

## **Greek Pagans Rile Church**

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Traditional guardians of Greek society cast wary eye on modern celebrations on Mt Olympus

On a green meadow at the foot of Mt Olympus, famous in mythical literature as the home of the Zeus and the Hellenic gods, a group of men and women stand dressed in togas in a circle, heads covered with wreaths of leaves, right hands held up as they repeat lines in Classical Greek.

A ritual of baptism has begun, at the end of which about a dozen members of the group will formally cast aside their old Christian beliefs and accept new Hellenic, pagan names.

About a thousand followers of “The Return of the Hellenes Movement” gathered this year on June 27 for the celebrations on Mt Olympus, to hear speeches in Classical Greek, listen to the beating of the drums and re-enact what they believe are their forefathers’ rituals.

The man leading the ceremony, 59-year-old Tryphon Olympios, taught philosophy at Stockholm University for 25 years before rejecting traditional Christian beliefs and starting a campaign to revive the pagan cult that dominated Greek life thousands of years ago.

After changing his surname from Kostopoulos to Olympios, he began to worship the Ancient Greek pantheon of gods with daily prayers and offerings of flowers and fruits to an altar at home.

For nine years now, he has tried to persuade his contemporaries that Christianity is both alien to Greek culture and inadequate to meet the needs of the modern world.

Olympios defines his Hellenic beliefs as an “ideology”, not a “religion”, and most of his followers adhere to no set pattern of worship.

Instead, they join occasional discussion groups and attend the annual celebration at Mt Olympus, where they don togas, drink red wine, listen to music, speak Classical Greek and – if they so feel – have themselves re-baptised with Classical Greek names.

Harmless though the Hellenic Movement sounds, Olympos faces an uphill battle in a country where for many centuries national identity and the profession of Orthodox Christianity have been seen as one and the same.

In spite of secularisation in recent decades, 98 per cent of the Greek population remain at least nominal members of the Greek Orthodox Church and many are enthusiastic church-goers.

Yet the number of pagans in Greece grows steadily – at least according to the Return of the Hellenes Movement, though its loose structure does not lend itself to a membership count.

“I joined because I like the freedom of thought that these people promote,” said Litho, 15, a schoolgirl from Thessaloniki who dressed for the ceremony on Mt Olympus in a purple toga.

Litho took her Hellenic name at a re-baptism ceremony a year ago and is back to witness the Hellenic renaming of her brother. She admits she still visits churches on occasion, mainly from concern that her schoolmates might not approve of her if they knew she associated with pagans.

Most of the people walking around in togas in the meadow in the shade of Olympus frankly admit Greek society does not accord their beliefs much respect. They blame the Church for a certain degree of hostility, saying it has conducted a hostile campaign against them in the media.

“These people are not taken seriously by the Greek press mainly because they have only about 3,000 active members,” said Nina Pashalidu, a journalist for the newspaper To Vima.

Pashalidu admires the pagans’ appreciation of Ancient Greek literature, even if she finds the setting and the togas too kitsch, “We live in a free world and I have no objection to them being given space to practice their religion, or to climb up and pray to Zeus.”

But Pashalidu’s tolerance is not shared by everyone and most pagans at the Mt Olympus festival say they do not feel confident enough to be outspoken about their beliefs.

A woman named Iliovithi from Thessalonica said her children had experienced troubles at school after the family’s pagan beliefs had become known.

Even Triphon Olympios's son, Athanasios, a strong supporter of his father’s movement, admits going to church now and then, to please his mother’s family who disapprove of his orientation.

Greek society’s disapproval towards those scorning Church teaching is on display even at this year’s festival on Mt Olympus.

The celebration has coincided with a wedding taking place at a small nearby church at one end of the meadow and as the wedding party passes through the throng of toga-clad pagans on their way to church, most frown angrily. One even hisses, “Idolaters!”

The priest at the nearby church has used the same word in the past for the pagan celebrations taking place on his doorstep, though this year he has refused to comment.

The pagans on Mt Olympus still remember the furore two years ago, when the local bishop installed a powerful sound system next to their celebrations, drowning out their pagan chants with Christian hymns.

They claim he used a megaphone to shout insults, and that when the police arrived they advised the pagans to pack up and leave instead of rebuking the bishop.

Church hostility to Triphon Olympus dates back several years. Seventeen years ago he attracted media comment when he decided to marry his second wife in a pagan ceremony.

“We were the first people in Greece to question seriously their [the Church’s] authority for years and they led a strongly negative campaign against us in the media,” said Triphon.

To add to the Church's annoyance, another organisation, the Committee for the Recognition of the Greek Religion Dodecatheon, led by Panagiotis Marinis, has joined the campaign to rehabilitate pagan values.

Popular suspicion of pagans is unlikely to disappear fast in a country where until only four years ago the religious affiliation of citizens was inscribed on their identity cards.

The government only removed such references under pressure from the EU and in the face of fierce resistance from the Church.

“I think that both sides - the pagans and the Christians - are going a bit too far,” said Elisabeth, a Scottish woman who has followed her Greek husband to the celebration.

“Perhaps this paganism is a response to the fact that the country’s life was for so many years influenced so strongly by the Church.”

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/greek-pagans-rile-church>