



Paganism

Paganism is a broad, eclectic modern religious movement that encompasses shamanistic, ecstatic, polytheistic, and magical religions. Most of the religions termed Pagan are characterized by nature-centered spirituality, honoring of pre-Christian deities, dynamic, personal belief systems, lack of institutionalization, a quest to develop the self, and acceptance and encouragement of diversity. Paganism is sometimes referred to as Neo-Paganism to emphasize its connections to as well as difference from pre-Christian religions.

Paganism is a worldwide phenomenon and includes revived and updated ancient European practices and religions, feminist Goddess-worship, and religions inspired by science-fiction writings. For their inspiration, Pagans look to non-Abrahamic, ecstatic, and mystery religions of Europe as well as indigenous and magic-using traditions from around the world. Modern Paganism is interwoven with artistic, visionary, and libertarian traditions and emphasizes the free will of the individual. Many traditions celebrate rituals to mark transitions in the natural world (such as solstices, lunar phases, or a birth) as well as in a person's life (such as marriage or moving to a new home).

While the largest segment of the Pagan population is white and middle class, Paganism cuts across all lines, whether racial, occupational, or class- or gender-based. Most Pagans, however, are avid readers with interests in ecology, creativity, and personal growth. Many come from the scientific, computer, and technical fields. Since it is not an organized movement, it is very difficult to determine the number of its practitioners, but it is estimated that there are perhaps 100,000 in the U.S. alone. Some have termed Paganism the fastest growing religion in the West.

History & Structure

Paganism as a movement grew out of the growing environmental awareness in the 1960s, though it encompasses some traditions from the Middle Ages and earlier. Since most Pagan religions are nature-centered, Pagans rethink the way in which we relate to the Earth. Rather than seek dominance over the environment, Pagans work to live as a part of Nature, finding a balance between the self, the biosphere, and society. Part of this rethinking goes along with the resurgence of Goddess-worship, which is widespread in the Pagan movement. Many Pagans look to the fertility Goddesses of old and find vibrant, dynamic models for ecological balance. The myriad Goddesses from the past

also provide Pagans with a vision of powerful feminine divinity which is missing from other Western religions.

The Pagan movement has become somewhat coherent largely through networks, journals, and festivals. But it is not unified or structured - herein lies some of its greatest appeal. Pagans believe profoundly in freedom and the power of the individual. People are encouraged to explore paths that are most helpful to them, rather than conform to a specific code of beliefs. Through magazine columns and personal contact, Pagans participate in a dynamic marketplace of ideas, where each person is encouraged to contribute and to take away what is most appropriate for him or her. Rather than structuring the community around a particular set of beliefs or symbols, Pagans concentrate on process to create community. A variety of practices are used to fulfill spiritual needs, heal, or create change. Each person's particular technique is honored in the understanding that our aims are often the same. Most Pagans abide by some form of "If it harm none, do what you will."

There are no charismatic gurus in Paganism. Pagans do not seek to convert others. Each Pagan is independent and autonomous, even when working in groups. All value choosing one's own path and beliefs. There is no one spokesperson for Paganism.

One of the most characteristic elements of Pagan religions is their adaptability. In the case of nature-based religions, some will differ from others simply because their practitioners live in different parts of the country. For instance, a system that includes rituals celebrating snowfall would be inappropriate for people in areas where it doesn't snow. Pagans believe that religions must change to meet the needs of people on an everyday basis. While some Pagan religions can be quite esoteric, most Pagan beliefs and practices are rooted in everyday, natural experience. Myths, rituals, and techniques are adapted to meet particular needs.

Some Pagan systems and religions

Most American Pagans practice a blend of different traditions, the most popular of which are Celtic, Greco-Roman, Native American, ancient Egyptian, and Norse.

Church of All Worlds: Promotes celebration and honoring of all life and the planet as a living, divine organism: Gaea. Combination of worldwide Goddess traditions.

Discordianism: Honors the Chaos principle and the humor of chance.

Druidism: Many varieties of Druidism are practiced, with varying emphasis on scholarly research into the original Druids, who were the priest/ess and judicial class of the ancient Celts.

Egyptian: Ancient Egyptian priestesses and priests were renowned for their level of knowledge and skill in magical arts. In its four-thousand year history, pharaonic Egypt

built complex spiritual and magical systems centering around death and rebirth, still influential today.

Kabbalah: Jewish mystical and magical system developed since the Middle Ages. The most influential magical system in the development of the Western magical tradition.

Magic (sometimes spelled "magick"): Most Pagan religions practice some form of magic, which can be defined as getting results through the application of will. Magic falls into two very general categories; "practical" or "folk" magic pertains to everyday life and is performed with common implements like stones or candles, while "high" or "ceremonial" magic often requires rigorous training, utilizes ancient languages, and concerns the mystical development of the self to its greatest potential.

Shamanism: Practiced by Native peoples worldwide. Shamanic techniques such as drumming are used in many different Pagan systems. In traditional societies, shamans travel to the spirit realm to gain information pertaining to the community's needs, such as healing or spiritual growth.

Witchcraft: Also known as Wicca or simply the Craft. Honoring of Goddess and God (some traditions honor the Goddess alone), use of magic, and healing, all within the context of "If it harm none, do what you will." Pagan Witchcraft has nothing to do with and is antithetical to Satanism.

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