

## Book Reviews

*Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, E.R. Dodds, Cambridge: University Press, 1965, Reprinted 1990. 144 pp.

*Pagans and Christians*, Robin Lane Fox, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988. 799 pp.

Because of the resurgence of interest in the world of Late Antiquity, the Wiles Lectures of 1963 have been reprinted for those who, like me, have only recently been exposed to the subject. In his book *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, E.R. Dodds masterfully explores a wide variety of writings from this period which reveal widespread contempt for the human condition by pagans and Christians alike. In spite of these common attitudes, Dodds writes, Christianity prevailed over paganism because it provided both the authoritativeness and the sense of community which paganism was unable to offer. One wonders, however, if Dodds is perhaps too eager to uncover evidence of deep-rooted Freudian guilt-feelings in this age, and if he inadvertently allows the inner thoughts of Marcus Aurelius and Plotinus to overshadow the concerns of the less articulate masses.

Robin Lane Fox, on the other hand, downplays the characterization of the Imperial age as one of anxiety. His monumental work, *Pagans and Christians*, brings to life a world in which Pan still plays his pipes and Homeric gods appear to men. Pagans faithfully heed the oracular advice of Apollo and worship the gods with sacrifices and offerings. Pagan "religiousness," Fox writes, was far from being a dead culture in the second and third centuries. Pagan piety was as strong as the "love of honor" and the intercity rivalry which pushed citizens to dedicate ever more impressive temples and gladiatorial games to their gods.

Fox describes the slow spread of Christianity against this colorful background. In an extensive survey of the historical evidence, he portrays Christians as a distinct minority, comprising perhaps four or five percent

of the Empire's population before the conversion of Constantine. The church of this period is bizarre: converts experience repeated exorcisms while they wait years for baptism; confessed Christians hand out certificates for the forgiveness of sins as they wait in jail to experience the martyrdom that will ensure their places in heaven. Far from being a radical, evangelistic organism, the Christian religion of the second and third centuries was remarkably unobtrusive. Only a minority of Christians strove for perfectionist ideals; the majority continued to sleep in church.

Intermittent persecution came to an end when Constantine set the Empire on the road to Christianization. From that point on, Christians gained dominance by legal privilege, the intrinsic appeal of Christian values, and the growing use of force. But the visitations of the pagan gods did not then cease; post-Constantinian Christian culture accommodated pagan *epiphaneiai*.

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