

Defining Paganism: Paleo-, Meso-, and Neo-

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The term "Pagan" comes from the Latin "paganus," which appears to have originally had such meanings as "country dweller," "villager," or "hick." The early Roman Christians used "pagan," to refer to everyone who preferred to worship pre-Christian divinities, whom the Christians had decided were all "really" demons in disguise. Over the centuries, "pagan" became an insult, applied to the monotheistic followers of Islam by the Christians (and vice versa), and by the Protestants and Catholics towards each other, as it gradually gained the connotation of "a follower of a false religion." By the beginning of the twentieth century, the word's primary meanings became a blend of "atheist," "agnostic," "hedonist," "religionless," etc., (when referring to an educated, white, non-Celtic European) and "ignorant savage" (when referring to everyone else on the planet).

Today there are many people who proudly call ourselves "Pagan," and we use the word differently from the ways that most mainstream Westerners do. To most of us, "Pagan" is a general term for polytheistic religions old and new, as well as their members. The overwhelming majority of all the human beings who have ever lived have been Pagans, and we believe that there is an enormous wealth of spiritual insight and strength to be gained from following a Pagan path.

"Paleopaganism" or "Paleo-Paganism" refers to the original tribal faiths of Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas, Oceania and Australia, when they were (or in some cases, still are) practiced as intact belief systems. Of the so-called "Great Religions of the World," Hinduism (prior to the influx of Islam into India), Taoism and Shinto, for example, fall under this category.

"Mesopaganism" or "Meso-Paganism" is the word used for those religions founded as attempts to recreate, revive or continue what their founders thought of as the Paleopagan ways of their ancestors (or predecessors), but which were heavily influenced (accidentally, deliberately or involuntarily) by the monotheistic and dualistic worldviews of Judaism, Christianity and/or Islam. Examples of Mesopagan belief systems would include Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism, Druidism as practiced by the Masonic-influenced fraternal movements in Europe and the Celtic Isles, the many Afro-American faiths (such as Voudoun, Santeria, or Macumba), Sikhism, and several sects of Hinduism that have been influenced by Islam and Christianity.

"Neopaganism" or "Neo-Paganism" refers to those religions created since 1940 or so (though they had literary roots going back to the mid-1800's), that have attempted to blend what their founders perceived as the best aspects of different types of Paleopaganism with modern "Aquarian Age" ideals, while consciously striving to eliminate as much as possible of the traditional Western monotheism and dualism. The Church of All Worlds, most Wiccan traditions, my own ADF and Keltria, for example, are all Neopagan.

These terms do not delineate clear-cut categories. Historically, there is often a period, whether of decades or centuries, when Paleopaganism is blending into Mesopaganism, or Mesopaganism into Neopaganism. Furthermore, the founders and members of Mesopagan and Neopagan groups frequently prefer to believe (or at least declare) that they are genuinely Paleopagan in beliefs and practices. This "myth of continuity" is in keeping with the habits of most creators and members of new religions throughout human existence.

When doing searching on the Net, you should be aware that some people do and some don't hyphenate these terms, especially "Neo-Paganism", that many Neopagans drop the "Neo-" entirely (especially in casual use), and that many outsiders refuse to capitalize the names of our religions. More confusingly, many Mesopagans and Paleopagans refuse to use the term "Pagan" for themselves at all, having accepted the mainstream Christian definitions. One sign of progress, however, occurred when the publishers of *Hinduism Today* -- a fabulous monthly journal published in a dozen languages around the globe -- printed an editorial a few years back in which they proudly accepted the term "Pagan" on behalf of the one billion Hindus in the world!

Obviously, the use of this vocabulary is currently in flux, and you may need to try variant spellings, capitalizations, and hyphenizations to find what you're looking for.