

What is a "Pagan?"

Everybody has his or her favorite definition of "Pagan." Most people are convinced that their meaning is the correct one. But no consensus exists, even within a single faith tradition or religion.

Origin of the term:

There is general agreement that the word "Pagan" comes from the Latin word "paganus." Unfortunately, there is no consensus on the precise meaning of the word in the fifth century CE and before. There are three main interpretations. None has won general acceptance:

- 1) Most modern Pagan sources interpret the word to have meant "rustic," "hick," or "country bumpkin" -- a pejorative term. The implication was that Christians used the term to ridicule country folk who tenaciously held on to what the Christians considered old-fashioned, outmoded Pagan beliefs. Those in the country were much slower in adopting the new religion of Christianity than were the city folks. They still followed the Greek state religion, Roman state religion, Mithraism, various mystery religions, etc., long after those in urban areas had converted.
- 2) Some believe that in the early Roman Empire, "paganus" came to mean "civilian" as opposed to "military." Christians often called themselves "miles Christi" (Soldiers of Christ). Thus, the non-Christians became "pagani" -- non-soldiers or civilians. No denigration would be implied.
- 3) C. Mohrmann suggests that the general meaning was any "outsider," -- a neutral term -- and that the other meanings, "civilian" and "hick," were merely specialized uses of the term.

By the third century CE, its meaning evolved to include all non-Christians. Eventually, it became an evil term that implied the possibility of Satan worship. The latter two meanings are still in widespread use today.

There is no generally accepted, single, current definition for the word "Pagan." The word is among the terms that the newsgroup alt.usage.english, calls "skunk words." They have varied meanings to different people. The field of religion is rife with such words. consider: Christian, cult, hell, heaven, occult, Paganism, pluralism, salvation, Witch, Witchcraft, Unitarian, Universalist, Voodoo, etc. Each has so many meanings that they often cause misunderstandings wherever they are used. Unfortunately, most people do not know this, and naturally assume that the meaning that they have been taught is universally accepted. A reader must often look at the context in which the word is used in order to guess at the intent of the writer.

We recognize that many Wiccans, Neopagans, and others regularly use the terms "Pagan" and "Paganism" to describe themselves. Everyone should be free to continue whatever definitions that they wish. However, the possibility of major confusion exists -- particularly if one is talking to a general audience. When addressing non-Wiccans or non-Neopagans, it is important that the term:

Be carefully defined in advance, or that
Its meaning is clearly understandable from the text's context.

Otherwise, the speaker or writer will be referring to one group of people, while the listeners or readers will assume that other groups are being referred to.

The six most common definitions of which we are aware are listed below:

1) Pagans consist of Wiccans and other Neopagans:

We recommend that this should be the primary definition of "Pagan," for the simple reason that many Wiccans and other Neopagans embrace the term for themselves. "Paganism" in this sense refers to a range of spiritual paths which are Earth centered -- involving their members living in harmony with the Earth and observing its cycles. These are often Neopagan religions based on the deities, symbols, practices, seasonal days of celebration and other surviving components of ancient religions, which had

been long suppressed. For example: The Druidic religion is based on the faith and practices of the ancient Celtic professional class;

- Followers of Asatru adhere to the ancient, pre-Christian Norse religion;
- Wiccans trace their roots back to the pre-Celtic era in Europe.
- Other Neo-pagans follow Roman, Greek, Egyptian and other traditions.

Some typical quotations which demonstrate this meaning of "Pagan" are:

- "Witchcraft, or Wicca, is considered part of the occult, but has little relationship to Satanism. Wicca is pagan (pre-Christian, as opposed to anti-Christian) and is currently gaining popularity."
- "Witches do not worship the devil...Witches are more interested in magical arts and the divinity of nature...Wiccans are considered pagans because they worship several nature gods instead of a single god."
- "The World Christian Encyclopedia estimates 6 million Americans profess to be witches and engage in practices like these. They are a sub-group of over 10 million persons the encyclopedia says call themselves pagans, who practice "primitive" religions such as Druidism, Odin worship and Native American shamanism."

In this sense, "Pagan" refers to a group of religious traditions, and should be capitalized, as Christianity, Islam and Judaism are.

2) Pagans are people to hate:

- Religious and social conservatives sometimes use "Pagan" as a general purpose "snarl" word to refer to cultures or religions that are very different from the speaker's. There is no general consensus as to meaning. It can be seen directed at any religious or cultural group that the speaker hates. Some examples: Dr. John Patrick, professor at the University of Ottawa, Canada was discussing at a conference the number of abortions performed worldwide. He said: "Gods and goddesses are beginning to re-inhabit the Western world. Infant sacrifice — there are 52 million a year. It is paganism."
- Dr. Richard Swenson, director of the Future Health Study Center, said at the same conference: "We went into post-Christian and neopaganism very quickly...We want the culture to change, we want some spiritual sanity, but we need to understand that this is a pluralistic and even neopaganist society."
- Jerry Falwell appeared as a guest on Pat Robertson's "700 Club" program on 2001-SEP-13. He said that God became sufficiently angry at America that he engineered the terrorist attack on New York City and Washington-- presumably to send Americans a message. He said: "I really believe that the Pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians ...all of them who have tried to secularize America - I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" Pat Robertson responded: "Well, I totally concur..." [We have asked Falwell's office via repeated Emails to tell us exactly to whom he was referring with the word "Pagans." As expected, they declined to respond.] More details.

3) Pagans are ancient polytheists:

The term "Pagan" is sometimes used to refer to ancient polytheistic religions:

The Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) contains many references to the societies surrounding the Israelites -- Babylonians, Canaanites, Philistines, etc. These are commonly referred to as Pagans:

- There are allegations that these societies engaged in human sacrifices: II Kings 3:26-27: "...the king of Moab...took his eldest son that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall."
- Psalms 106:37-38: "Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils, And shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood."

- Their altars were often referred to as "high places:" II Kings 16:4: "And he sacrificed and burnt incense in the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree."
- Surrounding tribes were viewed as committing idolatry by worshiping golden images of animals: II Kings 17:16: "And they left all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made them molten images, even two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal."
- Some current examples of this usage are: Referring to sun wheels and obelisks: "...These symbols of pagan sun worship were associated with Baal worship, or Baalim, which is strongly condemned in scripture. So why are they so prevalent in the Roman Catholic Church, if they are associated with paganism and apostasy?" An anti-Catholic essay on a conservative Protestant Christian web site.
- Ancient faiths of ancient Celtic, Egypt, Greece, Norse, Rome, and other cultures are frequently referred to as Pagan religions. Even though many of these religions had strict social and sexual behavioral codes, their followers are often portrayed as hedonist and immoral: 1 Peter 4:3: "For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries."

4) Pagans follow Aboriginal religions:

- Paganism is occasionally used to refer to animistic, spirits-and-essences filled belief systems. It is based upon direct perception of the forces of nature and usually involves the use of idols, talismans and taboos in order to convey respect for these forces and beings. Many native, aboriginal religions fit this definition.

5) Pagans are non-Abramics:

- A rare use of "Pagan" is to describe a person who does not follow an Abramic religion. That is, their faith does not recognize Abraham as a patriarch. The individual is neither Christian, Muslim, Baha'i nor Jew. This includes Agnostics, Atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Humanists, Taoists, etc. About 45% of the people of the world are Pagans, by this definition.

6) Pagans are Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, etc:

- The term "Pagan" was widely used by Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, etc. to refer to themselves. The word was also used by others to describe these groups. The usage dropped after the rise of Neopaganism in the middle of the 20th century, and is rarely seen today.

How common are the various meanings of "Pagan"?

On the Internet itself: Wiccans and other Neopagans have made extensive use of the Internet; they probably have more web pages per capita than followers of any other religion. Using the search string "Pagan," the Google search engine found about 459,000 hits on the Internet. We found that: The first 14 hits all referred to Wicca or another Neopagan religion. 24 of the first 27 hits referred to a Neopagan faith tradition.

In conservative Christian search engines: We used the same search string on Goshen. It is perhaps the largest conservative Christian search engine. It found ten web sites which referred to Paganism. Some were broken links; others had no apparent references to Pagans. But others did: Five referred to ancient polytheistic religions, such as the faiths of Babylonians, Celts, Romans, etc. during biblical times and in the early history of Christianity: An anti-Roman Catholic essay which described the use of sun wheels and obelisks of ancient Pagan religions within Roman Catholicism.

One condemned Christmas' practices as "merely variations of the ceremonies invented by the corrupt pagans of yesterday." It refers to the Christian concept of the Trinity as deriving from "Pagan Babylon." "The religion of pagan Babylon did not disappear...it was passed on down, to 'Mystery Babylon,'...[the] mother of abominations of the earth."

One promotes Christian observance of Halloween: "...someone is bound to ask why we allow our children to act out a ritual rooted in pagan and satanic beliefs..."

One referred to the Pagan cultures surrounding the early Christian movement.

Another anti-Roman Catholic essay discusses Jesus' mother Mary. It notes that the titles "Mother of God" and "Queen of Heaven" came from Pagan cultures that surrounded the early Christian movements. It says that the concept of the perpetual virginity of Mary is also Pagan, being derived from the worship of "Ashtoroth, also known as Isis, Diana, Venus, Vesta, Samariums, Istarte and Helen...".

One probably refers to Neopagans: The author writes that "all belief systems except atheism, paganism and satanism have had their roots from certain scriptures..." Presumably, the author is not referring to ancient polytheistic religions because various cultures from Babylon to Rome had religious writings. He might possibly be referring to Aboriginal religions, which typically use an oral tradition.

Examples:

To show the wide variety of meanings attributed to the word "Paganism," we will create a context file below. It will consist of quotations from various news sources in which the term is used. We started this list on 2000-OCT-25, and only have two entries to date:

Paganism = secularization + New Age religion, + politically liberal thinking + others:

According to U.S. Newswire:

The National Clergy Council and Operation Save Our Nation have scheduled for 2000-OCT-28 a "Jericho March" of 100 religious "intercessors" around Capitol Hill and the White House. President of the Council, the Rev. Rob Schenck said: "The concept behind this Jericho March is to 'tear down' the walls of the new 'Washington Paganism' -- the secularization, New Ageism and postmodern amorality -- epitomized in the Clinton-Gore Administration, in the morally weak leadership in the Congress, and in the liberal members of the Supreme Court."

Paganism = ancient polytheists: According to John Silber writing in the Boston Herald:

"This opposition [to Christmas trees], then and now, rests on a recognition of the pagan origin of the Christmas tree. Indeed, as columnist Kimberley Strassel has noted in The Wall Street Journal, the Prophet Jeremiah specifically condemned as pagan the practice of cutting down trees, bringing them inside and decorating them."

Paganism = Non-Abramics:

According to a Pagan news service:

"Vatican officials have labeled Europe a "Pagan country." The comment was prompted by a statistic from Austria that 43,632 Austrians formally renounced their Roman Catholic affiliation in 1999, whereas only 3,387 joined the Church.

Conclusions:

Most Internet references to Paganism refer to Wiccans and other Neopagans.

Conservative Christians generally use the term Pagan to refer to ancient Polytheistic religions that adversely affected Christianity.

Other meanings of "Paganism" appear to be rarely used in contemporary literature.

Recommendations:

We recommend that the terms "Pagan" and "Paganism" never be used in speech or written form, unless:

They are precisely defined in advance, or
A known and homogenous audience is being addressed.

Otherwise mass confusion will occur. Even if it is carefully defined, listeners or readers' interpretation of the text will probably be distorted. They will carry over some of the baggage associated with their own definition of "Pagan." In place of "Pagan," we suggest that you use the actual name of the religious group that you are referring to: (e.g. Animism, Asatru, Buddhism, Druidism, Hinduism, Native American Spirituality, Wicca, etc.) to avoid ambiguity.

The term "Neopagan" has a unique definition and can be used without confusion among those who know its meaning. However, not everyone is aware of what it means.