

Paganism Persisting: A History of European Paganisms Since Antiquity
by Robin Douglas and Francis Young

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Paganism Persisting: A History of European Paganisms since Antiquity sees Robin Douglas and Francis Young forge a new path away from a flawed stalemate: the view that contemporary western paganism is a survival of an unbroken spiritual tradition, and the contrasting perspective that it is a new creation which reimagines ancient religions. Both have been rejected as erroneous elsewhere in the academy, but Douglas and Young offer a carefully considered discussion of the relationship between the Classical paganism of ancient Greece and Rome and various pagan revivals through the major Ages of Europe, up to the present day.

The relationship proposed is this: that paganism, a contested but useful term, is a form of religiosity or a set of religious themes, rather than an assemblage of specific devotional practices and worshipped figures. These themes hold a persistent appeal to communities in Europe and as such have successively re-entered the spotlight, bearing links to prior paganisms and being reshaped again by pressures of the day. Thus, paganism persists both ‘under non-religious forms [...] the vast reservoir of symbols and ideas that made up the legacy of classical culture’ (2), and as ‘bursts of reanimation in which people chose to reactivate it as a fully-fledged belief or practice’ (2).

The book is structured chronologically, each chapter dedicated to an ‘Age’ of European history: Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, the Victorian Era, and finally the emergence of modern paganism. While the authors limit themselves to Europe, and to the influence of the Classical world, their discussion includes

states and polities often overlooked in histories of paganism. For instance, the discussion of Wicca alongside Eastern European and Slavic paganistic spiritualities of nationhood helps situate the latter as just one form of paganism's persistence in the twentieth century. The book contains discussion of many of the usual suspects associated with the history of paganism and occultism, from Francis Dashwood to Percy Bysshe Shelley to Aleister Crowley, as well as some less well-known figures, such as the Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino as well as John Fransham, 'the first person in modern times who can be shown to have embraced paganism as a revived religious system' (101). While each Age and figure is given their own consideration, some key links are highlighted. Notably, the authors claim that once 'the Christian monopoly over European religion had been broken' by the advent of rationalism, 'it was *all but certain* that a sustained pagan revival would get under way' (93). While the Romantic period has been well established as a key point for the development of much of modern paganism's substance, the relevant discussion in *Paganism Persisting* highlights the Enlightenment as an important moment for future pagan revivals and the mass popularity of paganisms that would come to fruition in the twenty-first century: 'modern pagan thought has particular affinities with Enlightenment thought: for example, in the value that it places on "natural" religion and in its anti-authoritarian orientation' (92).

In addition to being a worthwhile contribution to the libraries of researchers and students of paganism, this volume may also serve as a handbook for creators of popular media, who might be inspired by the authors' depiction of the conflict between Christianity and paganisms: they offer a nuanced treatment of the tensions and entanglements between these two modes of religiosity. Indeed, they answer a question I was plagued by as an undergraduate: how could the often-zealous Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages and Renaissance engage so enthusiastically with the overtly pagan philosophy and literature of the Classical world? Douglas and Young argue that the distinction between monotheistic

transcendental Christianity and polytheistic immanent paganism was not as clear cut as readers may be tempted to believe. Instead, both modes of religiosity incorporated or attempted to subsume elements of the other: '[e]ven radical Christian zealots [in the first three centuries of the Current Era, in the Classical world] sometimes had their reasons for borrowing elements from the surrounding pagan culture'.

The impressive selection of primary sources consulted, and the rich tapestry of historical episodes that inform the discussion, are tempered by a forthright style that makes this book both clear and compelling. The authors' outlook is perhaps best summarised by the title of the epilogue – 'Pagan Pasts, Pagan Futures?' – which acts in recognition that the religious mode of paganism holds a persistent fascination to us and is not restricted to any one era or specific revival. The epilogue also hints at the continuing evolution of paganism, which opens space for new scholarship on the subject. In all respects, Douglas and Young treat the subjects of their work with sensitivity as well as sense. The resulting book is also accessible without any loss of academic rigour, and highly enjoyable to read.