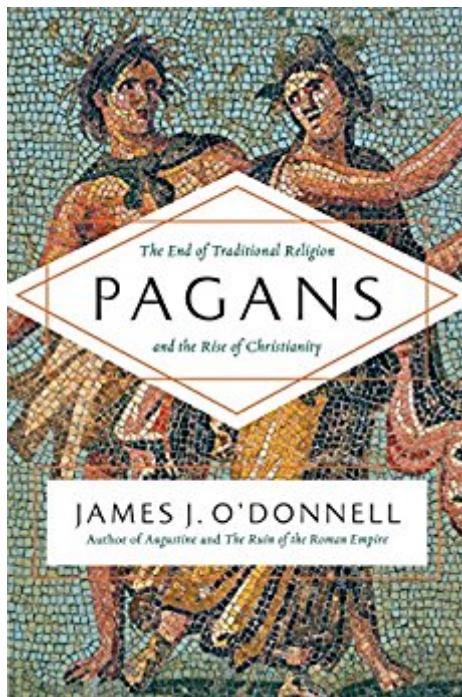


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Pagans: The End Of Traditional Religion And The Rise Of Christianity



Synopsis

A provocative and contrarian religious history that charts the rise of Christianity from the point of view of traditional religion from the religious scholar and critically acclaimed author of Augustine. Pagans explores the rise of Christianity from a surprising and unique viewpoint: that of the people who witnessed their ways of life destroyed by what seemed then a powerful religious cult. These pagans were actually pious Greeks, Romans, Syrians, and Gauls who observed the traditions of their ancestors. To these devout polytheists, Christians who worshipped only one deity were immoral atheists who believed that a splash of water on the deathbed could erase a lifetime of sin. Religious scholar James J. O'Donnell takes us on a lively tour of the Ancient Roman world through the fourth century CE, when Romans of every nationality, social class, and religious preference found their world suddenly constrained by rulers who preferred a strange new god. Some joined this new cult, while others denied its power, erroneously believing it was little more than a passing fad. In Pagans, O'Donnell brings to life various pagan rites and essential features of Roman religion and life, offers fresh portraits of iconic historical figures, including Constantine, Julian, and Augustine, and explores important themes "Rome versus the east, civilization versus barbarism, plurality versus unity, rich versus poor, and tradition versus innovation" in this startling account.Â

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

O'Donnell has the scholarly credentials to provide a comprehensive account of the displacement of the traditional religions of the Mediterranean and near-eastern world by the Christians who subsequently labeled those religious cultures (and later non-Christian religions) as "pagan." This is not that comprehensive treatment. It does, however, offer a fair amount of insight into the weakening traditions that fell out of favor, as well as a corrective to some of the dubious history of struggle between Christianity and the losing traditions. The book's tone, particularly the first half of the book, which seeks to put the reader in the time and mind-set of the classical religious culture, is rather easy-going. This has the benefit of making for quick and often amusing reading, but also undermines the seriousness of its treatment at times. The book's first half does succeed in giving the reader an improved sense of what "religion without a history" may have been like for contemporaries, but otherwise seems disjointed. The book's second half, "The History of Paganism," is more interesting: Not because it provides a detailed history of the religions preceding or competing with early Christianity (it doesn't and disclaims doing so), but rather because it explains how the notion of "paganism" arose as defined by Christianity. Put differently, the subject matter is not a history of traditional, non-Christian beliefs, but rather how Christianity came to define the notion of paganism. At times, this is a bit too clever in approach. That being said, O'Donnell has a fine grasp of the development of Christianity in calculated opposition to a supposed pagan alternative, and provides many nice insights into the Christian mythology developed.

I looked forward to reading this book because of the author's association with the Bryn Mawr Classical Review, and because he delves into how the word "Pagan" came to be used by Christians to label those who didn't share their beliefs. To say that the writing is irreverent is just the tip of the iceberg. The tone is casual, even chatty, which is unexpected, considering the author's credentials. But make no mistake: this is intended to be regarded as a scholarly book, and there are 16 pages of footnotes to prove it. It is not, however, an objective work, and that's an unfortunate detriment to the author's thesis. The book lacks an introduction, but it would have made sense for O'Donnell to at least have revealed his bias in the prologue. Instead, he waited until page 62 to quote from Jane Harrison's "Prolegomena": "It is only by a somewhat severe

mental effort that we realize the fact that there were no gods at all, that what we have to investigate are not so many actual facts and existences but only conceptions of the human mind that conceived them."O'Donnell then spends several pages discussing the nonexistence of the gods, creatures, he says, who were, imagined by the ancient Romans.I consider myself fairly well-read in history, and believe this sort of assertion to be uncommon in the field. Whatever the subject or era under consideration, whether the ancient Olympic games, the Crusades, or the Protestant Reformation, I haven't previously encountered any writer who declared, We should remember that all this was undertaken for the glory of a deity who only existed in the minds of the participants.

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