

## Paganism

Paganism is a group of religions that includes, Wiccans, Druids, Heathens and others.<sup>1</sup> They share a common reverence for the Earth. Some see it as a living system to be taken care of; some see it as a living deity to be worshiped; some see it as Mother-Earth who provides and cares for her children; some see it as a combination of all three. Most strands of Paganism are rooted in European folklore, though some take their inspiration from North American, African, or other cultures. All claim to predate Christianity.

It is estimated that there are over 250,000 Pagans in the British Isles today.

### God

Pagans worship the divine in many different forms, both male and female. The most important and widely recognised are the God and Goddess (or Gods and Goddesses) whose annual cycle of giving birth and dying defines the Pagan year.

Pagans can be pantheists, polytheists, duotheists, or monists. Most acknowledge the existence of Nature spirits — river spirits, dryads, elves, pixies, fairies, gnomes, goblins and trolls — and ancestral spirits and often engage with them in prayer. Some do not believe in deities at all but simply revere Nature.

### Creation

The aim of Pagan ritual is to make contact with the divine in the world that surrounds us. Pagans are deeply aware of the natural world and see the power of the divine in the ongoing cycle of life and death.

Pagans are, understandably, concerned about the environment — most try to live so as to minimise harm to it — and about the preservation of ancient sites of worship. A growing number feel strongly about nurturing the land-spirits of urban areas, arguing that the sense of alienation and disconnection felt by many people in urban environments can be reduced by building stronger connections with the neglected spirits of those areas. They believe that affirming the sacredness of all places breeds a healthier attitude to the Earth as a whole.

### Man

Pagans do not believe that they are set above, or apart from, the rest of nature. They understand divinity to be woven through every aspect of the living earth. They reject the idea of sin and judgement and see no need of salvation. Many pagans will understand man in terms of the psychology of Carl Jung.

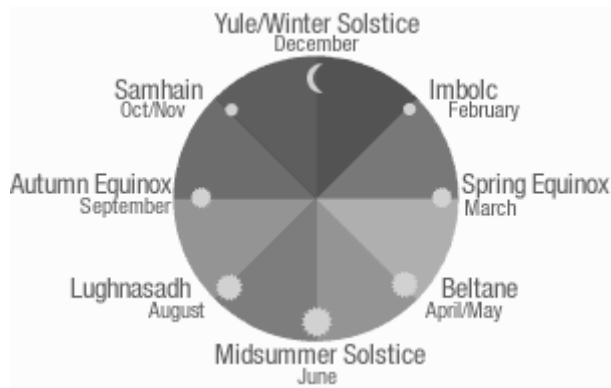
### The Wheel of the Year

Most Pagans engage in celebrations of the changing seasons, and see time in cyclical rather than linear terms. They celebrate eight annual festivals, which divide the Pagan seasonal cycle — the Wheel of the Year — into eight segments. Four of those festivals have Celtic origins: Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain. The other four are points in the solar calendar.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paganism is not to be confused with Satanism. Pagans neither believe in nor worship Satan.

<sup>2</sup> Neolithic sites like Stonehenge are solar calendars that mark the solstices and equinoxes.



## Winter Solstice

Winter Solstice is one of the oldest winter celebrations in the world. It falls on the shortest day of the year and was celebrated in Britain long before the arrival of Christianity. The Druids would cut mistletoe that grew on the oak tree — a symbol of life in the dark winter months — and give it as a blessing. It was also the Druids who began the tradition of the Yule log. The Celts thought that the sun stood still for twelve days in the middle of winter

and during this time a log was lit to conquer the darkness, banish evil spirits and bring luck for the coming year. Other traditions from the Norse Yule and the ancient Roman Saturnalia, both of which were Winter Solstice celebrations, have been added to modern celebrations.

## Spring Equinox

Spring Equinox celebrates the renewed life of the Earth that comes with the Spring. Pagans attribute the changes of Spring to an increase in the powers of their God and Goddess. Particular rituals are used to celebrate it. For instance a woman and a man are chosen to act out the roles of God and Goddess, playing out courtship and symbolically planting seeds. Egg races, egg hunts, egg eating and egg painting are also traditional activities.

## Lughnasadh

Lughnasadh, or Lammas, is a first-fruits festival celebrating the first loaf baked from the newly harvested corn. It is usually marked with fairs and games and giving thanks to the deities.

## Samhain

Samhain (pronounced 'sow'inn'), the Feast of the Dead, is seen as the time of year when the veils between this world and the Otherworld are thinnest: when the spirits of the dead can most readily mingle with the living. While Pagans always honour and show respect for their dead, this is particularly marked at Samhain. Loved ones who have recently died are remembered and their spirits invited to join the living in a celebratory feast. People bring harvest food and sacrifice animals to share a communal dinner in celebration of the festival. They wear costumes — usually animal heads and skins and play traditional games such as apple-ducking.

The Celts believed that the presence of the spirits at Samhain helped their priests to make predictions about the future.

Death also symbolises endings and so Samhain is a time for reflecting on the passing of relationships, jobs and other significant changes in life. It is a time to take stock of the past, come to terms with it, move on and look forward. It is also a time at which those born during the past year are formally welcomed into the community.

Later, when the festival was adopted by Christians, they celebrated it as All Hallows' Eve, followed by All Saints Day. It retained elements of remembering and honouring the dead.

## The Final Outcome

For Pagans, death is not a thing to be feared. Old age is valued for its wisdom and dying is accepted as a part of life as necessary and welcome as birth. Many believe in reincarnation.

## How Do We Know These Things Are True?

Paganism does not have any written doctrine. There is great variety in Pagan beliefs and practices and often an individual's thinking depends on his or her own experience and preference. Many would say 'if it harms no one, do what you will'.

## **Distinctive Practices**

Pagan worship usually takes place in the open air; in woods or caves, on hilltops, or along the seashore as well as at stone circles, in parks, private homes and gardens. Ceremonies begin with the marking of a ritual circle, a sacred space with neither beginning nor end, within which all are equal. At the quarter-points, the four directions and the corresponding elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water are acknowledged and bid welcome.

There may follow meditation, chanting, music, prayer, dance, the pouring of libations, recitations of poetry, the performance of sacred drama, and/or the sharing of food and drink. Worship ends with the circle being unmade and the deities that have been called upon thanked.

Pagan worship is mainly concerned with connecting to and honouring divinity. The rituals are a symbolic language of communication between the human and the divine and speak not only to the intellect but also to the body, the emotions, and the unconscious mind. It reflects the belief that spiritual truths are better understood by allusion and symbol rather than through teaching.

## **Pagan weddings**

Pagan wedding ceremonies are called handfastings. The form of commitment a couple will make to each other is ultimately whatever they choose it to be. The vows they will make to each other before their Gods and Goddesses will be carefully discussed and decided upon beforehand, in consultation with the Priestess or Priest who will officiate.

A couple may choose to handfast for the traditional period of a year and a day, and it is not uncommon for Pagans in long-term relationships to renew their vows when that time has passed so that neither comes to take the other for granted. Others vow to handfast for life while a few do so for all their future lives as well.

Within a sacred space, the Gods and Goddesses are called upon to bless the couple. Their right hands are bound together, they swear the oaths that will define their relationship, and their hands are then unbound in token that they remain together of their own free will. Rings are exchanged and the ceremony will conclude with them 'jumping the broomstick' — symbolically crossing the boundary between their old lives and their new, shared, one.

## **Sacrifice**

Many Pagans engage in ritual sacrifice to their gods and ancestral or nature spirits. Sacrifices are offerings given to the spirits to create and maintain a relationship. A sacrifice may be food, drink, flowers, incense, a handmade item or an item of jewellery. It is important to Pagans to give up something they hold dear and some may make sacrifices of a few strands of hair or a few drops of their blood. In some traditions it is acceptable to sacrifice an animal that will be eaten by the group. In these cases, the animal's spirit is thanked and honoured by the group, and many argue that this shows a far more respectful attitude towards animals than going to the butcher's and picking up a cut of meat.

## **Divisions Within Paganism**

### **Wicca**

Also called the Old Religion, Witchcraft, Wisecraft or simply the Craft, Wicca is the most influential and best known form of Paganism. Wiccans meet regularly in small groups or covens of like-minded people for social, religious and educational purposes.

Sometimes during these meetings they practise magic, of which there are two forms both of which, they stress, are directed toward good and healthy ends. High magic involves initiation rituals and aims at personal transformation through contact with the divine. Natural magic, by means of herbs, crystals or other natural materials, aims to harness natural and supernatural forces to effect changes in the physical world: anything from healing to changes in the weather.

There are four principal Wiccan traditions, from which many others have evolved: Gardnerians base their religion on the techniques taught by Gerald Gardner who, after the 1951 repeal of the Witchcraft Act published his influential *Witchcraft Today* in an attempt to make pre-Christian witchcraft available to the general public. Alex Sanders, the leader of a coven near Manchester, England who gave himself the title 'King of the witches' established the rival 'Alexandrian' Wicca. Hereditaries and Traditionalists argue that their beliefs and practices pre-date modern

manifestations of the Craft and have been carefully preserved and passed down through the generations. The Hereditaries make the more specific claim that this knowledge has been handed down within particular families. 'Hedge Witch' is a term used of practitioners of any tradition who prefer to work on their own, rather than as members of a coven.

Wicca is very attractive, not only because of the sense of power it brings, but also because, particularly in high magic, there is with it a sense of being initiated into a secret tradition with secret knowledge and secret symbols.

### **Druidry**

Druidry was a pre-Christian Celtic religion but the continuity between the ancient faith, of which little is known, and contemporary Druidry is questionable.

Contemporary Druidry, which dates back to the eighteenth-century, is not solely a Pagan tradition, in that many early Druids considered themselves and their beliefs to be compatible with traditional Christianity. Indeed, many continued to worship as Christians and hold offices in their local churches. Although Pagans have been involved in Druidry for many years, increasingly so since the 1960s, there were no explicitly Pagan Druid orders until the 1970s.

Each Druid group belongs to a particular Druid Order overseen by an elected 'Archdruid'. In Britain most of these orders belong to the Council of British Druid Orders.

Contemporary Pagan Druids (there are still Druids who identify themselves as Christian and not Pagan) have a faith that is a mixture of general Pagan beliefs constructed around what is known of Celtic belief and culture. Celtic gods and goddesses are worshipped, ley lines (a network of natural energy lines believed to criss-cross the planet) are important and prehistoric sites like Stonehenge and Avebury are revered sacred spaces. Smaller Druid orders focused on particular mythologies and narratives have emerged in recent years. For example, the Glastonbury Order of Bards focuses on the mythology of the town of Glastonbury in Somerset.

### **The Northern Tradition or Heathenism**

Those who belong within the Northern Tradition prefer the term 'Heathen' to 'Pagan'. They draw inspiration principally from Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Icelandic pre-Christian mythology. They believe that there are nine worlds, of which ours is the middle (Midgard or Middle Earth). These worlds are connected by Yggdrasil (the World Tree) and are populated by different beings — deities, humans, giants, dwarves, elves etc. — some of which can travel between worlds.

Heathens recognise two distinct groups of deities. The Aesir, the sky gods and goddesses of Norse mythology, are the sovereign deities of warfare and magic. The most important deity in contemporary Heathenism is Odin, generally understood to be the High God. Other deities among the Aesir include Frigga, Thor and Tyr. The Vanir, who include Freyja, Frigg, Freyr and Njord, are deities of the Earth associated with agriculture and fertility.

One of the most well-known aspects of Heathenism is the use of runes. Runes are symbols, often painted on small, smooth stones. They are not merely tools for fortune-telling. Their use is to do with spiritual guidance, achieving wholeness, communicating with non-human beings and listening to the deities.

### **Question For Discussion**

1. How do you account for the rapid growth of Paganism in the Western World in recent decades?