Book Reviews

Marion Gibson, *Imagining the Pagan Past: Gods and Goddesses in Literature and History since the Dark Ages* (Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2013); pp. ix + 257; ISBN 978-0-415-67419-5.

This volume examines the portrayal of Britain's pagan past in British literature and historical accounts from the fifth century CE to late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Primarily looking at narratives relating to deities, rather than religious practice, Marion Gibson shows how even devout Christians were willing to incorporate a pagan past into their writings.

The first couple of chapters take the reader through the development of Britain's pagan past, and the ideas of being associated with Rome and its legacy, in various writings from the early Middle Ages through to the Romantic Era. Moving to the eighteenth century, Gibson then discusses the Celtic Revival and its influence on British literature and ideas about Britain's pagan history through to the mid-twentieth century. With examining the place of Anglo-Saxon, and other Germanic deities, Gibson returns to the Middle Ages and traces the place of these deities in sundry literature up to the 1970s. At this point, she then steps back to the prehistoric era, and how it was incorporated into fiction from 1850s, as it was at this time that archaeologists began discovering Neolithic and Palaeolithic sites and artefacts. The final chapter then discusses the period from the 1970s to the present day, and how literature from this era has been imagining Britain's pagan past.

It should be mentioned that the title of this volume may be seen as problematic, as it does not mention that the subject matter only regards Britain. For while the deities mentioned in this British literature are not always native to the British Isles, the cases in which they are mentioned all pertain to Britain, and its history. It also uses the out-dated terminology of 'Dark Ages' rather than the preferred 'early Middle Ages' or 'early medieval era'. Given the significant time-frame across which British literature is examined, the volume is brief and lacks detail. However, it is a good entry point for someone looking into this area for the first time, or wanting basic knowledge on how pagan deities were incorporated into the literature and ideas of history in Britain. It also does not really discuss how

these pagan deities in the literature have affected people personally, or have shaped the religious landscape. Indeed, Gerald Gardner, father to the modern pagan religion Wicca and his work are discussed, but how Wicca, and the work of similar modern Pagan leaders, has affected the religio-spirituality of contemporary individuals and groups is not.

This volume would be of great use as a starting point for someone researching the inclusion of paganism in literature at any point during the vast time-frame it covers. It would be recommended to undergraduates, and also anyone with a beginner's interest in the area.

Lauren Bernauer
University of Sydney

William E. Arnal, Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, editors, *Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion: Essays in Honor of Donald Wiebe* (Sheffield, UK, Equinox, 2012); pp. xii + 243; ISBN 978-1-84553-898-9.

Referring to Wiebe's "thesis that the academic study of religion suffers from a failure of intellectual nerve", the editors and "contributors to this volume", while not accepting every facet of Wiebe's argument, "all share the view that conceptualizing religion as an element of the mundane world of human doings is the first requirement of a public inquiry into the history and function of religion" (p. vii). Wiebe's famous thesis is reprinted in this book, and has him arguing against the re-establishing of a role for theology in Religious Studies, which "constitutes a rejection of the scientific/academic goals it originally espoused" (p. 7). Recognising that a 'little c' confessional approach can also come from non-exclusivist adherents, he asserts that assuming the existence of God/gods is incompatible with a proper academic study of religion (pp. 8-10). Wiebe goes on to rightfully dismiss the attitude that Studies in Religion should be descriptive only (pp. 13-16). Indeed, there has as yet been no cogent argument against the explanatory and evaluative approaches. While not necessarily of interest to all scholars, particularly those who espouse postmodernism, these are certainly not wholly irrelevant. In fact, such approaches are already used by secular philosophers of religion – a field dominated by theists. Finding that much of the work done in Religious

Studies departments is crypto-theology, even unashamedly so, Wiebe goes on to "reiterate here that theology, when it commits itself to the existence of the Ultimate, constitutes a form of religious thought that can only "infect" the academic study of religion and not complement it" (pp. 26-27).

An ally is found in Luther Martin, who praises the use of 'methodological atheism' in studying religion, and hails Wiebe's efforts as strengthening our field (pp. 3-5). This *Festschrift* of sorts continues with a series of chapters meant to describe some 'general failures' of nerve in the academic study of religion. The first chapter proper actually has Matthew Day disagreeing considerably with Wiebe, asserting that it is the lack of evaluating the claims made by the religious that "unites the hopelessly disjointed field of religious studies", and haughtily declaring that "attending to "the truth of religion" is largely irrelevant for any academic study of religion worth having" (p. 34). Day invokes an example concerning the British conflicts with the Swazi in the 1930's, focussing on religious claims made by the latter, declaring that "*It simply doesn't matter if this story is true, false, or an outright lie*" (pp. 39-41, emphasis in original), arrogantly assuming that only his intellectual pursuits are worthwhile, whilst ignoring the obvious possibilities that certain historians, psychologists, and philosophers would be keenly interested. His further claim that considering the veridicality of the Swazi claims is to "muddy the waters", is absurd and even anti-intellectual, as if increasing our *knowledge* – especially regarding the truth – were to be considered a bad thing, and not the point of our scholarly existence! Interestingly, such a self-serving attitude can offend believers and non-believers alike.

Chapters more appreciative of Wiebe's approach follow, from feminist scholar Darlene Juschka and Janet Klippenstein, who focuses on the Psychology of Religion. A highlight in the 'general failures' part of the book is the chapter by McCutcheon, who effectively describes crypto-theologians as uncritical and ignorant (pp. 78-79), and advocates an outsider or etic approach, "rather than one that elevates select emic terms or interests to etic status and thus legitimacy" (p. 88). Johannes Wolfart is also supportive, claiming that "practitioners of Religious Studies still habitually suspect each other of hidden agendas", and notes that, in failing to heed Wiebe's warnings against 'small c' confessional theology, we have merely shifted the focus from Christianity, or at least feigned this, through names of university programs such as 'Religions of Late Antiquity' and 'Religion in America' (pp. 102-105).

The remaining chapters indicate 'special failures' of nerve. Herbert Berg brilliantly recognises that Islamic studies are not at all immune to crypto-theology, despite the fact that many scholars of Islam are not current or former Muslims (p. 112). He suspects that the heavy focus on Sufism, as the 'genuine' or "nice face of Islam", is political (p. 114), notes that the historical Muhammad looks suspiciously like the Qur'anic Muhammad (p. 116), and bemoans the attitude that descriptivism is virtuous whilst revisionism is allegedly rude and racist (pp. 117-119). Aaron Hughes expresses similar sentiments concerning contemporary Islam, noting a common thought in Islamic Studies which says that the Islams "practiced by the Taliban, Saddam Hussein, Wahhabi and neo-Wahhabi groups – are somehow inauthentic precisely because they stray from a pure, divine, and revealed original message" (pp. 142-143). He boldly describes the field's rejection of "what has now been pejoratively labeled as "Orientalist" approaches (e.g., archaeology, source critical, redaction criticism)", and its preference towards "confessional and descriptive approaches" (pp. 143-144).

The remaining chapters, by Michel Desjardins, John Parrish, Sarah Rollens, Vaia Touna, and the late T. Nicholas Schonhoffer, broadly discuss failures of nerve regarding Christian Studies, such as how Christian origins often serves a theological agenda, with Schonhoffer wondering why a violent parable in a non-canonical text is rejected as inauthentic, when Jesus was arguably violent himself, and made use of several violent parables in the canonical scriptures (pp. 197-201). Finally, Arnal and Braun present a pseudo-conclusion, which seems largely counter-productive. For example, they claim that by examining the sacred, we make it sacred (pp. 231-232). Surely this can be said of any field of study. They also assert that we ought to leave Religion to the religious, while we study "religious objects", without the reverence traditionally accorded them, which is partly apparent in the names granted to specialist fields (pp. 233-235). Strangely, the expected recommendations failed to eventuate, leaving this reader wondering whether these parting comments and underdeveloped 'conclusion' were altogether necessary. I will continue to be hypercritical towards religious claims, while still happily calling my primary area of focus Philosophy of Religion/s, rather than, say, Philosophy of Some Things That Some People Find Special but That Really Are Not. Nevertheless, *Failure and Nerve* is a useful collection of essays that,

together, reveal that there is still work to be done in making Religious Studies a properly objective and scientific discipline.

Raphael Lataster
University of Sydney

Robert MacSwain and Taylor Worley, editors, *Theology, Aesthetics, and Culture: Responses to the Work of David Brown* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012); pp. xiv + 313; ISBN 978-0-19-964682-1.

The legacy of David Brown (Professor of Theology, Aesthetics, and Culture, and Wardlaw Professor at the University of St Andrew's) has, thus far, been embodied in a quintet of works published between 1999 and 2008, namely, *Tradition and Imagination* (1999), *Discipleship and Imagination* (2000), *God and Enchantment of Place* (2004), *God and Grace of Body* (2007), and *God and Mystery in Words* (2008). These were celebrated at a 2010 conference held at the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts convened by the editors of this volume. Many of the papers delivered at that conference, including seven additional chapters, make up the bulk of the book under consideration; the reason I list the five publications above is because their titles inspired the names of the main sections of this volume, which follow them verbatim. Scholars from various disciplines have contributed chapters on the themes addressed by Brown's books in an attempt to nuance, critique, or advocate his encompassing vision for the meaningful encounter between Christian theology and art and culture. The basis for such an encounter is made explicit by MacSwain's 'Introduction' (pp. 1-10) and is repeated time and again by the contributors, namely, that:

> human imagination no less than reason is essential to the theological enterprise; that Scripture is not a fixed text but a manifestation of a living and moving tradition; that revelation is a culturally enmeshed, fallibly-mediated, and progressively-grasped phenomenon; and that divine action, grace, and truth are to be found outside the Christian Church as well as within, in secular philosophy and other religions no less than through the work of painters, sculptors, writers, composers, musicians, dancers, athletes… (p. 5)

Not all of the contributors, however, agree with Brown; and whilst his project is much lauded for moving beyond the restricting confines of biblicism to address the world at large from a Christian point of view, nevertheless some of his views remain contentious. For instance, in order to

offset the narrow biblicism that conditions much Protestant – even some Catholic – theology, Brown argues for the rehabilitation of tradition, and of viewing both scripture and tradition as 'products' of divine revelation. Most traditional Christians would agree with such a view. But in order to make room for a Christian engagement with other religions, Brown also suggests that this revelation can be seen as continuing in Judaism and Islam (p. 16, cf. p. 43); a highly problematic idea given that all three religions contradict each other in their rival claims to disclose the truth concerning God. According to William J. Abraham, Brown's view is based logically on the incarnation of God the Son as Jesus Christ, within which "there was a radical 'divine accommodation' to the relevant context" (p. 17, cf. pp. 31, 39) that is reflected in scripture, tradition, other religions, and, by extension, all other aspects of human cultural activity which are influenced by and imaginatively grasp out towards the divine. All very well and good; but then in order to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the incarnation, Brown overemphasises the humanity of Christ – with references to the ongoing development and change (in order to remain relevant to a changing world) of the Lord's body in its 'post-mortem' state (p. 200), and to a "limited human consciousness remaining" in Christ even after the ascension (p. 294). In response to Brown's comments about change and development in the ascended Christ, Graham Ward argues that in the ascension Christ's humanity "is assumed into the Godhead" (p. 207) and thus "historical existence is assumed into His eternal existence" (p. 209). As a Church historian, I would note that the positions of Brown and Ward seem to oscillate between quasi-Nestorianism and quasi-Monophysitism respectively. The traditional disposition to the incarnational unity-in-diversity in Christ, paradoxically articulated at the council of Chalcedon (in 451 CE) which maintained that he is both God and man in such a way that the properties of his divine and human natures are distinctly preserved in the unity of his personhood, is by-passed here for mere speculation concerning what happens to either nature at various junctures in his divine economy. Traditional Christology asserts that whereas something changes in the quality or intensity of Christ's humanity after his resurrection, nevertheless his humanity is never abolished or diminished; it is not assumed into the Godhead.

I mention traditional Christology only because it represents a 'middle way' that avoids the extremes reached by both Brown and Ward. In any case, the incarnation, for Brown, remains the bedrock for our

imaginative impulse towards God, as reflected, for instance, in hagiography, which Brown describes as fictional tales (pp. 56, 65) that can allow us to have some idea of what it is like to lead a life in imitation of Christ in historical contexts other than Christ's own (p. 55). At the same time, however, Brown advocates the efficacy of prayers to saints as our intercessors before Christ, an inconsistency picked up by Richard Bauckham, who reflects the traditional Protestant rejection of sainthood in his response that fictional figures cannot intercede for anybody (p. 60). Brown, to his credit, tries to overcome this difficulty, but one wonders as to why he did not assert more emphatically the relevance of the lives of the saints and their experience irrespective of the literary 'embellishments' in some of their biographies. This ambivalence towards saints comes up again in Brown's assessment of Orthodox iconography, which, for instance, is criticised as emphasising the transcendence of the figures being portrayed (pp. 94-95, 277) which makes them far too remote to the Christian believer; a point contested by Gordon Graham in his chapter when he affirms that icons have an important place in Orthodox Christian worship insofar as "it is not the icon itself that is venerated, but the person represented within it" (p. 97). This is a good first step in critiquing Brown's position; but in reality for the Orthodox veneration is not aimed exclusively at the person represented, instead including the actual representation, the icon. This not only contradicts Brown's assertion that icons are too transcendent – since in the process of veneration the gap between the 'mundane' and the transcendent is bridged – but brings into our discussion the theological basis for iconography, which is similar to what Brown claims is the basis for his own project: the incarnation. In Orthodox Christianity, the incarnation means that God the Son assumed not just human nature, but all matter. This means that material elements can be used to positively depict Christ and his saints, denoting once again that iconography does not merely depict the transcendent; it is transcendence-in-materiality, or, in the case of the saints, human persons in a gracefully divinised state, who are depicted for veneration (whereas worship is directed to God alone).

Despite theological shortcomings such as those signalled above, there is much merit to this volume. It is an impressive achievement in terms of its scope, the variety of the topics addressed, and its attempt to engage with broader milieus outside the realm of theology, including music and dance. Nevertheless, since Professor Brown claims to be having recourse to the general Christian tradition, it is my hope that he seriously investigates

other areas of this tradition and experience, such as those of the Orthodox churches of all colours. Such an enlarged investigation might fill in some of the gaps in his narrative, and help him in his commendable effort to present a fuller account of Christianity for its positive engagement with art and culture.

Mario Baghos
St Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College

David Werther and Mark D. Linville, editors, *Philosophy and the Christian Worldview: Analysis, Assessment and Development* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014); pp. xiv + 274; ISBN 978-1-6235-6765-5.

This book was supposed to provide a justification for theistic – and particularly Christian – exclusivism. The introduction states as much, rightly noting that seriously examining religious claims is to accord them respect, and also taunts Religious Studies scholars and their supposedly pluralistic tendencies (pp. 1-5). The book aims to examine various religious claims and systems, in order to "determine which, if any is right" (p. 7). It is inexplicable, then, that the vast majority of the book's chapters do not even attempt to prove the truth of theism, let alone Christian theism, while the more relevant chapters offer nothing convincing to support the exclusivist view. Though suffering from a lack of quality references, the first chapter, by Keith Yandell, successfully argues that philosophy of religion is possible, and even worthwhile. This should be uncontroversial, so long as the focus lies with scientific and historical claims.

Problems accumulate with the second chapter, by Harold Netland, whose piece on religious pluralism is tainted by his "thinking carefully about religious diversity in ways disciplined by the witness of Scripture" (p. 25). His claim that religious pluralism's rejection of certain aspects of various religions should count against its plausibility (p. 39) is supremely illogical; 'false aspects' would be expected, as all traditions would perceive 'the Real' differently. Netland fails to overcome the problems associated with religious diversity by outlining a case for Christian theism, only mentioning that Yandell's work gives good reasons to believe, without stating what they are (p. 45). In the third chapter, Paul Copan aims to explain why theism is preferable to naturalism, while acknowledging that

he could have contrasted theism's greater explanatory power over alternatives such as pantheism (p. 50), which would have made for a more interesting essay. Copan's ignorance is evident with such choice quotations as "non-theistic "religious" alternatives like Buddhism…" (p. 51) and his supposing that the naturalist must overcome "monumental hurdles" such as *creatio ex nihilo* and the existence of an objective morality (p. 53). While his theistic/naturalistic comparison fails, far more disappointing is Copan's failure to show that Christian theism, or even theism, is more preferable over non-naturalistic alternatives.

The following four chapters on epistemology are occasionally defensive and do not actually attempt to argue for the likelihood of the Christian worldview. Of note is Charles Taliaferro's correct claim that theistic religious experiences can be found among Muslims and other theists, and that some of the differences with such experiences may be "less radical than they first appear" (p. 104), which not only overlooks the primary purpose of the book, but counters it. The eighth chapter, by Linville, merely outlines his personal preference for Christian morality, failing to demonstrate that it is logically or evidentially preferable. In the following chapter on the evidential argument from evil, Michael Peterson does better in alluding to Bayesian and probabilistic methods (p. 191), but offers no good evidence to support the likelihood of any reason God may have to permit gratuitous suffering, and (once again) does not at all argue for theism or Christianity. Paul Reasoner's interesting and worthwhile chapter, which highlights some similarities between Christianity and Confucianism, seems out of place in this volume; perhaps an editing mistake.

The eleventh chapter, by William Hasker, tackles the important issue of substance dualism. Recognising that the concept is commonly rejected by leading philosophers of mind (p. 215), Hasker only truly argues for its possibility, rather than its probability (p. 219). Such fallacious appeals to possibility are common in Philosophy of Religion, as evidenced by Noel Hendrickson's proceeding chapter on free will. Hendrickson commendably acknowledges that with all the discussion about free will, it is oft given a 'free pass', with few discussing the evidence for its very existence, and he further doubts that there can be decisive evidence for it (pp. 241-242). Suffering from some illogical reasoning (such as the appeal to simplicity), this chapter makes no attempt to argue for theism/Christianity, and even notes the importance of the concept to many

Jews and Muslims (p. 249). In the thirteenth and final chapter, Werther also offers nothing convincing to further the case for Christian theism, in an essay that seems overly theological, with its all-too-casual references to Christ and Satan. He aims to defend the notion that Christ could have been fully human and fully divine, without providing any reasons for why the uncommitted scholar should think that Jesus was even 'partly divine'.

Philosophy and the Christian Worldview fails to justify Christian particularism, or even theistic exclusivism; it barely even attempts to do so. Insofar as merely highlighting the recent work of Christian philosophers, it provides nothing impressive. Perhaps the book's most significant contribution to the discipline comes from Hendrickson's inadvertently drawing attention to one of the great deficiencies of apologetic philosophy of religion: so much effort is expended in defending the *possibility* of various concepts, rather than arguing for their *probability*. Rare is the academic field in which the mere appeal to possibility provides such a cornerstone. This does, however, bring to mind the downplaying of primary sources – which are obviously of supreme importance – by many Historical Jesus researchers, simply because none are extant. Likewise, I take the heavy focus on what may be possible by Christian philosophers of religion as an effective admission that they really have nothing substantial to offer with regards to arguing for their views being probable.

Raphael Lataster
University of Sydney