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

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DTH: *A small company can do that. You don't have a bureaucracy in which things must go several levels up and back down before a decision can be made. You can be quick and agile, and it fosters a good working environment.*

TH: I agree.

DTH: *I will add one more for you to think about from my personal experience, and that is "keep smiling." I have never seen you enraged.*

TH: I have lost my temper from time to time — not with my people, but with the outside world. For example, at some of the hotels where we have our conferences, when they have botched something and it reflects badly on us, I have lost my temper. But I do try to keep a sense of humor.

DTH: *I think that is critical.*

TH: *We have covered a lot of territory here. ATG likes to include something about what people like to do in their spare time and what their outside interests are. I know that you have a similar interest to mine in that we both have a house at the beach on Long Beach Island, NJ where we like to go to relax.*

TH: I am a golfer, so that is my biggest "vice." I also have a sailboat which I bought in 1987 and which I enjoy, but unfortunately I don't get as much time to use it as I would like.

DTH: *Did it survive Hurricane Sandy?*

TH: It did. It was up on a cradle at a marina. We also have a little power boat that was at a different marina, and it floated off and was found about four blocks away.

DTH: *At least you got it back. Many people never found their boats.*

TH: *This has been a very interesting interview, and I thank you very much.* 🐾

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

by **Andrew T. Alwine** (Assistant Professor, Department of Classics, Randolph Hall 308C, College of Charleston; Phone: 843-953-5714) <alwineat@cofc.edu>

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 also 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 Elagabalus 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 distinctives 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. 🐾



Rumors from page 33

Jim O'Donnell who is now **Dean of Libraries at Arizona State University**. We are looking forward to his perspectives/thoughts/whatever on moving from the Provost of **Georgetown University** to a Library Dean. See the review of *Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity* (Ecco, 2015) on p.52. I see that **Amazon** has selected it as one of the **Best Books of the Year for 2015**.

Here's another book by a library dean! *Social Media and the Good Life: Do They Connect?* by **Mark Herring** (McFarland, 2015). This book examines some of the legal and ethical issues surrounding social

media, their impact on civil discourse and their role in suicides, murders and criminal enterprise.

For some time, we have wanted to start a Website called **Books From Our Crowd**, meaning the people who come to the **Charleston Conference** and who write for *Against the Grain*! Watch for it! Coming up!

Hope that y'all are thrilled with our new **Monographic Musings** Editor, **Regina Gong**. **Deb Vaughn** decided that she wanted more time to raise her FOUR children, fancy that, so **Regina** stepped in. Whew! Let's welcome **Regina** who is Head of Technical Services & Systems at **Lansing Community College** and will be at the **Charleston Conference** in November!

Speaking of which, would love comments, suggestions, etc. for the **Briefly Noted** column in *ATG* that we started a few months ago. This

is because we get so many wonderful books that we cannot review so we took an idea from the *New Yorker* and started this column. Thanks to all of you for your suggestions!!

A new report from the **Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR)**, *The Once and Future Publishing Library*, explores the revitalization of library publishing and its possible future, and examines elements that influence the success and sustainability of library publishing initiatives. Authors **Ann Okerson**, of the **Center for Research Libraries**, and **Alex Holzman**, of **Alex Publishing Solutions**, trace the history of library publishing and factors that have transformed the publishing landscape, including changes in technology and the publishing economy, a desire for open access, and the challenges of balancing institutional priorities. The authors describe

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