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Priestly Paganism: Anticlericalism in *Nu noch*

Those who represent Christianity have no doubt been ridiculed right from the start. From biblical times to the present day, people have spoken out and written against the church, against the people who represent it, and against Christianity itself. Several literary genres, including drama, have expressed this ridicule. *Nu noch* is no exception. In this paper I will show how the anonymous author of *Nu noch* uses an anti-Christian priest to reveal his anticlerical stance. In doing so I will analyze the priest's use of language, including his use of pagan creatures and icons as compared to his use of God.

There is a difference, of course, between anticlerical and anti-Christian attitudes. Anti-Christian attitudes involve the *religion* of Christianity along with its tenets and ideals. Anticlericalism, on the other hand, involves attitudes against the *people* who represent Christianity. In *Nu noch*, the playwright shows us an anti-Christian priest who plays a key role in an anticlerical play.

The anticlericalism of *Nu noch* stems from its portrayal of the character of this priest. This play shows a member of the clergy behaving in a manner opposite to the way he ought to act as a man of God. His speech and his actions seem contrary to the ideals of the church. Indeed, he seems to use pagan forms more readily than he uses Christian ones.

At the time this play was written priests and most good Christians believed that hobgoblins, witches, specters - what we might describe as pagan personages - had a certain power. They believed that certain demons deceived people into believing in the efficacy of certain pagan rituals. It is not that Christians believed in witches or in pagan cults, but that they believed that demons convinced people to falsely believe in these cults. They also believed that witchcraft should be viewed as a crime in view of the biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exod., 22, 18). According to Bernard Hamilton in *Religion in the Medieval West* (London, 1986), "the church taught that the invocation of spiritual beings was always addressed to demons unless it used specifically Christian forms, because there were no beneficent spirits except the angels and the saints" (p. 164).

The priest in *Nu noch* does not invoke Christian forms, but rather creatures that the church would consider demons. These creatures were seen as evil in much the same manner as the devil was. The church also considered an invocation of these spirits as a tacit pact with the devil. In this case, it is not that the priest was calling on something that the clergy thought had no power. Rather, it is that the priest was calling on something believed to be inherently evil. He is even more culpable since he is invoking creatures of evil, not fictitious ideas, to cure the husband. And he gives them precedence and power over Christianity.

When the priest first enters the house he greets the husband with the traditional, "In the name of the Father, the Son ..." (148), but he is quickly cut off by the husband's "Now again." What follows in the next two speeches given by the priest is anything but Christian. In the first speech, the priest speaks of a host of hobgoblins, witches, and specters, none of which are associated with Christianity. The priest explicitly states that these creatures can have power over a person, "everything that could harm you" (156). For the priest, these pagan creatures have a power that the priest is willing to use in his exorcism of the husband. No member of the clergy should even have entertained such a thought. His use of these beings in this manner is his misguided effort to legitimize them, showing that he believes they have power that can be used for good. And the very fact that they are being used by a clergyman in a Christian community makes them anathema to the church's teachings.

Twice the priest calls on creatures which he claims have a certain power over the Christian religion. The first instance is his mention of the "hobgoblins that make church bells ring" (157-58). The second is his speaking of the "cats that dance on Sunday" (162). Both hobgoblins and cats are pagan creatures that negatively affect aspects of Christianity, the bells of the church and the Christian day of worship respectively. Again, these almost pagan incantations, made by a member of the clergy, show the anticlerical stance that the play takes on through the words of the priest.

The second, shorter, speech of the priest is much the same as the first, invoking images and ideas that are antithetical to Christianity, such as "the sun-tree and the moon that seduced Alexander into false dreams" (169-70). Neither of these speeches elicits any response from the husband other than his familiar "Now again." After this second exhortation, the priest is at his wits' end about how to help the husband. He *still*, however, does not turn to God for help, although he does, at this point, mention God in a general way: "Why, God help us! I don't know what's the matter with him" (173). This is not, however, so much an invocation of God's help as an exclamation of frustration.

Curiously, it is not to his own religion that he now turns in an attempt to help the husband. In fact, it is not to any religion. Rather, he now turns to food. At the neighbor's suggestion, he directs the wife to give the husband, "the best stew and roast you have" (177). The husband eagerly accepts. As soon as the priest sees that the husband is eating and seems to be all right, the priest says, "He likes it well enough as a cure. I can see, this man doesn't need anything else" (184-85). At this point the priest is willing to accept anything that will cure the husband of his problems. He instructs the wife how she should further care for him. It is then, ironically, as he is preparing to leave, that he once more invokes God: "Now God be praised that this evil has departed from this man" (201-02). But God had nothing to do with it. It would be more appropriate to say, "Meat pie be praised," for the priest did not invoke God to cure the husband. Rather, he invoked food.

In analyzing the language of the priest, it is important to notice when he does and does not invoke God in his words to the husband. He invokes God three times; first as a greeting when he enters the house, second almost as a curse when he cannot figure out how to stop the husband from saying "Now again," and third as a farewell when he leaves the house. But what is even more important to observe is when the priest does *not* mention God in his speech. He does not invoke God even once during any of the times he is trying to help the husband. By not doing so, he is in effect saying that God is powerless to do anything to cure the husband. God's name is good as a greeting. He is good as a farewell. But when it really matters, the priest turns away from God in favor of something he believes will get the job done: evil creatures such as hobgoblins, water sprites, and specters, and, of course, food. This priest is a fool. He is someone to be laughed at.

All in all, the priest is an effective tool for portraying the anticlericalism of *Nu noch*. Through his use of language and pagan ritual we are able to see how the priest's anti-Christian attitude gives the play its anticlerical sting. Funny though it is, this play is more than a simple comedy without subtlety or substance. On one level, at least, it is serious and gives us a memorable example of behavior inappropriate to a Christian priest.