

benefit from a thorough look into pantheistic ideas in Greek religion. This volume certainly paves the way for that project and it is recommended to anyone interested in the relationship between religion, myths and nature.

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MATTIAS P. GASSMAN: *Worshippers of the Gods: Debating Paganism in the Fourth-Century Roman World*. Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity. Oxford University Press, New York 2020. ISBN 978-0-19-008244-4. XI, 236 pp. GBP 55.

The religious and intellectual milieu of Late Antique Rome in the fourth century has increasingly been the focus of classical scholars during the last couple of decades. The Christianization process of the Roman Empire, in particular, has fascinated numerous scholars. Some scholars tend to emphasize religious toleration and the pluralism of the period between the reigns of Emperor Constantine and Emperor Theodosius, while others see conflict and competition. Such concepts as 'pagan revival' and 'pagan resistance' have had a long life in classical scholarship. In recent scholarship, the Christianization of the Roman Empire has been seen as a long process of accommodation. There were religious tensions and even violence, but 'pagans' and Christians were no longer obvious enemies. Social class, tradition and shared values united them despite the religious differences.

In his monograph Mattias P. Gassman focuses on definitions of religion and, in particular, on views of traditional polytheistic religion in Late Antique texts. One central theme of his book is the range of attitudes of Roman emperors to traditional cults, going into greater detail with texts by Lactantius, Firmicus Maternus, Symmachus, Ambrosius, Praetextatus and Paulina. The book is chronologically structured, beginning with the tetrarchic era and ending at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries. Gassman first analyses some essential concepts he uses throughout his book, such as 'religion' and 'paganism', the latter being defined as an artificial structure created by Christian authors in the course of the fourth century. He also pays attention to the division created by Franz Cumont in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century between 'traditional Roman religion' and 'oriental mystery cults'. This division has been much criticized and largely abandoned by scholars of Roman religion during the past few decades. Such a division can obviously not be seen in Late Antiquity.

Gassman starts by analysing the earliest author of his study, Lactantius. Lactantius is an interesting example, since he started his career as a teacher of rhetoric during the reign of Diocletian, when he converted to Christianity, and he wrote his most important works after the tetrarchic period,

during the reign of Constantine. Gassman focuses on Lactantius' description of traditional Roman religion in his major work, *Divinae institutiones*. He argues that even though the *Divinae institutiones* is primarily an apologetic text that defends Christianity, Lactantius does not simply disapprove of pagan cults but tries to explain their origins and development. Thus, Lactantius' work is the first Christian text in Latin to study the history of pagan religion thoroughly.

Analysing texts by Firmicus Maternus, Gassman moves on to discuss the relationship of emperors to traditional Roman religion after Constantine. Gassman also pays attention to Firmicus' extensive astrological manual, but focuses primarily on his polemical text *De errore profanarum religionum*, which he characterizes as being openly hostile towards polytheistic religion. Gassman argues that Firmicus develops a new method of polemicizing against pagans by representing Christianity and traditional polytheistic religion as opposed ritual and theological systems. Gassman sees the effect of Firmicus' background as an astrologer in his views on religion. Polytheistic religion – 'profane religion' – is the Devil's work and the many gods are the Devil's offspring. Firmicus appeals to the emperors to destroy the remnants of traditional pagan religion.

In Chapter 3, Gassman first discusses a short anti-pagan polemic written by an anonymous Christian author in an extensive collection of theological texts, dating from the 370s or the 390s. The author is usually called Ambrosiaster. Gassman considers this text to be extraordinary in its systematic vision of polytheism and its use of the new terminology of *paganitas*. Gassman parallels the texts by Firmicus Maternus and Ambrosiaster with some contemporary pagan inscriptions. More specifically, he discusses taurobolium inscriptions found in the area of the so-called Phrygianum, the cult site of Magna Mater and Attis in front of the present-day basilica of St Peter in Rome. These inscriptions represent the religious interests of the pagan senatorial aristocracy who tended to participate in several cults and hold several priesthoods at the same time. Gassman compares this new religiosity of the senatorial aristocracy to the systematized pagan religion defined by Firmicus Maternus and Ambrosiaster.

The latter part of Gassman's monograph is dedicated to two well-known, basically pagan cases. The first is the famous dispute concerning the altar of Victoria, which was ordered by the Emperor Gratianus to be removed from the House of the Senate in 382. The removal of the altar had a huge symbolic significance. As Gassman puts it, this act meant that the wellbeing of the Roman state and its rulers no longer depended on traditional religion. The pagan-minded senators were opposed to the new imperial legislation that was hostile towards polytheistic religion and they sent embassies to the imperial court concerning this matter up until the 390s. Gassman analyses texts by both pagan and Christian elite members that refer to this affair, focusing primarily on Ambrose and Symmachus, who both tried to influence the religious policy of the emperor. Gassman examines the ways in which spokesmen from two different institutions, the Christian church and the Roman senate,

presented traditional Roman religion to the emperor. This discussion is one of the most interesting sections in Gassman's book, even though the affair of the altar of Victoria is widely discussed and we do not know on what grounds the decisions concerning this case were eventually made in the imperial court. Gassman points out that the influence of Ambrose and Symmachus may not have been as strong as their rhetorical texts suggest. Gassman offers a new reading of Symmachus' text by arguing that it was not in fact an appeal for religious toleration, or for the equality of Christianity and paganism, but for the restoration of the status quo before the anti-pagan actions of the emperors.

The last major example of the religious attitudes of pagans and Christians in fourth-century Rome that Gassman discusses is the memory of the influential and respected pagan senator Vettius Agorius Praetextatus. He examines the various ways in which the members of the Roman elite – pagans and Christians – reacted to Praetextatus' death and the different attitudes to traditional religion and religion in general that these reactions reveal. There were various attitudes to religious matters not only among Christians but also among pagans. Both epigraphic and literary sources concerning Praetextatus' commemoration do exist. Among the inscriptions analysed by Gassman there are honorary inscriptions by Vestals and by Paulina, Praetextatus' widow. Gassman's analysis of the criticism expressed by Symmachus against the actions of the Vestals might well have benefitted from a slightly wider view on the role of Vestals in imperial Rome. Furthermore, a gender perspective might have been useful in discussing Paulina's activities, even if gender is not the focus of the book. Is it, ultimately, Paulina's genuine voice we hear in the epitaph she erected to her late husband, or a combination of social norms and expectations and her personal emotions? In any case, the competition between various actors about managing the memory of Praetextatus is a fascinating topic. Gassman argues that the competing religious views and political strategies of the pagan senators suggest that polytheistic religion still played a significant role in the increasingly Christian Rome of the late fourth century.

Gassman claims that the objective of his book is to shed light on the multiplicity of discourses concerning traditional polytheistic Roman religion, both among Christians and pagans. Gassman succeeds well in his objective by providing the reader with a nuanced analysis of rich material. It is a collection of five case studies, but the reader may well ask why Julian's reign is omitted or why Augustine is referred to only briefly. However, overall Gassman offers convincing new readings of his sources and a multifaceted interpretation of the complexity of religious discourses during the fourth century.

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