



## In Defense of Christian Exceptionalism

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*Steven D. Smith persuasively shows that paganism and Christianity are in a culture war that spans two thousand years. Throughout his book, he shows that Christianity is the exceptional religion in three ways. First, Christianity is more authentically open to philosophy than paganism. Second, Christianity does not sacralize the State. Third, Christianity provides a more fulfilling understanding of sexual ethics. Despite the exceptionalism of Christianity, it is currently facing a significant challenge from a renewed and secularized paganism. This secularized paganism is attractive due to the fallibility of human nature. However, Christianity's theology and intellectual tradition provide meaningful answers and rebuttals to paganism's more sensual claims.*

We live in an era in which many people are hesitant to say, if not embarrassed to admit, that certain ideas are better than others. Many religious scholars, for example, tend to minimize the distinctions between and among world religions.<sup>1</sup> There is a widespread normative belief that all religions equally attempt to instill peace, justice, and meaning. Steven D. Smith's *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* challenges this false narrative brilliantly.<sup>2</sup> He argues persuasively in his book that paganism and Christianity are as different as night and day.

Smith begins by positing that, though Christians coined the name pagan pejoratively, paganism is in fact an apt name. Paganism is a religion that locates the transcendent in the world (as opposed to an afterlife). Its religion culminates in the city; hence, "religion" and "world" are often synonymous for pagans (33, 49, 63). Paganism can lead to great acts of courage, especially in the pursuit of the public good. Ancient Rome had, after all, the examples of republican Brutus, Cincinnatus, Scaevola, and Agricola, who were willing to make sacrifices for their fatherland.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the heroism of pagan icons is often the exception. Paganism is self-defeating because it is drawn to luxury and immoderation. Since it is concerned with materialism, paganism easily becomes apathetic to perennial philosophical questions and the pursuit of truth. Antiquity witnessed extraordinary men like Plato and Cicero, but they were not exemplary pagans. Pla-

to's *Republic* challenges the whole concept of polytheism, while Cicero questions pagan orthodoxy in *On the Nature of the Gods*. Indeed, when it comes to personal lifestyle—if the truth be told—paganism has few true philosophers worthy of the title, that is, men whose personal conduct attracted as much admiration as their ideas did.

Smith argues that the differences between paganism and Christianity illuminate our own historical epoch. His boldest claim is that paganism is not dead; it is currently thriving within the United States and Europe. Certain forms of contemporary secularism are pagan in nature. Contemporary secularism still retains some semblance of the sacred (e.g., rights and autonomy). In this regard, it is not trying to get rid of religion. Instead, it is making religion more worldly—more in the image of our age (xi, 218). Thus, a secularist like Jon O'Brien, the then-president of Catholics for Choice, can claim that the Democratic Party must fervently and uniformly support abortion because it “cannot turn its back on women’s moral *autonomy* and the right to make *conscience-based* decisions.”<sup>4</sup> Modern-day secularism, apparent in O'Brien's remarks, prizes autonomy over duty and responsibility and places conscience over objective moral truth. Smith warns that through paganism and secularism, religion becomes increasingly a matter of individual conscience rather than a way of life assenting to truth through the use of an immaterial intellect (328).

Whether in discussing the historical tension between paganism and Christianity or the contemporary culture war between secularism and Christianity, Smith argues in favor of what I call Christian exceptionalism. The nature of things demonstrates that Christian teaching and practice are better than paganism in at least three ways. First, Christianity is more open to philosophy and the pursuit of truth than paganism. Second, Christianity does not aggrandize or sacralize the State. Third, Christianity's emphasis on the moral virtues upholds genuinely healthy sexual norms in sharp contrast to the lasciviousness and decadence of paganism.

### CHRISTIANITY'S OPENNESS TO TRUTH

First, Christianity is more open to philosophy and the pursuit of truth than paganism. The danger of a worldly religion is that it does not adequately question the nature of things. Paganism is moved by an inordinate sensual love of the world, or what Aquinas calls concupiscence.<sup>5</sup> Smith argues that the pagan gods lacked the same presence of Christ. Faith in Christ produces moderation, self-sacrifice, and an austere way of life; bluntly put, it is harder to be a Christian than a pagan. The pagan religion was too useful for pagans to challenge or question it. Hence, pagan intellectuals such as Varro, Balbus, and Cotta the Skeptic challenged the more preposterous

stories about the gods, but they failed to reject the gods *in toto*. While they condemned the mythic aspects of paganism, they defended ardently the civic version of paganism. In so doing, they perpetuated lies (87–99). In other words, their utilitarianism hindered them from thinking more deeply.

Christianity, on the other hand, allows philosophy to flourish. Christians understand that they are in tension with the world. This tension leads them to question the nature of things and to find answers through both revelation and reason. As Smith points out, Christians consider creation to be good, but not the final good. When Christians live in a pagan society, which conflates the good of creation with the final good, they are able to accept some societal customs as good and reject others as incompatible with the final good, namely, beatitude with God (126). In the ancient world, Christians separated themselves by refusing to participate in public services and by avoiding the gladiatorial games. Antiquity abounds with accounts of the marvelous and daring acts of charity by Christians for both friend and foe.<sup>6</sup> Christians were persecuted and killed for refusing to worship the juvenile and crass acts of the gods (1–6). Similarly, Christians now separate themselves from the world by upholding the dignity of life from conception to natural death and traditional sexual norms such as chastity.

Christian theology is deeply concerned with living in accordance with the good. God is the Logos (cf. Jn 1:1), the very personification of wisdom. Then, of course, Jesus refers to himself as the way, the truth and the life (cf. Jn 14:6). Yet, none of these—the way, the truth or the life—is an opinion or a useful concept. The fact that Jesus can and does command imitation follows because his wisdom is the eternal law rooted in reason.<sup>7</sup> His parables rest upon a teleology comparable to what we find in Aristotle. When Jesus instructs, “You will know them by the fruit they yield” (Mt 7:16), he is inviting human beings to use their natural reason to examine the merits of things. When Jesus warns, “But how small the gate, how narrow the road that leads on to life, and how few there are to find it!” (Mt 7:14), he is teaching that choices matter and there are consequences to actions. This Biblical teleology opens us to the integration of Classical and Christian thought in the Church Fathers which has marked Christianity from the beginning.

### **CHRISTIANITY AND THE LIMITS OF THE STATE**

Second, Christianity does not sacralize the State. Paganism, on the other hand, sacralizes the city (116). Hence, the pagan order was present in state buildings, rituals, performances, processions, and holidays. It decided war matters through augury and deified its own leaders. Gods were particular

to a people. New and defeated gods were incorporated into a regime, not for matters of faith or virtue, but for utilitarian reasons. At face value, it provides some sort of tolerance, but, as Smith argues, it is a tolerance that existed solely for the purpose of the State, not for the individual's right to worship freely. (154–157). Thus, homage still needed to be given to the State and the State's gods. In the pagan order, nothing is greater than the State and its gods.

Christianity establishes the distinction between Church and State. Smith draws this achievement out in his excellent examination of Augustine's *City of God*. He writes:

Pagan *religious polytheism* was consistent with a sort of *political monism*; *Christian monotheism*, conversely, led to a kind of political polytheism—or at least a sort of *political dualism*. . . . [Christians], though they worshipped *one God*, were subject *two cities*—an earthly city and a heavenly city. Both cities were real; both were valuable; both were ordained of God. But the Christians' true home was in—and thus their ultimate loyalty was to—the heavenly city. (128)

The Christian God transcends politics The Christian understanding of God demonstrates that there is something higher than the State. Politics can still remain important for Christians, but it is no longer the *summum bonum*. A new and better world exists. Admittedly, this new Christian view of politics is susceptible to certain dangers such as quietism and passivism. But, more importantly, Christianity's distinction between the City of Man and the City of God provides a healthy and renewed emphasis on the limits of politics. Christianity developed in the shadows of the massive Roman Empire which claimed to have dominion over the world. Christianity provides a welcome check against such a radical and unfounded claim. Christianity brings a certain political realism to the world.

The distinction between the two cities also establishes an important political tradition: the idea of limited government. Christianity's distinction between the temporal and the eternal limits the power and jurisdiction of the State. The State can have only a limited claim on individuals. The State can neither pretend to be God nor act as a church. Therefore, the State's jurisdiction is limited to temporal concerns within the natural law tradition, while the Church's jurisdiction deals with the soul and salvation. The State cannot make laws that harm the Church, and it cannot act as a substitute when the Church fails to act. This tradition of limited government is found in the writings of medieval Catholics, the English common law, the Calvinists, the American Founding, and in Catholic Social Thought.<sup>8</sup>

## SEXUAL ETHICS

Third, Christianity is exceptional because of its teaching on sex. Pagan worldliness indulged the urges of carnal desire. Since pagans reduced nature to sheer materialism, pagans believed that the sex drive should always be satisfied. This immoderation produced neither a concern for consent nor equality. Antiquity gloried in all forms of sexual fulfillment, including prostitution and pedophilia. Chastity and abstinence were regarded, uncomprehendingly, as unhealthy. Citizens, especially men, followed what the gods did. As the gods satisfied themselves sexually, that signaled that men could have sexual conquests at will. Women, though, were held to stricter standards. That resulting double standard in sexual expression definitely did not derive from Christianity; it was Christianity alone which tried to end it (71–78).

Twenty-first-century secular pagans often mirror the actions of the ancient pagans. They simply have coined the term “self-expression” to defend their licentiousness. Unlike the Romans, they understand the importance of consent and equality, at least at face value. Yet, contemporary pornography often glorifies the fantasies of non-consensual sex and male domination.<sup>9</sup> Today’s pagans have brought back a new double standard when it comes to sex. Male debauchery and lasciviousness disproportionately hurt women. The hook-up culture, divorce, and pornography—all three negatively affect women more than men.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian teaching on sex provides an alternative and more fulfilling way of understanding sex. The starting point for Christians is that the body is a temple of God. Bodies are sacred, and cannot be treated as mere sex toys. It is a grave sin to violate the body. As Smith states, “Early Christians commonly equated fornication with idolatry. The confinement of sex to one partner within the sanctified bonds of matrimony was correlated with monotheism” (124). Several implications derive from this redirecting of sexuality. First, human sexuality reflects the cosmos. Monotheism implies monogamy. Second, Christians do not reject the importance of sexual satisfaction. Rather, they direct it to its natural teleological end: family life and procreation. Sex, in other words, has an innate purpose. Third, Christianity re-establishes an authentic understanding of manhood. Christian men, in sacrifice to God and spouse, are called to overcome their sexual urges by self-denial and discipline themselves to live chastely. Fourth, fornication is condemned as a grave sin because it is an abuse of both body and soul.

Christian sexual teaching is superior to paganism. It upholds the dignity of women and the equality of sexes, requiring both men and women

to sacrifice and give of themselves in imitation of Christ. (Eph 5:20–25). It is responsible for producing healthy families, respectful children, and condemns divorce based on the teaching of Christ. It likewise condemns ways of making a living that degrade women such as prostitution. Christian teaching on sex is basically what the virtue of moderation looks like.

## THE UNENDING CULTURE WAR

If Christianity is so exceptional, how has it not won the culture war? How could it let paganism resurface under the guise of secularism? At least part of the answer lies in the fallibility of human nature. The Fall is a pivotal aspect of Christian theology. If Adam and Eve could sin in the state of perfect human nature, then it should be unsurprising that human beings continue to turn away from God. Augustine teaches that the City of God is not of this world; the Christian realist tradition warns that a perfectly just society is impossible. Smith makes the off-hand comment that, in a certain way, paganism is more natural to human beings than Christianity (211). The human default is to sin, and both paganism and secularism provide justification and rationalization for sin. They assuage the conscience by arguing that sin is not sin at all. Additionally, Smith notes, paganism has seeped into Christian customs, art, and theology.<sup>11</sup> Artists, philosophers, political leaders, and even the clergy have even borrowed from paganism today, thus polluting the purity of the Christian inheritance. (193–216).

The whole concept of an unending culture war may seem contradictory. After all, wars are supposed to end. Yet, Christians often speak of spiritual warfare, and there is no end to that. The idea of an unending culture war turns the contemporary understanding of a culture war on its head. Some social scientists, such as James Davison Hunter, argue that the culture war began with the Sexual Revolution, student protests, the emergence of the New Left, and the general anti-traditional character of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> In response to this interpretation, Morris Fiorina insists that there is no culture war because the majority of Americans are in a non-ideological middle ground.<sup>13</sup> Smith's book supports and challenges both narratives, but is generally more aligned with Hunter. On the one hand, Smith agrees with Hunter that there are two clearly defined camps. The United States is divided because the 1960s sparked a renewed clash between these two different value systems. On the other hand, Smith also seems to acknowledge that there is a middle ground in today's culture war. Fiorina, however, misinterprets what the middle ground actually is. Fiorina assumes the middle ground is non-ideological, but Smith points out that the middle ground is simply a collection of individuals torn and divided between certain aspects of Christianity and paganism. A middle

ground only benefits paganism because what is considered to be the middle ground today is much more radical (and pagan) than it was fifty years ago. Thus, the existence of this intense culture war shows a resurgent paganism, but also a Christian faith willing to challenge it.

The idea of an unending culture war may initially depress one's spirit, but it is a cause for hope. If paganism is attractive and sensually alluring, it is all the more impressive that Christianity is entering its third millennia with such a large swarth of adherents on every major continent. Although Christianity is declining in the West, it is expanding throughout the world.<sup>14</sup> Hundreds of millions of individuals are persuaded by its arguments about the true, good, and the beautiful. Moreover, the struggle of this current wave of the culture war allows Christians to partake in the same questions, debates, and answers that their ancestors engaged in generations ago. Old, forgotten books and arguments become new again. Saints and heroes are rediscovered. Passages of Scripture, once ignored, sound electric. Institutions that survived through simple force of habit are renewed with energy. The struggle invigorates Christians, making sure they grapple with the most basic tenets of their faith. And it proves the words of Scripture: "That which has happened once shall happen again; there can be nothing new under the sun" (Eccl 1:9–10).

### Notes

1. The extent to which theologians minimize the differences between religion varies. A very mild version occurs in the final chapter of Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). In Catholicism, Karl Rahner's concept of "the anonymous Christian" flirts with this idea. See the multivolume set of Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

2. Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018). In future references, the page number will be given in the text.

3. Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Penguin, 1960), Books II and III.

4. Jon O'Brien, quoted in Daniel Marans and Laura Bassett, "Nancy Pelosi Is Under Fire For Tolerating Anti-Abortion Democrats," *Huffington Post* May 3, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nancy-pelosi-abortion-rights-democrats\\_n\\_590a44f0e4b05c397685febb](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nancy-pelosi-abortion-rights-democrats_n_590a44f0e4b05c397685febb) (accessed December 22, 2019), emphasis added.

5. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II Q. 30 <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2030.htm> (accessed December 22, 2019).

6. One of the most important testimonies of Christian charity comes from Julian the Apostate, who attempted to re-paganize the Empire after Constantine. He acknowledged that Christians succeeded because of their acts of charity. In response to their evangelization, Julian demanded that pagan priests mimic the Christians. See G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 88.

7. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II Q. 93 <http://newadvent.org/summa/2093.htm> (accessed December 22, 2019).

8. Ellis Sandoz, *A Government of Laws* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); Ellis Sandoz, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), esp. chap. 1.

9. Eleanor Ainge Roy, “New Zealand’s First Pornography Report Finds ‘Problematic’ Account of Coercion” *The Guardian* December 4, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/05/new-zealands-first-pornography-report-finds-problematic-amount-of-coercion?fbclid=IwAR0CIW8SfWNyRGKGRMLo0akIEjSzBck2XW99mzWivMSVULRqY56J0QdMKnk> (accessed December 22, 2019).

10. Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), esp. chap. 2.

11. While he is correct in stating this, his tone is sometimes a little too Protestant.

12. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

13. Morris Fiorina, Samuel J. Abrams, and Jeremy C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of Polarized America*, 3rd edition (New York: Longman, 2010).

14. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).