

# Are Paganisms religions?

## Definition of religion

According to *Chambers Concise Dictionary*, religion is defined as “belief in, recognition of, or an awakened sense of, a higher unseen controlling power or powers, with the emotion and morality connected with such; rites or worship; any system of such belief or worship; devoted fidelity; monastic life.”

This definition clearly does not recognise the structural differences between the major faiths. For example, Christianity is divided up into several churches or denominations, which could be argued to be religions in their own right, so great are the doctrinal differences between them. Just about the only thing they all agree on is the doctrine of salvation, but even there the precise means of how salvation is achieved is disputed. Hinduism is really an umbrella term for a group of religions or spiritual paths, which all share a Vedic world-view and come under the broad umbrella of Hindu *dharma* (truth). Indeed, many Hindus do not call themselves Hindus, as the name simply means “Indian”. There are six main traditions or *darshanas* in Hinduism, and Hindu beliefs embrace everything from polytheism to monism to monotheism (a similar range of beliefs can be found across modern Paganisms).

When Christian missionaries arrived in China in the nineteenth century, they thought that there was no religion in China, as they did not recognise Taoism or Buddhism as religions, because their key characteristics were so different from Christianity. Today, however, most people would recognise these as religions.

There are many Paganisms in the modern world (Wicca, Heathenry, Druidry, etc.) but in theory a member of each of these groups could be a full member of any of the others.

## Definition of Pagan

According to *Chambers Concise Dictionary*, pagan is defined as “a heathen; a person who is not a Christian, Jew or Muslim; more recently, someone who has no religion; a person who sets a high value on sensual pleasures. [L. *paganus*, rustic, peasant, also civilian (because the Christians reckoned themselves soldiers of Christ) – *pagus*, a district.]” Paganism is defined as “heathenism; the beliefs and practices of the heathen.” (*Chambers’* definition of ‘heathen’ is even worse!)

This is a very inadequate definition of Pagan. *Religions in the UK: Directory 2001-03* describes Paganism as “not a single, structured religion. Pagans understand it to be an indigenous religious outlook which is nature-venerating and recognises many deities, both goddesses and gods. Some Pagan traditions in the UK pre-date other major religious traditions.” It then goes on to describe the various different Paganisms – a massive improvement on the dictionary definition.

Pagans define themselves and their religions in quite varied ways, but the variations are no wider than those that can be found in other religious traditions (especially Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, arguably the most closely analogous traditions to the various Paganisms).

The key pointers which identify someone as Pagan are belief in deity which includes goddesses as well as gods (though beliefs range from monotheism to monism to polytheism, as in Hinduism); usually some kind of connection with or veneration of nature; that existence on earth is to be celebrated and enjoyed; that love and sexuality (in all its forms) is sacred; they generally also have a positive attitude to magic and ritual, and do not believe in sin or similar concepts. They acknowledge the existence of virtue and vice (indeed much of Pagan ethics is based on Virtue Ethics) but do not necessarily believe that this results in a fundamental separation from the divine.

### **Self-definition**

Many modern Pagans are suspicious of the term 'religion', associating it with bigotry and dogmatic attitudes, and hence prefer to describe their beliefs and practices as a spiritual path. Most Pagans, however, would be offended if their religion was described as a cult.

The term religion is possibly connected with the Latin verb *religare*, to bind. Hence it is about connection and community. Most Pagans feel themselves to be connected with nature (which includes other humans and animals), with each other, and with the deities and beings that they honour. They also recognise higher powers, have a system of ethics, feel emotion towards their deities, and practice rites and ceremonies to honour their deities. Many Pagans are uncomfortable with the term 'worship', associating it with self-abasement, and hence prefer to use the terms 'honour' or 'celebrate'.

### **Paganisms are not cults**

Sociologists of religion use the word cult to mean "a loosely knit organisation characterised by tolerance and open-mindedness in matters of belief and practice" (Peter Clarke, *Encarta Encyclopaedia*). In popular usage, however, the term 'cult' has entirely negative connotations, predicated on its definition as 'a great or excessive admiration for a person or thing' (*Chambers* again). "This largely originated with highly publicized cults which were widely believed to exploit their members psychologically and financially, or which were accused of group-based persuasion and conversion techniques. ... the quintessential modern cult is thought to be religion taken to the extreme, usually characterized by high levels of dependency and obedience to the cult's leadership; by separation from family and non-believers; and by the infiltration of religion into nearly every aspect of daily life." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult>)

Paganisms certainly fit the sociological definition of cults, but not the popular definition. Pagans are mostly highly independent-minded, generally operate in groups on principles of consensus, and are mostly highly suspicious of leaders,

especially self-proclaimed ones. They do not separate themselves from family and non-believers. Their religion permeates their lives, but as it is about the celebration of life and not its denial, this can hardly be seen as problematic. In any case, most serious practitioners of any religion would agree that their religion permeates their everyday life.

### Comparison with other religions

Feature Religion	Belief in a deity or deities	Ethics & "golden rule"	Rites and worship
Hinduism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Buddhism	Some	Yes	Yes, rites
Sikhism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paganisms	Yes	Ethics – all traditions; golden rule – some traditions	Yes, rites and honouring
Christianity	Yes	Yes	Yes
Judaism	Yes	Yes	Yes
Islam	Yes	Yes	Yes

The "golden rule" refers to the principle of helping and not harming others, expressed in various ways in different religions (see <http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm>). Other Pagan traditions have an ethic of reciprocity, involving the honouring of obligations.

### The numbers game

According to the UK Census 2001, there are around 40,000 Pagans in the UK. However, Ronald Hutton has estimated that the figure may be as high as 120,000. The disparity between his estimate and the census figure may be explained by the likelihood that many people did not disclose their religion for fear of discrimination. In addition, anyone who wrote "Heathen" was categorised as having no religion, despite the fact that many Pagans describe themselves as Heathens. Druids and Pantheists may or may not be Pagans, but it is most likely that they are, so I have included them below. The detailed figures no longer seem to be available from the National Census website, so I have collated these from a Pagan magazine, which did not list Shamanism among the categories:

Pagan	30,569
Wiccan	7,227
Druid	1,657
Pantheist	1,603
Heathen	278
Asatru	92
Animism	401
Ancestor worship	101
Celtic Pagan	508
<hr/> Total	<hr/> 42,436

The total population of Britain is 52,041,908. The reason the figure for Wicca is low by comparison with the Australian one (see below) is that the Pagan Federation advised people to put PAGAN on the form so as to be counted as a single group. Many of those who put Pagan on the form would also be Wiccan (by inclination if not by formal initiation), or belong to another specific Pagan tradition.

Compare the figures for Paganisms with some other smaller religions in the UK:

Baha' i	4,645
Jain	15,132
Zoroastrian	3,768

In Australia (which also carried out a census in 2001), the breakdown is as follows:

Pagan	10,632
wiccan	8,755
Australian Aborigine Traditional Religions	5,224
Nature Religion	2,225
Pantheist	1,085
Animism	763
Druid	697
Ancestor Veneration	573
<hr/> Total	<hr/> 29,954

The total population of Australia is 18,972,350.

Comparing the world figures for 2002, we get the following:

- Christianity: 2 billion
- Islam: 1.3 billion
- Hinduism: 900 million
- Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist: 850 million
- Buddhism: 360 million
- Chinese traditional religion: 225 million
- Primal-indigenous: 150 million
- African Traditional & Diasporic: 95 million
- Sikhism: 23 million
- Juche: 19 million
- Spiritism: 14 million
- Judaism: 14 million
- Baha'i: 6 million
- Jainism: 4 million
- Shinto: 4 million
- Cao Dai: 3 million
- Tenrikyo: 2.4 million
- Neo-Paganism: 1 million
- Unitarian-Universalism: 800 thousand
- Rastafarianism: 700 thousand

Scientology: 600 thousand  
Zoroastrianism: 150 thousand

Source: [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

If you add together the indigenous religions with Paganism (some of which are broadly similar in outlook but do not all identify as Pagan, because of the colonial usage of the term as a pejorative), you get the following:

Chinese traditional religion: 225 million  
Primal-indigenous: 150 million  
African Traditional & Diasporic: 95 million  
Shinto: 4 million  
Neo-Paganism: 1 million

**Total: 475 million**

(other sources list adherents of Shinto at 86 million:

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20030108b1.htm>)

### **Legal status in the UK**

Paganism is mentioned in the ACAS guidelines for the implementation of the Employment Equality Regulations 2003: Religion or Belief and the Workplace. The guidelines state "Religion or belief is defined as being any religion, religious belief or similar philosophical belief. This does not include any philosophical or political belief unless it is similar to religious belief". On page 6, it explicitly says that Paganism and Hinduism count as religious beliefs.

More information can be found at <http://paganwiccan.about.com/od/legal/>

### **Recognition by major bodies**

Paganisms are recognised as religions by the government (specifically the Home Office, where Pagans are recognised as prison visitors, and the NHS, which recognises Pagan chaplains for hospital visits). In *Religions in the UK: Directory 2001-03*, "Paganism" is listed under "Some Other Religious Traditions and Beliefs", but it is included. It should be noted that this directory was compiled before the 2001 census results became available. *Home Office Research Study 220: Religious discrimination in England and Wales* (Paul Weller, Alice Feldman and Kingsley Purdam), available at [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hors220.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hors220.pdf), examines the prejudices and discrimination experienced by various faith groups, including Pagans. The Scottish courts' diversity booklet covers Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism Sikhism, the Baha'i Faith, Paganism and Brahma Kumaris as well as general issues (available at [www.scotcourts.gov.uk/forms/res/diversityjun04.pdf](http://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/forms/res/diversityjun04.pdf)).

In addition, the Goddess temple in Glastonbury is officially recognised as a place of religious worship.

Pagan delegates are also welcomed at the Parliament of World Religions (<http://www.cpwr.org/>)

Recently, a new body, PEBBLE (Public Body Liaison Committee for British Paganism) was set up for Pagans to liaise with the government and other public bodies. It is worth quoting extensively from their website (<http://pebble.wiccauk.com/>):

“Following the report from the Home Office Faith Communities Unit early in 2004 several Pagan organisations including The Pagan Federation, The Council of British Druid Orders, Pagans in the Public Service and WiccaUK Pagan Network set up the Public Bodies Liaison Committee for British Paganism (Pebble) initiative. The principle aim of Pebble is to speak with one voice on all matters relating to Paganism in the UK to all publicly funded bodies, specifically relating to faith matters.

Earlier this year Pebble met with representatives from the Home Office Communities Faith Unit as a starting point for the consultation process with the government. From this meeting several key issues were raised by both parties and since the meeting these issues have been addressed opening up a line of communication with the government (more information about the meeting can be found on the Pebble website). Following the meeting with the Home Office the Pebble committee met in June with key representatives of the Department for Education and Skills. The meeting outlined the ways in which Pebble could distribute information about Paganism to Local Education Authorities and make it available to schools. It also gave Pebble the information on how to get involved with local Religious Education Councils and since the meeting members of the committee have been communicating with their LEA. Pebble recently met with the Interfaith Network and currently undergoing further consultation with them.

Pebble’s commitment to diversity stems from the inherent Pagan belief that we are all unique - and that diversity is something to be celebrated and valued - adding, as it does, richness and depth to our life experiences; diversity is seen as making a significant contribution to the development of individual self-awareness and our knowledge of the world we live in.”

### **Continuity with ancient and indigenous forms of pagan belief**

There is some continuity and some discontinuity with ancient forms of pagan belief.

Reconstructionists try to learn as much as possible about the beliefs and practices of ancient paganisms, and practice them where appropriate, whilst acknowledging that we live in a changed world. Examples of this include most Heathens, *Religio Romana*, Kemeticism (Egyptian), and Lithuanian Paganism (Romuva) among others.

Wiccans and Druids tend to take the view that, whilst we are honouring the same deities as our ancestors, our needs and priorities have changed. For example, our ancestors were preoccupied with nature because of the need to propitiate it and make the crops grow; modern urban Pagans are preoccupied with nature precisely

because they feel detached from it in our post-industrial, predominantly urban society.

It is very difficult to have complete continuity with ancient forms of pagan belief when a lot of the time, what they thought about many topics was not recorded; and we can only guess what they would have thought about many of the issues facing us today. Probably, if they found themselves in our modern context, they too would be preoccupied with ecology.

Looking at Hinduism and indigenous religions (the closest parallels to Paganisms), we can see that their priorities have changed over the millennia, and they too are worried about the same issues facing humanity. It is normal for religions to evolve (even religions of the book), so we should not be too surprised if Paganisms have evolved to fit modern circumstances and concerns. The only difference is that there was a thousand year hiatus in the evolution of European Paganisms, as they lay dormant beneath the hegemony of Christianity, and in some cases their continuity was maintained only in the evolution of magical practices and thinking.

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