



Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan

Anthony T. Kronman

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In this passionate and searching book, Anthony Kronman offers a third way—beyond atheism and religion—to the God of the modern world

“An astonishing, . . . epically ambitious book. . . . An intellectual adventure story based on the notion that ideas drive history, and that to dedicate yourself to them is to live a bigger, more intense life.”—David Brooks, *New York Times*

We live in an age of disenchantment. The number of self-professed “atheists” continues to grow. Yet many still feel an intense spiritual longing for a connection to what Aristotle called the “eternal and divine.” For those who do, but demand a God that is compatible with their modern ideals, a new theology is required. This is what Anthony Kronman offers here, in a book that leads its readers away from the inscrutable Creator of the Abrahamic religions toward a God whose inexhaustible and everlasting presence is that of the world itself. Kronman defends an ancient conception of God, deepened and transformed by Christian belief—the born-again paganism on which modern science, art, and politics all vitally depend. Brilliantly surveying centuries of Western thought—from Plato to Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant, from Spinoza to Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud—Kronman recovers and reclaims the God we need today.

Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan Details

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From Reader Review Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan for online ebook

Rob Squires says

My high hopes for this book were quickly dashed. It only took a few pages for me to conclude that it was plodding and superficial.

William says

Now I have the struggle to determine which of my life's 30 most influential books must be replaced by this one

John says

This is closer to 3.0 stars, but I wanted applaud ambition of 1,100 pages. This book is simultaneously erudite and pedantic. At times, reaching deepness yet then jumping out into shallower or reaching territory.

There are Cafeteria Catholics. This guy bring syncreticism to a whole new level. I think the chapter titles are among the best I've ever come across. It's more of a spiritual memoir than a guide for an potential postmodern pagans in my opinion. It's an exegesis of sorts that I wish I somehow have the capability of articulating and able to self-assess my own views.

It's definitely a book to read with a bit of a trot. But I love the level of thoroughness here. His focus is of course, largely on the Western Canon (with little to know influences from other cultures), but his more contemporary focus is where I found his commentary most interesting.

I had a hard time caring about his focus on Aristotle. But Max Weber onwards? Good stuff.

Michael Baranowski says

This would have been an absolutely amazing 600 page book. But instead, it's a 1000+ page book badly in need of an editor. I raced through the first 400 pages, plowed through the next 400 or so, and then called it quits.

Cheryl says

pa·gan
[?p???n]

NOUN

a person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions.

synonyms: heathen · infidel · idolater · idolatress · paynim

dated

derogatory

a non-Christian.

an adherent of neopaganism.

ADJECTIVE

relating to pagans:

"a pagan god"

synonyms: heathen · ungodly · irreligious · infidel · idolatrous

ORIGIN

late Middle English: from Latin *paganus* 'villager, rustic,' from *pagus* 'country district.' Latin *paganus* also meant 'civilian,' becoming, in Christian Latin, 'heathen' (i.e., one not enrolled in the army of Christ).

Neo-Paganism defined by Robert Ellwood and Harry Partin

"The unifying theme among the diverse [Neo-Pagan] traditions ... is the ecology of one's relation to nature and to the various parts of one's self. As Neo-Pagans understand it, the Judaeo-Christian tradition teaches that the human intellectual will is to have dominion over the world, and over the unruly lesser parts of the human psyche, as it, in turn, is to be subordinate to the One God and his will. The Neo-Pagans hold that, on the contrary, we must ... cooperate with nature and its deep forces on a basis of reverence and exchange. Of the parts of man, the imagination should be first among equals, for man's true glory is not in what he commands, but in what he sees. What wonders he sees of nature and of himself he leaves untouched, save to glorify and celebrate them.

"What Neo-Pagans seek is a new cosmic religion oriented to the tides not of history but of nature — the four directions, the seasons, the path of the sun — and of the timeless configurations of the psyche. They seek not that morality which comes from imposing the will on reluctant flesh, nor the mystical trance which is the fruit of asceticism, but the expansiveness of spirit which comes from allowing nature and rite to lower the gates confining the civilized imagination. For them, this is the spirit called up by the names 'pagan' and 'polytheism.' ...

"[Neo-Pagans] seek to restore a proper balance between masculine and feminine symbolization of the sacred. They seek to recover a sense of wonder and respect as religious feelings toward nature in all its moods and toward the human body and psyche. Thus they want to find a new totality, perhaps in reaction to a schizophrenic culture. They look for it in a new cosmic religion that vehemently rejects the religious value of history, while it radically affirms the religious value of raising the level of consciousness through stimulation of the imagination by ritually creating a suggestive and sacred milieu."

I actually can't rate this book, and I had to skim parts of it, and it was not what I expected. Only a few people in the world have read it, and it reads more like a legal tome than a theological "confessions" on the way to start a new religion that is pagan but not neo-pagan, ecological but not nature worshipful, and philosophical, not emotional. I love what he is trying to do, but to me, pagan either means the above, or it means the primal, primeval, root of us that we feel when we are confronted with the center of existence however we are open to it. Not as an antidote to Christianity or atheism, but as the time before them, and every religion takes ahold of this very human propensity towards the holy and sacred, and distills them in their own way and can be found beautiful. I am less interested in pagan traditions from white people Europe

as I am in tribal beliefs from Africa, New Guinea, and aboriginal ideas from native peoples. A tough read, but worth the time.

Jon says

The most notable feature of this book is undeniably its girth. At over 1000 pages, reading it from cover to cover is an enormous undertaking, and trying to encapsulate the book into a review seems almost unfair to the book's purpose.

It's important to understand the book's purpose and context. On one hand, Kronman seems to be writing the holy scriptures of a contemporary secular religion. On the other hand, *Confessions* is Kronman's life's work, an extended dive into the passions of his life—art, literature, philosophy, and, every once in a while, the law. To that end, it's not always entirely clear what he's trying accomplish with a given passage.

The main thrust of his argument, as it were, is that traditional Christianity and traditional atheism are both unsustainable philosophies. In his view, Christianity leaves the innate human desire to express gratitude unfulfilled, because the teaching of Christianity such that no amount of works can overcome the transcendent gulf between God and man. This irreconcilable transcendence, in turn, places God further and further away from humanity, ultimately abolishing him as a philosophical concept altogether. Yet Kronman also recognizes the value in how Christianity has bequeathed to the modern world the infinite value of the individual, a concept with its roots in the idea that the magnificent and transcendent God created the world out of nothing.

His solution, therefore, is to retain the values of Christianity without the theology. Or to put it another way, he recognizes that the Christian faith has bequeathed an enormous gift to society, and while he wants to keep the gift, he feels that Christianity as a theology is unsustainable. So what to replace it? He suggests Aristotle's divine cosmos, where the cosmos itself is the divine.

This is really, of course, defining God as a concept, and not as a person (as is the center of Christian theology). Furthermore, this is making the divine a concept consistent with our own preconceptions, which may be helpful as a philosophical construct but remains chained to our own finitude.

This book seems less about constructing an argument and more about being descriptive of Kronman's thinking. To the end, it seems almost unfair to be critiquing the argument. Nevertheless, there are [•] significant problems with Kronman's theology—at least as a matter of it being satisfying:

1. It does not properly account for the Incarnation in Christian theology. The idea of a fully transcendent God is indeed problematic, and the idea of a God with whom we can never commune with is equally problematic. Yet that was rectified in the Incarnation, for Christian theology teaches that its God is one who is radically personal—to the point of coming to the world “in the likeness of sinful man.” Rather than being a theological and philosophical problem, the gulf between man in God is, in Christian teaching, a personal problem—a problem written into the very fabric of our broken souls. Kronman's argument turns a personal problem into philosophical problem, and by consequence rejects Christianity.
2. This leads to the second problem, which is that his argument fails to adequately account for evil. Any philosophical system must account for the problem of evil in some fashion, because there is so much senseless evil and violence in this world—all of us have experience such evil at some level—for which we cannot easily account. Kronman spends very little time addressing the problem of evil, and while that has

been a challenge for Christianity as well over the centuries, it is also one which has been answered with forceful theodicies. Kronman offers very little in the way of his own theodicy.

3. In this way, Kronman has trouble coming to terms with the idea of death. The reality of death without a resurrection or afterlife is that relationships have been forever destroyed. As much as Kronman wishes an eternal value into life, humans are profoundly relational, and Kronman offers no hope for those relationships after death.

4. Finally, this is an easy philosophy to have for one who is wealthy and secure. It offers very little to the marginalized—to those for whom life is “nasty, brutish and short.” Life lands heavy on the lives of many, and religion—true or not—offers a hope of transcendence beyond the cares of this world.

Overall, Kronman’s book is an incredible effort in bringing transcendence—if not to our divine, certainly to our conversation. For that, this book is a tremendous contribution to philosophical conversation, and it is one not easily set aside.

Gary Beauregard Bottomley says

The author at the end of this book makes an apologetic like statement after 'having taxed the reader's patience with a long and abstract book....'. This is one reader who was never taxed and fully appreciated the author's abstract thoughts. Most books that I enjoyed as much as this one turn out to be dense and difficult for me to recommend since they are hard to follow but this one was a pleasant read while at the same time dealing with somewhat complex ideas and was able to tie together most of the books or Great Courses I've read or listened to over the last year (2016).

Slightly over a year ago I ran out of popular science books and came across Martin Heidegger Being and Time. That opened my eyes to the value of primary source books on thinking and the nature of being. Instead of reading books or Great Courses about the famous philosophers or schools of thought, I started to branch into the works of the great thinkers themselves.

The author realizes that there has been a 2400 year old conversation around the intelligibility of the universe and the world we live in. He starts with the pre-Socratics and he's going to end the discussion with Walt Whitman.

The author wants to bring Joy back into the world by taking away our sense of entitlement and giving us Gratitude by re-introducing Pride. The author really doesn't like 'nihilism' and is going to argue that the world is eternal and divine making his 'born-again' paganism more than just pantheism and wants to bring back mystery. He even justifies this by embracing 'patriotism', and I would even say that he would not agree with the sentiment 'there but for the grace of God go I' because he puts the responsibility only on the individual and he'll even say that we are under 'the stupor of political correctness' today and that's what Nietzsche was getting at. The author is clearly an anti-humanist and anti-modernist and not particularly pro-Enlightenment and loves his Edmund Burke (Burkeian Bells always go off in my head when conservatives quote Burke, and it's clear this author is a conservative but one who doesn't believe in God putting him in a corner of sorts nearly alone), and he's got a weird Freudian psychoanalytical streak (just look up 'breast feeding' in his index, btw, that index is one of the best I've ever come across. I love a good index, and that is a good index!). All the things within this paragraph are major themes within this book, and for which I tend not to agree with whatsoever, but I still would recommend this book strongly because of the way the author puts all the pieces together and for how the book overlapped with my last years reading list so closely and allowed me to put the great thinkers into a proper context.

To fully understand why this book is so cool I'm going to relate it to some of my last years reading. I was concurrently reading *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* and I was completely lost on the meaning of Christianity. It wasn't the fault of the book, after all it was a history book, but Anthony T Kronman gave me the necessary insights. He'll explain how it was Augustine who will create a 'necessary' God because the Christian God is a creator God and Pelagius tries to sneak in human behavior and prayers making a difference to God. The Catholics side with Augustine and his concept of 'free will' for the next 800 years meaning that our salvation comes through Grace. This argument is going to play out through out the middle ages up until Thomas Aquinas and then William of Ockham will try to have the last word on it by disagreeing with Thomas Aquinas by declaring that nothing is necessary for God and the universe must be contingent because God is omnipotent.

The author is going to take the argument up to Luther and the reformation. In 2016 I had been reading many different books related to this but the author was able to tie them all together for me because the books (and Great Courses) were only focused on one particular aspect of the situation, this book tied them all together for me.

Also, last year I focused on 'being' and 'ethics' and 'metaphysics'. I had read various works by and on Aristotle such as his *Metaphysics*, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, *Masters of Greek Thought: Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle* and a general book on Greek Philosophers, *The Dream of Reason: A History of Western Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance*. Each of these were enlightening in their own way, but this book, "Born-Again" made it such that I no longer recite Aristotles' four causes from memory now I realized what he really meant and his causes just flows naturally out of me. This would not have happened if not for this book, and I now realize why the species (form) of Aristotle is such a problem for understanding a God who must know of the individual.

I'm being somewhat presumptuous in calling the author an anti-humanist, but it was clear to me. The author was definitely more interested in Heidegger Martin's post Being and Time work. I have just recently reread Being and Time and it's clear that Heidegger takes an anti-humanist position after Being and Time. Heidegger tries to bring the mystery back into the universe and hearkens back to the Greeks of the Iliad with their 'truth as disclosure' and curses the 'dehumanization of man' because truth gets equated with 'correctness' (what the post "Being and Time" Heidegger would call the 2000 year mistake). This book "Born-Again" defends that Heideggerian position and the excellent Great Course lecture that I listened to last year, *Modern Intellectual Tradition: From Descartes to Derrida* shows how Heidegger took an anti-humanist turn.

The author really likes Spinoza and Nietzsche and will step the reader through their major works and what they are really getting at. Last year, I read Spinoza's *Ethics*, and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I loved Spinoza and relate to him. Nietzsche clearly reworks Spinoza but takes out Spinoza's humanism. That's why the author probably prefers Nietzsche in his 'born-again paganism'. Spinoza has the formulation God is Nature and Nature is God, but he also allows for a panentheistic (the universe is alive and is God) interpretation, in Ernest Holmes's *The Science of Mind* which I also read last year he's got a similar formulation or at least to the point where he would say "the man who thinks is God, and God thinks". The author, Kronman, will in detail describe Nietzsche's 'rank order of being', "a picture of the world that organizes a larger order of it in accordance with its own principle of interpretation is more powerful and therefore real than the viewpoints it incorporates in itself". This leads to Nietzsche's view point of "perspectives". Something worth understanding and for which this book does a superb job at. Also, since I do like learning and sharing, Nietzsche would say that everything that is wants to maintain what it is and always wants to take that which is around it (a quick summary of 'will to power', but the author really does a good job at explaining this).

Part of understanding where the author is coming from is by seeing who he doesn't talk about. He'll barely mention Soren Kierkegaard, Hegel G W F or Parmenides. Last year I read, Fear and Trembling, Phenomenology of Spirit and Parmenides by Plato. Each of these thinkers go against what he's trying to show. Kierkegaard would have the answer Kornman is looking for in his Knights of Truth and how we each must take our own stand based on ourselves, Hegel brings spirit alive by having it become aware of itself, and Parmenides would cause the most difficulty for Kornman to resolve because the author despises relativism (he'll use the word 'nihilism') but he really wants is to bring the necessary, the certain, and the universal back into the world, but he can't do it with God and Revelation because he rejects those two things.

Parmenides gives us the block universe of Einstein. The author Kornman states what he really is trying to do is take Einstein's formulation of the God of Spinoza and bring intelligibility to the world itself through adopting the eternal, divine and using science. This is definitely a problem I had with this book. The author really didn't understand the philosophy of science and its issues and I would recommend the pedantic and dense book Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues, one of my all time favorite books which I read last year, but would be reluctant to recommend because it is a tough read. BTW, Ludwig Wittgenstein is barely mentioned, in his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus he will say there is no structure to the world, but that would go against what the author is trying to say.

I haven't yet got to Kant Immanuel. Last year I just finished his Critique of Pure Reason and that is a recurring character within this book. He does one of the best jobs explaining what it means in the context of his world view. The author definitely likes Kant because the author clearly dislikes relativism of any kind, but at the same time the author will show how Kant lacks a proper 'ground' when need be, and as a reader of Kant, it's clear that Kant must create his categories of intuition (transcendence) in order to escape relativism.

The author will show in detail five modern works of literature and how they relate to what he's been talking about. He does such a good job I can recall all five of them but I won't. I'll just mentioned I read one of them, both the comic book version, "In Search of Lost Time" the graphic novel and the real book version (don't laugh, the Graphic Novel is incredibly pleasing and informative). He made me fully understand how they relate to Nietzsche and Spinoza.

The author really likes reason. Cause and effect rule supreme. Everything happens for a reason and he embraces the 'principle of sufficient reason'. Similar to two other books I read last year, On the Nature of Things and Monadology. The first explains the world in terms of atoms and the second in terms of monads.

Also, I would like to relate what my favorite fictional book I have ever read and I did read it last year, Gravity's Rainbow to this book. Gravity's Rainbow is concerned with the "temporal bandwidth" which gives us a infinity of time as death approaches, the rebirth of all parts including the machine gun from WW I which leads to an eternal recurrence (a big theme within "Born-again"), there is no extinction just renewal, and everything happens for a reason or nothing happens for a reason (paranoia and anti-paranoia), Kornman favors the paranoia view point.

A final book that I read last year that I'll mention that relates to this book is Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher. By far my favorite book in the Old Testament. The real theme of that book (and also a theme within Gravity's Rainbow) is that the race doesn't always go to the swiftest or the smartest, but time and chance will often decide. Those are themes that I embraced, or as I said above "there but for the Grace of God go I", a sentiment which runs counter to "Born-Again". I could say that if I were to relive this life, I would not be able to give myself any general advice to have improved my lot because I was born this way and couldn't really be any different from who I was. Time and chance have made my destiny. The author, clearly thinks we are to blame for our own problems, but I believe that the luck we have and unearned gifts we have

received make us who we are.

Overall, any book in which I can relate almost all of my previous years reading too, is a good book and I would recommend it, but mentioned that the 'born-again paganism' is not why I'm recommending the book, but I would recommend it for other reasons.
