Christopher P. Jones


The real strength of Jones’s latest book lies in its deft synthesis of familiar ideas and events from Late Antiquity, with the insight it provides into those areas of pagan and Christian relations that have survived for too long in the scholarly shadows. In this way, *Between Pagan and Christian* can be read profitably by both neophytes and established scholars of late antique religion. Its readable style, its accessible treatment of core topics, and its apposite selection of illustrations make it a welcome addition to the collection of books on ancient religions presently “tumbl[ing] from the presses” (p. xiii). Two notoriously thorny topics form the heart of Jones’s book. On the one hand, Jones proposes to investigate the extent to which the paganism of the late antique world was a “construction” by its (predominantly Christian) opponents; and, on the other, to explore the conceptual space between Christianity and paganism (hence the book’s title) in the context of the traditions and ideas shared between the two faiths. The book promises, therefore, to explore the twin poles of alterity (its conception and application), and appropriation (the symbiotic relationship between pagans and Christians) as mechanisms for understanding relations between the two traditions. While discussion of these conceptual concerns is not sustained across all chapters, and there is a fair amount of essentialising in evidence in Jones’s handling of both pagan and Christian identities, the result is a thoughtful and insightful survey of the topic.

The reader of Jones’s book will find eleven chapters plus an Appendix tackling the religious identity of Macrobius. A good number of chapters take as their starting point what we may call the conventional concerns of this topic. Thus, there are chapters looking at definitions of paganism (Chapter 1, “The Perception of Paganism”), the emergent imperial identity of Christianity in the fourth century (Chapter 2, “Constantine”), contrasting conceptions of the
divine between Christians and pagans (Chapter 4, “God and other Divinities”), and the transfer of religious allegiances across traditions (Chapter 8, “Conversion”). Less familiar topics include a very welcome chapter on ritual (Chapter 6, “Sacrifice, Blood, and Prayer”), the treatment of which by late antique scholars is still woefully patchy. This chapter is followed immediately by a discussion of the ongoing literary debate between elite pagans and Christians concerning the respective merits of their own faiths, and the failings of their opponents. Again, this is welcome in light of an emergent interest in the nature and purpose of literary, philosophical, and religious dialogues in the ancient world. It is especially insightful that Jones emphasises the role of epistolography as a “genre much closer to observable actuality than dialogue” (p. 82). I found this chapter to be among the most interesting of the book. It contains a lively discussion of some less well-known figures, including Isidore of Pelusium (whose letters still await a modern edition, and a complete literary and historical analysis), Nilus of Ancyra, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus. Another genuine strength of the book is Jones’s attention to the development of his themes across a chronological spectrum, beginning in the first century and running up to the emergence of proto-Islam in the seventh and eighth. While a charge of superficiality could be levelled at this approach, it is Jones’s abilities as a writer which mean that it is the perenniality of his themes – the same issues arising across these periods – which characterise the book’s analysis. This fact alone makes Between Pagan and Christian essential reading for all students wishing to become familiar with the character of late antique culture. Two chapters look – albeit in a cursory manner – at the “persistence” of pagan religion(s) and beliefs, and the correlative limits of christianization in “The West” (Chapter 9), and “The East” (Chapter 10), the latter of which contains a short but important survey of Aphrodisias in Caria.

There will inevitably be some shortcomings in a book of this size and purpose. For example, in terms of appreciating the genuine complexities involved in handling pagan and Christian relations, I would have liked to have seen a more detailed discussion of religious identity, presented either as a separate chapter, or as a theme running across chapters. In light of the book’s title, I was expecting to read more about identity formation and the blurring of religious identities in the period than is offered here. For example, the potential case-study offered by late antique Gnosticism in terms in tackling concepts such as alterity and appropriation in light of the complex nature of gnostic identities and texts, many of which disclose pagan, Jewish, and Christian influences, is very great. I was surprised to find little or no discussion of gnostic religion in Jones’s book, especially since research into gnostic, hermetic, and Manichaean traditions has come on leaps and bounds in the last twenty years. In this sense,