THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAGANISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY
EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA
AND THE CONCEPT OF PAGANISM

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Abstract

In scholarship the term ‘paganism’ is often rejected on the grounds that it reflects Christian attempts to project a false unity onto the variety of ancient religions. Although this is true to a certain extent, this paper argues that philosophers of the imperial age already ascribed a fundamental unity to all religions, and that Christian apologists drew on these ideas to formulate their own concept of ‘paganism’. The creation of paganism should thus been seen as a dialectical process, not as a one-sided projection.

INTRODUCTION: ‘PAGANISM’

It is received wisdom that the term ‘paganism’ should only be used between inverted commas. The reason for this can be summarised as follows. Invented by Christianity in an attempt to systematise and dismiss the loosely-knit amalgam of traditional Graeco-Roman and new Oriental cults, the concept conveys, as we all know, a wrong impression of coherence and unity to what are in reality the pluralist religions of Greece and Rome.1 Using the term in modern research equals treading in the footsteps of the Christian apologists who were trying to root out the venom of pagan superstition, and doing so merely perpetuates error and deformation.2 Admittedly, we witness in Late Antiquity attempts by philosophers like Macrobius and Proclus to adumbrate some kind of system in their traditional beliefs, but these
