What if Rome's Pagan Religion Had Prevailed?
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BOOK REVIEWS

What if Rome's Pagan Religion Had Prevailed?

An persuasive book explores the repercussions of Christianity's ascendency in ancient times

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God against the gods: the history of the War Between Monotheism and Polytheism is the latest from the pen of Jonathan Kirsch, author, journalist and attorney. In this book, Kirsch details the earliest historical conflicts of monotheism and polytheism as they occurred in ancient Europe, North Africa and the Middle East up to the death of Emperor Julian on June 26, 362 ce. His contention is that from its first historical appearance in ancient Egypt, monotheism has been an intolerant belief system. Monotheism's intolerance created conflicts then, and it continues to create conflicts that plague us today. Westerners who take pride in their monotheistic belief's bringing "civilization " to those of polytheistic customs may find Kirsch's analysis sobering and disconcerting.

Over thousands of years, recounts Kirsch, human cultures have worshiped a host of diverse Gods and Goddesses. This polytheistic worship of the Divine, while not totally benign, historically did not create conflict between neighboring peoples. As Symmachus, a pagan governor of the fourth century ce declared, "What does it matter by which wisdom each of us arrives at truth?" (See his entire speech in defense of paganism at http:/www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-10/Npnf2-10-46.htm) With this flexible posture toward worship of the Divine, little conflict would arise between worshipers of different Gods and Goddesses. Kirsch asserts, "The core value of paganism was religious tolerance--a man or woman was at liberty to offer worship to whatever God or Goddess seemed most likely to grant a prayerful request, with or without the assistance of priests and priestesses." However, in a small geographical area of the Western world an event occurred which presaged a change in humans' personal relationship to the Divine. This development would set

in motion what was to become a devastating polarization of enormous proportions--all in the name of divine worship.

In the fourteenth century bce, a young Egyptian pharaoh, Amenhotep IV, through the power of his absolute rule, commanded the Egyptians to worship but one God. This revolutionary move to restrict worship of the Divine to one God would set the stage for what was to become a 3,000 year bloody and acrimonious conflict over how human beings worshiped. "Like Moses [who lived a century later], who is shown in the Christian Bible to condemn the worship of a golden bull and other graven images, Amenhotep rejected all the traditional icons of paganism and chose a simple geometric shape to symbolize the God Aton." Amenhotep repudiated all the Gods and Goddesses in favor of a single God. No idols were fashioned in Aton's image because his was a form that could not be imagined; rather Aton was symbolized by a circle of gold. Amenhotep closed all temples to other deities and had their ritual worship suppressed. Statues were shattered and their names and images literally chiseled off existing monuments. While his radical religious practices were short-lived, the ultraist paradigm shift he initiated would be practiced in the extreme by a legion of believers in this new monotheistic worship.

Monotheism, in its exclusive devotion to the worship of one God, has inspired a ferocity and fanaticism that are mostly absent from polytheism, says Kirsch. He explains, "At the heart of polytheism is an open-minded and easygoing approach to religious belief and practice, a willingness to entertain the idea that there are many Gods and many ways to worship them. At the heart of monotheism, by contrast, is the sure conviction that only a single God exists, a tendency to regard one's own rituals and practices as the only proper way to worship the one true God. The conflict between these two fundamental values is what I call the war of God against the Gods. It is a war that has been fought with heart-shaking cruelty over the last thirty centuries, and is a war that is still being fought today."

In our world today, Islamic tradition is easily targeted as the origin of religious terrorism or religious fanaticism. Kirsch points out, that, to the contrary, "It begins in the pages of the Bible, and the very first examples of holy war and martyrdom are found in Jewish and Christian history. The opening skirmishes in the war of God against the Gods took place in distant biblical antiquity, when Yahweh is shown to decree a holy war against anyone who refuses to acknowledge Him as the one and only God worthy of worship." Biblical myth turned to recorded history with the Maccabeean warfare waged against the pagan Syrian king and later, when the Zealots fought against the pagan emperor of Rome.

Kirsch gives readers the derivation of the word pagan, which helps us understand how truly acrimonious this warfare was in the past and remains today. Derived from the Latin paganus, pagan originally meant someone who was a country bumpkin, or a village dweller. The Roman military used pagan to denote a civilian as distinguished from a soldier ready to fight. Kirsch explains, "The Christian rigorists regarded themselves as soldiers, ready to march forth as crusaders in a holy war, and they characterized anyone who refused to take up arms in the service of the Only True God as a civilian, a slacker, a paganus."

Kirsch also provides readers with the historical usage definition of the word atheist. "Ironically, the word atheist was first used by pagans to describe Christians because they denied the very existence of the Gods and Goddesses whom the pagans so revered. What to Christians was as an act of conscience, the pagan saw as an act of disloyalty and disrespect. All that was required of them was some simple demonstration of their civic virtue."

This rigorism--extreme strictness in enforcing religious belief and practice--was not always expressed through self-discipline or self-affliction. Kirsch explains that rigorism is possible only when men or women become so convinced of their version of truth that it becomes a matter of life or death. "Turning inward, rigorism may inspire a true believer to punish himself by holding back a bowel movement or feeding himself on raw vegetables [examples from hermits of early Christianity]. Turned outward, however, rigorism may inspire the same man or woman to punish others who fail to embrace the religious beliefs that he or she finds so compelling. Rigorism in one's beliefs and practices can readily turn into the kind of zealotry that expresses itself in unambiguous acts of terrorism. The very first use of the word zeal in the Bible is used to describe God's approval of an act of murder, one Israelite murdering another Israelite and his Midianite lover."

In the modern world, rigorism or religious terrorism, inexplicably has been carried out by monotheists against other monotheists--all followers of the Abrahamic religious traditions, Muslims, Jews and Christians. "The worst excesses of the Crusades and the Inquisition were inflicted by Christians on Jews and Muslims, all of whom claimed to believe in the same God. But the first casualties in the war of God against the Gods were found among those tolerant polytheists whom we are taught to call pagans." Rigorists today are found a plenty--Christian fundamentalists who murder physicians who perform abortions, Islamic suicide bombers who murder innocent people in public places, Afghani Taliban extremists who blasted apart the 1,600-year-old Bamiyan Buddhist statues, Catholic and Protestant extremists in Northern Ireland bombing one another--to name only a few.

Kirsch focuses on the reign of Emperor Julian, the last polytheistic emperor of Rome. Historically called "The Apostate " because of his conversion from Christianity to Paganism, Julian issued a tolerance edict in 362 decreeing the reopening of pagan temples and the restitution of temple properties. This was in stark contrast to his predecessor, Constantine I, who legalized Christianity and suppressed paganism. In the end, monotheism's final triumph at the death of Emperor Julian in battle with a Christian army was not so much a spiritual defeat of polytheism, but rather the political success of monotheism. Kirsch states, "They were both driven as much by grudges and grievances as by true belief, and intimate family politics mattered as much as the wars and conspiracies in which they were engaged." Julian's life was ended by a spear thrust two years into the pagan counterrevolution of his reign. Kirsch and other historians have speculated what our world would be like today if Julian had lived and succeeded in "bringing the spirit of respect and tolerance back into Roman government and thus back into the roots of Western civilization, and even more tantalizing to consider how different our benighted world might have been if he had succeeded."

Once in control, Christianity spread across Europe with a vengeance. Kirsch writes of Christian monks who, in the third century ce, "Urged on by the most militant of the bishops, took it upon themselves to search for and destroy any expression of paganism that they could find. They delighted in pulling down altars, smashing statuary and ruining shrines and temples. They set upon any unfortunate man or woman whom they suspected of engaging in pagan rituals of worship."

At the end of Kirsch's book, I was compelled to conclude that little had been accomplished during this 3,000-year conflict of monotheism versus polytheism, which often segued into political gain. And nothing had been gained by the creative and grim techniques of torture, warfare and missionary zeal--usually masquerading as educational opportunity and social aid--to effect change in those whose worship of the Divine was somehow unacceptable. The monotheistic origins of this proclivity Kirsch outlines; yet what readers may ponder is the appalling ferociousness of the killing--all in the name of God. Ending with a chronology of events, a list of major historical figures, bibliographic notes for each chapter and an extensive biography, the book invites readers to research for themselves monotheism's virulent struggle for supremacy over polytheism.

Jonathan Kirsch, God against the Gods--the History of the War between Monotheism and Polytheism, Penguin Putnam Group Publisher, 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014; US$25.95; 336 pages.