



## Matariki

On Friday this week the nation will have a day of paid leave to celebrate Matariki. In as short a space as possible I want to address a question that has been building as the day approached, namely: What are Christians to make of this? Is it something to run with and celebrate as some churches are doing or should we side-step this as being not in keeping and incompatible with Christianity?

At one level Matariki is simply a Māori new year event to add to the broadly Western, Chinese or Jewish New Year celebrations. Thus, just another calendar generated festivity marking a new beginning and the fresh hope that brings.

However, I have come to see it is not really as simple as this. Much more is being linked to the event than the ending and beginning of a calendar year. Let me explore this through my lens as a Christian European-New Zealander aware of the Pagan background European Christianity came from and is still blemished by.

The Judeo-Christian journey began in a world steeped in astrology. Through the Ancient Near East heavenly bodies were seen as influencers and governors of what happened on earth. Ancient Israel observed this and recognised the inadequacy of the divination and superstition that arose from such a world view. A subtle phrase in Genesis 1 deftly rebukes this.

<sup>14</sup>And God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, <sup>15</sup>and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.' And it was so. <sup>16</sup>God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—**and the stars.** <sup>17</sup>God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, <sup>18</sup>to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup>And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

The highlighted end of Verse 16 shows how the stars are only mentioned briefly in passing. This was to counter the prevailing belief that the stars are of huge importance and represent active divine entities. “No”, says Genesis, they are there in the ‘dome of the sky’ almost as an afterthought – “Oh yes, and the stars too.”

Pagan thinking often features an integrated worldview where humanity and its context are strongly linked at the experiential level. This can be very appealing: spirituality such as prayers are linked to the experienced environment, communal history is linked to the physical environment, seasons as qualities of time have significance that resonate in how life is lived and the seen cosmos is invoked.

Judeo-Christianity took leave of all this in recognising the creator as above and distinct from the creation and not embedded in it. Prayer to God did not involve the creation or its seasons. This shift took many centuries and was always at risk of relapse as the Old Testament traces again and again. Then the journey from Paganism to Christianity involved moving from the widely held perception of an enchanted cosmos to accepting a disenchanting universe. It involved moving from seeing ourselves as prone and subject to many spiritual forces to being subject to God alone in and through Jesus Christ. It involved seeing the world around us as God's creation instead of it being a living flux of spirits, under a pantheon of departmental managers governing the aspects of our existence.

So while the signs of the zodiac linger in the Western cultural framework and are utilised for astrology, the broader working consensus is that stars and planets are physical phenomena without personality or direct influence on people and their lives. This is in part what makes modern science possible. Holding Star A to be a serious influencer and/or Star B to govern over a department of our existence would rule out modern science as we know it.

By now you may already anticipate my conclusion that Matariki represents a move back to a pre-Judeo-Christian worldview. It is essentially a pagan cosmology underlying Māori mythology and its annual calendar.

As with many global cultures, Europeans were once worshipping sticks and stones under the governance of heavenly lights and living a rough crude existence. The shift from an enchanted cosmos to a disenchanting universe both lifted them from superstition and moved them from a focus on God's raw creation to a focus on God. It was only after a thousand years of such shifting with St Francis in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that the stars of the night sky could again be innocently enjoyed as declaring the glory of God and not remembered as pagan entities with their lurid associations as had been imagined in antiquity.

In my perception the chatter around Matariki is clearly taking us back to celebrating reality not as God's creation but as an enchanted cosmos inhabited by entities or at least tokens of a pagan world view. It is paganism being rehabilitated under the guise of Māori cultural recovery and decolonisation etc.

Where this brings us is clear: If you really want to dip into classical paganism then Matariki is perfect. It offers a strong local contextual experience with available indigenous mythology and legends to fascinate. In the European 'Dark ages', when much of Europe was first Christianised, such pagan legacies were taken over in an attempt to transform them. Christmas and Easter are obvious legacies of this. Some Christians seek to do this now with Matariki. It has a noble pastoral agenda attached that could be Christianised. It has been done before so why not again? My answer to that is that the talk around Matariki elevates the creation and the Māori mythical imagination while ignoring the One True God represented in history by Jesus Christ. It also ignores the disenchanting universe of science and learning in which this nation and the world really moves and functions. This is evident in the blurring of distinction between astronomy and astrology so evident in the conversation around Matariki.

So on balance my discernment is to watch Matariki as Israel watched its pagan neighbours but not embrace it. The old gods are being reclaimed and Christians need to recognise that even when they are cleverly promoted and linked to wider cultural and political agendas.

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AD 2022

### Responses?

If you want to respond to this please email me: [covicars@stmatthews.co.nz](mailto:covicars@stmatthews.co.nz)