Why Not Paganism?

To answer the question, “Why not paganism?” we must know what paganism is. Paganism is, so to speak, defined by what all pagans actually reject. In fact, the strongest argument against paganism is to point out what they reject and that it is unreasonable to reject what they reject.

We will first define paganism and give elements of commonality between various forms of paganism; then, we will show the common truths they all reject, how paganism began, and then overview different types of paganism.

Paganism, in the broadest sense, includes all religions other than the true religion revealed by God and, in a narrower [strict] sense, all [religions] except [Christianity](https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03712a.htm), [Judaism](https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08399a.htm), and [Mohammedanism](https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10424a.htm). The term is also used as the equivalent of [Polytheism](https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12223b.htm).[[1]](#footnote-1)

The point here is that when we speak of paganism in the proper sense, we are not speaking of monotheists.

* Monotheists are those who believe in one God, and this includes the Jews and Muslims who do not believe in the One True God but do have a concept of one God, though it is a false concept, and you will see them later in this series under false religions.

The term “Pagan” was coined by Christians to categorize those who didn’t adhere to [the Christian] belief in the one true God. It is derived from the Latin *pagus*, whence *pagani* (i.e., those who live in the country), a name given to the country folk who remained heathen after the cities had become Christian.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We first note that paganism is not one specific religion but various beliefs. A pagan is anyone who rejects that there is only one God who distinct from nature.

Paganism encompasses two principal characteristics:

1. Animism. When spoken of as referring to religious systems, this term indicates religious practices concerning worshiping or devotion to the earth, the natural world, and the manifest physical universe. For animists, divinity and the material universe are one. The name comes from “Anima,” Latin for “soul.” This system holds that there is a type of spiritual soul in all things. Rather than seeing the wonders of nature as effects of an all-powerful and all-good God, they see the wonders of nature as gods. Every object is controlled by its own independent spirit. This leads to pantheism, which means that divinity is inseparable from nature and that deity is immanent in nature. All is God. There is also panentheism, which addresses the theological issue of God’s relationship to the world by proposing that the world is “in God.” The term is derived from the Greek *pan-en-theos* and means “all-in-God.”
2. Polytheism, another principle of paganism, is a belief and veneration of many gods and goddesses, including fairies, elves, animals, and ancestral spirits. Within paganism, there can be found many deities, both male and female, who have various associations and embody forces of nature, aspects of culture, and facets of human psychology. These deities are typically depicted in human form and are viewed as having human faults. Therefore, despite many human vices, they are not seen as perfect but are venerated as being wise and powerful.

Traditional Polytheists most familiar to the early Christians were the Greeks and Romans. When the early Christians began using the term pagan, they usually talked about the polytheism of ancient Greece and Rome. There was no one set of beliefs.  People had many different personal gods.  The Greeks and Romans eventually determined there was a set of twelve gods that ruled over everything.

All pagans unreasonably reject the most fundamental natural truths of the existence of God, and they unreasonably reject Divine Revelation.

Why do I say unreasonably? This takes us back to the entire purpose of apologetics. The purpose of the science of apologetics, which is as ancient as the Church herself, is to demonstrate that Catholic Dogma is rationally acceptable.

Catholic Dogma, as you have already seen, consists of those truths found in Sacred Scripture and Tradition and presented to us by the Catholic Church by Her ordinary or extraordinary magisterium.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This revelation teaches that there is One God whom we must adore, and in the New Testament, there is One Church which we must enter and outside of which there is no salvation. This same revelation also teaches us to follow a fixed moral code to be happy in this life and the next.

In addition to rejecting revelation, they also reject the most fundamental natural truth of God’s existence. We can think back to the five proofs of the Existence of God of St. Thomas Aquinas. We can know from reason that “God is absolutely separate from the world” and that God holds the world in existence at each moment.

To quote Vatican I Constitution, Dei Filius: “The same Holy Mother Church believes and teaches that God, the Principle and the End of all things, can be known with certainty in the natural light of human reason from created things. “For the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; his eternal power also, and divinity.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Pagans fail to attain the natural knowledge of one God and the Natural Law. The Natural Law has no substance for those who reject the truth that there is a God who created fixed natures and wrote laws into those natures.

Vatican I could define that man could know God by reason because this truth was clearly taught in Revelation, notably in St. Paul to the Romans. 1 18f:

We will look at this chapter of Romans more extensively since it gives insights into three realities related to this topic:

1: That we can know God by reason alone,

2: How paganism began,

3: That morals are linked to doctrine:

We will start with Romans 1: Verse 18th.

“For the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; his eternal power also, and divinity: so that they are inexcusable.”

The Holy Ghost, through Saint Paul, tells us that by observing the effects of God in creation, we must reasonably come to the knowledge of God, and polytheism and animism reject this natural truth.

We also know, as you have already seen, that mankind as a whole was never left to know God without the help of Divine Revelation. God gave primitive revelation to Adam, patriarchal revelation to the patriarchs, Mosaic to the chosen people, and finally, Christian Revelation for all mankind, and Pagans do not accept this revelation.

We see very early in the history of the world that primitive revelation was quickly corrupted, and people turned from the worship of the true God to the worship of the earth and many gods. Primitive Revelation was corrupted due to the wounds of Original Sin. Fallen Man has blindness in mind, which makes it challenging to know the truth, and malice in the will makes it difficult to do good. He also has the wound of concupiscence, by which he seeks pleasure in a disordered way, and irascibility, by which he gets angry too quickly and unjustly.

As we know, the moral life has many challenges; it is often “easier” to corrupt revelation than to live according to its demands. Man needs his actions to correspond to his understanding of reality, and if a man is not living up to his ideals, he will change his ideals to have harmony in his life. In rejecting the moral code revealed by God and known by the natural law, men are led to reject this one God who is the author of the moral code.

However, man is essentially a spiritual being. St. Augustine once remarked, "There is a God-shaped hole in every person.” Thus, after rejecting God, man will make himself “gods,” which are the works of his imagination or hands by which man becomes his own god.

To support this proposition, we will continue with St.Paul to Romans 1: 21 to show the development of Paganism.

Because that when they knew God, they have not glorified him as God, or given thanks; but became vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened. For professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man, and of birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of creeping things.

To show that there is a link between Doctrine and morals. We will continue with St. Paul. Romans 1:26

Wherefore God gave them up to the desires of their heart, unto uncleanness, to dishonor their own bodies among themselves. Who changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator… For this cause, God delivered them up to shameful affections.

St. Paul then gives a long list of sins against nature, which are so common, especially in paganism, and which the reader can find in the first chapter of Romans.

As mentioned, the type of paganism most common to the early Christians was the polytheism of the Romans and Greeks with their canons of gods. Many others had their canons of gods, including the Vikings and [Aztecs](https://teachnthrive.com/history-passages/world-history-passages/the-aztec-empire-an-overview/).

In this traditional polytheism, everything did not have a soul.  Many gods and supernatural beings were found in rivers, watching over everything. People had the duty to worship them properly.  Religion was often concerned about the proper rituals and religious duties.

I recommend St. Augustine's City of God book four as a very good resource to see the absurd ideas concerning the Greek and Roman gods.

In the East, at this same time, there is Hinduism and Buddhism. Both have their roots in Brahmanism. Brahmanism is the complex religious and social system that grew out of the polytheistic nature worship in ancient India. It extended over the whole country, maintaining itself with profound modifications down to the present day. In its modern phases, it is generally known as [Hinduism](https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/hinduism).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Hinduism is a polytheistic system of belief from India. The word Hindu derives from the Greek mispronunciation of the river Sindu, which delineates the western part of the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism is a loosely knit family of religious beliefs based on the “Veda,” which was a collection of orally preserved religious and philosophical texts from 1500 BC.

The word Veda means knowledge, and each Veda had corresponding books of ritualistic precepts. The Upanishads were books on metaphysics teaching a certain mysticism.

* Most Hindus recognize a supreme “Brahman” who underlines all reality and countless other gods. What is Brahman? Whatever reality is in existence, by which all the rest subsists, that is Brahman. An eternal behind all instabilities, it is hidden in all appearances, a constant that supports all mutations but is not increased or diminished.
* Opinions differ on whether the countless Hindu gods are distinct from Brahman or just facets of Brahman's infinite, formless nature.[[6]](#footnote-6) The final assessment of Brahman and Atman (a person's soul), according to Hinduism, is that they are indistinguishable.
* Human souls are as eternal as Brahman. While Brahman includes “whatever reality is in existence,” Hinduism defines Atman as “the self.” Whereas Christianity teaches that the transcendent and eminent creator God is separate from his creation, Hinduism adopts the formula, “Brahman is Atman.” These souls are stuck in a long series of reincarnations. Hindus seek to escape this long series of reincarnations by taming worldly desire, which means being absorbed into Brahman. [[7]](#footnote-7)
* Progress in this process to Brahman follows the law of Karma. Karma is a technical term employed in Hindu and Buddhist discourse to describe actions that sustain one’s entrapment in the unhappy cycle of rebirth, known as samsara.
* Hindu salvation is simply the end of reincarnation, and since all of one’s life are suffering, this means the end of torment.

Buddhism:

Buddhism is a “reform” of Hinduism and depends primarily on Hindu doctrine. Hindus often see Buddhism as a subset of Hinduism, whereas Buddhists energetically claim originality.

Buddhism is a non-theistic “religion” based on philosophical thought instead of any notion of revelation.

Siddhartha Gautama founded Buddhism. He lived from around 563 B.C. to 483 B.C. It is claimed to be the son of a king or prince in India. He was a pragmatic philosopher and moralist who spent several years traveling and meditating on the human condition, especially considering the reality of suffering. He avoided all speculative questions and remained an agnostic.

It is claimed that one day, meditating beneath a bodhi tree, he became “enlightened”(Buddha =“enlightened one”) and afterward began to teach his *dharma*, or doctrine, of the Four Noble Truths. Before going through these “Noble Truths,” we point out that Buddha wrote nothing down, trusting all to the memory of his disciples. It seems that the first time his teaching was put in writing was around 80 B.C.

The Four Noble Truths very much echo Hindu belief.

* That life is suffering. This is the diagnosis, so to speak.
* The cause of suffering is desire and craving to be or even not to be. This is what needs to be treated and cured.
* To be free from suffering, we must detach from desire and this is the goal.
* How to get to this goal? the “eight-fold path” to alleviate desire and, by means of that, end suffering. The eight-fold path includes having (attuned/upright) views, upright intentions, right speech, upright actions, upright livelihood, upright effort, upright mindfulness, and right concentration.

The “right” is the middle path, which is open to all truths and has no prejudices toward others. The final goal of Buddhism is to be free from all suffering by eradicating desires.

Buddha also taught the “three characteristics of being”:

1. all things are transitory,
2. there is no “self” or personality,
3. and this world only brings pain and suffering.

For the Buddhist, to accept the existence of anything involves giving birth to its opposite (i.e., to accept love gives birth to hate, to accept joy gives birth to fear, etc.). This results in a duality of “good” and “bad.” And a rejection of virtue as we know it.

The goal of life is “*Nirvana*," literally “putting out a fire.” It is the extinction of self and the escape from the cycle of reincarnation.

Within 200 years of “Buddha’s” death, Buddhism divided into two schools of thought.

Hinayana, “little vehicle,” tends towards pantheism and emphasizes the humanity of Buddha. It does not have the original focus on human kindness and centers in Sri Lanka and Burma.

Mahayana, “Great Vehicle,” tends towards viewing Buddha as a god-like figure who has compassion for men and whom we must imitate in this compassion. The practitioners seek not only to eliminate their suffering but also the suffering of others and thus focus on human kindness and compassion. Some even think there is some time of afterlife called “Buddha Fields” where enlightened Buddhists go after a life of compassion for others.

* Zen Buddhism is part of Mahayana. It is an important school of East Asian [Buddhism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Buddhism) that [constitutes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutes) the mainstream monastic form of [Mahayana](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mahayana) Buddhism in [China](https://www.britannica.com/place/China), [Korea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea), and [Vietnam](https://www.britannica.com/place/Vietnam) and accounts for approximately 20 percent of the Buddhist temples in [Japan](https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan). The word derives from the [Sanskrit](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sanskrit-language) *dhyana*, meaning “meditation.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Hinduism does not have as much of an appeal as Buddhism since it is so tied to the Indian Caste System. Still, it is tragically spreading with the spread of religious pluralism, which is the foundational assertion of Hinduism. Religious pluralism is rooted in man's rejection of Truth as an absolute and the consequence of this truth.

Buddhism has more of an appeal since it is not tied to the caste system and is agnostic, which is very popular today. If there is a God, we cannot know him, which is convenient since it means we have no obligations to him. Buddhism has no mysteries to offend the rationalist and has no belief in a judgment by an all-powerful and just God.

What they both have in common may be the real reason both are growing in the West. Man wants to live in peace without constant conflict. In a more and more barbaric post-Christian world, both promote polite behavior, philanthropy, and a certain code of conduct but no doctrinal absolutes, which are offensive to modern man. Both Hinduism and Buddhism seek to avoid conflict but offer a “peace of disorder” since they cannot put man at peace with God.

Another reason for the popularity is because of the modernist crisis in the church, which promoted the document Nostra Aetate at Vatican II, which sought to defend the “good" in false religions. This was already promoted by Thomas Merton even before Vatican II and notably in most.

In the 1969 book “Recollections of Thomas Merton’s Last Days in the West, Benedictine monk Br. David Steindl-Rast wrote that Thomas said that he wanted “to become as good a Buddhist as I can.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

This syncretism of Merton was possible since Buddhism and Hinduism do not have doctrinal or moral absolutes, and Thomas Merton, like many Catholics, has lost any sense of True God and the true Religion Christ founded.

Hinduism is essentially polytheistic, and Buddhism is agnostic. Consequently, both deny the existence of God, who is the Creator of heaven and earth. The Hindu belief that all things are indistinguishable from one another denies the possibility of a creator God, which is forcefully rejected in the Nicene Creed, in which Catholics proclaim, “I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.”

The Hindu belief regarding God (Brahman) and man (Atman) is pantheism, the view that God is not distinct from anything else and that everything is part of and equal to everything else.

They believe all religious traditions are different paths to the same end. But, this is a contradiction: To assert that two conflicting positions are in fact, correlative is not only irrational but untruthful. Christianity’s claim to be the only true faith, founded upon the natural and revealed certainties given by one God, cannot, by sound reasoning, fit into the ideals of religious pluralism.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Consequently, they cannot accurately understand the Natural law or have any real motivation to keep it. The reason they will, at times, seek to live well is to escape suffering, so their motivation is selfish and negative. They completely misunderstand human nature and are scandalized by the age-old question of evil and suffering.

Yes, the Catholic Church cares about the truth and solutions that truly correspond to reality as known by reason and revelation.

This includes that God created all from nothing and that man, who has free will, offended an infinitely good God and needed to be redeemed.

The Catholic Church not only teaches the golden rule of the natural law— that we should treat everyone as we want to be treated— but also teaches us to love each other as Christ has loved us. Christ willingly took upon Himself the greatest of suffering to redeem fallen man.

The Catholic Church teaches that while suffering is not part of God’s perfect plan, it is a consequence of sin, and thanks to God’s mercy, it does bring us closer to God by uniting us more intimately with our Suffering Lord.

Christianity is focused on worshipping God, on holiness, and restoring the right relationships between God and man through the Person and work of Jesus.

Right reason and revelation teach us that the will of man and desire are good things, created by God. But, we are wounded and must work to use our free will well by means of grace and moral virtue. Hinduism and Buddhism reject this.

Today, there is much neo-paganism, with Wicca, witchcraft, and nature worship, which leads to the ideology and agenda that the population has to be reduced to save the planet. Man is to be sacrificed to save the planet that God created for man. Unfortunately, many of these elements have been introduced into the Church.

Like the paganism of old, neopaganism is the ultimate devil worship. We think of the words of the Psalmist: "For the Lord is great, and exceedingly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods.”[[11]](#footnote-11) For all the gods of the Gentiles are devils: but the Lord made the heavens.

What all pagans have in common is that they do not know or know and do not accept the revelation of God as regards his nature and the moral code which we must follow to reach happiness in this life and the next. Ideas have consequences, and codes of conduct must follow belief systems. No pagan system answers the ultimate question of life and cannot provide happiness in this life and not bring us happiness in the next life and we should not want to be pagans.

1. Catholic Encyclopedia [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Catholic Encyclopedia [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Laying the Foundation p. 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roman 1:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/hinduism [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (“The Knowledge of Brahman” from Katha Upanishad, quoted by Sri Aurobindo in The Upanishads, p. 245). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on these two terms, see the classic work by Hervey DeWitt Griswold, Brahman: A Study in the History of Indian Philosophy, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zen [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/can-you-trust-thomas-merton [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/all-is-not-one [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Psalms 95. 4,5 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)