

NOTES AND REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEW: *PAGANISM PERSISTING: A HISTORY OF EUROPEAN PAGANISMS SINCE ANTIQUITY*

Douglas, Robin and Francis Young. 2024. *Paganism Persisting: A History of European Paganisms since Antiquity*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press. 228 pp.

Paganism Persisting: A History of European Paganisms since Antiquity is an attempt to offer an explanation for the continuous presence of pagan themes and elements in post-pagan Europe, an explanation that allows the author to avoid the pitfalls of theories of pagan survivals and concoction. Robin Douglas and Francis Young claim that the “persistence of paganism is the continued significance of themes from the pre-Christian religious traditions of Europe ... which can be fashioned into revived pagan religions” (p. 3). The book consists of an introduction and six chapters followed by an epilogue. The six chapters present, in chronological order, various instances of paganism, as well as positive (and, more rarely, negative) interest in it, expressed in artistic, academic, and diverse religious works and practices.

The first chapter discusses classical Graeco-Roman paganism and its interactions with Christianity, which ultimately replaced it. While the authors refer to the religion of “ordinary people” when discussing the demise of paganism, they acknowledge the diversity of paganism and are particularly interested in its esoteric tradition in later epochs. The second chapter explores paganisms as practised in certain areas of Scandinavia and the Baltic region during the Middle Ages, as well as how the Pagan heritage was dealt with in medieval Europe. In this context, the authors evaluate the concept of “pagan survival”, considering it “not entirely useful” and emphasising that the

survival of pagan beliefs and practices in the Middle Ages was “complex, ambiguous, and often unexpected” (p. 21).

The two subsequent chapters then deal with interest in, or use of, paganism rather than pagans. The third chapter follows developments during the Renaissance, looks at both western Europe and the Byzantine Empire, and concludes with the Reformation. The fourth chapter examines diverse interests in paganism in 18th-century western Europe. It notes that some regions in the Baltics and Scandinavia, specifically rural Samogitia and Sápmi, were “still only cosmetically Christianized” (p. 91), while Sámi and Nenets living in the Kola Peninsula “remained loyal to their ancestral beliefs” (ibid.). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the first individuals who explicitly identified as pagan.

The fifth chapter examines developments in the 19th century, mainly focusing on the UK, while also providing glimpses into France, Italy, and the Baltic states. It explores the interest in paganism within bohemian circles, using the writings of poet and novelist George Meredith (1828–1919) and poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), described as the key figure of British “Romantic artistic paganism” or “Victorian literary paganism” (p. 119), as well as Scottish writers Kenneth Grahame (1859–1932) and William Sharp (1855–1905). The chapter moves on to British paganism of the late 19th century to early 20th

century, which attempted to offer a spiritual alternative to industrial modernity, the revival of Druidry, and esoteric paganism. Finally, the authors take a look at developments in other countries: folklorist Charles G. Leland's (1824–1903) book *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899) presents the Italian case, and several historians and writers who "laid the conceptual groundwork for later pagan revivals" (p. 135), such as historian Theodor Narbutt (1784–1864), writer Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882), and poet Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902), are mentioned in the context of the Baltic states.

The sixth chapter discusses developments primarily in the first half of the 20th century, expanding the geographical scope to include some other European countries and the USA. Here we find British poet Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), the Woodcraft movement, English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), and other historical figures. The chapter also discusses pagan revivals in Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia, Nazi Germany, and the Baltic states, and considers their influence on contemporary societies.

The book not only provides an overview with a geographically and chronologically broader scope compared to similar previous overviews, but it is also based on fresh interpretations of existing material and insights into regions where pagan traditions have been presented in English-language scholarship by historians of religion only recently, such as Lithuania. Such a broad overview is necessary for the authors' argument, but inevitably results in certain reductions and omissions. In the discussion of some historical periods, the analysis seems to encompass all figures known either as revivers of paganism or as closely associated with such a characterisation. In the context of paganism during its encounter with, and mass European conversion to, Christianity, Graeco-Roman paganism and pagans in certain areas of Scandinavia and the Baltic region seem to be reasonable

cases for developing the authors' argument. In the case of modern paganism, however, British developments are presented as the most significant and are clearly prioritised over those in other European countries, including well-researched cases such as Germany in the first half of the 20th century. The latter developments, as presented in the study, lack corresponding detail and may have been described somewhat incorrectly (for example, the authors inaccurately state that there were no people identifying with paganism in interwar Lithuania). Some remarks suggest that, to the authors, the scale or number of followers is an indicator of significance. References to the small scale are especially noticeable in the presentation of East European cases: "Neither Mari native faith nor Latvian Dievturi have become majority religions" (p. 150); "pagan revivalist movements in Poland, Estonia and Lithuania ... remain the special interest of a small minority" (p. 150). The story of "the most significant" modern British paganism ends by the middle of the 20th century, while in the case of East European paganisms, it continues to the end of the century, and even some prognoses – always a risky business in the humanities and social sciences – are made regarding their possible development in the future: "it is unlikely that a statistically significant number of people will ever articulate their Russianness through a revived faith" (ibid.).

In the Introduction, the authors discuss the problems related to defining paganism and, following Ronald Hutton, employ a tentative and pragmatic definition of paganism as the active worship of deities associated with the pre-Christian religions of Europe and the Near East (p. 14), referring to various meanings attributed to the term "pagan" in specific historical contexts throughout the book. The authors also acknowledge the difficulties of separating religion and non-religion, but do not engage more deeply with the issue, using a variety of terms ("pagan elements" and "pagan-

izing elements", "religions" and "religious modes", "philosophical" and "devotional" religion, "literary paganism", to mention just a few) and making some statements about religion in general or specific religious traditions that do not add clarity to their analysis. It is not clear what makes someone a pagan revivalist, what boundaries can be drawn between admiration of paganism and reviving paganism as one's own religion, or what constitutes some idea or practice as a "pagan element". A clearer definition of the concepts the authors use would have been helpful, as many of the cases analysed lie on the border between religion and culture.

It seems that the authors regard pagan and Christian identities and practices as mutually exclusive. In some complex cases where the authors tend to see an individual as a pagan – for example, philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon (1355–1450/52) or poet Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta (1417–1468) – they describe his or her Christianity as merely "outward" (p. 72, p. 81). One of the concepts the authors use to solve the issue is "identity". Indeed, they state that "Religion is nothing if not a matter of identity" (p. 80), and describe some of the historical figures they analyse as having "pagan identity". On the other hand, it is not clear what they mean by the term, as, in the Epilogue, they note: "But paganism never was a confession; in one sense, for a pagan to clearly define their religious identity is a contradiction in terms, and the imposition of a Christian mode of religiosity-as-confession on something quite alien" (p. 157). What research has shown, however, is that individuals' relationships with religious traditions are not always a clear-cut either/or, and multiple religious identities are indeed possible.

While such conceptualisations are predominantly found in the work of anthropologists (and sociologists) of religion, this study explicitly presents a historians' perspective. The authors' attitudes towards other disciplines dealing with religion (especially comparative mythology and

folkloristics) are sceptical and indicative of interdisciplinary politics. For example, they write: "Comparative mythology may have its merits, but for historians of religion it represents a problematic and potentially ahistoric approach to the history of religion that shades into cultural anthropology" (p. 8). In the Epilogue, the authors recognise the limits of history as a discipline and express a cautious thought about the possible collaboration of historians and anthropologists: "if the historian is to get past a reliance on prescriptive, elite accounts of religious behaviour and understand how ordinary people actually practise religion on the ground, *some degree* of rapprochement with anthropology may be necessary" (p. 156, emphasis mine). Indeed, such a rapprochement, stepping over disciplinary politics and employing interdisciplinary approaches, would definitely be beneficial in future attempts to rethink a history of European paganisms since Antiquity.

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References

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