

[Thank Goddess For Pagans!](#)

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Thank Goddess For Pagans!

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Pagan. The very word conjures up uneasy feelings, and images of dancers in a moon-lit meadow or nearly-naked primitives. Yet every Hindu, all 900 million of us, is a Pagan. That's right. And if we knew the real meaning of the word, we would be proudly Pagan (though you might not have the machismo to wear the T-shirt that Orin Lyons, an Iroquois Indian chief and New York professor, designed proclaiming himself a "Born Again Pagan."

Webster defines Pagan as: "From the Latin pagus, a peasant, rustic. 1. A person who is not a Christian, Muslim or Jew; heathen: 2. A person who has no religion." Both Pagan and heathen apply to polytheistic peoples, though Pagan specifically refers to ancient peoples and traditions while heathen refers to any so-called primitive idolaters. Don't you just love Webster's implication that if you are not a Christian, Jew or Moslem, you have no religion?

Other etymologies - more interesting to Hindus, but less reliable - suggest as source the Greek root pagos, meaning "upright stone." Europe's early Pagans used the megaliths, large upright stones, in their rites. Today's neo-Pagans still use stones to honor the masculine Divine, just as we have worshipped the Sivalingam and Salagrama for millennia.

Researching this issue's page one story, I spoke to a few Pagans this week. They were all noticeably intelligent, informed and enthusiastic about their chosen faith, far more aware of what they believe than most Christians or Hindus are. Certainly they were more aware of Hinduism than our readers are likely to be about Paganism. Morning Glory Zell, a California-based Pagan leader, happily confessed that for seven years she has kept an altar to Lakshmi. Of several forms she has, a

favorite is the painted image made from Ganges clay. She offers fresh flowers and water daily and performs puja, complete with sandalpaste, on holy days. She cherishes several dream visions of Ganesha and notes, "Most Pagans I know have at least one Hindu deity on their altar. Egyptian and Greek forms are also popular."

Morning Glory's husband, Otto, articulates their philosophy skillfully, "The Pagan theology is basically pantheism, the belief that all objects are given sacred significance. It has a universal outlook, one which embraces all indigenous folkways, one whose unifying vision keeps a place for all ethnic traditions. It is non-hierarchical, non-dogmatic and experiential, placing emphasis on unity through diversity."

Their numbers are small, resources modest and structure unstable. There are about 250,000 Pagans in the US. Most are what they term "solitaries," though more these days are joining groups, like the 200-member Church of All Worlds, founded in 1962 and federally tax-exempt since 1968.

Neo-Pagans possess a rich heritage of song, art, dance, mystery plays and poetry, mostly in English. Part of their liturgy comes from India. They commonly chant "Om" and sing hymns like Jai Ganesha or Kali Ma. Like Hindus, they follow a sacred calendar and place importance on the movement of the seasons and the cycles of sun and moon. Like Hindus, they decry the notion of a one true path, preferring to see God everywhere and in everyone. Like Hindus, Pagans hold personal enlightenment above faith or belief.

Aggressively suppressed by the Christians of Europe, Pagans were nearly exterminated. Even today they are under fire from fundamentalist Christians. They speak of losing their jobs, losing custody of their children in divorce proceedings, being falsely branded as satanic when they are in fact gentle, loving worshippers of nature.

Just as Hindus deplore the Nazi desecration of the auspicious swastika, Pagans lament the disparagement of the pentagram, a centuries-old symbol of their tradition. This five-sided insignia is a mark of man, arms outstretched, and a symbol of the heavenly star - Goddess Tara. Forces allied against the Pagans are linking the pentagram with demon worship and cultism. It is a false attack, but

effective.

In reality, Pagans are nature worshippers, children of the Earth and devotees of the Goddess, the feminine divine. Religion to them centers on the natural world and cosmic entities, rather than a transcendent God. Pagans feel that Tibetan Buddhism is much attuned to them and count many Buddhists among their members. Otto Zell says, "We regard Hinduism as a sister religion from India. We both believe that the whole universe is a living, conscious entity." They find a similar kinship with Shinto. Attacked by Semitic faiths which ferociously repudiate polytheism, they want to forge alliances. We want them to know that Hinduism is a natural refuge and ally. Equally important is that they know this is possible without subtle reins on their independence or offense to their ways and wisdom.

Morning Glory has researched the occurrence of universal symbols - such as the unicorn, swastika, yin-yang and our own symbol for Himalayan Academy, the triskelion (the three-part logo at the bottom of this page). She has found these symbols in many places, distant in time and space, and concludes that the world's cultures share a single source, sort of a primeval path or perennial wisdom. "We have found the swastika in the arts of the pre-Indo-European Dravidians of India, the Tibetans, the Hopi Indians of the Americas, the European Pagans and others. It seems to be a sun symbol, and defines the four directions of the earth. It also represents the four elements, earth, air, fire and water."

Outside of the rural peoples of Europe, who are the great Pagans of history? They count Pythagoras and Archimedes, King Arthur and Chief Seattle. More broadly, Pagans would have to include the Druids (whom one man calls "the Brahmins of Europe") and American Indians. The Egyptians and Mayans. The Sumerians and Babylonians. The Romans and Greeks. The Polynesian tribes. The African peoples. The Japanese Shintos certainly qualify, as do the Chinese Taoists. The Tibetans, Indonesians, Nepalese and East Indians. The list is long. Being bold, we may count as Pagan the entire human race prior to the Christian era and all those following the Christian era but not following Christianity. Most of the human family, in other words.

Neo-Pagans look upon themselves as the first pluralists, the original Gaia hypothesizers, the deepest environmentalists. They revere and understand the earth. They believe all things are alive, and all of life is related. Vision quests and direct encounter with the Divine are central to their path, thus they spend time in

the wilderness, together or alone. Their ways (which can be eccentric, even weird) capture all that is human - the wisdom, humor, mysticism, vulnerability, strangeness, joy and spiritual drives that unify us.

There are resonances and common ground, but not everything called Pagan today is Hindu. Isaac Bonewits, priest of the Reformed Druids of America, says, "Hinduism is really paleo-Pagan. Like Taoism, it is the old, original Paganism, uncontaminated, existing before monotheism was created. The neo-Paganism of the last 30 or 40 years is a sincere reconstruction, but filled with romantic fantasy, making it the distant cousin of Hinduism, 16 times removed."

Still, Morning Glory's bottom line is apt, "We are all reaching into the self, seeking to touch the Gods within us."

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