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Book Review

Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), 368 pp., $35 (hbk), ISBN: 9780674976771.

In this title Gin Lum addresses how Americans consider themselves both a superior and a humanitarian people set apart from sufferers in the developing world. Despite the title of her book, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History*, she makes clear from the start that the contemporary revivals of pre-Christian folk traditions (Wiccans, Heathenry, etc.) is 'a topic outside the scope of this book' (p. 2). In the dichotomy of paganism versus Christianity or civilisation versus heathenism, the 'heathen' label was originally the primary way to describe human difference, before being replaced by colour-based race talk which has now become the foremost binary used for approaching 'us versus them'. As an elastic category, the 'suffering heathen' allowed its metamorphosis into a polarity between the non-White inferior and the Christian White superior. Racial hierarchy becomes the 'replacement narrative' for explaining human difference – what had originally been understood as a religious differentiation. In other words, 'othering based on belief gave way to othering based on bodies, marking the uneven transition from the Middle Ages to modernity' (p. 10).

While race has become the primary marker for signalling difference in America, it is important to realise that it has not fully replaced religion within Anglo-American imagination. As Gin Lum explains, race became constructed 'as the historical operation of heathenism and Christianity on different peoples, as bodily deviance becomes religiously wrought over time' (p. 100). The very indistinctness of the heathen and Christian identities emphasises the instability of race itself. Moreover, for someone like Uchimura Kanzō, founder of the Non-church Movement (Mukyokai-shugi) in 1901, America's hypocritical racism rendered Christendom to him 'Pagan-like'. The various counterscripts to the prevailing religio-racist heathen concept emerged in themselves as measures of deviance and deficiency and critiques of White Americans and their belief in being a charitable, exceptionalistic and righteous 'master race'. Against attitudes of usurpation and intervention from the likes of the Doctrine of Discovery (the papal bulls of 1493 and 1494), the Calvinist/Congregationalist Andover Theological Seminary (founded in 1807), the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (founded in 1810), the medical missionary Daniel Jerome Macgowan (1815–1893) and the evangelical Lausanne Covenant of 1974, they recapitulate both the damage done by paternalistic colonialism and conservative missiologists and indicate the need for a new and revised orientation to the world in promoting a liberating potential for solidarity as a homogenised force against the 'devastation wrought on the lands and lives of people marked as "heathen" by the Western Christian world' (pp. 270–71).

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While Gin Lum appears to accept the old trope that 'pagan' originally referred to the rustic country folk (p. 25),[1] she subsequently allows that this was a fourth century CE development (p. 28). The Germanic term 'heathen', for someone who lives according to nature, is a later translation of the Latin *paganus* that by the sixth century had become an equivalent of 'barbarian'. The author conveys the emerging European idea of pagans to be found in other parts of the world as cannibalistic, idol worshippers, self-mutilators, demonic and worshippers of multiple gods (pp. 33, 35, 40). The heathen as other extends beyond animists, shamanists and idolaters – those we may broadly identify as pagan – and has come at various times to include atheists, Hindus, Buddhists and even such Abrahamists as Muslims and Mormons. In fact, from the dominant perspective of White Protestant (Anglo-) Americans, even Catholics and Jews could be placed under the heathen umbrella. Nevertheless, Anglo-Americans have had difficulty including the civilisations of India and China, let alone the classical Greco-Roman culture, as ignorant and poverty-burdened heathens in need of Western intervention. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating into the United States, but as Gin Lum points out, 'for others in the so-called heathen world whose lands and material goods they had an interest in' (e.g., natives of the Hawaiian Islands), such migratory restrictions did not apply (p. 177).

After the 1893 World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, and as 'Americans increasingly referred to Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, and more by those names, the specific label of "heathen" shrank to primarily apply to those traditions considered to be "primitive," "folk," and "ethnic"' (p. 197). By the twentieth century, the term 'unreached' replaced 'heathen' for much of American evangelical missiology. Nonetheless, the underlying notion remains that of 'wrong religion' that essentially belongs to the Third World and is comprised by the THUMBS classification of the twenty first-century Joshua Project as *T*ribal groups, *H*indu, *U*nreligious/Chinese, *M*uslim, *B*uddhist and *S*ikh (pp. 244–46).

Recalling that the term 'heathen' originates from *heath* signifying 'barren, uncultivated', for such heathen landscapes as India, Charles Lloyd maintained in his 1814 *Travels at Home, and Voyages by the Fire-Side, for the Instruction and Entertainment of Young Persons* that for such idolatrous and unproductive people 'there are various divinities belonging to the air, earth, sea, rivers, mountains' (p. 92). Likewise, Thomas L. Johnson notes that West African tribes 'pay homage to lakes, rivers, and mountains, believing that their gods live there' (p. 139). As such, perceiving that a land's human inhabitants who do not understand the true workings of nature leaves open the possibility that heathen landscapes could be remade. The technological advances of the nineteenth-century and beyond gave the 'intellectual power to seize upon the forces of nature and make them instruments … to overcome the obstacles of nature itself' (p. 160).

Admittedly, for readers of *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, Gin Lum's *Heathen* does not have much to say about ecology and the earth's living systems. Her book is instead an historical analysis of the cultural dimensions of race and religion specifically in America. 'I offer this history … not as a definitive prescription but in the hopes that it might help foster conversation about religion, race, and the ethics of aid' (p. 274). White Americans are in need of a different God than the superficial and patriotic one they have worshipped. In connection with climate change and ecological devastation, activist Diana Paxson from a contemporary

1. See further York (2003: 6, 12).

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heathenry perspective asserts that 'To fight beside the gods of Ragnarök today means to get really involved in environmental protection and all the political structures that support it'.[2] The predominant connection of contemporary heathenry/paganism is toward nature and preserving or restoring the natural ecological balance of planet earth.

This inclusive and nature-oriented position of paganism in its most open-tent forms with its 'emphasis on harmonization with the natural as a foundation for ethical behavior' includes both advocacy for the natural order of life and Gin Lum's efforts to end the 'structural inequities that privilege one group over others' (York 2016: 275, 399). In her finely constructed and hopefully influential book, a recommended read for anyone and everyone, Gin Lum allows that Christianity has some good points and even some truth, but so has 'heathenism and the various religions believed in and practiced by those we call pagan' (p. 148).

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Michael York
Cherry Hill Seminary
Professor Emeritus Bath Spa University
and University of Wales Trinity Saint David
exchange@michaelyork.co.uk

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