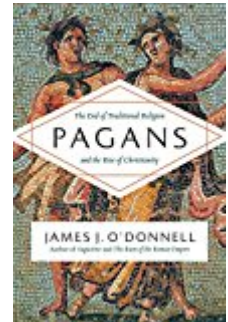


James J. O'Donnell. *Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity.* New York: Ecco, 2015. 288 pp. \$15.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-06-184539-0.



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In this book, James J. O'Donnell argues that the concept of “pagan” did not, and could not, exist until Christianity became the dominant religion. In fact, he claims that Christians invented the idea of “paganism” to demonize traditional religious practice of Rome. He breaks up his argument into two main parts: the first discusses the practices of Roman religion prior to Christianity and the second examines how Christian predominance created the concept of “pagan.”

In part 1, “Religion without a History,” O'Donnell uses Augustus's celebration of the Ludi Saeculares in 17 BCE as a jumping-off point to discuss the larger world of Roman religion. He points out that while modern religions have a history, traditional religions do not: “No classical Greek or Roman writer ever thought to address the history of religion, because religion was woven seamlessly into everyday life, the kind of everyday life that has no history to speak of” (p. 4). These practices were part of conventional life that no one thought to discuss in detail, in the same way a modern person would see no reason to explain how they

travel from home to work on an average day. In the pre-Christian world, it was a given that there were higher powers in the universe, but how they manifested themselves was different for any given individual: “where many gods and many temples and many stories and many communities of interpretation coexisted, benevolent lazy indifference was the rule” (p. 98). The “indifference” of the Romans did not mean that they ignored their gods. They, for example, were scrupulous about attending various rites, because they expected benefits or, at least, a lack of harm. O'Donnell discusses many of the ways in which Romans attempted to gain divine favor. He focuses an entire chapter (“Divine Butchery”) on Romans' use of sacrifices and another chapter (“The Gods at Home”) on their worship of some gods in the temples in which they were believed to dwell. Because they actively disbelieved and defied traditional gods and practices, Christians were functionally atheists, a foreign concept to the traditionally minded Roman.

In the chapter “An Eloquent Man Who Loved His Country,” the author uses some of Cicero’s works (*The Laws*, *The Nature of the Gods*, and *On Divination*) to show that the Romans did consider the disposition of their deities. This leads into a chapter in which he attempts to define the concept of a “god,” and leads the reader through a series of useful “inventories” at the end of which he states that “there is, emphatically, no simple, coherent, or straightforward answer to the question *what is a god*” (p. 55). This serves as important background for his discussion in chapter 9 (“Divine Exaltation”) on the changes that occurred in the ideas of divinity in the third century, at which point a god came to be defined as “spiritual, eternal, omnipotent and omniscient” (p. 117).

In part 2, “The History of Paganism,” O’Donnell begins with the story of how Christianity came to be dominant within the empire, specifically the civil war that placed Constantine on the throne. He shows that Constantine’s acceptance of Christianity and his insistence that it would create and conform to an orthodoxy changed how religion was viewed within the context of the rest of the world. “What did emerge from Constantine’s reign, and through little choice of his own, was the *idea* of Christian hegemony, the idea that Christianity could try to define itself against a pagan world from which it was fundamentally different” (p. 158). This is where the author begins to make his point that Christianity created paganism. The next chapter (“The Baptism of Paganism”) discusses the etymology of the word “paganism”: how it moved from meaning “peasant” to the modern understanding as a direct result of the Christian usage of the word. “People became pagans when it was convenient to Christians for them to do so” (p. 163). Once this is established, O’Donnell shows the decline of traditional religion through two exemplars, Julian the Apostate and Quintus Aurelius Symmachus. His discussion of both men, as well as other Romans of the era, indicates that Christianity and traditional religions coexisted amicably for some time before Theodo-

sius’s laws that made adherence to anything other than Christianity illegal.

The book ends with two chapters (“Cicero Reborn” and “A Roman Religion”) discussing Augustine of Hippo. The saint is exemplary of the mix between traditionalist Roman civic life and Christianity. By using traditional literary methods to explain Christian ideas, Augustine of Hippo sought “to prove that the old gods did not bring greatness and empire and that the new god did imperil it” (p. 230).

Overall, O’Donnell does an excellent job of explaining the context of the religious structure of the world into which Christianity was born and the path to its supremacy. His argument that without Christianity there would be no such thing as paganism is well argued, and he writes in such a way that is equally accessible to the academic and the casual reader. In an era when there seems to be little but conflict between religious organization and government structure, *Pagans* could serve as a guide for how to reconcile the two, without allowing either to overshadow the other.

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