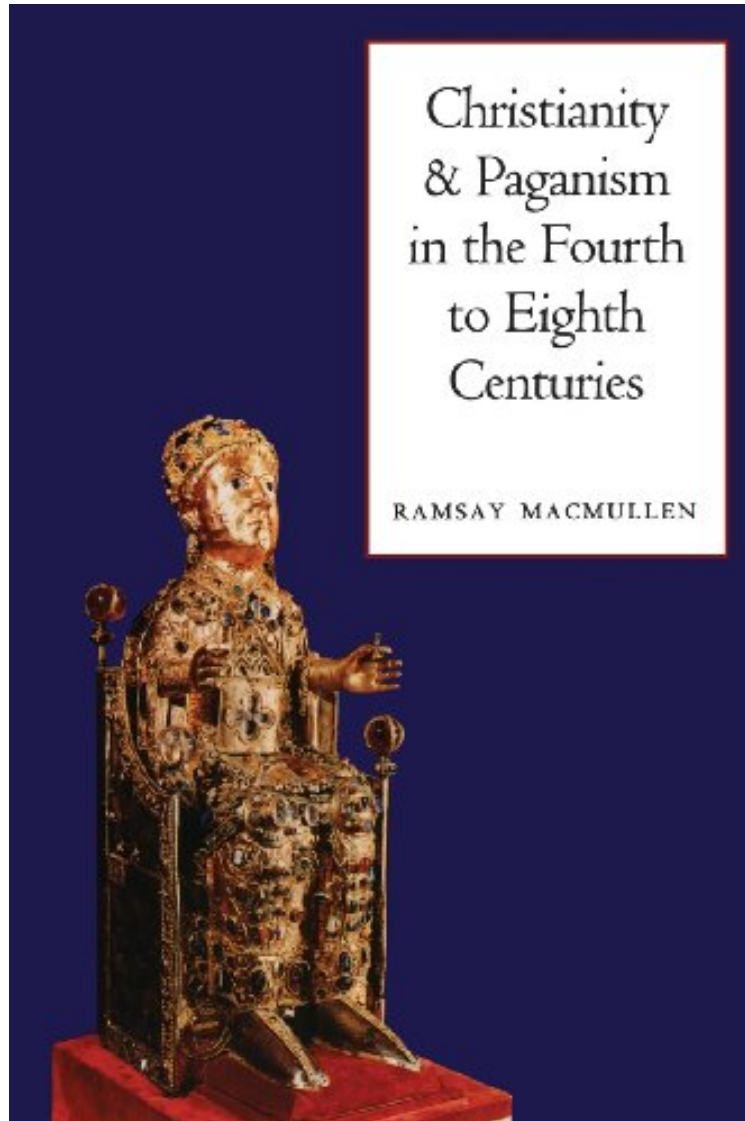


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Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries

Ramsay MacMullen

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#1848792 in Books Ramsay MacMullen 1999-10-11 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.21 x .65 x 6.141, .88 #File Name: 0300080778288 pages Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries | File size: 23.Mb

Ramsay MacMullen : Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries:

46 of 49 people found the following review helpful. Superb research nearly swamped by convoluted prose By D. Cloyce Smith Most readers of religious history are familiar with the pagan roots of Christmas, such as tree candles and the date of the feast itself. In this magnificently researched monograph, MacMullen digs far deeper and finds paganism

lurking in the dimmest corners of Christianity. His book focuses on the first millennium, but even today's Christians (especially Catholics) will recognize many of the rituals and beliefs he discusses. The book is not without controversy. The traditional view has been that, during the century after Constantine's conversion, most of the Roman Empire (and lands beyond) converted to Christianity with wholehearted gusto, and pagan beliefs survived only in remote pockets. Not so, according to the author's overwhelming evidence: paganism had an extremely long half-life. MacMullen also dispenses with the long-held traditional argument that women and slaves converted to Christianity because paganism did not offer them much. (If anything, as he clearly and succinctly shows, the reverse is true.) Furthermore, MacMullen discusses how, beginning in the fourth century, upon subsuming power, Christians dealt with pagans in the traditional (non-Christian) way: they persecuted them with intimidation, torture, forced conversions, and death. Persecutions continued for many centuries, indicating that the underlying pagan culture was indeed very hearty. The problem with the early Church's aggressive approach is obvious: many converts were not true believers, or they didn't quite understand what they were accepting. In addition, the relatively new Christianity, "a religion of the book" that was strong on doctrine, lacked a distinctive culture or the ability to satisfy everyday needs and desires (whether worldly or supernatural). Still, the Christian elites--the educated or the anointed--placed far more faith in the supernatural (God) than did their pagan predecessors, who viewed the reliance on superstition (gods) as a crutch for the lower, especially rural, classes. This difference ironically gave Christianity an advantage: believers at both ends of the social spectrum, from bishops to peasants, looked to the supernatural for explanations of everyday occurrences, from the weather to illness to death. Thus, many pagan rituals provided the basis for Christian traditions: offerings to the gods became cults of the saints, pagan feasts became Christian festivals, etc. As Jerome acknowledged, in MacMullen's paraphrase: "better, worship of the saints in the pagan manner than none at all." MacMullen marshals an impressive parade of evidence, both in the text (only 160 pages) and in the notes and bibliography (which occupy only slightly less space). Unlike most scholars, he entirely avoids unfamiliar terminology and spices his treatise with glib comments and wry witticisms--it's been a long time since I've chuckled while reading a scholarly monograph. Unfortunately (alas, like most scholars), MacMullen is just not a very good writer. Perfectly lucid passages alternate with sentences that resemble very rough lecture notes. He has an aversion to direct statement and a fondness for pronouns that will send the most alert reader hunting for an antecedent. A not atypical sentence: "Within tradition, what lacked any supporting scripture or even any conscious reason they might think foolish; but they accepted it as harmless." "They," whose antecedent appears three sentences previous, refers to pagan civic leaders. Even armed with this discovery, most readers will find this sentence difficult, I wager. Other sentences are backwards for no good reason: "But in the ideas and rites just described a large area of new loyalties opened up." And, finally, there are run-on sentences of such length that a lethal dose of caffeine is required to follow the sense from beginning to end. Such idiosyncratic sentence structures might be amusing affectations when used sparingly, but their overuse in this volume is frustrating and unnecessary. It's too bad that MacMullen isn't kinder to his readers. Although the book is certainly meant for a scholarly audience, it contains little material that wouldn't be within reach of interested readers outside the academy. (Even professional historians must tire of such sloppiness.) Nevertheless, if you're willing to slog through tortuous prose, you'll find treasures on every page.

9 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Why Pagans converted to Christianity -- after Constantine
By John Harrison
Continues the story of MacMullen's "Christianizing the Roman Empire" with a solid scholarly look at the reasons Pagans converted to Christianity in the period after Christianity took over the central government of the Roman Empire. Christian Roman Emperors outlawed Pagan ceremonies, taxed Pagan temples, and gave Christian Romans preferences in official advancement. By the end of this period everyone was Christian and the Empire was gone. By a famous Yale historian, an essential text for serious students. Highly recommended. And like everything MacMullen writes, it is hard to read.

8 of 12 people found the following review helpful. The History Christianity Never Told
By Hrafnkell Haraldsson
This is a very important book, one that every student of religious history should read. Ramsay MacMullen has undertaken the task of speaking on behalf of a people who were not allowed to speak for themselves: the pagans of the Roman Empire. He points out that the focus of history has been on Christianity; after all, Christians wrote the histories of that era. But he notes as well that the estimates on Christian numbers by Tertullian and Eusebius are "manifestly absurd", an expression "of the authors' zeal and their sense of the distance traveled by their church since the first century." What this amounts to, in MacMullen's view, is that "the Christians, not only in their triumphant exaggerations but in their sheer bulk, today, seriously misrepresent the true proportions of religious history." Orthodox Christianity was not interested in voices raised in protest. What were seen as heretical writings were burned, as were non-Christian texts and "copyists were discouraged from replacing them by the threat of having their hands cut off." And Christianity's own historians were not interested in giving a balanced accounting of events. MacMullen comments that Eusebius "disclaimed the telling of the whole truth. Rather, he proposed to limit his account to 'what may be of profit.'" This book attempts to set the record straight. MacMullen notes that previously scholars had thought that paganism had been defeated by the end of the fourth century and all converted to the new faith. This is not true, he tells us. "Stain Augustine did not live in a Christian world" he says and in the book's five chapters proceeds to demonstrate the truth of this assertion. We see that paganism of the late Roman Empire was alive and well. "It used to be thought that, at the end, the eradication of

paganism really required no effort" and that paganism had become a hollow husk. "But historians seem now to have abandoned this interpretation...The real vitality of paganism is instead recognized; and to explain its eventual fate what must also be recognized is an opposing force, an urgent one, determined on its extinction." And we see the extreme measures to which Christianity was willing to resort to stamp out all opposition: fines, confiscation, exile, imprisonment, flogging, torture, beheading, and crucifixion. "What more could be imagined? Nothing. The extremes of conceivable pressure were brought to bear." Nor was this violence restricted to pagans. Speaking of the fourth century, MacMullen says "more Christians died for their faith at the hands of fellow Christians than had died before in all the persecutions." Like Pagans and Christians before it, Christianity Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries must be read for the truth of the past to be understood. The facts have for long been misrepresented and misunderstood, and MacMullen brushes these obstructions away with a masterful hand to reveal the vibrancy of a pagan world scholarship has long consigned to oblivion. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

The slaughter of animals for religious feasts, the tinkling of bells to ward off evil during holy rites, the custom of dancing in religious services these and many other pagan practices persisted in the Christian church for hundreds of years after Constantine proclaimed Christianity the one official religion of Rome. In this book, Ramsay MacMullen investigates the transition from paganism to Christianity between the fourth and eighth centuries. He reassesses the triumph of Christianity, contending that it was neither tidy nor quick, and he shows that the two religious systems were both vital during an interactive period that lasted far longer than historians have previously believed. MacMullen explores the influences of paganism and Christianity upon each other. In a rich discussion of the different strengths of the two systems, he demonstrates that pagan beliefs were not eclipsed or displaced by Christianity but persisted or were transformed. The victory of the Christian church, he explains, was one not of obliteration but of widening embrace and assimilation. This fascinating book also includes new material on the Christian persecution of pagans over the centuries through methods that ranged from fines to crucifixion; the mixture of motives in conversion; the stubbornness of pagan resistance; the difficulty of satisfying the demands and expectations of new converts; and the degree of assimilation of Christianity to paganism.