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THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE RECONSIDERED

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Abstract: *The present article deals with the terminology used by Christians to denominate their adversaries. The origin and use of the words pagan and hellenos are discussed in detail. It further elaborates on the types of religious thinking and the attitudes toward the divine. This survey shows how diverse the experiences of individual people and groups were in Late Antiquity, concerning their religiosity.*

Keywords: *Christianity, pagans, Hellenes, Jews.*

Terminology: The Image of the Other

When addressing the pagan–Christian debate at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century (let us, somewhat euphemistically, designate the relations between Christians and pagans), one important clarification must be borne in mind: what does the word “pagan” express and signify during this period? What are we to understand by this notion—the Old Bulgarian rendering of the Greek *ethnos* (respectively *ethnoi* in the plural) and the Latin *gentiles*, terms of biblical origin?

The very term *paganus* (from *pagus*—village, rural district) came to designate those inhabitants of the countryside for whom Christianity, predominantly an urban phenomenon, long remained an obscure message. The uneducated rural population, accustomed to the rhythms of nature, continued to venerate the various forces of the natural world. This is likely the sense behind the otherwise contemptuous Christian denomination, which also carries the connotation of foreignness, of otherness—precisely what the pagan signifies in the Old Testament tradition. The term *paganus* thus expresses urban condescension toward the countryside, finding religious manifestation.

Naturally, the Christian Church did not succeed in entirely overcoming traditional beliefs—in the centuries that followed, these were gradually incorporated into a form of popular, “everyday” Christianity. Yet this is another major question, lying beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

There are, however, other interpretations of the term *paganus*. From the fourth century onward, it appears that “pagani” began to be used to refer to adherents of the old faiths, as, according to Christian views, pagans would not be admitted into the City of God—the Heavenly Jerusalem—but rather cast out from it due to their “ignorance.” For this reason, Christians began to use the word *pagani* in a derogatory sense, implying people who would remain outside the gates of the Heavenly City.

In the legislation of Constantine the Great, however, the term still bears a different meaning: that of a civilian, as opposed to a member of the military estate. There is also a third, more conciliatory interpretation, developed by C. Mohrmann. According to her, the meaning “civilian,” as opposed to

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“soldier,” is a particular instance of the broader sense of a person external to a given system or social stratum, a stranger. In the Christian sense, *paganus* came to designate those who stand outside the Church, those “external” to the Christian community, set in opposition to the *miles Christi*.

The first recorded use of the term *paganus* appears in Tertullian. This is followed by a “silence” of about a century. During that time, Christians referred to others—non-Christians and non-Jews—by terms such as “nationes, gentes, gentiles, ethnici, Graeci,” and, in Greek, “ethnoi” and “Hellenes.” In legal texts, the term *paganus* first appears with the meaning “pagan,” “non-Christian,” in law 16.2.18 (C.Th) of the year 370.

Another noteworthy aspect of Christian self-identification through the terminology of otherness should also be mentioned. In this way, Christians responded to the attacks of educated pagans, who traditionally accused Christianity of cultural inferiority. Over time, the notion of the pagan came to encompass a wide variety of non-Christian and anti-Christian groups: adherents of the official and ancient state cults, somewhat old-fashioned Roman patriots of the type of Symmachus, Praetextatus, and Nicomachus Flavianus the Elder; devotees of various mystery cults, among which Mithraism and the cult of Isis occupy prominent positions; representatives of Neoplatonic philosophy, who stood openly outside or even in opposition to Christianity (such as Porphyry and Proclus, for example); and, finally, atheists—those who, in practice, believed in nothing at all.

All these heterogeneous groups, together with the uneducated rural and urban populace, fell under this unifying, though often quite misleading, Christian denomination. In fact, the term *paganus* held its greatest significance for Christianity itself, insofar as it set it apart, as faith, cult, and vocation, from all others, thereby conferring upon it the consciously sought and achieved sense of exclusivity.

The reduction of the Other into a single mass with uniform beliefs—and correspondingly uniform errors—was an effective strategy, insofar as the unification of the opponent strengthened internal cohesion. It was a way of waging struggle against heresies. The work of Paulus Orosius offers a good example of this approach. Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* responds to criticisms coming from non-Christian circles, yet in a far more balanced manner, directed toward specific segments of the diverse pagan world.

Marius Victorinus equates *paganus* with *Graecus*, while Isidore of Seville, in the early seventh century, even attempts, rather arbitrarily, to derive the origin of the term from the Athenian *pagi* of antiquity. In Greek Christian texts, the dominant term is *ethnoi* (“nations”), a literal translation of the Hebrew *goyim* (the other peoples, the non-Jews). This Old Hebrew “connection” is also employed in translations into Old Bulgarian from the ninth century onward. In the Old Bulgarian context, the term “pagan” (*ezichnik*) and the derived word “paganism” (*ezichestvo*) in fact denote peoples, not merely their languages, as in modern Bulgarian usage. This is why the word “paganism” appears obscure today, whereas it is in fact a translation of the Greek *ethnos* (“people”) and, correspondingly, of the Hebrew *goy*.

A further clarification is required here. Today we understand “people” in a purely ethnological or political sense. In antiquity, however, the concept bore a broader meaning. Christians, for example, perceived themselves as a distinct people (*laos* in Greek, *natio Christiana* in Latin)—a people of the chosen, destined to replace the Old Testament people of God, that is, the Jews. From this perspective, all others are likewise “peoples,” yet they are the other peoples—those who do not believe in our God, Jesus Christ, the Savior of humankind.

In Old Bulgarian literature, the already established Greco-Roman terms are encountered with the meaning of “pagan,” such as *Hellene*, *pogany* (from *paganus*), idol-worshipper, and others. Of particular interest is the use of the term “*Hellene*” as a synonym for pagan.

In antiquity, “*Hellenes*” denoted the collective body of ancient Greek tribes speaking various, yet mutually related, dialects. Within the Roman Empire, however, the term “*Hellene*” gradually acquired another meaning—that of a person educated in the Greek language, culture, and philosophy. Thus, in the fourth century, Julian and Libanius would flatter one another with this appellation, insofar as they were adherents of Greek learning and (Neo-)Platonic philosophy, although neither of them was ethnically Greek—indeed, not a drop of Hellenic blood flowed in Julian’s veins. Yet he wrote and

thought in Greek, which in this case proved more significant, though not easily reconcilable with his status as a Roman emperor.

From the fourth century onward, for Christians the term “Hellene” became a convenient designation for the adherents of various cults and philosophical schools grounded in the ancient Hellenistic religious and philosophical tradition, as opposed to the overly political notion of “Roman.” Thus arose what, from our perspective, appears almost an absurd accusation of “Hellenism” in Byzantium. For the Romans (Rhomaioi), “Hellenes” were pagans; hence, a Rhomaian fluent in excellent Greek would find nothing strange in calling, for example, the Pechenegs “Hellenes”, simply because they were pagans.

Only in the late Byzantine period, in the spirit of so-called “philhellenism,” did Byzantine intellectuals (though not the Church as a whole) begin to regard themselves not only as Romans but also as heirs to ancient Hellas in a cultural and educational sense, and the term underwent a partial rehabilitation. Its full rehabilitation would have to await the Greek uprising and the emergence of the modern Hellenic state in the nineteenth century.

Types of Religious Thinking and Attitudes Toward the Divine

One of the principal reasons for the problematic, anachronistic understanding—whether from a modern or even a medieval perspective—of the pagan–Christian conflict in Late Antiquity lies in our own conception of religion. Being too accustomed to the tradition of monotheistic religions of revelation, we often forget that there exist other types of religiosity. Nor is it necessary to probe the minds of people in the distant past—one need only look at the religious sensibilities of the majority of the inhabitants of present-day India or China to be convinced of the existence of profoundly different perspectives on the divine, the mystical, and the transcendent.

Roman religiosity is patriarchal-traditional and state-patriotic, to some extent comparable to Confucianism. It is bound up with the veneration of ancestors, the forces of nature, the spirits (*genii*) of prominent individuals (including emperors), the City, and so forth. As we have already seen in the first topic, the Latin word *religio* derives from the verb *religo* (“to bind, to fasten”) and broadly signifies “attachment, oath, sacred obligation, generational duty, piety.” The “primitive” belief in various deities associated with natural phenomena or economic activities (and these deities, in the archaic period, number in the hundreds) is gradually outlived with the formation of a society and state that were modern for their time. Thus, the “polytheism” of the Romans (as well as of the Greeks) becomes an opportunity to affiliate oneself with one or another “club,” depending on the cult one prefers.

An increasing number are drawn to the mystery cults – those of Isis, the Great Goddess, Mithras. Obligatory in a strictly political sense remain the cults of the City of Rome, the Capitoline Triad, and the genius of the emperor, as well as the cult of deified deceased emperors. These cults were clearly propagandistic and, despite the difference in epochs, bore some resemblance to the official veneration of dead and living heroes and “leaders” in modern totalitarian societies.

In fact, the principal accusation brought against Christians by Roman authority from the first century to the early fourth century is that of impiety, or atheism. If we understand the logic of Roman religious sensibility, this accusation will not appear strange in the least: Christians refuse to recognize the other cults, including the political ones, and deny others the right to follow their traditional beliefs. From the Roman point of view, this constitutes a provocation against the very idea of religiosity. With the Christianization of the Empire, the roles were reversed, and Christians became judges over others from the position of law and power. All others were subsumed under the general designation “pagans,” which we freely use today, though we do not always grasp its complexity and its relative inadequacy.

Some scholars, among them Dodds and O’Donnell, draw a further distinction between the Christian understanding of the pagan (that is, an idolater, an unbeliever, the Other) and the “pagan” understanding of religion itself. According to this view, pagans are those for whom religion is something strictly personal and private, which at the same time presupposes the simultaneous coexistence

of different beliefs and cults that complement one another or at least do not negate each other [Dodds, E. R. 1966; O'Donnell, J. 1973, pp. 45–88].

This interpretation of paganism (in every case referring only to one aspect or segment of what we designate under the general term “paganism”) transforms it from a religious affiliation into an attitude toward religion. For this group of “philosophizing pagans,” different religions are beneficial to society, while individuals and social groups retain the right of choice. From this perspective, the policy of a figure such as Julian against the Christians, for example, is unacceptable insofar as it is “un-pagan.” For this reason, many pagans, among them Themistius, did not side with the apostate emperor, and the historian Ammianus Marcellinus—evidently a pagan and to a great extent an admirer of Julian—expresses dissatisfaction with the law issued by the latter against Christians, which forbade them to teach except within their own informal circles. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, this was “a cruel act worthy of oblivion” (*Res Gestae*, 22.10.7 and 25.4.20).

According to O'Donnell, Julian's anti-Christian fervor is rooted in his renegade status, insofar as the future apostate emperor was raised and educated as a Christian. His conscious hostility toward Christianity expresses a renegade's complex, whereby he subconsciously adopts traits and characteristics of those he hates [O'Donnell, J. 1973, pp. 45–47].

Thus, at least two distinctions may be drawn: on the one hand, between the followers of Christ's word and those who venerate older or newer pagan deities; and on the other, between those who accept as normal the coexistence of multiple religious beliefs and cults (“pluralists” of the type of Libanius and Symmachus) and those who adopt an intolerant attitude toward the Other (that is, Christians and the representatives of the “pagan reaction” in an intellectual or political sense, such as Julian the Apostate and, to some extent, Nicomachus Flavianus).

Here, however, a justification must be made, one that O'Donnell overlooked: among the “pluralists” there were those for whom religious belief was something personal and, in its own way, mystical (the Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus, for example), as well as legalists who support the old cults out of respect for tradition and their own understanding of patriotism, while their personal attitude toward religion remained difficult to discern (Symmachus, who manifests such a stance in his *Third Relatio*).

Moreover, between paganism (whatever may be understood by this complex and ambiguous concept) and Christianity in all its forms—from elite to “popular” belief, and from the rigorist heresies of the Macedonians, Pelagians, and Novatians, through Nicene orthodoxy, to the “semi-pagan” Arianism—there does not exist so rigid and insurmountable a barrier as protagonists on various sides attempt to persuade us.

As early as at the beginning of the 360s, during the pagan reaction, the Emperor Julian sought allies everywhere—even among renegades such as Pegasius, bishop of Ilium, who under Julian became a priest of the god Helios, and Photinus, bishop of the important ecclesiastical center of Sirmium, who moved from an extreme form of Arianism to a complete and categorical denial of the divine nature of Jesus. Some modern scholars even speak of a kind of paranoia.

Robert L. Fox provides examples from the local council of Elvira in the early fourth century, where strict measures were decreed against Christians who visited pagan temples and practiced idolatry, and who in certain cases even continued, after their holy baptism, to perform the functions of pagan priests. Others, meanwhile, claimed to be clergy while in fact remaining pagans, with the sole aim of benefiting from the associated privileges, including exemption from curial obligations [Lane Fox, R. 1987, pp. 664–667].

At times, Christians practiced divination alongside pagans and sought answers to their problems from oracles. Inscriptions from the fourth and fifth centuries still attest to the popularity of pilgrimage to sites sacred to pagans. Around the year 400, Augustine warned Christian priests that the same people attended churches and crowded into theaters to celebrate pagan festivals without the slightest pang of conscience (*De Civitate Dei* 1.1: sic evaserunt multi, qui nunc Christianis temporibus detrahunt et mala, quae illa civitas pertulit, Christo imputant—referring to the events in Rome in 410).

Conversely, when necessary, pagans did not hesitate to seek refuge in Christian temples, taking advantage of the right of asylum. According to Alison Frantz, the dividing line between pagans and

Christians in fourth- and fifth-century Athens was not clearly drawn—a conclusion confirmed by archaeological research. Even at the end of the fifth century, pagans and Christians continued to coexist in Athens and its environs, while pagan temples—though in most cases no longer in use and desacralized—had not yet been converted into Christian churches [Frantz, A. 1988]. The author of the study maintains that this transformation occurred only in the sixth and seventh centuries.

In many cities of the Empire, both in the East and the West, necropolises were used simultaneously by Christians and non-Christians. The Great Catechism of Gregory of Nyssa reveals the extraordinary intermingling of religious beliefs, customs, cults, and heresies in late antique society. Not only in the middle but even at the end of the fourth century, and throughout the entire fifth century, there still existed a kind of “no man’s land” between Christianity and paganism, traversed with relative ease by both sides.

The life path of Themistius illustrates well how little confessional differences could matter within the context of a relatively homogeneous cultural and political environment, at least as far as the elite were concerned. Equally curious is the fate of the military commander Sebastianus. A Manichaean for a time (like Saint Augustine), Sebastianus was a supporter of the Alexandrian bishop George, yet at the same time a confidant of Julian. He was respected by prominent pagans such as Libanius and Eunapius, and was even considered a potential claimant to the throne, before being removed by Merobaudes in 375. In the decades that followed, we encounter many such cases, in which personal qualities or lineage counted for more than religious affiliation.

The circle surrounding Augustine demonstrates how complex the question of choice and spiritual development was at the end of the fourth century, and how oversimplified and one-sided the division between pagans and Christians appears. It is enough to read Augustine’s *Confessions* in order to enter into the mentality of the age.

Romanianus, like Augustine himself, was inclined for a time to embrace Manichaeism, while Nebridius and Nectarius remained close to Augustine despite being pagans. Concerning Mallius Theodorus, a doubtful Christian, the bishop of Hippo remarks that he praised him more than was necessary as a man learned in Christianity. Augustine himself passed through various phases: Manichaeism, Neo-Platonism, and Academic skepticism, before receiving holy baptism and becoming one of the most eminent Latin Fathers of the Church.

The senator Volusianus, who resided in Africa after the Gothic sack of Rome in 410, entered Augustine’s circle, being inclined to accept Christian ideas, and indirectly initiated, through his questions, the writing of Augustine’s greatest work – *De Civitate Dei* (On the City of God). Later, already prefect of Rome, Volusianus was close to the “bard” of the pagan cause, Rutilius Namatianus, and at the end of his life, in 437, he received holy baptism. Moreover, he maintained close kinship ties with the two Melanias from the circle of Saint Jerome.

Among circles faithful to traditional culture, the drawing of boundaries proved even more difficult. The poet and rhetorician Ausonius, tutor of the emperor Gratian, was portrayed now as a Christian, now as a pagan. The religious preferences of Marius Victorinus are better attested: in the 350s, the African rhetorician and philosopher publicly and spectacularly embraced Christianity, yet even thereafter remained faithful to Neoplatonic philosophy. As a translator of Plotinus, he is regarded as one of the founders of Latin Christian Platonism.

Cultural models of thought and behavior still did not recognize the significance of confessional differences. Two fifth-century figures—Cyrus of Panopolis and his fellow citizen Nonnus—offer a good illustration of this. Cyrus was a poet, patrician, and consul with influence at the court of Theodosius II; he was a friend of Saint Daniel the Stylite, yet fell into disgrace because of his close relations with the empress Athenais-Eudocia and was exiled, being at the same time accused of adherence to paganism. From 443 onward, he served as bishop of Cotyaeum (modern Kütahya in Turkey) and lived at least into the reign of Leo I (457–474).

Nonnus of Panopolis, for his part, was the author of the thoroughly pagan-in-spirit epic *Dionysiaca*, a kind of compendium of ancient Greek mythology, more voluminous than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. Yet he was also the author of poetic *Paraphrases* on the Gospel of John, and he, too, became bishop of his native Panopolis in Egypt.

The scholar of early Christianity, R. Markus, poses the question of what it meant to be a Christian after Constantine the Great, when the traditional and in some way convenient opposition between Christians—with their monotheism and high moral standards—and the pagan Roman state and classical culture, often perceived as hostile and absorbed in worldly vanity, was disrupted. After Constantine, many converted to Christianity following circumstance and even fashion, so that the Christian community inevitably became diluted. The pagan type of culture, inherited through universal education, remained characteristic of most new Christians. In this context, monasticism spread as an expression of a clear and radical identification of the Christian way of life as distinct from the non-Christian one, regardless of formal religious affiliation [Markus, R. 1990].

This crisis of Christian identity after the beginning of the fourth century remains insufficiently studied, despite the valuable works of Brown and Markus. One of the responses of “true” Christians to these blurred boundaries was the emergence of monasticism in Egypt and its spread in the centuries that followed.

The traditions of ancient, Hellenistic and Roman, narrative culture proved the most enduring. Education remained conservative and resistant to change; for this reason, the victorious Christianity gradually assimilated the methods and many of the ideas embedded in Greco-Roman rhetorical and philosophical training. The educational curriculum itself did not undergo substantial change—the corpus of texts studied remained largely intact throughout the Byzantine Middle Ages. Hellenism, in its Christian form (or proto-form), outlived Antiquity and became the cultural core of the Byzantine world.

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