

Pagans, Heathens, and Infidels

(with a side-order of heretics)

Martin M. Conrad II

Introduction

The terms “pagan”, “heathen”, and “infidel” get bandied about a lot in modern English vernacular. Quite often, each gets used to hint at (or as a direct synonym for) “godless” (which none of them actually means).

For the proper study of mythology, however, we need to have a better, fuller understanding of the history and historicity of these terms.

Pagan

“Pagan” comes (ultimately) from the Latin word *pāgānum*, meaning “peasant” or “rural”, and which was derived from *pāgus*, meaning “village” or “rural district” (cf. Greek πόλις (polis), “city”). The Latin *pāgānum* thus had a primary meaning of “one who dwells in the country”, in contrast to *urbānum*, “of or belonging to a city”.

With the rise of large cities and social stratification, “town-dwellers” often had little-or-no contact with either country-dwellers or the particulars of their lives and livelihood. (There are inner-city residents in our own society who may go their entire lives without encountering farm animals in any situation other than a petting zoo.)

So, there were people living and working in the city (“civilians” or “citizens”, from the Latin *civis*), and there were people living and working in the countryside. The country-dwellers were of two main types: agriculturalists (farmers) and pastoralists (herders)¹. They tended to remain “closer to nature”² than the city-dwellers. As often remains the case today, these country-dwellers were viewed by the city-dwellers as “quaint”, “backward”, “naïve” — as “bumpkins” or “hicks”.

¹ It is worth noting, here, as well, that agriculture probably developed before animal husbandry (see Reay Tannahill, *Sex In History*, Time Warner Books UK, 1980, ISBN-13 978-0349104867), and the farmers and herders didn't always get along. There were often disputes about which activity was a better use of the land (a phenomenon not limited to the Roman Empire, and continuing right up to the present day). The story of Cain and Abel in the Bible may be seen as reflecting this animosity between agriculturalists (Cain) and pastoralists (Abel). The historical chronology between the two is also embedded in the myth by the fact that Cain, the agriculturalist, is older than Abel, the pastoralist. It is also surmised (see Tannahill, again) that *women* were the first agriculturalists, and men the first to domesticate large animals (sheep, goats, and cattle). This situation may be seen as *inverted* in the biblical myth: the younger son, Abel, the pastoralist, is depicted as more passive and nurturing than his brusque older brother, though his focus is on the historically *male* task of managing large animals. Indeed, many myths (and fairy tales) center on the vulnerability or lesser status of *shepherdesses*, who are women (usually young and often virginal) who are, nevertheless, performing “man’s work”. The overt vulnerability of the shepherdess may be a way of depicting them as non-threatening to the male ego — they are doing a man’s job, but they do not have the “superior male qualities” — they are the epitome of the “helpless female” (and, indeed, it is Abel who suffers fatal violence at the hands of his older brother). Thus, this may indicate that the task of watching over flocks of animals had become viewed as “passive” and “safe” in comparison to hunting individual animals, despite the necessity of the herder to fend off the predators which sought to capitalize on the ease of hunting captive prey animals. Finally, it is *well* worth noting that the young David, before being taken into King Saul’s palace, (later to become King of Israel, himself) was originally a shepherd.

² In Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet*, the depressed prince refers to the act of sex as “country matters” (*Hamlet*, III.2).

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These *pāgāna*, because they still tended to crops and animals, also still tended to worship (or at least show reverence to/for) the older nature-based deities (e. g. *Faunus* [*Pan* in Greece, shown at right], *Ceres* (Greek: *Demeter*), etc.). This reverence was sometimes even *in preference to or instead of* the official state gods³ (who, in Rome, were, of course, largely borrowed from the Greeks).

So, “pagan” originally meant simply “a country-dwelling worshiper of the older nature spirits and deities”. As such, it didn’t carry much more of a negative connotation than being “from the country” does among enlightened urbanites today.



Heretics and Heresy



In 325 CE, the Roman Emperor Constantine I (“the Great”), called an ecumenical⁴ council (it was the seventh such council to be called; the earliest had been in 50 CE, in Jerusalem). The council was held in the small Anatolian town of Nicaea, and charged with producing a document which defined Christianity once-and-for-all: its beliefs, practices, doctrines. It was the first attempt in the history

of the movement to achieve a consensus through debate and compromise. Which it did, mostly.

The result was the Nicene Creed of 325 CE, which, among other things, established the divine nature of Jesus as *The Christ* (see below) and set the official date of Easter⁵. Constantine threw the political and military might of the Roman (later Byzantine) Empire behind the Nicene Creed, and, as a result, for the first time it became possible to be “Christian in the wrong way”. In other words, if you continued to hold beliefs or to practice doctrines that weren’t approved of in the Nicene Creed, then you were “doing Christianity wrong”⁶. Among these “wrong-headed” beliefs and practices were: denying the divinity of Jesus; rejecting the belief in Jesus’ resurrection three days after his crucifixion; and questioning the verity and efficacy of the Holy Ghost as God’s primary conduit of interaction with the physical world. (Later, other attitudes and/or practices that were seen as threatening to the power of the Church (eastern or western) would be denounced as heretical, as would practicing any religion other than some accepted, recognized version of Christianity).

The word “heretic” comes from the Greek word *hairesis*, which meant “able to choose”. It came to be applied first to those who resisted the Nicene Creed. Because they were seen as “choosing to do Christianity wrong”, they were *heretics* (see the discussion on the word

³ Which was one of the charges brought against Socrates in 399 BCE and which helped to assure his eventual execution.

⁴ From the Latin *oecumenicus*, meaning “belonging to the whole world” (which shows just how both Rome and Christianity viewed themselves at the time); here, it specifically means that the council was supposed to be attended by representatives of all the different sects of Jesus-followers which existed at that time, and, indeed, delegates came from as far away as Britain and Persia.

⁵ Easter has always been a far more important holiday in canonical Christian doctrine than Christmas, the latter having not been widely observed nor celebrated until much later (apparently subsequent to Charlemagne having been crowned by Pope Leo III during a Christmas observance in Rome in the year 800 CE). Also, calculating the correct date of Easter in a given year has been a major concern for both the Roman and Orthodox Churches for centuries (see David Ewing, *Calendar: Humanity’s Epic Struggle to Determine a True and Accurate Year*, Harper Perennial, 1999, ISBN-13 978-0380793242).

⁶ Later councils would refine the idea, even declaring certain writings to be heretical (or at least apocryphal).

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“infidel”, below). The Church used Roman military might (later developing armies of its own) to do its best to stamp out these “willfully chosen, wrong beliefs and practices” and to eradicate the writings upon which they were based.

This, of course, established a precedent that would see some of its worst excesses during the Crusades (between 1095 and 1271) and the Inquisition (starting 1231 CE) — in fact, more than half of the Crusades ordered by the Roman Church were conducted *in Europe against people who also called themselves Christians!*

Today, the word “heretic” has taken on a more generic sense of “anyone who does not conform to an established attitude, doctrine, or principle,” and is used in secular as well as religious circumstances. For instance, fan-fiction is sometimes called “heresy” when it contradicts the accepted norms and/or history of a given fictional universe (its *canon*).

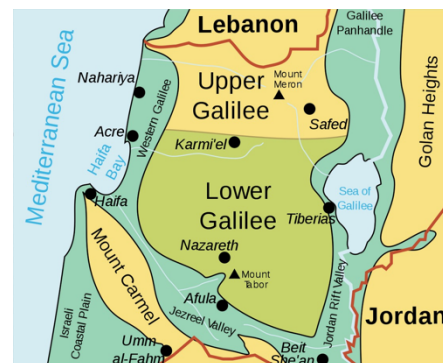
Julian the Apostate: Looking Back



The Roman Emperor Julian (Flavius Claudius Julianus; Constantine’s grandson), was born in 331, and ruled the Roman Empire as Augustus (from the eastern capital of Constantinople) for about 2½ years between 361 – 363. Julian was born a Christian⁷ and professed the Christian faith (at least publicly) until shortly before becoming Emperor. After his ascension to the throne, he openly embraced Neoplatonic Hellenism⁸ and sought to restore widespread pagan worship. Thus, he was called “the Apostate”: apostasy is the condition of having rejected one’s former religion.

He was stridently opposed to the Christianity of his time (he had not had a very positive experience of it). He almost exclusively referred to Christians as “Galileans”, and even wrote a treatise titled *Contra Galilaeos (Against the Galileans)*. The original has been lost, but from references made to it by other writers, we know it focused on the inconsistencies and disagreements between the various Christian sects as the primary reason for restoring polytheistic religion to prominence in the Roman Empire. (The fact that his family was renowned for familial homicide, yet claimed to embrace the peace-loving ideologies of Christianity also contributed significantly to his rejection of the newer religion in favor of the older spirituality.)

Julian’s choice of the name “Galileans” was a reference to Jesus’ purported origins in the Levantine region of Galilee, where he is written to have spent his childhood in the village of Nazareth (hence the epithet “Jesus of Nazareth”). Some sources claim that the family of Jesus’ Earthly father, Joseph, was centered in Nazareth. Jesus’ birthplace is reputed, of course, to have been the town of Bethlehem, which was the seat of the line of King David (reigned c1010-970 BCE); thus claiming that Jesus was born there meant that that he could also be claimed to be descended from the Hebrew King of a thousand years before. This would mean that not only would he have a political claim to the throne, but centuries of prophecy had also declared that the



⁷ Though the Roman Empire wouldn’t become *officially* Christian for another 20 years (see below).

⁸ A set of ideas and practices that combined Plato’s pre-Christian ideas about the nature of reality and experience with the nature-based polytheistic pagan worship of ancient and Hellenistic Greece.

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Jewish *messiah* (see below) would be born in the “city of David” — thus, it could also be claimed that Jesus was that prophesied “anointed one”.

Julian’s reference to Christians as “Galileans” was derogatory. This insult is in the same vein as the question posed by Nathanael in the biblical Book of John, chapter 1, verse 46, when he was told of Jesus’ origins: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

From Bumpkin To Sinner

Six emperors later (they tended to go through them quickly in those days) the Emperor Theodosius I (the Great) declared in 382 CE that Christianity was the *official and only religion of the Roman Empire*⁹; he banned all other forms of worship, and decreed that any-and-all deities other than the Christian God were fictions, “false” gods, and that to worship them was heretical.

As a result, *anyone* – not just those still living in the countryside – who continued worshipping other gods (and *particularly* the old Roman gods), was no longer to be tolerated as “quaint”, “backward”, and “naïve”, but to be vilified as “rebellious”, “barbaric”, and “ignorant”. By definition, to be a pagan was now to be a heretic, as well. A word that had previously simply identified “a worshiper of the older nature deities” came to be applied to *anyone* who worshiped *any* deities other than the God recognized by the Roman Church — and you could easily lose your life over it.

Enter The Heathens

Interestingly, the word “heathen” comes from an old Gothic (western/southwestern Germanic) word that may have been related to the word “heath”¹⁰. So, “heathen” seems to have had a similar sense as “pagan”, but referring not just to someone who didn’t live in a town or city, but to someone who came from “a place outside”, in other words, an “outlander”. Thus, by extension, a “heathen” is “a non-believer” (because *obviously* anyone who wasn’t part of your culture automatically had to have a different religion, right?) The term probably was used by the pre-Christian Germans and Scandinavians simply to refer to those who worshiped other gods, and as such was retained (and slightly redefined) when Christianity took root in Northern Europe in the 700s CE.

Thus, “pagan” and “heathen” both came to be used (largely interchangeably, at least north of the Alps) to refer to non-Christians, and particularly those who worshiped older, more nature-oriented deities, and who were therefore “wrong” in their worship according to Roman Catholicism. They “needed to be corrected”, and would make themselves into heretics if they refused to convert.

Nowadays, of course “heathen” tends to be used disparagingly and/or pejoratively (in religious contexts¹¹) to mean “an individual of a people that does not acknowledge the God of the Bible; a person who is neither a Jew, Christian, nor Muslim”, and that leads us to....

⁹ He was also the last emperor to rule over a united Roman Empire; upon his death, the empire was divided between his sons Honorius and Arcadius and it remained divided thereafter (despite the best efforts of Emperor Justinian I – also called “the Great” – in the 530s CE). This division also ultimately led to the schism between the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church (properly called the Orthodox Catholic Church), headquartered in Constantinople, the “second capital” of the Roman Empire. The Western Empire fell to the Ostrogoths in 476 CE; the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire continued until the Fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE.

¹⁰ A heath, of course, is a tract of open, uncultivated land, or a wasteland; hence, “the countryside”.

¹¹ In secular contexts, it can be used (often humorously) to mean “undisciplined” or “wild”.

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"Western Infidels"

The word "infidel" comes from the Latin *infidēlis*, meaning "unfaithful, treacherous"¹². While it has been (and still is) used by Christians to refer both to non-Christians and to those who have renounced their previous adherence to the Christian faith¹³, most Westerners are probably more familiar with its use by some sects of Islam in reference to Christians. In this sense, it is an English translation of the Arabic word *kafir*¹⁴, which means "rejector", "denier", "disbeliever", or "unbeliever".

In Islamic belief, God (Allah) revealed his plan for humankind in three parts, or stages: the Law of Moses (the Ten Commandments, canonically said to have been revealed in the 13th Century BCE); the teachings of Jesus (1st Century CE); and the revelations to Muhammed (7th Century CE)¹⁵.

In this view, Christians, by clinging to Jesus' message but ignoring the teachings of Muhammed, are being "unfaithful" to God (Allah). They are ignoring the last revelations of Allah's will, and thereby rejecting his plan for humanity. Islam actually recognizes and reveres Jesus as a prophet, but takes exception to the (post 5th Century CE) Christian doctrine of *dyophysitism*, which is the belief that Jesus (as the *Christ*, see below) was (at least partly) divine, and therefore, was "the Word made flesh"¹⁶, a physical manifestation of God on Earth.

The vehemence of the Islamic rejection of this idea is evidenced in the inscription around the outside of the Dome of the Rock¹⁷ in Jerusalem, which reads, in part: "It is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son."¹⁸

¹² "Hi-fidelity" recordings, therefore, are so-called because they are "true" to the original live sounds made at the time of the recording.

¹³ As mentioned above, the "official" word for this is *apostasy*, as discussed in reference to Emperor Julian.

¹⁴ The insulting and deprecating South African word for a Black person, *kaffir*, is borrowed from this Arabic term. It was originally used exclusively in South Africa of the Xhosa people, but later came to be applied to any Black person. It was borrowed by colonizing Europeans (mostly Dutch), who heard it used of the native Black peoples (non-racially and non-pejoratively) by Arab traders along the southeast coast of Africa, in-and-after the 16th Century. These Arabs used it merely as a synonym for "not Muslim"; it was the Europeans who turned it into a racial epithet.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Buddha reputedly lived about 600 years before Jesus, and Muhammed historically lived about 600 years after Jesus, but Buddha's teachings had little impact in the West until modern times (depending on who you ask).

¹⁶ *Book of John*, chapter 1, verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

¹⁷ Completed by Caliph Abd Al-Malik in 691-2 CE.

¹⁸ *Quran* (19:35): "It does not [behoove] God to have a son. Too immaculate is He!"

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The Dome of the Rock
Andrew Shiva CC-BY-SA 4.0

Jesus (the) Christ

The earliest followers of Jesus did not call themselves “Christians”; indeed, for the first 70 years or so of the movement, they still considered themselves to be Jews (albeit of a new variety), and conducted their worship in the synagogues alongside their more traditional neighbors¹⁹. Judaism, after all, had prophesied a Messiah (see below) since ancient times — and Jesus’ followers declared that he had fulfilled that prophecy. The name “Jesus”, is, in fact the Latinization (*Iēsus*) of the Greek *Iēsoūs*, which is itself a translation of the Hebrew *Yēshūa* (“God is help”, or “God Saves”). The historical person’s actual name would probably have been Yeshua Bar Yosef (Aramaic) or Yeshua Ben Yosef (Hebrew), both meaning “Yeshua, Son of Yosef (Joseph)”.

Another direct translation of “Yeshua” into English is the name “Joshua”. In fact, in the King James Version of the Old Testament, *Book of Hebrews*, chapter 4, verse 8, there exists a mistranslation in which the name of the Hebrew leader, Joshua, is rendered as “Jesus”: “For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.”)

¹⁹ It was after the Jewish Great Revolt of 66-73 CE (which included the mass suicide of the defenders of Masada) that Christians began to distance themselves (politically, socially, *and* religiously) from their Jewish forebearers. This is evidenced in the *Book of Mark*, which is believed to have been written around 65-75CE. In this writing, the ultimate responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus is (for the first time in the history of the movement) *blamed on the Jews*. It was a tradition at the time of the crucifixion for Roman governors to release a prisoner on the emperor’s birthday, to demonstrate the mercy of the Roman state. The Roman governor of Judea from 26–36 CE, Pontius Pilate, offered the populace a choice of whom to have freed: Jesus, or another man named Barabbas. The people chose Barabbas. Thus, they are depicted in the Book of Mark as having rejected Jesus, and Pilate as having been manipulated by the Jewish Sanhedrin judges into condemning and executing Jesus. By this account, it is the Jews, not the Romans, who were to blame for Jesus’ death. Modern historians view this shift in the narrative to have been an attempt by later Christian writers to deflect Roman animosity away from Christians at a time when the Jews were being particularly troublesome to Rome. In effect, they were saying to Rome, “We’re not them; don’t punish us.” (It didn’t work.)

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"The Christ"

The word *christ* is from the Latin *Chrīstus*, borrowed from the Greek *χριστός* (*chrīstos*, "anointed"), which is a conceptual translation of the Hebrew *māshīaḥ* ("anointed"), and which is directly transliterated into English as "messiah". It appears in 2 *Maccabees*, chapter 1, verse 10, in a reference to those who had been *anointed* (chosen) as priests.

The first (written) use of *christ* to refer to Jesus appears in the *Book of Matthew*, chapter 16, verse 16, when Simon (Peter) answers a question from Jesus by saying: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It then subsequently appears in the first line of the *Book of Mark* (1:1), which reads: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Christian

The first use of the word "Christian" to refer to followers of Jesus appears in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which was probably written between about 90-110 CE, most likely by the same author as the *Gospel of Luke*, where the passage reads, "... the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch,"²⁰ which tells us that the term was in common use by at least the end of the first century of the movement. "Christian" as the name of the followers of Jesus appears only two other times in the New Testament, in *Acts* 26, and finally in *1 Peter* 4. It is worth noting that in the first two instances, the word is used in the sense of *others speaking about* the followers of Jesus and not the followers referring to themselves using the term.

Modern Borrowings: Pagans, Wiccans, and Druids, Oh My!

Pagan

Various groups today refer to themselves as *pagans* or *neo-pagans*. In both cases, the speaker is often referring both to a set of beliefs and to a set of practices. Interestingly, though, for many who choose these self-descriptions, they seem to use them more as indicators of what they have rejected than as affirmations of what they've adopted. "I am a pagan," seems more to be the rebellious declaration, "I am *not* a Christian!" Fundamentally, these terms are used validly *only* if what is meant by them is the reverence or worship of pre-Christian, nature-based deities — whether perceived as personified or simply as universal forces.

Wicca

Wicca is (not to put too fine a point on it) a completely modern invention, having been developed in the 20th Century and publicized in Gerald Gardner's 1954 book *Witchcraft Today* (ISBN-13: 978-0806525938). It seeks to position itself as a legitimate successor to older pagan belief systems, but with aspects that tailor it to the specific spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs arising out of the special challenges of modernity.

Druidism/Druidry

In a similar vein, Druidism (Druidry) is largely a modern belief system, though its origins are older than that of Wicca, dating to the 17th Century in Britain. The Ancient Druids, apparently a shamanic/priestly class in Gaulish and Celtic culture, left behind no writings of their own to record or explain their beliefs and practices. While ancient sources²¹ *do* make mention of the Druids, these accounts are almost universally disparaging, and therefore suspect.

²⁰ *Book of the Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 11, verse 26.

²¹ *The Gallic War*, written by Julius Caesar in the 1st Century BCE, is the primary source.