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## Paganism

Latin *pagani* meant country-dwellers, the rural people whose religious conservatism caused them to cling to old gods and goddesses even when Christianity was well established in cities and among the aristocracy. "It has now been demonstrated that the hostility of the peasantry to Christianity gave the meaning of 'pagan' to *paganus*. This seems to date from the first half of the fourth century and it gradually becomes general in the second half."<sup>1</sup>

"Heathen" came from Germanic *heiden*, that which is hidden, because the church officially forbade the rites of the old deities, and the pagan people continued their rites in secret.<sup>2</sup>

Through the first half of the Christian era, paganism was overt and more or less acceptable. Christianity and paganism existed side by side in uneasy proximity long enough for Christians to take over as many pagan deities, holy places, customs, and holidays as possible. Noting that the people wouldn't accept Christianity unless it could be considered an extension of their paganism, Pope Gregory the Great directed that Christian relics must be placed in the inner shrines of pagan temples, and the people converted gradually to the idea that their deity was a saint instead of an un-Christian spirit.<sup>3</sup> Pagan feast days were to be Christianized. For example, at Christmas the people were to be allowed to sacrifice and eat "a great number of oxen to the glory of God, as they had formerly done to the Devil."<sup>4</sup>

Though the old deities were re-defined as devils, nominal Christians continued to believe in them as firmly as they believed in Christ, if not more so.<sup>5</sup> They were quite willing to consult "devils" for guidance in their daily lives. The Venerable Bede said Redwald, king of the East Saxons, kept in the same temple an altar to offer sacrifices to Christ and another altar to offer sacrifices to "devils."<sup>6</sup> Gothic converts to the church simply added the name of Christ to their own lists of native gods but dropped it with equal readiness if its magic proved ineffective.<sup>7</sup>

This dual religious system persisted even through periods when the "fairy-religion" was persecuted as witchcraft. It could be said that Christianity and paganism co-exist even now, for the greater part of Christian worship, sacraments, and basic theology came from the pagan heritage. "The lamb, the dragon (or serpent), the dove above the altar, the triangle enclosing the all-seeing eye (common to Freemasonry as well), the sacred fish-symbol, the ever-burning fire, or the image of the risen sun upon the receptacle for the consecrated wafer in the Roman Mass, the architectural symbols and the orientation of church and cathedral, the cross itself, and even the colors and designs of the robes of priest and bishop and pope, are a few of the silent witnesses of the survival in the modern Christian churches of the symbolism of paganism."<sup>8</sup> Even such essential doctrines as the virgin birth, Incarnation, Logos, resurrection, salvation, purgatory, baptism, and holy communion were products of paganism, developed many centuries before the Christian era.

Giraldus Cambrensis complained in the 12th century that the people of Ireland were still given over to "old, barbaric and obscene customs."<sup>9</sup> The cult of Diana co-existed with Christianity in Devon as late as the 14th century, when the Goddess was worshipped in woodland shrines even by monks.<sup>10</sup> At Cologne in 1333, Petrarch saw "women conjuring the Rhine" in what was described as "a rite of the people."<sup>11</sup>

The people's religion had been largely in the hands of women since Caesar's day, and so it remained up to the 12th and 13th centuries when active persecution of "witches" began.<sup>12</sup> Martin of Braga, a 6th-century Portuguese missionary father, noted that women not only maintained their own un-Christian temples, but also performed domestic acts of worship like decorating tables, wearing laurels, taking omens, offering bread to water spirits and wine to the Yule log, calling upon Minerva when spinning, and invoking Venus at weddings and on the public road. "What is that but worship of the devil?" he asked. Moreover, he believed in the women's pagan deities himself. He said the rivers, springs, and woods were filled with Lamias, Nymphs, and Dianas; "and they were all malign devils and nefarious spirits."<sup>13</sup>

A 10th-century Penitential tried to forbid women to present their children to Mother Earth at the crossroads in their ancient manner, "for this is great paganism."<sup>14</sup> A 16th-century Finnish bishop observed that "when people fall ill, they seek help from the devil by laying wax figures, candles, squirrel skins and other things on the altars, and on certain days sacrifice sheep and coins."<sup>15</sup> The 9th-century Synod of Rome recorded pagan worship in the churches: "Many people, mostly women, come to church on Sundays and holy days not to attend the Mass but to dance, sing broad songs, and do other such pagan things."<sup>16</sup>

Of course the churches had deliberately lured women by taking over the shrines of their Goddess, with the promise that the rites could continue as usual. Churches were built over shrines of Syrian Astarte at Corbridge in Northumberland, of Diana Nemetona at Bath, and of Sarapis and Mithra at York.<sup>17</sup> At Cangas de Onis, Arrichinaga, and other places in Spain, churches were built around pagan dolmens and sacred mounds, still in existence today.<sup>18</sup> Church processions featured carnival mummers in the masks and costumes of ancient beast-gods, such as the four totems of the pagan sacred year—lion, bull, eagle, and serpent—adopted as symbols of the evangelists.<sup>19</sup> Pagan deities appeared in the very carvings and decorations of churches. As late as 1576 a British church employed workmen to pull down and destroy "sundry superstitious things tending to the maintenance of idolatry."<sup>20</sup>

The Christian church had no holidays of its own; every feast in the Christian calendar was borrowed from the pagans, including Easter

and Christmas. Roman festivals were particularly tenacious, until they had to be given Christian names to excuse the people's continued celebration of them. The Hilaria became the Feast of Annunciation; the Robigalia became the Feast of St. Mark; the Quinquatrus became the Feast of St. Joseph; St. Cyprian's Day replaced the day of Jupiter.<sup>21</sup> "A thousand years ago, old and young assembled in woods or on plains to bring gifts to their gods, and celebrated with dances, games, and offerings the festival of spring, or of awaking and blooming Nature. These celebrations have taken Christian names, but innumerable old heathen rites and customs are still to be found in them."<sup>22</sup>

Christian historians often give an impression that Europe's barbarians welcomed the new faith, which held out a hope of immortality and a more kindly ethic. The impression is false. The people didn't willingly give up the faith of their ancestors, which they considered essential to proper functioning of the earth's cycles. They had their own hope of immortality and their own ethic, in many ways a kinder ethic than that of Christianity which was imposed on them by force.<sup>23</sup> Justinian obtained 70,000 conversions in Asia Minor by methods that were so cruel that the subject populations eventually adopted Islam in order to rid themselves of the rigors of Christian rule.<sup>24</sup>

As a rule, heathen folk resisted Christianity as long as they could, even after their rulers had gone over to the new faith for its material rewards. Louis the Pious baptized a Danish chieftain named Harald Klak, and gave him a large fief on the Weser river, on the understanding that he would convert his people; but the people rejected both Christianity and Harald. In the 10th century, King Haakon of Norway was fiercely opposed when he tried to institute Christianity. His people rebelled, burned the new Christian churches, and forced Haakon to eat the horse-liver sacrifices and drink New Year toasts to Woden, Frey, Bragi, and the totemic clan. Some rulers themselves rejected the new faith out of hand. Alcuin announced in the 8th century that there would never be any hope of Christianizing the Danes. Their king was "harder than a stone and wilder than any beast," and would have none of Rome's God.<sup>25</sup>

Certain words reveal by their derivation some of the opposition met by missionaries. The pagan Savoyards called Christians "idiots," hence *crétin*, "idiot," descended from *Chrétien*, "Christian." German pagans coined the term *bigot*, from *bei Gott*, an expression constantly used by the monks.<sup>26</sup> Christians were the first to insist that there was only one god, and it was theirs. This attitude tended to produce resentment among worshippers of other gods.

The Roman Empire tolerated all religions within its far-flung borders, so long as Rome's official deities received due lip-service, and the deified emperors were properly honored. This policy of religious freedom was soon abandoned by the Roman church, which began to insist that all non-Christian faiths be destroyed; then that even Christians of non-orthodox sects must give up their heretical "errors,"

or die. The beginning of organized Christianity marked the true end of the ancient world's polytheistic freedom of worship. The new Gospels became the sole authority. Other scriptures were burned. Yet, despite all the destruction, there was no real end to paganism.<sup>27</sup> The people remembered it and practiced it throughout the Christian era.

The third Council of Constantinople decreed in the 7th century that the people must stop kindling bonfires and leaping over them on nights of the new moon.<sup>28</sup> St. Eligius wrote: "Let no Christian place lights at the temples, or the stones, or at fountains, or at trees, or enclosures, or at places where three ways meet. . . . Let no one presume to make lustrations, or to enchant herbs, or to make flocks pass through a hollow tree or an aperture in the earth; for by doing so he seems to consecrate them to the devil."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, these activities continued.

In vain the Council of Toledo condemned "worshippers of idols, those who venerate stones, who kindle torches, who celebrate the rites of springs and trees . . . men who go about in the mask of a stag or bull-calf, who dress in the skin of a herd animal, or put on the heads of beasts."<sup>30</sup> At Ephesus, twelve centuries after the time of Christ, ancient fertility rites were still performed though Christian writers reported that "men took delight in unholy things as if they were pious deeds."<sup>31</sup> To the pagans, they were pious deeds.

Slavs never ceased to worship Kupala, the Water-mother Va-kul, Volos the horse god, Yarilo the fertility-savior, and the rest of their pantheon. Bulgarian penitential books tried again and again to abolish worship of the sun and moon—without success. As late as the 18th century, the bishop of Voronezh denounced the "satanic games" connected with the sacrifice of Yarilo; and the Bulgarian monk Spiridon complained that most of his countrymen still worshipped Pyeron the thunder god instead of Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

The old customs were preserved especially by women, who were not welcome in the new church, and preferred paganism for the spiritual authority it could confer on them. A 10th-century Ecclesiastical Canon appealed to fathers, not mothers, to instruct their children in Christian ways. Men must "forbid well-worshippings, necromancies and divinations; enchantments and man-worshippings, and all the other vain practices which are carried out with various spells. . . . And we enjoin that every Christian man zealously accustom his children to Christianity and teach them the Paternoster and the Creed. And we enjoin that on feast-days, they abstain from heathen songs and devil's games."<sup>33</sup>

But the songs and games went on, gradually taking on the guise of secular carnivals, harvest-homes, May dances, Oktoberfests, Midsummer feasts, and so on. Women maintained many of these traditions, not because they were more rebellious than men but because they were more conservative. Priestesses came to be called "witches" by their Christian enemies. "Pagan folk practices and beliefs, whether Greco-

Roman, Teutonic, or Celtic, did not die out with the introduction of Christianity but rather remained and constituted the fundamental substratum of witchcraft."<sup>34</sup>

After centuries of denunciation and suppression, the church found that many pagan ceremonies were too tenacious to be stamped out and had to be assimilated by the Christian system. At the end of the 18th century, Irish clergymen "artfully yielded to the superstitions of the natives, in order to gain and keep up an establishment, grafting Christianity on Pagan rites." Bourne said "The monks, in the dark unlearned ages of Popery, copied after the heathens, and dreamed themselves into the like superstitions."<sup>35</sup> Sometimes Christ and the old gods were incongruously blended, as at a 15th-century temple at Istein dedicated to "Jupiter Christus."<sup>36</sup> To this day, the pagan ceremony of the New Fire is enacted each Easter on Mount Lycabettus, where it used to commemorate the rebirth of Apollo.

Many pagan deities were remade into saints. Others were vaguely Christianized by interpreting them as prophetic figures. "Aesculapius, who suffered death because he had raised the dead, is a type of Christ. . . . Jupiter, changed into a bull and carrying Europa on his back, also typifies Christ, the sacrificial ox who bore the burden of the sin of the world. Theseus who forsook Ariadne for Phaedra prefigures the choice which Christ made between the Church and the Synagogue. Thetis who gave her son Achilles arms with which to triumph over Hector, is no other than the Virgin Mary who gave a body to the Son of God."<sup>37</sup>

With a combination of syncretism, reinterpretation and exegesis, Christianity managed to absorb nearly all of paganism except its Goddess. According to Guignebert:

*Western peoples in the early centuries of the Christian era never really understood the Christian dogmas, nor have they understood them since. The religion which they have constructed upon these dogmas through their own efforts was something different . . . it was cast in formulas ill able to contain it. The Western peoples have, strictly speaking, never been Christians. . . . Bearing the impress only of the Christian legend and nourished upon formulas passively repeated, these men—the vast majority of professed Christians—remained actually pagans, and still do so within the folds of the Catholic commonwealth.<sup>38</sup>*

1. Guignebert, 175. 2. Borchardt, 290. 3. Hitching, 210; Guignebert, 214.  
4. M. Harrison, 139. 5. Coulton, 27. 6. M. Harrison, 42. 7. J.H. Smith, D.C.P., 238.  
8. *Bardo Thodol*, 4. 9. M. Harrison, 181. 10. Lethbridge, 71. 11. Borchardt, 282.  
12. Turville-Petre, 261. 13. J.H. Smith, D.C.P., 238-41. 14. Hitching, 210.  
15. Robbins, 199. 16. J.B. Russell, 75. 17. Squire, 275. 18. Hitching, 216.  
19. Rose, 298. 20. Hazlitt, 335. 21. Rose, 295. 22. Leland, 142.  
23. Campbell, C.M., 390. 24. H. Smith, 228. 25. Oxenstierna, 67-69, 221.  
26. Potter & Sargent, 202. 27. Phillips, 152. 28. Hazlitt, 63. 29. Hitching, 209.  
30. H. Smith, 270. 31. Lawson, 223. 32. *Larousse*, 294; Spinka, 34.  
33. M. Harrison, 143. 34. J.B. Russell, 37. 35. Hazlitt, 336, 374. 36. Borchardt, 117.  
37. Mâle, 339-40. 38. Guignebert, 500, 502.