

If few Fundamentalists know the history of their religion—which distressingly few do—even fewer have an appreciation of the history of the Catholic Church. They become easy prey for purveyors of fanciful “histories” that claim to account for the origin and advance of Catholicism.

Anti-Catholics often suggest that Catholicism did not exist prior to the Edict of Milan, which was issued in 313 AD and made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. With this, pagan influences began to contaminate the previously untainted Christian Church. In no time, various inventions adopted from paganism began to replace the gospel that had been once for all delivered to the saints. At least, that is the theory.

PAGAN INFLUENCE FALLACY

Opponents of the Church often attempt to discredit Catholicism by attempting to show similarities between it and the beliefs or practices of ancient paganism. This fallacy is frequently committed by Fundamentalists against Catholics, by Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and others against both Protestants and Catholics, and by atheists and skeptics against both Christians and Jews.

The nineteenth century witnessed a flowering of this “pagan influence fallacy.” Publications such as *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop (the classic English text charging the Catholic Church with paganism) paved the way for generations of antagonism towards the Church. During this time, entire new sects were created (Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses)—all considering traditional Catholicism and Protestantism as polluted by paganism. This era also saw atheistic “free-thinkers” such as Robert Ingersoll writing books attacking Christianity and Judaism as pagan.

The pagan influence fallacy has not gone away in the twentieth century, but newer archaeology and more mature scholarship have diminished its influence. Yet there are still many committing it. In Protestant circles, numerous works have continued

to popularize the claims of Alexander Hislop, most notably the comic books of Jack Chick and the book *Babylon Mystery Religion* by the young Ralph Woodrow (later Woodrow realized its flaws and wrote *The Babylon Connection?* repudiating it and refuting Hislop). Other Christian and quasi-Christian sects have continued to charge mainstream Christianity with paganism, and many atheists have continued to repeat—unquestioned—the charges of paganism leveled by their forebears.

USE OF A ROUND WAFER IMPLIES SUN WORSHIP?

Hislop and Chick argue that the wafers of Communion are round, just like the wafers of the sun worshippers of Baal. They don’t bother to mention that the wafers used by the same pagans were also ovals, triangles, some with the edges folded over, or shaped like leaves or animals, etc. The fact that a wafer is round does not make it immoral or pagan, since even the Jews had wafers and cakes offered in the Old Testament (Gen. 18:1-8, Ex 29:1-2).

Unfortunately for Chick and other Fundamentalists, their arguments backfire. An atheist will take the pagan connection one step further, saying, “Christianity itself is simply a regurgitation of pagan myths: the incarnation of a divinity from a virgin, a venerated mother and child, just like Isis and Osiris, Isa and Iswara, Fortuna and Jupiter, and Semiramis and Tammuz. Beyond this, some pagans had a trine God, and pagan gods were often pictured with wings, as was your God in Psalms 91:4. The flames on the heads of the apostles were also seen as an omen from the gods in Roman poetry and heathen myths long before Pentecost. A rock is struck that brings forth water in the Old Testament . . . just like the pagan goddess Rhea did long before then. Also, Jesus is known as the ‘fish,’ just like the fish-god Dagon, etc.” Unless the Fundamentalists are willing to honestly examine the logical fallacies and historical inaccuracies, they are left defenseless. Fortunately, like the attacks on Catholicism in particular, all of the supposed parallels mentioned above self-

destruct when examined with any scholarly rigor. If not guilty of historical inaccuracies, they all are guilty of what can be called “pagan influence fallacies.”

ANYTHING CAN BE ATTACKED USING FALLACY

The pagan influence fallacy is committed when one charges that a particular religion, belief, or practice is of pagan origin or has been influenced by paganism and is therefore false, wrong, tainted, or to be repudiated. In this minimal form, the pagan influence fallacy is a subcase of the genetic fallacy, which improperly judges a thing based on its history or origins rather than on its own merits (e.g., “No one should use this medicine because it was invented by a drunkard and adulterer”).

Very frequently, the pagan influence fallacy is committed in connection with other fallacies, most notably the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (“After this, therefore because of this”) fallacy—e.g., “Some ancient pagans did or believed something millennia ago, therefore any parallel Christian practices and beliefs must be derived from that source.” Frequently, a variant on this fallacy is committed in which, as soon as a parallel with something pagan is noted, it is assumed that the pagan counterpart is the more ancient. This variant might be called the *similis hoc ergo propter hoc* (“Similar to this, therefore because of this”) fallacy.

When the pagan influence fallacy is encountered, it should be pointed out that it is, in fact, a fallacy. To help make this clear to a religious person committing it, it may be helpful to illustrate with cases where the pagan influence fallacy could be committed against his own position (e.g., the practice of circumcision was practiced in the ancient world by a number of peoples—including the Egyptians—but few Jews or Christians would say that its divinely authorized use in Israel was an example of “pagan corruption”).

To help a secular person see the fallacy involved, one might point to a parallel case of the genetic fal-

lacy involving his co-religionists (e.g., “Nobody should accept this particular scientific theory because it was developed by an atheist”).

Whenever one encounters a proposed example of pagan influence, one should demand that its existence be properly documented, not just asserted. The danger of accepting an inaccurate claim is too great. The amount of misinformation in this area is great enough that it is advisable never to accept a reported parallel as true unless it can be demonstrated from primary source documents or through reliable, scholarly secondary sources. After receiving documentation supporting the claim of a pagan parallel, one should ask a number of questions:

1. Is there a parallel? Frequently, there is not. The claim of a parallel may be erroneous, especially when the documentation provided is based on an old or undisclosed source.

For example: “The Egyptians had a trinity. They worshiped Osiris, Isis, and Horus, thousands of years before the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were known” (Robert Ingersoll, *Why I Am an Agnostic*). This is not true. The Egyptians had an Ennead—a pantheon of nine major gods and goddesses. Osiris, Isis, and Horus were simply three divinities in the pantheon who were closely related by marriage and blood (not surprising, since the Ennead itself was an extended family) and who figured in the same myth cycle. They did not represent the three persons of a single divine being (the Christian understanding of the Trinity). The claim of an Egyptian trinity is simply wrong. There is no parallel.

2. Is the parallel dependent or independent? Even if there is a pagan parallel, that does not mean that there is a causal relationship involved. Two groups may develop similar beliefs, practices, and artifacts totally independently of each other. The idea that similar forms are always the result of diffusion from a common source has long been rejected by archaeology and anthropology, and for very good reason: Humans are similar to each other and live in similar (i.e., terrestrial) environments, leading them to have similar cultural artifacts and views.

For example, Fundamentalists have made much

of the fact that Catholic art includes Madonna and Child images and that non-Christian art, all over the world, also frequently includes mother and child images. There is nothing sinister in this. The fact is that, in every culture, there are mothers who hold their children! Sometimes this gets represented in art, including religious art, and it especially is used when a work of art is being done to show the motherhood of an individual. Mother-with child-images do not need to be explained by a theory of diffusion from a common, pagan religious source (such as Hislop's suggestion that such images stem from representations of Semiramis holding Tammuz). One need look no further than the fact that mothers holding children is a universal feature of human experience and a convenient way for artists to represent motherhood.

3. Is the parallel antecedent or consequent? Even if there is a pagan parallel that is causally related to a non-pagan counterpart, this does not establish which gave rise to the other. It may be that the pagan parallel is a late borrowing from a non-pagan source. Frequently, the pagan sources we have are so late that they have been shaped in reaction to Jewish and Christian ideas. Sometimes it is possible to tell that pagans have been borrowing from non-pagans. Other times, it cannot be discerned who is borrowing from whom (or, indeed, if anyone is borrowing from anyone).

For example: The ideas expressed in the Norse *Elder Edda* about the end and regeneration of the world were probably influenced by the teachings of Christians with whom the Norse had been in contact for centuries (H. A. Guerber, *The Norsemen*, 339f).

4. Is the parallel treated positively, neutrally, or negatively? Even if there is a pagan parallel to a non-pagan counterpart, that does not mean that the item or concept was enthusiastically or uncritically accepted by non-pagans. One must ask how they regarded it. Did they regard it as something positive, neutral, or negative?

For example: Circumcision and the symbol of the cross might be termed "neutral" Jewish and Christ-

ian counterparts to pagan parallels. It is quite likely that the early Hebrews first encountered the idea of circumcision among neighboring non-Jewish peoples, but that does not mean they regarded it as a religiously good thing for non-Jews to do. Circumcision was regarded as a religiously good thing only for Jews because for them it symbolized a special covenant with the one true God (Gen. 17). The Hebrew scriptures are silent in a religious appraisal of non-Jewish circumcision; they seemed indifferent to the fact that some pagans circumcised.

Similarly, the early Christians who adopted the cross as a symbol did not do so because it was a pagan religious symbol (the pagan cultures which use it as a symbol, notably in East Asia and the Americas, had no influence on the early Christians). The cross was used as a Christian symbol because Christ died on a cross—his execution being regarded as a bad thing in itself, in fact, an infinite injustice—but one from which he brought life for the world. Christians did not adopt it because it was a pagan symbol they liked and wanted to copy.

Examples of negative parallels are often found in Genesis. For instance, the Flood narrative (Gen. 6-9) has parallels to pagan flood stories, but is written so that it refutes ideas in them. Thus Genesis attributes the flood to human sin (6:5-7), not overpopulation, as *Atrahasis' Epic* and the Greek poem *Cypria* did (I. Kikawada & A. Quinn). The presence of flood stories in cultures around the world does not undermine the validity of the biblical narrative, but lends it more credence.

Criticism, refutation, and replacement are also the principles behind modern holidays being celebrated to a limited extent around the same time as former pagan holidays. In actuality, reports of Christian holidays coinciding with pagan ones are often inaccurate (Christmas does not occur on Saturnalia, for example). However, to the extent the phenomenon occurs at all, Christian holidays were introduced to provide a wholesome, non-pagan alternative celebration, which thus critiques and rejects the pagan holiday.

This is the same process that leads Fundamental-

ists who are offended at the (inaccurately alleged) pagan derivation of Halloween to introduce alternative "Reformation Day" celebrations for their children. (This modern Protestant holiday is based on the fact that the Reformation began when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517.) Another Fundamentalist substitution for Halloween has been "harvest festivals" that celebrate the season of autumn and the gathering of crops. These fundamentalist substitutions are no more "pagan" than the celebrations of days or seasons that may have been introduced by earlier Christians.

HISTORICAL TRUTH PREVAILS

Ultimately, all attempts to prove Catholicism "pagan" fail. Catholic doctrines are neither borrowed from the mystery religions nor introduced from pagans after the conversion of Constantine. To make a charge of paganism stick, one must be able to show more than a similarity between something in the Church and something in the non-Christian world. One must be able to demonstrate a legitimate connection between the two, showing clearly that one is a result of the other, and that there is something wrong with the non-Christian item.

In the final analysis, nobody has been able to prove these things regarding a doctrine of the Catholic faith, or even its officially authorized practices. The charge of paganism just doesn't work.

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Anti-Catholicism

IS CATHOLICISM PAGAN?

