC 57, 843, 2116-2117, John XXIII, *Princeps Pastorum* (November 28, 1959), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_28111959_princeps.html.

that all such “infamies” that treat people as mere instruments rather than free and responsible persons are a “supreme dishonor to the Creator”.

iii. Attacks on the sanctity of life: The Church vehemently condemns any practices that directly attack human life, such as abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction. These are seen as “unspeakable crimes” that poison human society and dishonor the Creator.

iv. Rejection of Christian revelation: The Church recognizes that the appeal of neo-paganism often stems from a genuine spiritual longing. However, it teaches that these practices run counter to Christian revelation and cannot satisfy the true spiritual needs of humanity. Only the Gospel of life revealed in Christ can provide the fulfillment that people seek.

v. Importance of consecrated persons: The Church rather emphasizes the vital role of consecrated persons in addressing the challenges of neo-paganism. Their formation should aim to configure them to Christ, assimilate the mind and heart of Christ, and achieve a harmonious integration of the human, cultural, spiritual, and pastoral dimensions. This equips them to effectively witness to Gospel values, transmit the charism of their order, and promote dialogue between faith and culture.

Thus, in the context of today, religious formation faces challenges such as secularization and individualism, which often erodes communal living and vocational commitment (Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 2013, n. 33). These challenges, in any case, also present opportunities for growth and renewal. By grounding formation in Scripture, Tradition, and the charism, and embracing mentorship and accompaniment, religious can deepen their configuration to Christ and live out their mission in the Church and in the world (Francis, 2013, n. 5).

Summarily, the Catholic Church sees these Neo-pagan practices as fundamentally incompatible with the Christian faith, as they reject the sovereignty of God, violate human dignity, attack the sanctity of life, and fail to provide the true spiritual nourishment that only Christ can offer. Thus, she sees Neo-paganism as a dangerous trend that must be addressed through the formation and witness of consecrated persons, who can bring the light of Christ to all sectors of society and promote a genuine dialogue between faith and culture.

Therefore, strong formation is crucial in equipping consecrated persons to navigate the challenges of the modern world, including Neo-paganism. They should be prepared to discover effective methods to bring the light of Christ to all sectors of society, contributing to the promotion of culture and the dialogue between faith and culture. This is crucial in the face of growing neo-paganism. Formation programmes can be adapted to address this specific context by providing a deeper understanding of Neo-paganism, its appeal, and its challenges.

In a 2002 message of Pope John Paul II to the Carmelite family, the message by implication relates that the consecrated life “recall to all believers... the absolute primacy of God.” They are “immersed in silence and prayer,” and their total consecration to the “quest for God” becomes a witness that God is the source of the full realization of the human person. (cf. Message to Rev. Joseph Chalmers, Prior General of the Order of the Carmelites for the 550th anniversary of the addition of the cloistered nuns and the Third Order of the laity to the Carmelite Order). Hence, even though contemporary life be saturated with competing priorities, the Consecrated life, stands as a living critique of that fragmentation and points the primacy of God, its ultimate aim.

Enhancing Formation for Modern World

Formation

The universal law highlights the requirement of a continued formation which must go far beyond the initial formation that ended with the novitiate and first profession (cf. Can. 659 §§1-2). The required content and

modality of carrying out the programme of formation are the prerogative of each institute (cf. Can. 660 §1), while prominence is given to ongoing formation of the religious (cf. Can. 661).

“Initial formation” of religious does not end with the novitiate. Universal law requires that, during the time of temporary profession, this initial formation should be completed. The purpose of such formation is twofold: to assist the religious to lead the life of the institute more fully; and to help the religious carry out the proper mission of the institute. It is the prerogative of each institute to prepare an adequate “programme” of formation for the period, which must take account of the needs of the Church, and must be adapted to local circumstances and updated regularly, always in keeping with the purpose and character of each institute. The duration of this post-novitiate formation is to be determined by each institute’s own legislation, but must last at least three years (cf. Can. 659 §1).

The description of religious formation provides a basic outline or guideline of the content for the preparation of an institute’s programme. The formation must be systematic, i.e., it must be planned and well-structured, educating the religious in the various aspects of the institute’s life and mission. This programme must also be adapted to the capacity of the members so that each can benefit from it to the maximum. Finally, the programme of formation must be holistic and balanced, combining elements that are spiritual and apostolic, doctrinal, and practical. In addition, where appropriate, religious are encouraged to pursue relevant academic degrees at ecclesiastical or civil universities or institutes (cf. Can. 660). (cf. “Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes”, cf. SCRIS 2.II. 1990 *Potissimum institutioni*: AAS 82(1990) 470-532; official translation in English in *Origins* 19(1990) 677-699. In the current context, cf. in particular nn. 58-65, 86-100: *Origins* 690-691, 694-697)

In addition to a programme of initial formation, each institute is to organise a programme for the ongoing formation of the perpetually professed members. The responsibility for the ongoing formation (cf. Can. 661) is twofold: the religious themselves must do what is necessary to renew and update themselves in spiritual, doctrinal, and practical matters; while the superiors within each institute are obliged to provide whatever the members need for this ongoing formation.

Religious Formation in the Consecrated Life

Religious formation in the consecrated life refers to the initial and ongoing process of configuring oneself to Christ, embracing the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, and living out one's charism in service to the Church and the world (*Vita consecrata*, 1996, n. 65). Formation is the personal responsibility of the consecrated persons themselves to ensure that they mature in their vocation and in their saying “yes” to the call to radically follow Christ. The primary objective of this formation, initial and ongoing formation is to empower the members for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church’s mission. (cf. John Paul II, March 25, 1996, *Vita consecrata*, no 65; Peter Akpoghiran vol 6A: Canonical Institutes and Societies Acts, pp. 10-11). As Pope Francis emphasizes, formation is not merely acquiring knowledge, but becoming conformed to Christ (Francis, 2013, n. 3). As the consecrated life is “deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, and a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit” (*Vita consecrata* 1), the process of formation is rooted in baptism and radicalised in the consecrated life through the profession of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, which calls individuals to a radical following of Christ (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 1965, n. 44). The entire life of the consecrated person remains open to the action of the Holy Spirit, as one willingly opens oneself for the formation and accepts in faith the means of

grace offered by the Lord and the Church. (John Paul II, March 25, 1996, *Vita consecrata*, no 65).

The Second Vatican Council highlights that religious formation must be holistic, integrating human, spiritual, intellectual, and apostolic dimensions, and adapted to the needs of the times while remaining faithful to the charism of the religious Institute (cf. *Perfectae caritatis*, 1965, n. 18-19; *Optatam totius*, 1965, n. 16). Formation profoundly impacts individuals so their attitudes, thoughts and actions - in vital and everyday moments - reflect complete, joyful belonging to God, in their human, spiritual, intellectual and missionary endeavors. As the purpose of the consecrated life is conformity to Jesus' total self-giving, this becomes the chief goal of formation. Formation gradually aligns one with Christ's attitude toward the Father, engaging the whole person - behavior, intentions, every aspect of the personality. Lifelong transformation means that the commitment to formation never ends; consecrated persons need ongoing growth opportunities in the charism and mission of their religious Institute at each and every stage. This process involves a deepening relationship with God, self, and others, and is essential for living the consecrated life, authentically radiating the joy of Christ to the world (cf. *Vita consecrata*, n. 91). Besides, for formation to be complete, it must involve every aspect of Christian life, therefore providing "a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects." (John Paul II, March 25, 1996, *Vita consecrata*, no 65). The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (known as a Dicastery since 2022) underscores the importance of ongoing formation, citing the need for religious to be "experts in communion" and to cultivate a prophetic spirit (Congregation, 2002, n. 25).

The Code of Canon Law affirms that Religious are to be diligent in continuing their spiritual, doctrinal and practical formation throughout their lives, and that the Superiors are to ensure that they have the assistance and the time to do this (CIC can. 661). In the ongoing formation, one has ample opportunity to more consciously reaffirm one's attachment to Christ. (cf. Jean Galot, "Fidelity Forever", see *Communio* IX (1982), 39-43). In this vein, the Roman Pontiff, Pope John Paul II affirms that on-going formation must not aim merely at the "formation of the intellect, but of the whole person, principally in his spiritual dimension, so that each religious may be able to live his own consecration to God in its fullness, in the specific mission entrusted to him by the Church." (34. Pope John Paul II, "Message to Conference of Religious", 11 July 1986, see *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1 September 1986, 10).

Religious Formation in the ecclesial doctrine, must involve both the mind and the heart of the consecrated person. It should "lead a person not only to be well informed about the Church's teachings, but also to understand the ways in which these teachings fit together and form the basis for the Church's structure and discipline. ... Only then will the faithful find in their clergy and religious, and learn from them, a profound love for the ecclesial unity and communion and a clearer understanding of the mysteries of faith." (John Paul II, "Address to Bishops of New Zealand", 9 April 1988, see *L'Osservatore Romano*, 18 April 1988, 5).

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1986, 10).

Again, the fundamental commitment of evangelization, especially in the context of today, sensitive and demanding as it may be, “presupposes a great interior richness which is also the very fruit of continual preparation and formation.” (35. Pope John Paul II, “Address to Priests, Religious and Consecrated Persons”, 7 September 1986, see *L'Osservatore Romano*, 29 September 1986, 5.)

Therefore, as initial formation leading to one’s religious profession is ordered towards a person’s acquisition of autonomy sufficient for faithfully living a religious commitment, on-going formation assists the consecrated religious in integrating creativity within fidelity to the consecrated life. Thus, continuing formation influences the entire person in various aspect as:

i) living according to the Spirit or spirituality must take precedence, as it encompasses a deepening of faith and understanding of one’s religious commitment. Therefore, the annual retreat and other forms of spiritual renewal should be prioritized.

ii) participation in the life of the Church according to the charism of the pastoral activities in collaboration with other members and religious Institutes involved in that activity locally;

iii) ongoing doctrinal and professional formation encompassing: deeper biblical and theological understanding, study of universal and local Magisterium documents, grasp of local cultures where one serves, and relevant professional/technical updates.

iv) fidelity to the charism of one’s religious institute, through an ever increasing knowledge of its founder, its history, its spirit, its mission and a creative effort to live this charism personally and in community.” (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction, Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes, see *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19 March 1990, 8).

Such continual renewal should be a normal part of religious life, which must enable the religious to deepen the commitment made at profession to the life and mission of the institute.

The institutes are further urged to explore various ways to enhance their formation programmes which could address the current and specific context of Neo-paganism. Such could be by:

Deepening Scriptural and Theological Foundation

i. Required courses: Emphasis should be laid on a thorough study of scripture and core Catholic theology during formation. A course on Neo-paganism will be very apt.

ii. Critical thinking skills: Equip future consecrated persons to analyze and evaluate Neo-pagan ideas within a strong theological framework.

iii. African theologians: Incorporate the works of African theologians who address inculturation and contemporary challenges.

Fostering a Strong Relationship With Christ

i. Prayer and contemplation: Encourage regular personal and communal prayer practices.

ii. Spiritual direction: Provide access to experienced spiritual directors for ongoing guidance in prayer and discernment.

iii. Eucharistic adoration: Highlight the importance of Eucharistic adoration for deepening one’s relationship with Christ.

Integrating African Cultural Values

i. African spirituality: Explore the rich traditions of African spirituality that emphasize communal living,

respect for ancestors, and connection to nature.

ii. Liturgy and music: Incorporate elements of African music and cultural expressions into liturgical celebrations.

iii. Ministry and service: Connect formation programs to community needs, allowing future consecrated persons to offer culturally relevant ministry.

Engaging With Modern Challenges

i. Dialogue and interfaith understanding: Develop skills for respectful dialogue with those drawn to Neo-pagan beliefs.

ii. Social justice issues: Address social and economic challenges that contribute to the appeal of Neo-paganism.

iii. Digital media literacy: Equip consecrated persons to engage with contemporary issues and offer relevant ministry through social media and technology.

Examples

i. Integrate service learning opportunities that address local needs, like poverty alleviation or healthcare access.

ii. Explore how traditional African rituals of healing and reconciliation can be reinterpreted within a Christian context. E.g. inculturation.

iii. Discuss the ethical implications of technology and its potential role in fostering a deeper connection with faith. Use of the social media for evangelization.

Conclusion

Finally, the vital role of consecrated persons in the Church cannot be overemphasized. Consecrated persons, through their vows and dedicated lives, offer a powerful counterpoint to the materialism and individualism of the modern world. Their lives of witness, service, and sacrifice, exemplify the transformative power of Christian faith. Consecrated persons play a crucial role in building a vibrant and dynamic Church that speaks to the hearts and minds of everyone. We are therefore challenged as consecrated persons to deepen our faith through ongoing formation, personal prayer, and active participation in the Church to remain strong witnesses and evangelizers in the face of Neo-paganism. We are urged to find ways to integrate the faith with the rich African traditions and cultural values, creating a truly unique expression of consecrated life. We are empowered to engage with those drawn to Neo-paganism, offering dialogue, understanding, and the message of Christ's love. We must never forget that we as consecrated persons are beacons of hope and a vital force for positive change in the face of Neo-paganism. Therefore, even though Neo-paganism presents both challenges for consecrated persons in Africa, particularly Nigeria, it is essential to understand the allure of Neo-paganism and its challenges to consecrated life. Strong formation is crucial in equipping consecrated persons to navigate these challenges and to engage with Neo-paganism in a more informed and effective manner.

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