

Book Review

John Daniel Davidson, *Pagan America: The Decline of Christianity and the Dark Age to Come* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2024), xxii, 344 pp. \$29.99

Reviewed by Tony Seel

IN THE NORTH END OF BOSTON, in August, the Feast of St. Anthony is celebrated with city blocks closed off for parades and street vendors. Five parades, one for each day of the festival, are conducted on public streets. This kind of celebration is commended by John Daniel Davidson in *Pagan America: The Decline of Christianity and the Dark Age to Come*. Davidson looks at our current situation in the United States and foresees darker days ahead for the church and nation. As the author says in the Introduction, “As Christianity fades in America, so too will our system of government, our civil society, and all our rights and freedoms” (xiii). That’s a bold statement that will take strong support to stand.

In ten chapters, Davidson develops his thesis, beginning with the Viking Age in chapter one. In the second half of the tenth century, Harald Bluetooth, king over Denmark and Norway, converted to Christianity. He worked to turn Denmark from the pagan ways of earlier generations. Beginning in 1934, archaeologists uncovered fortresses in Denmark and Norway built over the remains of animals and young children. Later archaeological findings confirmed that from the sixth century to the eleventh century, pagan sacrifices were made in a number of locations in Northern Europe.

Davidson moves his narrative to Tenochtitlan, a place founded in the 14th century as the capitol of the Aztec Empire. In the three years of 1519 to 1521, Hernan Cortes was able to end the reign of the Aztecs and their practices of human sacrifice “that far surpassed what even the most pious Viking pagans undertook” (6). What was the motive for this undertaking? “Yes, Cortes sought Aztec gold, but he also sincerely sought the conversion of the indigenous peoples to the Catholic faith” (11).

His third example of pagan barbarism is found in Benin, Africa where “ritual human sacrifice” was performed as late as 1897, the remains of which were discovered by a British army unit there after the massacre of Brits on a trade mission in Benin (13). The British military force found “Crucifixion, mutilation, and ritual slaughter of every conceivable kind were at the center of their religion, which they practiced right to the bitter, horrifying end” (17). The British forces were able to end these practices.

In all three instances, in northern Europe, in what is now Mexico, and in Africa, the Christian faith vanquished pagan beliefs and practices. In a fourth instance, in

8th century Germany, Boniface, a Benedictine monk, did what others had done earlier and since—he brought Christianity to formerly pagan lands. Boniface is the model to which Davidson returns in later pages.

The paganism found in the instances cited above follows after the paganism described in the Christian Bible. From the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament, paganism flourished. Davidson observes,

In the eyes of both the ancient Israelites and later the New Testament writers and early Christians, the casting down of the devil and the rebellious angels, and their subsequent authority over the various nations of the world, is the source of all pagan religion (26).

With the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and His followers, we enter another struggle against pagan forces. For Christ and His followers, it was first the paganism of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire, before the influence of Christianity, practiced infanticide, sexual immorality (as understood from the perspective of Christian morality), and cruelty to the weak, the poor, and anyone who lacked power or authority. It was the Christian faith that drew the Roman Empire away from pagan worship and other practices that had been the hallmark of the Empire prior to Constantine's conversion.

Tom Holland's massive work, *Dominion*, is another exhibit of the author's portrayal of the pagan world before Christianity.¹ Holland had left the Christian faith that he was raised with at the time of his writing *Dominion*. Even so, he could not deny the power of the Christian faith. In *Dominion*, he writes,

Secularism owes its existence to the medieval papacy. Humanism derives ultimately from the claims of the Bible: that humans are made in God's image; that his Son died equally for everyone; that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Repeatedly, like a great earthquake, Christianity has sent reverberations across the world.²

Davidson comments: "secularism, toleration, freedom of choice, consent, equality: all of these are inheritances of Christendom" (40). Applying this insight, he says:

In America, a country founded explicitly on Christian ideals and dependent on a civic culture forged by Christian morality, the post-Christian era will bring a life-or-death struggle for the republic and our constitutional system (43).

This struggle is the primary focus of this book. Before our founding, British subjects fled their country for our shores to escape religious persecution. These pilgrims landed in what is now Massachusetts in 1620. Other Puritans came later to New England to enjoy the same freedoms that the earlier pilgrims established. These Puritan colonists founded their communities with precepts drawn from their Chris-

tian faith. Davidson reports: “By the late eighteenth century, American civic life was suffused with Christian doctrine and religious piety” (51). He goes on to say,

While it’s true that the Founders did not openly endorse particular Protestant denominations, or even specific Christian doctrines beyond a general belief in a benevolent and almighty God, they clearly believed their constitutional scheme could not work with a citizenry unformed by religious piety and bereft of Christian moral virtue (54).

There’s the rub. From that understanding, we have moved to one that espouses that government must be neutral toward religion and secular in policy and purpose. Gone is the natural law philosophy that John Locke derived from Catholic medievalists like Thomas Aquinas. Gone are the beliefs that this philosophy has divine origins. Gone are the inalienable rights that flow from natural law and enumerated in the U.S. Constitution. Several times, the author quotes Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy. Kennedy wrote for the majority opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life” (56).

That subjectivism eviscerates the plain meaning of the Constitution. However, a move away from the Christian underpinnings of our rule of law began decades before Kennedy’s Supreme Court opinion. Davidson argues that “by the time of the Great Depression, religion in American public life was poised to undergo a profound shift that would eventually clear a path for the neopaganism we see emerging today” (73). He has not yet developed his case for this neopaganism; that is the work of subsequent chapters. He lays the groundwork for his thesis with reference to several Supreme Court cases, beginning with *Cantwell v. Connecticut* in 1940. Davidson views this case as a watershed in the profound shift that he is elucidating. He recognizes that *Cantwell* is “a major turning point in religious liberty jurisprudence—and, in fact, a major turning point in American history...” (76).

The implications of this were enormous. Any state authority, according to the unanimous ruling in *Cantwell*, is forbidden by the Constitution from making a determination about what is and is not a religious cause. We are habituated today to accept this reasoning without question, but it is not at all obvious that we should. It only makes sense if we accept without question a host of assumptions about religion, reason, and American constitutionalism that are of relatively recent vintage. Yes, in a society that considers religion strictly a private matter of subjective belief, a “religious cause” could be almost anything (77).

The author concedes, “That way of thinking has been the consensus in America for decades” (77). From the case the author has developed to this point, it is clear that this consensus is a radical departure from “an understanding that prevailed in Amer-

ica from 1776 all the way up until the 1940s” (77). A trajectory from *Cantwell* is mapped through cases that extend to *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* in 2022, which Davidson recognizes as “a long-overdue corrective” to the line of reasoning that began with *Cantwell*. Speaking of the *Cantwell* trajectory, Davidson says,

That ascendant view is one that John Adams and George Washington—to say nothing of most ordinary Americans from the Founding era until the mid-twentieth century—would have found utterly inconsistent with their vision of America (81).

As the Founders understood, “the secular and the religious overlap constantly” (82). Davidson asserts that “Absolute state neutrality on matters of religion is a comforting fiction at best. At worst, it’s a trojan horse for state persecution of religious citizens” (82). We’ve recently seen the worst-case scenario play out in the FBI surveillance of traditional Roman Catholics worshiping according to the Latin Mass. The author points to a subject area being taught in American public schools that is at odds with the beliefs of orthodox Christians, Jews, or Muslims. What he terms “a typical secular education” in American public schools includes teaching that there are more than two “genders” (83).

Even leaving aside controversies over specific subjects, plenty of religiously conservative parents believe that any education that makes no reference to God is not only deficient, but absolutely *not* neutral.³ Such a strictly secular approach holds that religious education should be excluded from the curriculum—a position that stands in stark contrast to how public education was conducted in America up until the 1960s (83).

This section of Chapter 3 marks the transition into neopaganism in contemporary America. Chapter 4 is titled “The Collapse,” and it outlines how the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted what was evident since the 1960s in America—“the secularizing trend” (99) was morphing into “a sea-change” (100) with the rise of those with “no religious affiliation,” commonly called nones (101). Davidson acknowledges a “steep decline” (103) not only in religious affiliation, but a parallel decline in what he terms the quality of religious belief. This is evident in a decline in Americans who pray daily, consider religion as an important part of their lives, and are conversant in the basic beliefs of orthodox Christianity. Based on survey data, he reports that “long-dead heresies are now coming back” (105). He notes that “every Christian denomination in America, with the exception of Catholics, is in decline” (107), and the Catholics are basically flat-lined in terms of the number of members.

The author provides a summary statement that introduces the following chapters, which delve deeper into the current religious situation:

Skepticism abounds in our age, especially skepticism of reason, the corruption of which is driving a resurgence of superstition along with new forms of religious belief. The most accurate term for these superstitions and beliefs is paganism, or neopaganism; and indeed, the nones, in so far as they are “spiritual but not religious,” are best understood as modern pagans (111).

For example, he names climate change activism as “just paganism behind a modern facade” (111). Gender ideology is also named as part of the neopaganism. Faith in science, as proclaimed during the COVID-19 pandemic, is another example. Davidson observes, “No dissent was allowed, not even from highly-credentialed scientists behind the Great Barrington Declaration...” (113). He diagnoses “The COVID and George Floyd hysterias” as “overlapping expressions of a deep spiritual anxiety—an inchoate desire to fight evil, to belong to something larger than oneself, and to be on the side of righteousness” (115).

Another sign of this “new post-Christian religion” is the disintegration of families. Here is another parallel—“It’s health and wellbeing—or lack thereof—tells us something important not just about the state of American Christianity: the fate of one is inextricably tied to the other” (116). What Davidson calls a “new domestic reality” (119) is more partners cohabiting and fewer partners marrying. In addition to this, more American adults are living alone. The United States has the highest rate of single-parent households. Here’s another disturbing statistic: “rates of anxiety and depression among young people under age eighteen are the highest ever recorded” (120).

In April 2022, the *New York Times* reported on “soaring rates of mental health disorders” among teenagers, including “depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior, and an alarming increase in self-harm and suicide” (121). Prior to this report, in December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory warning of a “‘devastating’ mental health crisis among American youth” (121). Add to this another sign of the declining health of America’s families—our declining fertility rate. The author gives another summary statement after all this: “Americans are increasingly living alone and dying alone, and their civilization could very easily die with them” (123).

Davidson further expands his case for neopaganism in America in chapter 5, “The Rise of the ‘Materialist Magician.’” The Materialist Magician is a reference to C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*. In that work, Lewis depicts Screwtape, a senior demon, instructing his nephew Wormwood, a junior demon. Lewis further develops the Materialist Magician in another work, *That Hideous Strength*. In that book, the Materialist Magician is someone who reduces all aspects of life to science. That’s the magic—everything is explained in materialist terms with no regard for the spiritual realm. Materialism is a falsehood that Lewis fought throughout his entire writing career, beginning with *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. As he demonstrated in a number of his works, all that *is* cannot be reduced to mere physical material and processes.

Davidson uses the Satanic Temple, founded in 2012 in Salem, Massachusetts, to illustrate Lewis' point. The seven tenets of the Satanic Temple declare adherence to beliefs that "conform to one's best scientific understanding of the world."⁴ Davidson asserts that "the invocation of Satan is really just a radical affirmation of a materialist, rationalist philosophy that amounts in the end to an elaborate form of self-worship" (139).

Chapter 6 explores how this cult of self plays out in the human sacrifices of abortion and euthanasia. Chapter 7 examines the cult of self as reflected in transgenderism and pedophilia. Chapter 9 provides a summary of "The Pagan State," of which Davidson says,

America's post-Christian state morality is an unsustainable admixture of ecological or climate-change radicalism; a wholesale embrace of sexual deviancy; racial (and straightforwardly racist) identity politics; and a conviction that the individual self is the final arbiter of truth, and therefore all things are licit public morality, and they are enforced today mostly through insults and ostracism, promulgated to varying degrees through law, public policy, and public funding, and constantly reinforced by our ruling elite: global corporations, the medical and educational establishments, Hollywood, Big Tech, the corporate media, and the political class (226-227).

This is the author's understanding of our current national predicament, and if it is accepted as true, the forces arrayed against orthodox Christian faith, as seen in the natural law reasoning of the Constitution, are formidable. The author foresees a day when "the enforcement mechanisms" of this state morality will move from "soft measures like ostracism and censorship" to "ever-greater social penalties" like "mandatory reeducation, the loss of parental rights, fines and financial penalties, and even imprisonment" (228).

If that sounds extreme and far-fetched, the author raises the many court cases against Colorado baker Jack Phillips who refused to create a wedding cake for a homosexual wedding. Or Lorrie Smith, who refused to create websites that promoted homosexual marriages. Or Barronelle Stutzman, who refused to create floral arrangements for a homosexual wedding. Outside of wedding services, we have the city of Philadelphia removing Catholic Social Services (CSS) from its foster care system "because CSS would not certify same-sex couples as foster parents" (235). The cities of Boston, San Francisco, Washington D.C., and the State of Illinois also insist that CSS either include same sex couples for adoptions or foster care, or be barred from providing these services.

Davidson devotes an entire chapter to the dangers of AI and concludes his work with a chapter where he prophecies that the current trend "is probably irreversible"

(279). He critiques the “quietism” of Rod Dreher’s book, *The Benedict Option*. While commending a number of aspects of Dreher’s prescription, Davidson notes that it is “incomplete” (283). What Dreher leaves out is the gospel mandate to fight. For Davidson, Dreher’s cloistered life for Christians, families, and churches is a far cry from the New Testament admonitions to be engaged with the world.

Davidson revisits Boniface as an example of how Christians can respond to a paganizing society. Just as Boniface did in the eighth century, “You’ll have to drive the neopagans out, chop down their sacred trees, and, in the name of Saint Boniface, use the wood to build a new church” (285). That work includes reclaiming local institutions like “the city council, public library, school board” (285). It means cleaning house by replacing the neopagans who are currently making decisions from positions of authority. “The rule is: fight on ground you can win” (286).

It’s not enough to show up at school board meetings and protest school board decisions. “It will certainly mean ripping out, root and branch, every outgrowth of the invasive pagan state...” (289). In short, “Christians need to take their faith public, to show that it belongs in society and is good for society” (292). This is an activist prescription that differs great from Dreher’s approach. We are not only combating the LGBTQ+ agenda. We are also opposing Critical Race Theory and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion mandates. Additionally, we resist any other evils our neopagan society dreams up. This will be a battle lasting for generations, provided Christians have the courage to fight.

Is Davidson correct in his analysis? I believe so. He presents a compelling case undergirded by a history of paganism that dates back to biblical times and extends to more recent events. The decline of Christianity and Christian influence in America is well documented; however, the rise of neopaganism is less so. What elevates Davidson’s work above other books in this area is the historical context the author provides. From biblical times through the twentieth century, the church was able to push back the tides of paganism. Today, there is a resurgence of paganism that must be met, challenged, and overcome once again. The author’s call to start at the local level and work upward makes sense given the many obstacles in place at the national and even many state levels.

Is the picture he paints too pessimistic? Can we rebuild a Judeo-Christian ethic in American society? Given our diverse and diversifying population, I believe it will be a very long journey to reach that point. It’s not just paganism we’re combating; it’s also other faith traditions, including polytheistic Hinduism. The major world religions may converge at the Golden Rule, but there are significant differences once we look beyond that seemingly universal standard.

Is Davidson’s thesis too simplistic? The closest he comes to a definition of paganism is in the Introduction, where he states that the term pagan

refers to an entire system of belief, which holds that truth is relative and that we are therefore free to ascribe sacred or divine status to the here and now, to things and activities, even to human beings if they're powerful enough (a pharaoh or Roman emperor)" (xiv).

He groups totalitarianism, nihilism, radical individualism, materialist rationalism, and barbarism under his definition of paganism, but the problem with this is that his historical examples don't fit neatly into his definition. According to Davidson, all these "isms" can be seen as part of the neopaganism that the author describes, but this creates an amalgam of disparate views. At a few points, the author presents a nihilist and relativistic slogan from Leil Leibovitz that appears to represent the essence of the neopaganism he describes: "nothing is true, everything is permitted." Is it correct to believe that what is happening in America is simply a downward slide into paganism?

In 1946, *Strand* magazine asked C.S. Lewis to write an essay on Christmas for pagans. In that essay, "A Christmas Sermon for Pagans," Lewis mused on whether there were really any pagans in England at that time. He admitted that "people keep telling us that this country is relapsing into Paganism. But they only mean that it is ceasing to be Christian." He asks, "And is that the same thing?"⁵ Using the words pagan and heathen as synonyms, Lewis defines them as "backward people in the remote districts" where "the old Nature religions still lingered..."⁶

This definition is much narrower than what we find from Davidson, but to be fair, Davidson names what he describes as neopaganism. Perhaps neopaganism is just one of a number of different kinds of forces that are pulling the United States away from a largely Christian heritage. Or is his definition of paganism and neopaganism so broad that anything that isn't Christian qualifies? It does appear so. In any event, what Davidson describes is sobering. His antidote is extremely challenging. Will Christians mobilize in the ways that he suggests?

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Notes

1. Tom Holland, *Dominion* (Basic Books, 2019).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 539-40.
3. Italics in original text.
4. Taken from the website for the Satanic Temple.
5. C.S. Lewis, "A Christmas Sermon for Pagans" (*Strand* magazine, December 1946, p. 30).
6. *Ibid.*

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