Neopaganism from The Columbia Encyclopedia

polytheistic religious movement, practiced in small groups by partisans of pre-Christian religious traditions such as Egyptian, Greek, Norse, and Celtic. Neopagans fall into two broad categories, nature-oriented and magical groups, and often incorporate arcane and elaborate rituals. Two of the movement’s most influential thinkers were Alphonse L. Constant (1810–75) and Gerard Encausse (1865–1916).


Neo-Paganism

From Encyclopedia of Religion in America

Neo-paganism, or contemporary Paganism as many of its practitioners prefer to call it, is a loosely affiliated group of religions or spiritual paths that share a notion of divinity within nature, typically celebrate both a male and female element to the divine, and in most instances practice forms of divination and magic. The term Paganism, like the term Christianity, covers a number of different sects or denominations. Just as Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Evangelicals, and Calvinists would all be considered Christian, so too Wiccans, Witches, Druids, and Asatru, to name a few groups, would all be considered Pagan. The term pagan comes from the Latin for country dwellers. When Christianity was a new religion spreading through Europe, the term was applied to nonbelievers because of the lag in conversion between urban and rural dwellers. Most contemporary Pagans believe they are worshipping the old deities, reviving older sensibilities, and returning to the ritual practices of the religions that were practiced before the spread of Christianity. Most contemporary Pagans see what they are doing as a recreation or re-imagining of pre-Christian religions. Although a few groups and individuals still claim an unbroken link to the pre-Christian European religions, this is now rare. No evidence has been found to support claims of continuous practice since antiquity of any contemporary Pagan group.

The largest sect or denomination within Paganism is Wicca; however, two other forms of Paganism are currently increasing in popularity: eclectic Paganism and ethnic Paganism. The former involves individuals who combine beliefs and practices of a number of different traditions and at times poetry, mythology, or science fiction with their own innovation. Ethnic Pagans revive or recreate the pre-Christian religious practices of one part of the world. For example, Druids focus on the Celtic tradition, Asatru worship the northern gods and goddesses, and still others are oriented toward the Greek or Egyptian religions of antiquity. These groups largely rely on mythological, archeological, and anthropological records of these distinct areas to create their rituals and mythology.

The best estimate of the number of Contemporary Pagans in the United States is provided by the American Religious Identity survey (ARIS), which was conducted in 2001. This survey found that there were 307,000 Pagans in the United States. Most scholars of Paganism believe that the ARIS method of phone interviews may have resulted in some Pagans not stating their true religious identity, fearing
discrimination for their practice of a nontraditional religion. Internet usage of Pagan Web sites, book purchases, and other indicators also suggest that ARIS's numbers are probably low. Given continued rapid growth in the religion, it would be safe to estimate that there are at least twice as many Pagans as indicated by ARIS.

Surveys of contemporary Pagans consistently paint a picture of a group that is well-educated, middle-class, mostly white, with more women as members than men. Women are drawn to the religion because it includes a female aspect of the divine. Some women, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, came to Paganism as an extension of, and conforming to their commitment to feminism. Women's spirituality groups and feminist witches typically venerate the goddess or goddesses to the exclusion of the god(s). The Asatru, who worship the northern warrior god and goddess of fertility, tend to have a larger proportion of men than women as do the Druids.

Beliefs

There is no single set of beliefs that all Pagans adhere to, nor is there any central bureaucracy that has the authority to determine who is or is not a Pagan. Similarly to Eastern religions, beliefs on the whole are less important in most branches of Paganism than experience of the divine, the otherworld, or the spiritual. Nonetheless, there tend to be some beliefs and practices that are common among the different forms of Paganism. Michael York suggests that Pagans tend to share "an essential this-worldliness," as well as a belief in the "earth as sacred source or mother of existence." Additionally York notes that Paganism includes a belief in pantheism, animism, polytheism, humanism, and naturalism, although not all Pagans would adhere to all of these beliefs. For some Pagans the deities are real beings that exist in another plane and who regularly influence human events; for others the deities are Jungian archetypes; and for still others the deities exist within each of us, or are thought forms. As York notes, most Pagans are polytheists but certainly not all. Some believe that the divine is so complex that the only way humans can interact with and understand it is to put names to aspects of the divine. Others worship only the goddess or a dual divinity, the goddess and the god.

Most contemporary Pagans believe in reincarnation, typically after a period of reflection in the Other World. But this is not a religion that focuses on the hereafter; it is a this-worldly religion. As York describes it, Paganism "rejoices in the cyclical round of nature, of birth, death and rebirth, as an open-ended plethora of possibility.... Earth is ... the divine womb of unlimited challenge, discovery.... It is to be honored ... cherished as a gift." Part of the Pagan celebration of nature is celebrating the human body and human sexuality in all of its varieties.

Practices

Paganism is normally called an earth-based spirituality. The emphasis on nature has resulted in some environmental activists finding a home within this religion. There is a debate within Pagan studies about whether or not the religion results in a romanticizing of nature with no actual change of behavior or activism among the participants who have not entered the religion through either environmentalism or feminism. Helen A. Berger and Douglas Ezzy, in their study of teenagers who are primarily Wiccans or Witches, found that while the religion did not result in the teenagers becoming either activists for feminism or environmentalism, and few took either label, it did influence some aspects of their behavior and attitude.

Pagan rituals celebrate the cycle of the year. Typically Pagans follow the Wiccan Wheel of the Year,
which divides the year into eight major Sabbats celebrating the beginning and height of each season, with the corresponding changes in nature for that season and its implications for people's lives (see also *Wicca and Witchcraft*). For example, Beltane on May first celebrates fertility in nature and in human beings—fertility of creativity and of productivity as well as or instead of reproduction. Some forms of Paganism have a different calendar with fewer or more holidays a year. Most Pagans prefer when possible to do their rituals out of doors, availability of a site and weather permitting. Wiccans normally have their rituals at night, while some other forms of Paganism, for example, Druids, prefer to do their rituals in the daytime. Rituals differ somewhat depending on the form of Paganism practiced but normally involve the creation of sacred space, the calling in the four directions (east, south, west, and north) and the divinities associated with those directions, and a "working" that celebrates the holiday. This working normally entails the reading of poetry, an enactment or a description of the meaning of the holiday, meditation, dancing, singing, and raising of magical energy.

Magic is practiced by most Pagans. Within the religion there is an ethic against using magic to harm or manipulate others. How-to guides often present magic in its most mechanical guise—as a series of steps to get a better job, find love, or secure a parking place. Although most Pagans believe magic works, many object to this mechanistic portrayal of magic. For many Pagans magic is part of a spiritual and religious activity that provides one way in which they contact and open themselves to the divine. Different theories exist among Pagans about how magic works. The two most common theories are (1) there are forces in nature that the magician taps into to have his/her will done, and (2) it is a psychological tool that helps the person focus and believe in themselves so they are able to more efficaciously reach their goals. For example, doing magic to find a job would be said to work because it will make the applicant more diligent while searching for work and more confident when going for an interview. Some groups and individuals believe it is a gift from the deities, although this is a less common belief. Magic is in some ways similar to prayer, but differs in that it is believed the magician has more control of the outcome.

**Paganism and Contemporary Society**

The growth of contemporary Paganism at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries is part of the increased interest in spirituality throughout the developed world. Spirituality is a turn to the subjective, in which individuals seek a direct experience of the divine as an element of their own self-growth and development. The world is viewed holistically—that is humans are not seen as separate or superior to other elements of nature, but as part of a web of life. Animals, plants, and even rocks are part of this interconnected web. Within this worldview, holistic medical treatments are frequently sought out and more generally science is seen as only one possible discourse or framework for understanding the world.

Alternative spirituality was part of the larger movement in the 1960s and 1970s of questioning all authority, including that of science, medicine, and religion. This combined with the growth of interest in magical realism, interest in environmentalism, gender equity, and support of diversity all serve as a backdrop in which Paganism has grown as a religion. Initially the religion was learned in small groups. Books, particularly how-to-books, and journals helped to spread the religion, particularly in areas where there might not be a group already formed. The Internet further has helped to spread the religion, as it makes it cheap and easy for people to find information about the religion. It also makes it possible for individuals to participate in online communities. While initially the religion was composed of converts, there is now a second and third generation of Pagans for whom this is their family religion. Although
Paganism remains a minority religion, aspects of Pagan beliefs, such as the belief in reincarnation or the use of alternative medicine, are becoming more commonplace throughout Western societies.

See also Esoteric Movements; Feminism; Harmonalism and Metaphysical Religion; Healing; Health, Disease, and Medicine; Internet; Nature and Nature Religion; New Age Religion(s); Occult and Metaphysical Religion; Spiritualism; Spirituality: Contemporary Trends; Wicca and Witchcraft.

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Helen A. Berger

APA

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