

Paganism

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Paganism (from Latin *paganus*, meaning "country dweller, rustic") is a term which, from a Western perspective, has modern connotations of spiritual or cult practices or beliefs of any folk religion, and of historical and contemporary polytheistic religions in particular.

The term can be defined broadly, to encompass the faith traditions outside the Abrahamic monotheistic group of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The group so defined includes many of the Eastern religions, Native American religions and mythologies and as well as non-Abrahamic ethnic religions in general. More narrow definitions will not include any of the world religions and restrict the term to local or rural currents not organized as civil religions. Characteristic of pagan traditions is the absence of proselytism and the presence of a living mythology which explains religious practice.^[1]

The term "pagan" is a Christian adaptation of the "gentile" of Judaism, and as such has an inherent Christian or Abrahamic bias, and pejorative connotations among Westerners,^[2] comparable to heathen, and infidel, mushrik and kafir (كافر) in Islam. For this reason, ethnologists avoid the term "paganism," with its uncertain and varied meanings, in referring to traditional or historic faiths, preferring more precise categories such as polytheism, shamanism, pantheism, or animism, however others criticise the use of these terms, claiming that these are only aspects that different faiths may share and do not denote the religions themselves.

Since the later 20th century, "Pagan" or "Paganism" has become widely used as a self-designation by adherents of Neopaganism.^[3]



Mayan priests dancing around fire at a ceremony

Contents

- 1 Etymology
 - 1.1 Pagan
 - 1.2 Heathen
- 2 Terminology
 - 2.1 Common word usage
 - 2.2 Heathenry
 - 2.3 Pagan classifications
- 3 Groups considered Pagan

- 3.1 Historical polytheism
- 3.2 Contemporary ethnic religion
 - 3.2.1 Africa
 - 3.2.2 Eurasia
 - 3.2.3 Central America
- 3.3 Pagan revivals and new religious movements
 - 3.3.1 Neopaganism
 - 3.3.2 Modern nature religion
- 4 Demographics
- 5 See also
- 6 Notes
- 7 References
- 8 External links
 - 8.1 Articles
 - 8.2 Organisations

Etymology

Pagan

The term *pagan* is from Latin *paganus*, an adjective originally meaning "rural", "rustic" or "of the country." As a noun, *paganus* was used to mean "country dweller, villager." In colloquial use, it could mean much the same as calling someone today a 'Hillbilly'.

The semantic development of post-classical Latin *paganus* in the sense "non-Christian, heathen" is unclear. The dating of this sense is controversial, but the 4th century seems most plausible. An earlier example has been suggested in Tertullian *De Corona Militis xi*, "*Apud hunc [sc. Christum] tam miles est paganus fidelis quam paganus est miles infidelis*," but here the word *paganus* may be interpreted in the sense "civilian" rather than "heathen". There are three main explanations of the development:

- (i) The older sense of classical Latin *pāgānus* is "of the country, rustic" (also as noun). It has been argued that the transferred use reflects the fact that the ancient idolatry lingered on in the rural villages and hamlets after Christianity had been generally accepted in the towns and cities of the Roman Empire; cf. Orosius *Histories 1. Prol.* "*Ex locorum agrestium compitis et pagis pagani vocantur*." From its earliest beginnings, Christianity spread much more quickly in major urban areas (like Antioch, Alexandria, Corinth, Rome) than in the countryside (in fact, the early church was almost entirely urban), and soon the word for "country dweller" became synonymous with someone who was "not a Christian," giving rise to the modern meaning of "Pagan." This may, in part, have had to do with the conservative nature of rural people, who may have been more resistant to the new ideas of Christianity than those who lived in major urban centers. However, it may have also resulted from early Christian missionaries focusing their efforts within major population centers (e.g., St. Paul), rather than throughout an expansive, yet sparsely populated, countryside (hence, the Latin term suggesting "uneducated country folk") until a bit later on.
- (ii) The more common meaning of classical Latin *pāgānus* is "civilian, non-militant" (adjective and noun). Christians called themselves *mīlitēs*, "enrolled soldiers" of Christ, members of his militant

church, and applied to non-Christians the term applied by soldiers to all who were "not enrolled in the army".

- (iii) The sense "heathen" arose from an interpretation of *paganus* as denoting a person who was outside a particular group or community, hence "not of the city" or "rural"; cf. Orosius *Histories* 1. Prol. "*ui alieni a civitate dei..pagani vocantur.*" See C. Mohrmann, *Vigiliae Christianae* 6 (1952) 9ff.

-- Oxford English Dictionary, (online) 2nd Edition (1989) (<http://dictionary.oed.com>)

"Peasant" is a cognate, via Old French *paisent*. (Harry Thurston Peck, *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Antiquity*, 1897; "pagus" (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999%2e04%2e0062&query=id%3dpagus#id,pagus>)).

In their distant origins, these usages derived from *pagus*, "province, countryside", cognate to Greek *πάγος* "rocky hill", and, even earlier, "something stuck in the ground", as a landmark: the Proto-Indo-European root **pag-* means "fixed" and is also the source of the words *page*, *pale* (stake), and *pole*, as well as *pact* and *peace*.

While *pagan* is attested in English from the 14th century, there is no evidence that the term *paganism* was in use in English before the 17th century. The *OED* instances Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776): "The divisions of Christianity suspended the ruin of paganism." The term was not a neologism, however, as *paganismus* was already used by Augustine.^[4]

Less than twenty years after the last vestiges of paganism were crushed with great severity by the emperor Theodosius I^[5] Rome was seized by Alaric in 410. This led to murmuring that the gods of paganism had taken greater care of the city than that of the Christian God, inspiring St Augustine to write *The City of God*, alternative title "*De Civitate Dei contra Paganos: The City of God against the Pagans*", in which he claimed that whilst the great 'city of Man' had fallen, Christians were ultimately citizens of the 'city of God.'^[6]

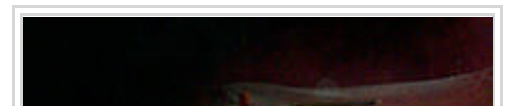
Heathen

Heathen is from Old English *hæðen* "not Christian or Jewish", (c.f. Old Norse *heiðinn*). Historically, the term was probably influenced by Gothic *haiþi* "dwelling on the heath", appearing as *haiþno* in Ulfilas' bible as "gentile woman," (translating the "Hellene" in Mark 7:26). This translation probably influenced by Latin *paganus*, "country dweller", or it was chosen because of its similarity to the Greek *ethne*, "gentile". It has even been suggested that Gothic *haiþi* is not related to "heath" at all, but rather a loan from Armenian *hethanos*, itself loaned from Greek *ethnos*.

Terminology

Common word usage

Both "pagan" and "heathen" have historically been used as a pejorative by adherents of monotheistic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to indicate a disbeliever in their religion. "Paganism"



frequently refers to the religions of classical antiquity, most notably Greek mythology or Roman religion, and can be used neutrally or admiringly by those who refer to those complexes of belief. However, until the rise of Romanticism and the general acceptance of freedom of religion in Western civilization, "Paganism" was almost always used disparagingly of heterodox beliefs falling outside the established political framework of the Christian Church. "Pagan" came to be equated with a Christianized sense of "epicurian" to signify a person who is sensual, materialistic, self-indulgent, unconcerned with the future and uninterested in sophisticated religion. The word was usually used in this worldly and stereotypical sense, particularly among those who were drawing attention to what they perceived as being the limitations of paganism, for example, as when G. K. Chesterton wrote: "The pagan set out, with admirable sense, to enjoy himself. By the end of his civilization he had discovered that a man cannot enjoy himself and continue to enjoy anything else." In sharp contrast Swinburne the poet would comment on this same theme: "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath; We have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death."^[7]



Perchten procession in Klagenfurt.

Christianity itself has been perceived at times as a form of paganism by followers of the other Abrahamic religions^{[8][9]} because of, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the celebration of pagan feast days,^[10] and other practices^[11] – through a process described as "baptising"^[12] or "christianization". Even between Christians there have been similar charges of paganism levelled, especially by Protestants,^{[13][14]} towards the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches for their veneration of the saints and images.

Heathenry

"Heathen" (Old English *hæðen*) is a translation of *paganus*. The Germanic tribes were distributed over Eastern and Central Europe by the 5th century, and their dialects ceased to be mutually intelligible from around that time. Christianization of the Germanic peoples took place from the 4th (Goths) to the 6th (Anglo-Saxons, Alamanni) or 8th (Saxons) centuries on the continent, and from the 9th to 12th centuries in Iceland and Scandinavia.

Pagan classifications

Pagan subdivisions coined by Isaac Bonewits^[15]

- **Paleopaganism:** A retronym coined to contrast with "Neopaganism", denoting a Pagan culture that has not been disrupted by other cultures. The term applies to Hinduism, Shinto, pre-Migration period Germanic paganism as described by Tacitus, Celtic polytheism as described by Julius Caesar, and the Greek and Roman religion.

- **Mesopaganism:** A group, which is, or has been, significantly influenced by monotheistic, dualistic, or nontheistic worldviews, but has been able to maintain an independence of religious practices. This group includes aboriginal Americans as well as Australian aboriginals, Viking Age Norse paganism. Influences include: Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, and the many Afro-Diasporic faiths like Haitian Vodou, and Santería. Bonewits includes British Traditional Wicca in this subdivision.
- **Neopaganism:** A movement by modern people to revive nature-worshipping, pre-Christian religions, or other nature-based spiritual paths. This definition may include anything on a sliding scale from Reconstructionist at one end to New Age and non-reconstructionist groups such as Neo-druidism and Wicca at the other.

Groups considered Pagan

Historical polytheism

Further information: Prehistoric religion and Polytheism

Bronze Age to Classical Antiquity (as opposed to Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Indian religions)

- Religions of the Ancient Near East
 - Ancient Egyptian religion
 - Ancient Semitic religion
- reconstructed Proto-Indo-European religion
- Graeco-Roman
 - Ancient Greek religion
 - Ancient Roman religion
 - Hellenistic religion
 - Roman imperial cult
 - Mystery religion
- Celtic polytheism

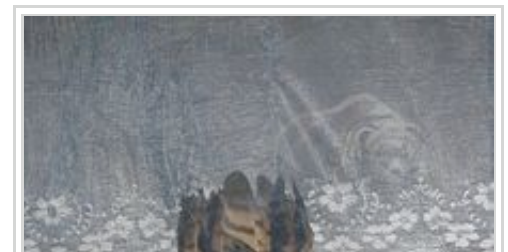
Late Antiquity to High Middle Ages (as opposed to Abrahamic and Indian religions)

- Germanic paganism
- Slavic paganism
- Baltic paganism
- Finnish paganism
- Estonian paganism

Contemporary ethnic religion

Further information: ethnic religion

There are many surviving traditions of ethnic religion. Organized ethnic religions that achieved the status of a civil religion are Shinto, tied to Japanese identity, and Judaism, tied to Jewish identity. In nationalist definitions, Hinduism may be tied to Indian identity.



Uninstitutionalized folk religion is found mainly in rural and sparsely populated areas. These include Animism, ancestor worship and Shamanism of Asia, Africa, the Americas, as well as New Guinea and other Pacific islands. Chinese folk religion is an umbrella term for uninstitutionalized folk traditions under a secular regime.

All world religions, however, also include folk religious aspects, as opposed to their theological or philosophical aspects, see folk Christianity, or local institutions of revealed religions may become strongly tied to ethnic identity, e.g. Yazdânism (Kurdish faiths descending from Zoroastrianism), Tibetan Buddhism, or various Christian national churches such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the various Syriac churches, and the various branches of the Orthodox Church, e.g., Anglican Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and other non-Roman churches.

Africa

Further information: Yoruba religion and Bwiti

During the expansion of the Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa, Islamic Fulbe (Fula) labelled their non-Muslim neighbours, such as this Kapsiki diviner, *Kirdi*, or "pagans".

Eurasia

Further information: Chinese folk religion, Shamanism in Siberia, Korean shamanism, and Bön

Eurasian ethnic religions became largely extinct in the course of the Middle Ages, first with Christianization in the West and the spread of Buddhism in the East, and then with the Islamic conquests of Persia, Central and South Asia. A notable survival of pre-Islamic traditions are the people of Kafirstan, now shrunk to the Kalasha people, inhabiting three valleys in the NWFP, Pakistan. The 2002 census of the Russian Federation reports 123,423 people (0.23% of the population) as belonging to ethnic groups predominantly adhering to "traditional beliefs", mostly in Siberia and the Russian Far East. In Japan, there is the Ryukyuan religion.

Central America

Further information: Mayan astrology

In spite of five centuries of persecution Mayan paganism is alive and well in Guatemala, and is experiencing a



Shaman doctor of Kyzyl.



A Kapsiki crab sorcerer of Rhumsiki.

resurgence of interest among young Mayans. Recent peace accords signed by the Guatemalan government have provided funds to teach Mayan language and traditional religion in rural schools.

Pagan revivals and new religious movements



A ceremony at the annual *Prometheia* festival of the Greek polytheistic group Supreme Council of Ethnikoi Hellenes, June 2006.

Neopaganism

Neopaganism includes reconstructed religions such as Hellenic, Celtic or Germanic reconstructionism as well as modern eclectic traditions such as Discordianism, or Wicca and its many offshoots.

Many of the "revivals", Wicca and Neo-druidism in particular, have their roots in 19th century Romanticism and retain noticeable elements of occultism or theosophy that were current then, setting them apart from historical rural (*paganus*) folk religion. The *Íslenska Ásatrúarfélagið* is a notable exception in that it was derived more or less directly from remnants in rural folklore.

Neopaganism in the United States accounts for roughly a third of all neopagans worldwide, and for some 0.2% of US population,

figuring as the sixth largest non-Christian denomination in the US, after Judaism (1.4%), Islam (0.6%), Buddhism (0.5%), Hinduism (0.3%) and Unitarian Universalism (0.3%).^[16]

Modern nature religion

Many current pagans in industrial societies base their beliefs and practices on a connection to Nature, and a divinity within all living things, but this may not hold true for all forms of Paganism, past or present. Some believe that there are many deities, pantheon of deities, which is known as polytheism. By contrast, pantheism is the belief that the combined subconscious spirit of all living things forms the universal deity. Panentheism takes this one step further, incorporating the idea that the Universal Deity is both in everything (in the universe) but also extends beyond the known physical universe. Ancient Greek paganism, which tended in many cases to be a deification of the local deity, as Athena in Athens, saw each local emanation as an aspect of an Olympian deity during the Classical period and then after Alexander to syncretize the deity with the political process, with "state divinities" increasingly assigned to various localities, as Roma personified Rome. Many ancient regimes would claim to be the representative on earth of these gods, and would depend on more or less elaborate bureaucracies of state-supported priests and scribes to lend public support to their claims.

In one well-established sense, paganism is the belief in any non-monotheistic religion, which would mean that the Pythagoreans of ancient Greece would not be considered Pagan in that sense, since they were monotheist, but not in the Abrahamic tradition. In an extreme sense, and like the pejorative sense below, any belief, ritual or pastime not sanctioned by a religion accepted as orthodox by those doing the describing, such as Burning Man, Halloween, or even Christmas, can be described as "pagan" by the person or people who object to them and the individuals who choose to claim this title.

Demographics

Paganism has been previously defined broadly, to encompass many or most of the faith traditions outside the Abrahamic monotheistic group of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If the Indian religions are included, nearly 30% of the world population can be termed as *Pagans*.^[17]

The term has also been used more narrowly,^{[18][19][20]} however, to refer only to religions outside the very large group of so-called Axial Age faiths that encompass both the Abrahamic religions and the chief Indian religions. Under this narrower definition, which differs from that historically used by many^{[21][22]} (though by no means all^{[23][24]}) Christians and other Westerners, contemporary paganism is a relatively smaller and more marginal numerical phenomenon. According to Encyclopedia Britannica estimates (as of 2005), adherents of Chinese folk religion account for some 6.3% of world population, and adherents of tribal religions ("ethnogeligionists") for another 4.0%. The number of adherents of neopaganism is insignificant in comparison, amounting to 0.02% of world population at the most, or some 0.4% of the "ethnoreligious" population.

See also

- Animism
- Druid
- Folk religion
- Idolatry
- List of Pagans
- Myth and ritual
- Mythology
- Neo-druidism
- Neopaganism
- Orthopraxy
- Polytheism
- Polytheistic reconstructionism
- Religion and mythology
- Shamanism
- Shirk (polytheism)
- Virtuous paganism
- Witchcraft

Notes

- ↑ "And it Harms No-one", A Pagan Manifesto, Janet Farrar & Gavin Bone, 1998.[1] (<http://www.wicca.utvinternet.com/manifest.htm>)
- ↑ "Pagan", Encyclopedia Britannica 11th Edition, 1911, retrieved 22 May 2007.[2] (http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/ORC_PA/PAGAN_Lat_paganus_of_or_belongi.html)
- ↑ "A Basic Introduction to Paganism" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/classic/A1032166>) , BBC, retrieved 19 May 2007.

4. ^ Divers. Quaest. 83. Augustine makes clear that, in his time, *paganus* was the term in Vulgar Latin synonymous to educated *gentilis* "gentile".
5. ^ "Theodosius I", *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1912.[3] (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14577d.htm>)
6. ^ "The City of God", *Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite DVD*, 2003.
7. ^ 'Hymn to Proserpine'
8. ^ *Jewish Encyclopedia* (<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=489&letter=C&search=polytheism%20christianity>)
9. ^ Shirk
10. ^ Christianised calendar
11. ^ Christianised rituals
12. ^ The Pope, The Emperor and the Persian Leader (<http://asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=6465>)
13. ^ 'Philip Melanchthon 'Apologia Confessionis Augustanae'
14. ^ Jean Seznec 'The Survival of the Pagan Gods'
15. ^ "Defining Paganism: Paleo-, Meso-, and Neo-" (<http://www.neopagan.net/PaganDefs.html>) (Version 2.5.1) 1979, 2007 c.e., Isaac Bonewits
16. ^ ARIS 2001 figures.
17. ^ Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherent (http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html) on Adherents.com
18. ^ Meanings of the terms Pagan and Paganism (<http://www.religioustolerance.org/paganism.htm>)
19. ^ Eisenstadt, S.N., 1983, *Transcendental Visions -- Other-Worldliness -- and Its Transformations: Some More Comments on L. Dumont. Religion*13:1-17, at p. 3.
20. ^ Michael York, *Paganism as Root-Religion*, *The Pomegranate*, 6:1 (2004), pp. 11-18 (distinguishing the main streams of developed religion as gnostic, dharmic, Abrahamic and pagan).
21. ^ *Catholic Encyclopaedia* (1917 edition) on paganism (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11388a.htm>)
22. ^ Hindu rites at a famous Catholic shrine shocks many Catholics (<http://www.cwnews.com/news/viewstory.cfm?recnum=33161>)
23. ^ David Scott, *Christian Responses to Buddhism in Pre-Medieval Times*, *Numen*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Jul., 1985), pp. 88-100
24. ^ Audrius Beinorius, *Buddhism in the Early European Imagination: A Historical Perspective*, *ACTA ORIENTALIA VILNENSIA* 6:2 (2005), pp. 7–22

References

- Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* NYU Press (2003), ISBN 0814797083.

External links

Articles

- BBC - Religion & Ethics - Paganism (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/>) - overview with many articles and links
- BBC - The Revival of Paganism (http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/history/modern_1.shtml) - short report on modern Paganism
- The Demise of Paganism (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/demise.html>) by James J. O'Donnell
- Surviving in church as a Pagan (<http://www.pagannews.com/cgi-bin/articles1.pl?160>) - article supporting the claim that Pagan religions influenced Christianity

Organisations

- Netherlands Centre for Indigenous Peoples (<http://www.nciv.net/engels/englishhome.htm>)
- Pagan Association UK (<http://www.paganassociation.co.uk/>)
- The Pagan Federation International (<http://www.paganfederation.org/>)
- The Pagan Federation UK (<http://www.paganfed.org/>)
- Pagan Network (<http://www.pagan-network.org/site/>)
- Speaking 4 Earth: International Platform for Indigenous Peoples (<http://www.speaking4earth.net>)
- Chakana: NGO & knowledge centre about Indians of the highlands (<http://www.chakana.nl>) (Nederlands)

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