42. "Catholicism is paganism with Christian names"

Often heard: "Christmas, Easter, the papal mitre and the pine cone are all pagan (Babylon)."
Also heard: "Paul used a pagan altar to preach Christ. Taking over a building or a season isn't worshiping a false god."

Pagan customs entered Catholic worship

HELD BY Reformed Westminster tradition · Baptist

Many Catholic customs, feasts and symbols were borrowed from paganism, and God forbids worshiping Him in pagan ways.

VERSES CITED

Deut 12:30–31; Jer 10:2–4; 2 Cor 6:14–18; Rev 17–18.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Largely Alexander Hislop's *The Two Babylons* (1853; expanded 1858), Jack Chick tracts (from the 1960s) and Ralph Woodrow's *Babylon Mystery Religion* (1966). Woodrow later retracted his book after checking Hislop's sources (*The Babylon Connection?*, 1997).

Christian customs are not pagan borrowings

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox · Lutheran customs as adiaphora · Anglican kept, with reforms · Methodist rites may vary

Similarity is not derivation. Many claimed parallels are invented or rest on poor sources; others reflect the Church deliberately redeeming good human customs for Christ, as Paul used an altar to the "unknown god." The dates of Christmas and Easter come from Christian reckoning about Christ's conception, death and the Passover.

VERSES CITED

Acts 17:22–31; 1 Cor 9:19–23; Phil 4:8.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition regards customs and ceremonies that Scripture does not command, from its own documents.

Catholic

Similarity is not derivation: many alleged pagan parallels are invented or poorly sourced, while

Orthodox

The Orthodox share the Catholic feasts, vestments and icons and answer the same critics

the Church has deliberately redeemed good human customs for Christ, as Gregory the Great advised in 601 and as Vatican II affirms for elements of a people's culture not bound up with superstition and error. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Gregory the Great to Abbot Mellitus (601), in Bede, Ecclesiastical History 1.30; Vatican II, Sacrosanctum Concilium 37–40.

the same way: their customs come from apostolic and patristic tradition, not from paganism. St Basil taught that unwritten customs, such as signing with the cross and facing east in prayer, were delivered by the tradition of the apostles. The canons also purge genuine pagan survivals: the Council in Trullo (692) abolished the Calends, Bota and Brumalia and dances in the names of false gods.

Sources: Basil of Caesarea, On the Holy Spirit 27.66; Council in Trullo (Quinisext, 692), canon 62.

Lutheran

Lutherans hold that unity rests on agreement in the Gospel and the sacraments, and that human rites need not be everywhere alike (Augsburg Confession VII). Harmless customs that serve order, such as holy days, may be kept, provided no one thinks them necessary to salvation (XV). The Formula of Concord calls such rites adiaphora, neither commanded nor forbidden by God, which each church may change; but under persecution nothing may be conceded, because the truth of the Gospel is then at stake (X).

Sources: Augsburg Confession VII, XV; Formula of Concord, Epitome X, affirmative theses 1–4.

Reformed

Reformed churches hold the regulative principle: God "may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men" or in any way not prescribed in Scripture (Westminster Confession 21.1; Heidelberg Catechism Q 96), though circumstances common to human gatherings are ordered by Christian prudence (1.6). The Westminster Directory set aside holy days as having no warrant in God's Word. Continental practice differed: the Second Helvetic Confession approves feasts of Christ's nativity, passion, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, but not saints' days.

Sources: Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6, 20.2, 21.1; Heidelberg Catechism Q 96; Directory for the Public Worship of God (1644/45), "An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship"; Second Helvetic Confession (1566), ch. 24.

Anglican

Anglicans hold that the Church has power to decree rites and ceremonies, but nothing contrary to God's Word (Article XX), and that ceremonies may differ by country and be

Methodist

Methodists inherited the Anglican principle: rites and ceremonies need not be the same everywhere, may vary with countries, times and manners, and may be ordained, changed or

changed by each national church (Article XXXIV). The Prayer Book preface on ceremonies explains that many were abolished for superstition and abuse, while others were kept for decent order and edification; these may be altered upon just causes, and other nations are not condemned. So the Church of England kept Christmas, Easter and the saints' days.

Sources: Thirty-nine Articles XX, XXXIV; Book of Common Prayer 1662, Preface "Of Ceremonies, why some be abolished, and some retained"; BCP 1662 Calendar and Collects.

abolished by each church, so long as nothing is ordained against God's Word and all is done to edification (Articles of Religion XXII).

Sources: United Methodist Articles of Religion XXII (Of the Rites and Ceremonies of Churches).

Baptist

Baptists hold that many Catholic customs, feasts and symbols were borrowed from paganism and that God forbids His people to worship Him in the ways the nations served their gods. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Chapter text; Deuteronomy 12:30–31; Jeremiah 10:2–4; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18.

Where it gets contested: Deliberate Christian reuse of pagan sites, dates and objects is documented (the Pantheon, Gregory the Great's mission instructions, the Vatican obelisk). Catholics answer that borrowing a building or a season is not borrowing a god, and that the Church set out to claim such things for Christ. Critics, among them the Reformed of the Westminster tradition and Baptists, answer that folk customs attached themselves to the feasts and that the line between redeeming a custom and absorbing it was not always kept. The broader claim of a hidden continuity of pagan worship, popularized by Alexander Hislop's *The Two Babylons* (1853; expanded 1858), argues from resemblance: its defenders hold that the parallels are too many to be chance, while its critics, Protestant as well as Catholic, reply that resemblance alone does not show descent. The deeper study below takes the claims one by one.

Deeper study: the specific claims examined: pine cone, obelisk, mitre, All Saints, Christmas, Easter

Each claim as those who make it argue it, the documented history, and how each side reads that history. Where a claim has no documentary support, the source of the evidence is given.

The Vatican pine cone

The claim: the giant bronze pine cone (the *Pigna*) in the Vatican shows that the Church keeps pagan symbols in a place of honour. Popular versions link it to the pineal gland or "third eye," and to the pine-cone staffs of Dionysus and Osiris.

The history: the Pigna is an ancient Roman bronze, probably of the first or second century AD, that served as a fountain, probably near the Temple of Isis and Serapis on the Campus Martius. By about 1300 it stood at St Peter's, where Dante compares a giant's face to "la pina di San Pietro a Roma" (*Inferno* 31.59), and in 1608 it was moved to the Vatican courtyard now named after it. Pine cones did carry fertility, regeneration and Dionysian associations in Greco-Roman culture.

How each side reads it: critics see a pagan cult object kept at the heart of the Church. Catholics answer that it is a reused antiquity, like the many classical statues in the Vatican collections. The pineal-gland and "third eye" readings rest on the resemblance of shape; no historical source connects the Pigna with either.

Obelisk in St. Peter’s Square

The claim: obelisks were pillars of Egyptian sun worship (critics cite Jeremiah 43:13, on the breaking of the images of Beth-shemesh, the Egyptian "house of the sun"), so setting one before St Peter's honours a pagan symbol.

The history: the Vatican obelisk is genuinely ancient and pagan in origin. Caligula brought it to Rome and set it up in his circus on the Vatican hill (c. AD 37–41), where tradition places the martyrdom of Peter. Pope **Sixtus V** had it moved to its present location in **1586**, added a cross and Christian inscriptions, and explicitly reframed the monument as subjected to Christ. One inscription says it had been dedicated to the gods of the nations in impious worship; another reads "Ecce crux Domini, fugite partes adversae, vicit leo de tribu Iuda" ("Behold the cross of the Lord; flee, adversaries; the lion of the tribe of Juda has conquered").

How each side reads it: Catholics see deliberate triumphal reuse, together with the preservation of Roman antiquity: the monument that stood where Peter died now stands under the cross. Critics answer that God told Israel to break the pillars of the nations' gods, not to reuse them (Deuteronomy 12:3), so the reuse is itself the problem.

Mitre / fish-god theory

The claim: Alexander Hislop argued that the bishop's two-horned mitre "is the very mitre worn by Dagon, the fish-god of the Philistines and Babylonians" (*The Two Babylons*, ch. 6, sect. 1), pointing

to an Assyrian figure, published by A. H. Layard from the excavations at Nineveh, whose cap is the head of a fish. Many later writers repeat the claim.

The history: a resemblance exists between some ancient fish-cloak imagery and later mitres, but there is no documented line of transmission. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* ("Mitre," 1911) dates the first pictures of the liturgical mitre to the beginning of the eleventh century and its first written mention to a papal document of 1049; it developed from the *camelaucum*, a cap worn by the popes, and was general among bishops by about 1100–1150. The identification of Dagon as a fish-god rests on the Hebrew *dag*, "fish"; the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* describes him as the "god of seed, vegetation, and crops" and links the name with *dagan*, "grain."

How each side reads it: those who hold the theory take the resemblance as a survival of Babylonian religion. Historians, and Ralph Woodrow after he retracted his own book (*The Babylon Connection?*, 1997), answer that resemblance without a documented link is not evidence of descent.

Vestments

Christian vestments largely developed from late Roman clothing and were progressively standardized to distinguish clerical office, mark liturgical function, symbolize theology, and preserve ceremonial continuity.

Documented examples of deliberate reuse

- **Pantheon:** converted into a church under Pope Boniface IV around AD 609/610.
- **Gregory the Great, c. AD 601:** advised missionaries in England not necessarily to destroy pagan temples, but to remove idols, purify the buildings, install Christian altars/relics, and redirect existing feast customs toward Christian use.

Historians describe such reuse as Christianization, sacral appropriation or *interpretatio Christiana*; Catholic writers speak of inculturation; critics call it syncretism.

All Saints / Halloween / Samhain

The claim: All Saints' Day (1 November) and Halloween were set to absorb the Celtic festival of Samhain, kept at the same season, in line with the policy of Gregory the Great's letter of 601.

- Pantheon dedication to Christian use: c. 609/610, May 13.
- Gregory III (731–741) consecrated a chapel in St Peter's to all the saints; its anniversary, 1 November, became the date of the feast.
- Gregory IV (827–844) extended the 1 November celebration to the whole Church, traditionally dated around 835 (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, "All Saints' Day").

- Halloween literally means All Hallows' Eve.
- Samhain predates these developments.

How each side reads it: those who make the claim point to the shared season, to Gregory's letter, and to folk customs that gathered around the feast. Others answer that the 1 November date comes from a chapel dedicated in Rome, far from Celtic lands, and that no document of the period gives Samhain as the reason; a claim that the Church created All Saints solely to replace Samhain is not directly documented.

Christmas

The claim: 25 December was a pagan festival taken over by the Church: the birthday of the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*), the Saturnalia, or, in Hislop, a festival "in honour of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven" (*The Two Babylons*, ch. 3, sect. 1).

The evidence: a Roman almanac of the mid-fourth century (the Philocalian Calendar of 354) is the first to record Christ's birth on 25 December: "natus Christus in Betleem Iudeae." The emperor Aurelian is said to have established a festival of the birth of Sol Invictus on that date in 274. A note in the margin of a manuscript of the twelfth-century Syriac writer Dionysius bar Salibi says the feast was moved from 6 January to 25 December to coincide with the pagan sun festival. The Saturnalia began on 17 December and lasted about seven days (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.10), ending before the 25th.

How each side reads it: those who see a pagan origin point to the solar festival on the same day and to the Syriac note. Others, such as the historian Andrew McGowan ("How December 25 Became Christmas," *Bible Review*, December 2002), point out that no ancient Christian writer says the Church chose the date to match a pagan feast, that the Syriac note comes some eight centuries after the first evidence for the date, and that a second explanation fits the early sources: Christians dated Christ's conception to 25 March, the date they gave for his death, which puts his birth nine months later on 25 December. "Christmas is simply Saturnalia" does not fit the dates. Some Protestants, following the Puritans, decline to keep Christmas whatever its origin, because Scripture does not command it.

Easter

The claim: Hislop wrote that "Easter is nothing else than Astarte," the Babylonian queen of heaven, and called the Easter egg the "mystic egg of Astarte" (*The Two Babylons*, ch. 3, sect. 2). Others point to Bede, who wrote that the Anglo-Saxon month Eosturmonath had once been named after a goddess called Eostre (*De temporum ratione* 15).

The history: the Christian Paschal celebration is rooted in Passover and the resurrection narrative. By the second century churches were already disputing whether to keep it on the Jewish date of 14 Nisan (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.23–24), and most Christian languages call it by forms of *Pascha*, from the Hebrew for Passover. The English "Easter" and German "Ostern" are the exceptions, and their background is debated; Bede is the only source for a goddess Eostre, and no document links the word with Astarte or Ishtar beyond similarity of sound. Eggs and rabbits are later folk customs.

How each side reads it: critics take the English name and the folk customs as signs that pagan spring rites attached themselves to the feast. Others answer that the feast was kept, and called *Pascha*, long before it reached the English, and that a name taken from a month does not make the Resurrection feast pagan.

The texts each side cites

Texts raised against adopting pagan forms:

- **Deuteronomy 12:30–31** — do not inquire how the nations worshiped their gods in order to imitate them.
- **Jeremiah 10:2–4** — "Learn not the way of the heathen"; "one cutteth a tree out of the forest ... They deck it with silver and with gold." Some apply it to the Christmas tree; others reply that the passage describes a tree carved into an idol by "the workman, with the axe."
- **2 Corinthians 6:14–18** — separation from idolatry and uncleanness.
- **Galatians 4:10–11** — warning about bondage to observing days and seasons.

Texts raised for Christian liberty and the reuse of what is not itself idolatry:

- **Acts 17:22–31** — Paul takes as his starting point an altar inscribed "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD."
- **1 Corinthians 8:4** — "an idol is nothing in the world."
- **Colossians 2:16–17** — do not let others judge regarding festival observance.
- **Romans 14:5–6** — individual liberty regarding esteem of days.

What is actually in dispute

That the Church reused some pagan buildings, objects and customs is documented; the claims of a hidden continuity of pagan worship rest on resemblances for which no documented link has been produced. The underlying question is whether reuse carries the old worship with it, as critics argue from Deuteronomy 12, or whether Christian use gives a thing a new meaning, as Catholics, the Orthodox and the many Protestants who keep Christmas and Easter hold.

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