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The Place for Sacredness: A Review of Pagans and Christians in the City

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The Place for Sacredness: A Review of Pagans and Christians in the City

Abstract

"Smith uses ideas and examples that would be very familiar to a reader knowledgeable of concepts such as Creation, Fall, Redemption, and the idea that all life is shaped by religious beliefs."

Posting about the book *Pagans and Christians in the City* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-place-for-sacredness-a-review-of-pagans-and-christians-in-the-city/?highlight=the%20place%20for%20sacredness>

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The Place for Sacredness: A Review of *Pagans and Christians in the City*

Mark McCarthy

July 13, 2021

Title: *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac*

Author: Steven D. Smith

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We live in rapidly changing and confusing times. Key ideas, concepts, and beliefs of what it means to be human and how we interact with each other in society that would not have been seen as outside of the mainstream just a few years ago are now being called into question. Sometimes, it is not just the ideas, but also the people who hold them that are considered toxic by portions of our society. How are we to make sense of all this, and what is actually bringing about this rapid and massive transformation? Recently, many different thinkers have tried to address why this is happening. One of the better explanations can be found in a book written by Dr. Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac*. Smith is a professor at the University of San Diego Law School and his 2018 book is the 29th work published by Eerdmans in the Emory University Studies in Law and Religion series, edited by John Witte Jr.

Smith turns to the deep currents of history to understand our present circumstances and, in the process, makes a very compelling case for his interpretations. He starts with two related questions that were asked almost two thousand years apart. The first was part of a discussion of whether Rome should be executing Christians even though they had committed no crimes, obeyed the law, cared for the poor, and supported the empire. The second question was asked in the 21st century by the law professor Douglas Laycock concerning court cases in which same-sex couples have sued certain professionals who have objected on religious grounds from participating in their ceremonies. As Laycock has asked, why, if the services are readily available from others who have no religious objections, would couples want to sue people whose services they do not need nor want. What links both of these questions, according to Smith, is that the legal system was used to target a religious group or individuals that did not impact the offended in any negative way.

Coming back to the primary question of what is happening in society today, Smith makes the case that what we are seeing is no less than the resurgence of a Greek and Roman pagan

understanding of the universe. By this, Smith does not mean a revival of the Greek and Roman systems of pagan deities, rather the location of the sacred. Smith argues that this pagan understanding places the sacred within this world, and thus pagans could consecrate this world without reference to a transcendence. Christianity, on the other hand, desacralized this immanent world and instead introduced a transcendent understanding of the sacred which stood outside of this earthly world. What this ultimately means is that the pagan idea of the sacred is much more flexible and open to human interpretation and needs as opposed to a transcendent idea of the sacred.

Professor Smith develops his thesis in a step-by-step process. In the first part, he shows how Rome was fundamentally a religious society. Rome's religion gave meaning to life and held the empire together. Christianity, however, challenged that by moving the location of the sacred from this world to one given and defined by the transcendent Christian God. This new understanding of the location of the sacred was simply incompatible with the Roman pagan version, and no amount of compromise by either party could overcome this fundamental difference if each party were to remain true to their beliefs. From this difference emerges the reason for the persecutions of Christians by Roman authorities. By the early 4th century, however, with the rise of Emperor Constantine and the Edict of Milan, the status of Christianity was changing. Paganism and its earthly location of the sacred was giving way to the transcendent Christian notion of the sacred, at least among the governing and religious elites.

One of the aspects that makes Smith's work compelling is that he lays out exactly how this difference in the location of the sacred has had such a profound impact on how people understood and lived out their lives. For example, Roman paganism focused on ritual and had a piety of outward performance. Roman gods demanded sacrifices, but for the most part did not seem to care about questions of morality. For the Romans, their faith was of this world; their gods were a part of this world.

Christianity, however, was focused on the next world and their transcended God who stood outside of His own creation. Christians focused more on things like creeds and cared about truth, doctrine, belief and heresy in a way that most Roman pagans would not have understood. In addition, Christianity was very concerned with moral issues and living a moral life. Ultimately, pagans were fully at home in this world, and the things of this world were the only things they needed to deal with. For Christians, they were part of this world, but their ultimate focus was outside of it—they were pilgrims, not permanent residents.

In some ways, these differences might seem to be very abstract, but Smith also demonstrates how the location of the sacred can change very specific understandings of nature and worldly goods such as wealth, power, fame, and happiness. For example, in terms of nature, pagans tended to sacralize it. Many aspects of nature had their own deity. The Christian faith, however, took away this sacred notion and instead saw nature as God's creation. Thus, a pagan might look at the night sky and

see the divine. A Christian might look up at the same sky and see a beautiful creation by the transcendent God.

The second half of Smith's book demonstrates how the dominance of Christian understanding of the transcendent and its shaping of society has slowly been challenged. Up through the 1990s, many people would have said that the main challenge to Christian understanding of the world came from positivistic secularism brought about by modern science, logic, and reason. Smith argues, however, that the ideas of immanent paganism were never fully rejected and in fact operated under a canopy of a Christian world. As time progressed, this paganism became more and more pronounced so that today, modern secularism is merely a façade out of which a world that values the immanent sacred operates. As examples of this, Smith looks at the intellectual thought of several atheistic legal scholars, including Ronald Dworkin and his challenge to ground his ideas concerning legal rights and constraints into something more than just convention. In the end, Dworkin developed his idea of 'religious atheism,' or a religion without God, to bring back the inviolable or sacred into this world. Smith also briefly looks at the recent publication of legal scholar and former Yale Law School dean, Anthony Kronman: *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan*. Kronman's book is over 1,100 pages, and, in some ways, is set up as a counter to Augustine and his famous work, *Confessions*. Instead of moving from paganism to Christianity, however, Kronman moves from Marxism to paganism.

In the last third of the book, Smith demonstrates through the use of multiple court cases how this re-emergence of paganism has worked its way into the legal system through acceptable symbols, views of sexuality, religious freedom, and the American Constitution. In terms of symbols, Smith argues that the court has been much more critical of symbols that invoke an idea of the transcendent religion, such as a town sponsored nativity scene. On the other hand, if those symbols can be argued to no longer have a transcendent, sacred meaning, but simply denote deep reverence or what is worthy of commemoration in society—a more immanent notion of the sacred—then the court has been much more accepting of them. When it comes to human sexuality, the courts have been moving in a direction that corresponds to a more pagan understanding of sex as a natural fulfilment of human desires instead of the Christian understanding. In terms of the question of religious freedom, Smith writes that one of the dangers for a traditional transcendent view is that while a legal system will still recognize the importance of sacred issues, like marriage, it will not allow the influence of ideas traced back to the transcendence when making any decisions. In fact, ideas that can be traced back to the transcendent will be considered offensive within the confines of accepted thought. In addition, while the court may not outright attack belief in the transcendence, it will try and push it further and further out of the public sphere. One consequence of these changes, Smith argues, is that the courts have taken what was once a neutral framework for governance, the Constitution, and turned it into partisan struggle in the divide between transcendent and immanent understandings of the world.

In Smith's final chapter, *Coming Home? The Imminent Immanent City*, he asks if these modern developments are to be celebrated or lamented. While pondering this question, Smith

goes through many of the different aspects of the two systems. In coming back to his opening questions (why was Christianity seen as such a threat, why do some people insist on suing Christian businesses even though their services are not wanted or needed), he gives his answer. In the end, for the modern pagans, the ideas of the transcendent represent an affront to human dignity, “and their presence is an irritant and an insult to the kind of community to which modern progressive pagans aspire.”¹ In his final analysis, Smith questions whether the immanent sacred system has the ability to provide an ultimate point, purpose, or meaning in life, and if it can support the broad pluralistic community that its supporters desire. In the end, Smith has his doubts.

In terms of Smith’s book overall, it is very well written, and he has researched his topic thoroughly. Almost every one of his twelve chapters has well over 100 footnotes, and most of them refer to scholarship that has been done in the last twenty years. In addition, Smith uses ideas and examples that would be very familiar to a reader knowledgeable of concepts such as Creation, Fall, Redemption, and the idea that all life is shaped by religious beliefs. In regards to writing style, Smith writes very much like the lawyer that he is. He makes his arguments in a step-by-step fashion and proposes and evaluates competing interpretations. In addition, Smith has a gift for language and a certain playfulness in his writing. In his mentioning of things like Monty Python and Douglas Adams, he can bring the reading about often dry court cases and legal theories to almost a level of enjoyment. On the whole, this book is highly recommended, and one should take the time to work through his arguments. Smith has given us some perceptive insights into some of the bigger issues and struggles of our time.

1. p. 363