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A Special Review — Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity

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In a slim 240 pages, James J. O’Donnell introduces readers to “traditional religion” (i.e., what had been called paganism/polytheism) in the Roman Empire and offers a nuanced explanation for its almost complete demise by the fifth century A.D. The book accordingly divides into two parts, the first being a general introduction to the basic features of pre-Christian Roman religion, the second a well-conceived elucidation of how religious dialogue shifted dramatically during the Christian era. As the subtitle implies, the book is as much about early Christianity as it is about traditional religion, although the story is told primarily from the perspective of the so-called “pagans.”

The scholarship is absolutely sound, and the author’s familiarity with not only the texts but the physical landscapes is striking. Even the casual reader will be able to sense that O’Donnell is an authority on the subject. And yet the informal and chatty style (and the understated sense of humor throughout) lighten the tone and render the prose unintimidating. At times, Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity does become perhaps too discursive, especially when recounting historical background not strictly relevant to the topic, but these are minor blemishes. Perhaps the most refreshing element is the author’s willingness to make outright judgments; he calls Elagabulus a “flamboyant airhead” (p. 129). The discipline of history writing needs more of such color, and we are grateful to O’Donnell for providing us with such memorable phrases, laced with laughter.

Though the word appears as the title of the book, O’Donnell argues that “pagan” ought to be avoided because in the original context it was pejorative, used by Christians to stigmatize old-fashioned polytheists. This terminological quibble is connected with a major theme of the book: “pagans” were never a self-identifying group of people (in other words, nobody ever considered himself a “pagan” — a member of an identifiable “religion” based on polytheism). While admitting these two facts, I wonder if the word is really so objectionable: its pejorative force is obsolete, and there is nothing wrong with words used as etic terms (i.e., viewing historical phenomena from the outside rather than the inside). In the end, any term (including “traditional religion”) will be subject to similar objections, but we need something to describe the disparate group of practices that has been called “paganism.”

Another theme merits comment. O’Donnell argues that many pagan practices were falling out of favor as a result of larger changes in the religious landscape, of which Christianity was only one element. Certainly, the idea of an “epic battle” between Christianity and paganism is overly simplistic, but the alternative of a seemingly inevitable and gradual shift in fundamental religious assumptions is, in my opinion, equally unsatisfactory as it tends to smooth over particulars, especially the distinctive of early Christianity.

For the sake of dialogue, I have chosen a couple of points to nitpick, but I should end with a reminder that the book, as a whole, is solid — an enjoyable and informative read. As an introduction for a general reader to the main issues of the momentous religious developments in the first centuries A.D., this book would be difficult to improve upon.