



Symposium: Steven D. Smith's *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac*

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INTRODUCTION

Why, it is sometimes wondered, do today's culture wars have to be so intense? Why can't we, to raise the question famously attributed to Rodney King, all get along?¹ Douglas Laycock, one of contemporary America's preeminent scholars of religious freedom, for example, accuses both traditional Christians and today's gay rights activists of being intolerant. Why do Christians oppose same sex marriage? Why can't they just agree to live and let live? After all, Laycock argues, nobody is going to compel their churches to perform such marriages, much less force them to enter in to one. Likewise, why do gay rights activists persecute Christian florists, bakers, etc., who don't want to assist with same sex marriage? After all, there are plenty of other florists and bakers who would be more than happy to do so. Why would they want to compel people who are opposed, on religious grounds, to their marriage to provide services to them?²

Framed by T. S. Eliot's famous reflections about Christianity and the future of Western Culture in *The Idea of a Christian Society*,³ Steven Smith's *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* attempts to cast light on today's culture wars and the situation of Christians in modern America by exploring the cultural conflict between Christian and pagans in ancient Rome. More specifically, he argues that an understanding of what was at issue in this older cultural conflict and why it was not resolvable by an agreement to peacefully coexist—to live and let live—illuminates both what is at issue in today's conflict and why it is not resolvable via a policy of mutual toleration.

The key to understanding today's culture war, Smith maintains, is grasping its fundamentally religious character. Drawing on the work of thinkers like Victor Frankl, Jonathan Sachs, Abraham Herschel, Rudolf Otto, and Mircea Eliade, Smith contends that religion "grows out of human nature and experience" (34), out of man's quest for meaning and the human experience of the sublime or holy. From this emerges what Smith terms the imperative to consecrate, to "become or remain in harmony with the holy—with the reality that gives meaning and sublimity to life" (40), that gives life and world meaning, beauty, order—even being" (38). Indeed, Smith contends that the current conflict, like its Roman predecessor, is really a conflict between two "fundamentally different" (102) types of religiosity: a religion of immanence and a religion of transcendence. The question that divides the two is the location of the sacred: A religion of immanence locates the sacred, the holy, within "this world and this life" (251); a religion of transcendence locates them "outside the world—'beyond time and space.'" Whether in its popular, civic or philosophical versions, the religion of ancient Rome—like all forms of paganism—is a religion of immanence, a religion that sacralizes things located in this the world and, above all, sacralizes the City. Christianity, on the other hand, like Judaism and other forms of "transcendent religiosity," locates the divine beyond the world (although inasmuch as God created and sustains the world and is reflected in the world, the divine also has an immanent—"even incarnate"—dimension) (111–12).

The different types of religiosity, embodied in Roman paganism and Christianity, in turn, issued in "fundamentally different orientations or attitudes toward the world—different orientations with effects and profound implications for even the most mundane aspects of life (114)" including our attitudes toward nature, the human good, human sexuality, and social and political life.

Here we encounter the reason why in the Roman world Christians and pagans couldn't simply agree to disagree. To begin with, Christians rejected Rome's established religion and official civil theology. More importantly, ancient Rome was not a secular society with an official "church" in the manner of, say, contemporary Great Britain. As Gibbon noted, the "deities and rites" of Roman paganism "were closely interwoven with every circumstance of business or pleasure, of public and private life" and it was "impossible to escape the observance of them, without, at times, renouncing all the commerce of mankind, and all the offices and amusements of society" (141). Not only were "subjects expected to make formal, visible sacrifices to the gods and divine emperor" (139) but virtually every aspect of Roman society was permeated by invocations of, or sacrifices to, the

world-immanent divinities of Roman religion. To give but one example, participation in pagan rites were a precondition of any commercial activity and thus of simply securing the goods one needed to survive (141). At the same time, paganism grounded the norms and values of Roman society—its understanding of the cosmos, the nature of the human good, the family and human sexuality, the body politic, the relation of the individual and society, etc. The ascendancy of Christianity thus necessarily involved what one author quoted by Smith calls “a tectonic shift in cultural values” (107).

Participation in Roman society was thus incompatible with the religious integrity of Christians, with their fidelity to the imperatives of their faith; and the acceptance of Christianity required the rejection of the norms, practices and values that informed Roman civilization. Christianity was thus of its very nature a revolutionary force, a direct challenge to defining commitments of Roman society and the institutions, practices, etc. in which these commitments found expression (e.g., infanticide, gladiatorial combat, etc.).

“Both pagans and Christians,” Smith writes, offered “terms of mutual accommodation that seemed fair and reasonable to them, but for discernable reasons were not—and could not be—acceptable to the other side” (131). On the one hand, paganism’s proposed terms for “peaceful coexistence” were simple and straightforward: Christianity could be “accepted on the same terms under which a vast variety of other cults . . . were embraced,” namely, “on terms of reciprocity”: Romans would respect Christianity, if Christians respected their religion by agreeing that Christianity’s God was one of many divinities in the family of gods (accepting their God’s niche in the Roman Pantheon, as it were), offering to sacrifices to these other gods, and “mingled congenially with their pagan neighbors.” (150, 151). However, these were not terms Christians could accept inasmuch as they entailed subordinating the integrity of their faith to the demands of peaceful coexistence and civic amity.

On the other hand, Christians offered their own terms of peaceful coexistence: allow us the full integrity of our convictions and the freedom to practice our faith, they argued, so long as we “pay allegiance to the government,” and we will be model citizens. After all, the apostle Paul wrote, our faith enjoins “to submit . . . to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except which God has established” (136–37). Here again, while these terms might have seemed fair and reasonable to the Christians, they did not seem so to their pagan opponents. To begin with, inasmuch as this would require pagan religiosity to be excluded from public life, it required the rejection of Roman paganism itself insofar as the latter demanded the consecration of every aspect of human life to its divinities, and hence the

interweaving of every facet of human existence with its invocation, rites, etc. “It effectively undid,” Smith remarks, “the pagan sacralization of the world” (115). “Indeed, Christianity did not merely undermine belief in the gods; even more importantly, it interfered with the actual relation between the people and their rulers and the gods.” From the perspective of paganism’s immanent religiosity, Christianity “defied and insulted the gods” and was itself “a kind of desecration or desacralization” (145).

Over and above its directly religious effects, accepting these terms would have involved fundamentally transforming Roman civilization in accordance with the demands of the Christian vision of God, man, morality, human social life and the cosmos. As Smith observes, since Christianity, (like Judaism or any other form of transcendent religiosity), “represented a fundamentally different kind of religiosity from paganism, the acceptance of Christianity, would amount to a transformation not just of ‘religion’ (as if that were some discrete and severable compartment of life) but of the basic orientation of human beings toward the world, and toward the city” (103). Indeed, “despite the Christians’ sincere profession of loyalty,” the simple fact is that “in a variety of ways Christianity was subversive of the Roman city, or at least of the kind of political community that the Romans were striving to maintain” (301).

What does this ancient conflict have to do with us today? Once again, Smith believes, the transcendent religiosity of Christianity is facing off against paganism, albeit a new and different type of paganism. Today’s paganism doesn’t involve the worship of Jupiter, Mars, or Venus, etc. nor animal sacrifice nor the existence of a being or beings higher than man. In this new paganism, the sacred is somehow located within the universe, in man or certain human experiences (e.g., sex, love, beauty, etc.), values (e.g., human dignity, freedom, equality, autonomy, etc.), or institutions (e.g., the state, market, etc.). What unites both Roman and modern paganism and justifies grouping them both under the rubric of paganism despite their obvious differences, Smith maintains, is a rejection of a world-transcendent deity (above all, the God of Christianity) and the embrace of an immanent religiosity, a religiosity that locates the sacred within the world of space and time. The conflict between these two religiosities isn’t limited simply to matters of theology and worship, but involve “fundamentally different orientations or attitudes toward the world,” fundamentally different understandings of the human good, the world, human sexuality and the family, the nature of the political order, the proper structure of human social relations and the organizing principles of a rightly ordered society.

The result is today’s culture war: A struggle over the truths—the conception of man society and the “sacred”—that will inform America’s self-

understanding, the truths that will define who we are as a people and will animate our institutions and guide our actions. If this war is bitter and seemingly interminable, it is so much because of the intensity of the partisans as it is because of the fundamental character of their disagreements. As was the case in the conflict between pagans and Christians in ancient Rome, if mutually agreeable terms of peaceful coexistence seem impossible, this is because any such terms would involve compromise on the part of one side or the other of something seen as essential and non-negotiable. We cannot simply agree to live and let live—to all get along, in Rodney King’s formulation—because political and social life necessarily involve making judgements about moral questions (including the limits of what may be tolerated) that must necessarily be made against the backdrop of our understanding of God, man, the human good, and proper structure of human social life. And, if our polity seems increasingly polarized and public decisions on these matters increasingly harder to arrive at, it is because we have come to disagree fundamentally on what man is and what norms should inform human life.

As to what the future holds, the seeming ascendancy of modern paganism in American culture has far-reaching and necessarily revolutionary implications. The American experiment in self-government and ordered liberty unfolded against the backdrop of an intellectual and cultural “legacy” that had a “discernably Christian character” (310), that reflected commitments derived from Christianity such as political dualism (i.e., a distinction between church and state rooted in the distinction between the sacred and the secular spheres), an acknowledgement of a “transcendent authority,” an approach to civic life accommodating to religious beliefs and practices, and legal norms reflecting a Christian understanding of “sexual morality and marriage,” etc. (128, 315, 322, 299). If the old American order emerged in the context of Christianity’s transcendent religiosity, the ascendancy of modern paganism points to a new and very different American public order rooted in an immanent religiosity. This order will not only reflect a very different type of man and the human good, it will be “self-consciously closed off against transcendence” and, if it would not necessarily “prohibit belief” in Christianity, it would see it as a threat to civic unity and as “a foreign and offensive element” that must be “marginalized” (377). If this new immanent city would be different in many respects from ancient Rome, it would have this in common with it: Here, as in ancient Rome, Christians would be very much outsiders, existing precariously in an order which not only rejects their beliefs and principles, but in which they are effectively excluded from the public sphere

and in which “the space for the free practice of transcendent religion” is “cramped” (340).

Smith’s far-ranging analysis raises many questions: Is he right that today’s culture war is ultimately a religious, rather than political, conflict? Is he correct that today’s culture war is best understood as a continuation of the long-standing battle between Christianity and paganism, and, if so, what are the implications of this for our understanding of the nature, uniqueness, and history of Western civilization? What assistance does his analysis provide us with in understanding the distinctiveness of Christianity and its social and political consequences? Is Smith right that no mutually agreeable articles of peace—terms of peaceful coexistence—are possible? If so, what are the implications of this for America’s future? Is his account of the relationship between Christianity and America’s public order persuasive? How successful is Smith in casting light on the ongoing and debilitating cultural conflict that wracks our body politic? What assistance does it give Catholic Americans in orienting themselves in the face of the new American public order that seems to be taking shape?

It is these questions and other closely related questions that the contributors to this symposium seek to address. This symposium began as a roundtable at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Three of the four articles that comprise it are revised versions of remarks delivered at that roundtable. I wish to thank the contributors for their willingness to participate in both the panel and the symposium.

Notes

1 What King actually asked was “Can we all get along?” https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Rodney_King.

2 Douglas Laycock and Thomas C. Berg, “Protecting Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty,” *Virginia Law Review* 99 (2013): 9; and Douglas Laycock, “Religious Liberty and the Culture Wars,” *University of Illinois Law Review* (2014): 879.

3 *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2018). Further citations of this volume will be given parenthetically in the text.