

Good research paper about pagan religious traditions

[Environment](#), [Water](#)



Periodically throughout the last two millennia or so, Pagans, or followers of classical polytheisms found themselves facing oppression or persecution. As the influence of Christianity grew, the term “pagan” was used to broadly describe any non-Christians. Attempts to suppress Paganism successfully erased many Pagan rituals and demolished or covered sacred sites, but early Christianity was far from uniform between different regions and different blendings of Paganism and Christianity occasionally emerged. Examining varied pagan traditions and beliefs and understanding the interaction between Paganism and Judaism and Christianity and Paganism when Christianity was a young religion allows greater insight into some traditions and symbols that are found in major world religions like Christianity and Judaism, sometimes persisting even today.

Paganism has no known beginning, specific origin, holy book or founder, as most or all societies that predated Christianity are classified as pagan. Additionally, there are few texts considered authoritatively “pagan,” as societies placed emphasis on oral tradition and the conquering force of Christianity destroyed pagan records and teachings in its wake. Many remaining sources about paganism available today are actually in the form of denunciations made by the Christian church.

Religious rituals in paganism were mostly performed in religiously-correct places. Ken Dowden (2000, p. 25) outlines that religious place consists of “at and within,” or focus and area. For example, a ritual may be performed at an altar within a sanctuary, at a large, unique rock within a cave, or at an especially large tree within a meadow. Paganism was also characteristically, though not absolutely always, public, with shared ritual owned by the whole

community (Dowden, 2000, p. 8). Trees, rocks and water, often in combination, were common parts of sacred Pagan sites (Dowden, 2000, p. 35). The possible foci for Pagan worship was recognized by Early Christians, as evidenced by a 5th century decree during the time of Caesarius at Arles, dated to 542:

So Christians should neither make vows at trees nor worship at trees nor worship at springs if they wish through God's Grace to be freed from eternal punishment. Accordingly, anyone who has trees or altars or any sort of fauna on his land or in his villa or next to his villa where wretched men are accustomed to make any vows – if he does not destroy them and chop them down, he will be without doubt implicated in those sacrileges which take place there. (Caesarius, Sermon 54. 5, as in Dowden, 2000)

Paganism was heavily focused in nature, with specific natural sites often playing host to ritual and also inspiring worship. According to Dowden (2000, p. 41), one element prevalent in paganism is water: “ Anyone looking at paganism in Europe will quickly realise that ‘ the worship of springs and streams is common to all Indo-European peoples’and that ‘ holy wells are revered all over Europe.’”

In the sixth century, Martin of Braga, in On Reforming Pagans, delves into the paganism centered around water:

many of those demons that have been expelled from heaven have their seat in the sea or in rivers or in springs or in woods and in the same way men ignorant of God worship them as gods and offer them sacrifices. They are called: in the sea, Neptune; in rivers, Lamiae; and in springs, Nymphs.

Springs were especially revered, as the visible purity of spring water was

associated with health and healing (Dowden, 2000, p. 44). Various gods were associated with springs in different areas, prayers were made at pagan springs and offerings were made to the water or associated god by tossing objects into the water, a practice that has persisted to the present day, or even by offering a sacrifice to the spring (Dowden, 2000, p. 46)

Notable stones, trees and lands also held power and were associated with Pagan gods and rocks and trees were sometimes personalized or assigned names.

Again, much information about Paganism comes through its conflict with Christianity and denouncements of Paganism. From these documents, it is possible to infer the activities that pagans (and straying Christians) participated in or at least were known for by the Christian leaders. Dowden (2000) quotes from Sermon 63. 1 from Maximus of Turin:

And so, anyone who wants to share in the divine should not be a comrade of idols. It is joining the idol to inebriate the mind with wine, to distend the stomach with food, to rack the limbs with dancing and to be so engaged in wicked actions that you are forced into ignorance of the nature of God. If we are the temple of God, why is the festivity of idols worshipped in the temple of God? Why where Christ lives, who is abstinence, temperance and chastity, do we introduce feasting, drunkenness and debauchery?

A handy definition of Paganism came from the Archbishop Wulfstan of York, who wrote Anglo-Saxon laws for the King of England at the time (Canute, r. 1016-1035), describing Paganism in Laws II. 5. 1, probably with the Vikings in mind:

Paganism is when one worships devil-idols, ie. one worships heathen gods

and sun or moon, fire or running water (rivers), wells (springs) or stones or any kind of wood, or loves witchcraft or accomplishes any murderous deed in anywise, either in sacrifice or divination or performs any thing out of such mistaken ideas. (from Dowden, 2000, p. 42)

An important part of paganism was eating – after all, communal eating was often an outcome of ritual sacrifice, so many rulings of Christian councils pertained to consuming food.

Indo-European paganism also held libation, or pouring of a drink offering, and sacrifice central to their religion. It is impossible to know with certainty what sacrifices and libations were intended to accomplish by those conducting the ritual, but Dowden (2000, p. 169) examines sacrifice from a social perspective, saying that the sacrifice of an animal was a: group event in which aggression is channeled and guilt dispersed; it unites the murdering group and offers the shared and special mealreinforces the communal identity as well as offering various psychological experiences which we can perceive readily enough through comparison with modern times—violence of the football hooligan, comradeship of guerillas, or Christmas dinner as feast of family integration.

According to Karen Armstrong (1993, p. 92), “ Educated pagans looked to philosophy, not religion, for enlightenment,” revering philosophers like Pythagoras, Epictatus and Plato, who was sometimes held to have been the son of Apollo. Philosophers held their philosophies sacred, determined to attract contemporaries to their own school of thought. One group in late antiquity held Platonism as its philosophy and was attracted to the study of Plato as a mystic.

Paganism in late antiquity, even in the Roman Empire, was based on emotion, cult and ritual rather than ideas, ideology or theories (Armstrong, 1993, p. 91). According to Armstrong, deities like Isis and Semele were worshipped alongside the traditional gods of Rome, the guardians of the state. None of these new religious enthusiasms threatened the old order. Eastern deities did not demand a radical conversion and a rejection of the familiar rites but were like new saints, providing a fresh and novel outlook and a sense of a wider world. You could join as many mystery cults as you liked. Mystery religions were tolerated and absorbed into the established order.

At the end of the second century, some educated pagans started to be converted to Christianity and were able to blend the Christian God and the Greco-Roman ideal. These include Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, who taught a doctrine that called Jesus the incarnate Logos, or divine reason, and Sabellius, who suggested that it was possible to compare “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” to the masks actors used to assume different roles in a play (Armstrong, 1993, p. 98-9).

Some of the most striking similarities between Judaism and paganism are in the early history of the Jewish religion, at the time of Abraham. Karen Armstrong, in her *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, asserts that it is probably accurate to refer to early Hebrews like Abraham, his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob as pagans who would have believed in deities like Anat, Baal and Marduk like their neighbors in Canaan (1993, p. 14). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob interacted with and experienced the divine in ways familiar to pagans of the region. The

deity that appears to Abraham introduces himself as “El Shaddai,” one of the traditional titles given to El, the High God of Canaan. El appears as a mild deity, giving Abraham advice and appearing in dreams and sometimes in human form (Armstrong, 1993, p. 15).

Human sacrifice, a not uncommon ritual in the pagan world, was asked of Abraham by his god. Karen Armstrong calls this deity a “brutal, partial and murderous god: a god of war who would be known as Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Armies. He is simply a tribal deity” (1993, p. 19). This Yahweh also split the sea to allow the Israelites to cross and then drowned the Egyptians pursuing them, a divine action familiar to people of the ancient Middle East. Although Christians were oppressed or persecuted in the early history of the religion, Pagans were far more repressed over a longer period of time. Early Christian Roman emperors prohibited magical practices and soothsaying, but the Roman state became firmly aligned with Roman Catholicism with the accession of Emperor Theodosius in 379. During Theodosius’ rule, major attacks on paganism were decreed. Laws that prohibited public discussion of religious topics and the pagan religion of the Roman state as a whole were issued and eventually the threat of the death penalty was issued in 435 (Hillgarth, 1985, p. 45). Only Catholicism and Judaism were recognized as legal religions and Jews were kept as separate as possible. This rise of Catholicism made the church a wealthy, powerful and influential force. While the strength of the powerful Roman state largely dictated the Pagan conversion to Christianity within the Roman Empire, Christianity evolved differently in areas outside of the full reach of the empire, like Ireland. Here, when Christianity triumphed over Paganism, it was not with force but rather

through making concessions and fusing Christianity with older Pagan traditions (Hillgarth, 1985, p. 120). Christianity was an urban religion and rural areas hosted Pagans, or heathens.

For example, Irish Christian society justified legal polygamy. In Ireland, rural monasteries played a greater role in the structure of the Christian church than monasteries elsewhere and much of the literature combining Christianity and Paganism was likely produced in monasteries. Pagan gods and goddesses were substituted with Christian saints, who carried the same attributes as the deities they were replacing (Hillgarth, 1985, p. 120).

Law in Ireland also presented greater respect for women by protecting clergy, women, children, churches and their property with the “ Law of the Innocents” in 697. Hillgarth suggests that this law was likely related to or inspired by “ the exaltation of female sanctity found in some Old Irish poems of the eighth century (122)” like the “ Eulogy of St. Brigit,” or Hail Brigit. Christianity and Judaism, while condemning Paganism and oppressing or even persecuting followers of pagan religion, still borrowed heavily from various pagan religions when writing sacred texts, observing certain practices, creating religious art and in other ways.

Simply looking at a map of the Middle East and Northern Africa might allow one to guess that Egyptian beliefs, rituals and symbolism likely merged with Christianity at a fairly early time in the history of Christianity. Indeed, Christianity features many obvious indicators of an Egyptian influence. One well-known belief of the Ancient Egyptians was that an individual’s soul was weighed after death, with the outcome of the weighing, or judgment, determining the soul’s fate. In Christianity, this is echoed in the Book of

Daniel (5: 27): “Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting.”

This scene is also depicted in medieval artwork in France in the form of a bas-relief in a church in Velay, which pictures an angel at a scale weighing souls and a woman whose virtue was found lacking being carried away by a pig (Wallis, 1964, p. 4).

An annual Egyptian festival was described by Herodotus and involved priests wrapping a man in a shroud, carrying him to a temple of Isis outside of the city and leaving him there. The man was then led back by two priests and he carried with him a napkin. This bears a striking similarity to the Bible’s Gospel of John, when a napkin was found separate from the shroud in the tomb of Jesus (Wallis, 1964, p. 6).

Egyptian priests wore white linen robes, inspiring the white vestments worn during Christian worship (Wallis, 1964). Additionally, the Egyptian goddess Isis was often featured with a sun-ray crown, or halo, which persisted through time around the head of the Greek god Apollo and also landed atop Christian and Buddhist saints in representations (Wallis, 1964, p. 7).

A mother-goddess or holy mother was a common thread that ran through many pagan religions and into Christianity. Some aspects of the Virgin Mary, or at least her depiction, were undoubtedly inspired by certain Pagan beliefs. For example, depictions of the Egyptian goddess Isis, mother of Horus, and her divine child are mimicked in works featuring Mary and Jesus. Isis, as well as Artemis, was symbolized by a crescent moon, which appears in a number of paintings showing Mary. Isis also persisted more obviously in medieval Christianity. Some cathedrals and churches had carvings or statues depicting Isis, and there are even cases where worshippers, sometimes for centuries,

mistook statues of Isis for the Virgin Mary (Wallis, 1964, p. 7).

The Libri Carolini of around 800 CE makes not of how difficult it was to tell depictions of Mary and Venus apart if they are not labeled (Wallis, 1964, p. 85).

In Ancient Egypt, a ray of light descended upon the Sacred Cow in depictions. In Mesopotamia, the ear was considered the center of intelligence, not the brain, and in some medieval pictures the Immaculate Conception is depicted as a ray of light descending into the Virgin Mary's Ear (Wallis, 1964, p. 84).

Even a symbol as important in Christianity as the cross may have been borrowed from paganism. The cross was used as a Christian symbol at least as early as late in the first century, but it was not a common Christian symbol until Constantinople rose to greatness in the fourth century. Wallis (1964) asserts that the adoption of the cross probably came due as a result of pagan influence. Crosses with four bars of equal length extending from the center are found in Greek and Babylonian works. Assyrian sculptures feature a radiating cross with four arms and four rays of light, with the four arms perhaps representative of the four quarters of the heavens that the god Anu presides over. The dove, a symbol strongly associated with Christianity for its important presence in parts of the Old Testament, was sacred to the Semitic goddess Astarte, or Ishtar, in Cyprus, Palestine and Syria. The holy trinity, or sacredness of the number three, is a common theme in several religions that predate Christianity and Judaism and the rosary may also have Pagan origins.

Some holidays and celebrations that are now thought of as primarily

Christian or even secular have roots in paganism or borrow from paganism during celebrations. For example, according to Regina Hanson of Boston University, Halloween has origins in the Celtic paganism of the British Isles, where Pagans believed that spirits came out to haunt on Halloween and required appeasing with treats. Elements of Roman Paganism are also associated with Halloween. Hanson cites the Roman harvest-type feast honoring Pomona—the goddess of fruit and trees—as providing the inspiration for the tradition of bobbing for apples.

When Christianity arrived in Britain, Christian forces there decided, as they did not have the strong arm of the Church at that distance, to incorporate the existing Halloween celebration into existing Christian ritual. As November 1 was already the Christian Feast of All Saints and All Souls' Day was November 2, October 31 was renamed “ All Hallows' Eve,” or the “ Eve of All Souls.”

Easter eggs, representative rabbits and greenery around Christmas that includes mistletoe, Yule logs and evergreen tree also draw inspiration from paganism.

Valentine's Day or, more properly, St. Valentine's Day, commemorates one or multiple men named Valentinus who lived in the third century and were martyrs under Emperor Claudius II. Pope Gelasisus I decreed that the Feast of Saint Valentine was to be celebrated on February 14.

Ancient Rome celebrated the Festival of Lupercalia on February 14.

Lupercalia was revered as the she-wolf that suckled the founders of Rome, Remus and Romulus, and the she-wolf was honored with a ceremony performed by priests of the Roman god Faunus. The ritual involved the

sacrifice of goats, followed by a feast. The skin of the sacrificed goats was then utilized in a ceremony for fertility and marriage, indicating the pagan origins for Valentine's Day as a day for romance. The same Pope Gelasius I who decreed February 14 as Saint Valentine's Day outlawed observation of the Festival of Lupercalia.

Through a Christian lens, it is speculated that St. Valentine's Day is associated with love and romance because one of the men named Valentinus that came to be St. Valentine continued to perform secret marriages for soldiers after the Emperor Claudius II outlawed marriage for young soldiers in the hopes they would be better soldiers until this was revealed and he was put to death, becoming a martyr.

As discussed, Pagan traditions and rituals were largely focused around nature, although there was great diversity in polytheistic religion, and feeling was emphasized over theology. Christianity arose out of a break with Judaism and to eventually become powerful and reaching. In the process of spreading through converting, Christianity tried to abolish certain Pagan practices and incorporated others to gain as many followers as possible. It is because of this compromise that many originally-Pagan traditions and images or symbols found places in Christianity.

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