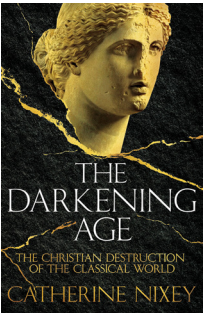


Shadow Stories: Review of Catherine Nixey, *The Darkening Age*

Katherine Kelaidis



Catherine Nixey, *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Ancient World* (London: Macmillan, 2017).

When is an age “dark”? It was the great Renaissance scholar Petrarch who, in the 1330s, first used the term “Dark Age” to describe his own time, a epoch he saw in sharp contrast to the bright glories of the pre-Christian Greco-Roman world. Within a hundred years, historians such as Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo developed a three-tiered view of history: a long period of darkness bookended by the glories of classical antiquity and the hope of Renaissance. It is a view that has come down to us, a view that consigns those “Middle Ages” to darkness and cruelty. It is a tale in which the triumph of Christianity is a defeat for humanity. On the other hand is an older narrative, an inheritance for the Middle Ages. In this story, the persecuted Christians, small in number and completely lacking in power, by the grace of God, come to rule the world’s greatest Empire, fighting back the dark gloom of paganism. Both stories are partial, inadequate, and incomplete. There is much we do not know about the persecution of Christians in the pre-Christian Roman Empire and even more we do not know about the persecution of the old beliefs under Christian emperors. Among these important “missing parts”: To what extent was the antagonism between Christianity and the old beliefs one-sided? How widespread was Christian suppression of ancient learning? The traditional understanding of these questions has

been, more or less, that early Christians were widely persecuted by the pagan Roman Empire and once they gained imperial power did engage in some attempts to eradicate pagan antiquity before ultimately deploying the power of the imperial Church to save and shepherd the ancients through the long night of the Middle Ages.

Catherine Nixey’s new book *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Ancient World* boldly challenges this traditional understanding and lays the destruction and loss of ancient learning clearly at the feet of Christianity. To be clear, much of what Nixey argues has been widely accepted by scholars for a generation now. For example, most historians now reject the traditional Christian narrative surrounding late imperial persecutions, asserting that while Christians were most certainly persecuted under Nero, later emperors acted to limit the prosecution of Christians even in the face of zealous attempts by individual Christians to obtain martyrdom. These efforts are well attested to, including in Pliny’s letters to Trajan, which detail the efforts of a regional Roman governor to not make any more Christian martyrs despite the best efforts of would-be saints. Nixey spends an inordinate and unnecessary amount of time refuting the Christian martyr narrative, and it is altogether unclear how doing so helps build the case for later, imperial Christianity’s

systematic persecution of pagans and pagan culture. Perhaps she hopes to highlight early Christian radicalism through this effort, though it seems this goal could be accomplished without such lengthy discussion.

The greatest oversight of Nixey's book, however, is one that might escape the notice of some Western readers, but is glaring clear to an Orthodox one. While Nixey is quick to cite the anti-classical sentiment of early Latin fathers, particularly Saint Augustine (who famously never mastered Greek) and Saint Jerome, she is strangely silent on the great Eastern patristic writing on the subject of pagan education. It was, undoubtedly, however, the Greek fathers who most ardently sought a place for Plato, Aristotle, and even Euripides, even as the schools and libraries of the ancient world were destroyed as suspect centers of demonic worship. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, whose treatise on the proper use of pagan learning in a Christian education helped shape pedagogy not only in the Byzantine Empire, but also in Renaissance Italy, is absent from the index entirely. It would seem entirely impossible to describe Christian attitudes to-

ward pagan learning in Late Antiquity adequately without accounting for this incredibly influential, pro-classical argument.

It is a telling omission and speaks to a wider shortcoming of *The Darkening Age*. In a completely worthwhile attempt to expand the conversation and correct the record surrounding early Christian engagements with pagan learning and culture, Nixey falls into the same reductive trap that has shaped Christian understandings of the period. The simple and not very book-pitch-worthy truth is that early Christian attitudes toward pre-Christian culture and toward non-Christian cultures were as diverse and complicated in Late Antiquity as they are today. There were both fundamentalists and universalists among the early Christians. They argued and fought with each other just as much, if not more, as with the outside world. This conflict has an important story to offer the present, though it certainly would make neither side of the culture wars happy. Nixey misses the opportunity to tell this story, choosing instead to create an alternative, polemical vision. It is sadly a missed opportunity. ❄

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Katherine Kelaidis is a resident scholar at the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago. She is a professional historian, trained at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of London.