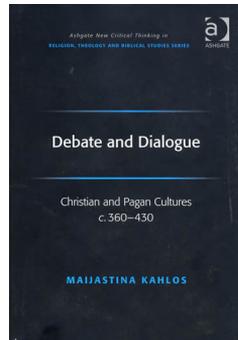


○ REVIEW OF MAIJASTINA KAHLOS, *DEBATE AND DIALOGUE: CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN CULTURES C. 360–430*

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In this book, Kahlos sets out to explore “the construction of Christian identity,” which western Christian writers of the period achieved, “through inventing, fabricating and sharpening binary oppositions,” such as Christians/pagan, religion/superstition, truth/falsehood, and the one true God/the multitude of demons. (p. 1) Kahlos’ working hypothesis, of which this text is a test, is that the polemical Christian writings of this time tell us more about the Christians who produced them than about the polytheists and polytheistic religions they claim to describe. Christian identity, Kahlos contends, cannot be successfully constructed without a foil against which Christians can define themselves. Thus, while Christian writings of the period may contain varying degrees of historically accurate information regarding polytheistic religious practice, it is incumbent upon the modern reader to recognize that the authors of these texts are consciously sharpening the distinctions between pagan and Christian and, in the process, exaggerating these distinctions.

In conducting this examination, Kahlos focuses on the Latin fathers of the period 360–430 CE. Kahlos limits her inquiry to this period of time because, as she argues, it is the period immediately following a lengthy time of tolerance and co-existence between pagan and Christian, which apparently led to a crisis of Christian identity. The examination of the writings themselves excludes attempted historical reconstructions of the actual practice of polytheistic religion during the period (though, as we shall see below, Kahlos cannot fully avoid such reconstructions) and focuses on the “structures of the polemics of the Latin fathers: rhetorical strategies, argumentation, the means of debate and the moments of dialogue.”

Kahlos, as noted, eschews attempts at reconstructing the realities of polytheistic religious practice in this period, but must come into contact with this very issue in formulating a suggestion that is of fundamental importance to her work as a whole: the presence in the church of *incerti*, a large segment of people who were not fully committed to the life of the church and had not,

as a result, fully disentangled themselves from the pagan world around them. It is the presence, indeed in the eyes of the fathers the pressing problem, of these *incerti* that prompts the strong differentiation made by the fathers between paganism and Christianity. As noted above, the period of peaceful co-existence between pagan and Christian in the period leading up to 360–430 CE created a social climate in which either/or choices for Christians between their present Christian commitment and their pagan past were unnecessary, so far as Christians' pagan neighbors were concerned. The dual allegiances of these Christians prompted the Christian writers of the time to attempt to force the *incerti* to make a final decision for and firm commitment to the church by sharpening the differences between paganism and Christianity.

From this reconstruction of the behavior of *incerti* and the motivation for this behavior, Kahlos moves to the negative evaluation of such behavior on the part of patristic writers and their attempt to affect this behavior by constructing binary oppositions (or, as Kahlos terms them, contrapositions) in a dualistic fashion, contrasting the light of Christianity with the darkness of paganism. Such an approach is both a rhetorical tool and a means of constructing a worldview, and Kahlos takes care to point out that the use of binary oppositions in religious thought is not unique to Christianity, being evidenced in religions across both time and space and are to be found in religious movements contemporaneous with Christianity, i.e., Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Gnosticism, Hermetism, Stoicism, etc. (p. 12) The rest of the text focuses on examining these binary oppositions in logical groupings, with chapters two and three dealing with what we might term the binary oppositions of symbolic language (light/darkness, certainty/uncertainty, etc), chapter four on *religio* vs. *superstitio*, chapter five on liturgy, and the sixth and final chapter on characterizing deities as either God or demons.

The construction of these binary oppositions by Christian authors created an artificially dichotomous presentation in which each side, pagan and Christian, adheres to a uniform system of beliefs and practices. To the contrary, Kahlos argues that the “cults, beliefs and practices of the Greco-Roman world varied so much in time and area that any attempt to telescope them into a single ‘pagan’ pattern necessarily distorts them,” (p. 15) yet this is exactly what the patristic writers have done. This construction of theirs was an attempt to bring pressure to bear upon the *incerti* in order to bring about an unambiguous choice of the one over the other, Christianity or paganism. The categories formulated by the patristic writers continue to influence the terminology employed by the academy as well as the way the academy views historical evidence of the religion of this period. The academy, Kahlos argues, continues to attempt to place figures of ambiguous religious persuasion into one category or the other (thus perpetuating the false dichotomy constructed by the patristic writers) when perhaps we should understand these figures as drawing from a variety of influences that we simplistically label in either/or terms.

Kahlos moves on to an examination of the historical use of *religio* and *superstitio* in Roman thought, arguing that the terms are used to describe what is and is not, respectively, socially acceptable approaches to relationship with the divine. Though early Christians were often considered atheists by the Romans, Kahlos argues that they were also sometimes seen as a distorted form of religion, thus becoming worthy of the title *superstitio*. As Christianity attains a more acceptable, and indeed more powerful, place in society in the period in question, Christian authors begin to redefine *religio* and *superstitio* in terms of truth and falsehood, thus reversing the recipients of the appellations. Pagan religion thereby becomes *superstitio* and Christian superstition becomes

religio. With this reversal, the patristic writers are able to heap upon paganism the old insults formerly hurled at them: error, perversity, futility, insanity, etc.

The newly dignified Christian religion then becomes a point of contrast to the “profligacy of pagan rituals.” (p. 113) Again, patristic writers reverse the historical social roles of Christians and pagans: whereas Christians were once decried by pagans for their supposed immoral rites, Christians now assail the pagans for the error of their rituals. The patristic writers depict pagan rituals in terms of ritual uncleanness that are carried out in private rather than in the honorable public space. The bloodless nature of Christian liturgy is contrasted with the still bloody system of pagan cult and is depicted as inferior to Spirit-animated Christian worship. Pagan cult then ultimately becomes diabolical, directly linked with Satan, and the urban festivals, a great area of concern given that *incerti* participate in this venue of paganism more than any other, are implicated in these demonically inspired rites.

This finally leads to the ultimate opposition painted by the patristic writers: the one true God set over against the multitude of pagan gods who are, of course, demonic. Old pagan philosophical critiques of popular pagan cult are, ironically, employed by the patristic writers to malign contemporary paganism and emphasis is placed on the extraordinary number and bizarre functions of long-forgotten or ignored pagan deities. Likewise, these same philosophers are quoted in their praise of the one true God, to whom the patristic writers claim exclusive access.

On the negative side, Kahlos’ work is not without its flaws. The text itself would have benefited from a more thorough editing in that minor errors in spelling were frequent and some sentence constructions were awkward to the point of obscuring what the author intended to communicate. Further, Kahlos has as her stated objective to test the hypothesis that these texts tell us more about their authors than about the pagans they purport to describe; yet Kahlos leaves the results of this testing implicit. One gets the strong impression that the case has indeed been proven, but the full implications of the work are left unstated. While this allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about the import and application of this study, I would not have felt deprived had Kahlos chosen to let her voice be heard on this subject since she is, of course, better versed in this area of study than I. These criticisms, however, do not detract from the validity of the research Kahlos has conducted.

Positively, Kahlos has made a valuable contribution not only to the field of history and patristics, but to all who would study religious texts produced in a polemical context. Kahlos’ careful examination of the texts, their use of prior traditions, and their role in early Christianity’s struggle to define itself over against the other has provided a valuable model of how texts such as these reflect not objective reality but reality as it is perceived by the authors. Indeed, Kahlos has provided the guild with a valuable resource not only for understanding Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries, but polemical religious texts in general.