

Paganism, An Introduction

People frequently ask those pagans who are “out of the closet” what a pagan is. The simple answer according to comparative religious studies is that Pagans are not Jews, Christians, Muslims, Ba’ha’is, or Zoroastrians (the Levantine religions). They are just about everybody else. There is considerable argument on this point among those Pagans who would like to be considered in a class by themselves. Unfortunately there are so few common elements involved that it is impossible to further divide this diverse group without endless academic arguments, all valid.

Members of non-western cultures such as Native Americans, Africans, and Hindus have learned from English speakers that “pagan” means irreligious or superstitious. Naturally, they do not welcome such a label as applied to their traditional practices and are unaware of the more positive meaning delineated in this article.

The fact is that the Levantine religions are the only ones that share enough common elements to be able to group them successfully.¹ These elements are:

1. Prophets – persons considered unique in their ability to speak for God and/or predict future events.
2. Scriptures – writings believed to be sacred and uniquely true.
3. The belief that theirs is truer than or superior to all other religions
4. Belief in evil as an independent cosmic principle.
5. Active recruitment and/or proselytizing

Most of the other major world religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, have written scriptures but lack the other four elements. Neopaganism lacks all five elements.

A discussion of all pagan practices would be impossible. There are some very devoted professional folks in the fields of Anthropology, and the Social Sciences who have spent their entire lives in this pursuit and their works are readily available in larger libraries, universities and on the World Wide Web.

Neopagans are actually practicing a reconstructed religion which, borrowed from pre-Christians, has been shaped by many influences that have developed between then and now to create a unique new religious practice. We are not trying to “go back to ancient times” but rather to create a religion suitable for the here and now. Those who are seriously practicing this religious path know that and I would be quick to question the background and purpose of anyone who tries to tell you differently.

There are three types of practice which may often be combined in the same ritual. These types are fertility, ecstatic, and practical magical practice. Fertility practice involves the idea that the ritual is done to insure fertility in crops, herds, and the human race. Ecstatic practice is the deliberate alteration of consciousness for the purpose of communion with Deity or natural forces. Practical magic is that magic which is done with the intent to alter the physical world for a specific purpose, such as a healing, prosperity, protection, work, etc.

Another typology of Neopaganism is based on the structure and focus of Neopagan groups. An article in Lewis Stead’s recent book divides Neopagan practitioners into three groups and though there would have been cross over the divisions seem to work. These divisions are roughly: hierarchical groups which require initiations and elevations given by recognized and qualified members of the community; earth/ecology groups; and gender-centric groups, including but not limited to the women’s groups who call themselves Dianics. This study was done by a social anthropologist who centered her work in Canada and the western US. It does not take into account the practitioners of the “heathen” religions of the Nordic traditions who do not *require*, though they may have, initiations or hierarchical practices. To her credit she states this clearly and admits that her emphases was on the practitioners of

¹ The outlook and practices of Judaism are in some respects intermediate between Christianity and Paganism. Jews do not proselytize. Many Jewish holidays fall on full moons, or are linked to the agricultural cycle. Judaism is not ascetic and regards human sexuality and other physical pleasures as basically good.

British types of traditions.

The groups that now refer to themselves as Witches, however, do share some general ideas in common though even among these groups theology may vary slightly. These ideas are:

1. The existence of both a male and female aspect of deity
2. The possible existence of more than one god
3. That practice, not faith, makes a pagan
4. That deity is both transcendent and immanent
5. That a person is solely responsible for his/her own actions and there is no external salvation from the results of these actions.
6. That the forces of the universe can be bent to one's personal will (magic)
7. That magic is based on natural laws and works in accordance with scientific principle that cannot be explained (yet)
8. The belief that we are all tied to and an inseparable part of this earth
9. That not all events, especially misfortune, are "bad karma" (or the will of the gods) but may be the workings of natural law.

Witchcraft generally finds that science complements, rather than detracts from religious beliefs. They are predominantly evolutionists, and they are geocentric in their practice of religion. This means that the focus of the religion is in nature. Pagans worship the Goddess in the phases of the moon, the cycles of the seasons, and the forces that occur naturally within an earthbased framework. (Remember that these are generalities. Not every pagan uses these symbols or this nomenclature.) Living in the city is no excuse for not being aware of nature and her cycles nor are those who live in the city less pagan because of their decision to do so. Pagans feel that the earth surrounds and is a part of all that pagans do, touch, and are. There really is no way to leave the influence of the earth short of taking off into outer space and even then we are forced to take an artificial environment along with us from Mother Earth to survive.

Witches share some fundamental assumptions that are not found in most other religions. One is that ultimate spiritual truth is accessible to every human being, and can be directly experienced. Along with this idea goes the belief that an individual's spiritual insights have as much or more authority for that person than any handed-down teaching or scriptural text.

Another assumption has to do with the assignment of ultimate value or sacredness. Many religions are concerned almost entirely with the relations between divinity, human society and individual human beings. Witches are also concerned with the relations between human beings and the other life forms on the planet. Some religions regard human beings as the most important, holiest form of life, but Neopaganism, rooted in an ecological perspective, views all species as possessing intrinsic worth unrelated to how useful they are to humans.

Witches also have a distinctive way of handling the problem of human suffering and the sources of human morality and ethics. Since pagans do not believe in an ultimate evil, it is impossible to postulate the existence of a personality that represents such within the framework of pagan beliefs. Therefore of all pagan beliefs it is the concept of good vs. evil that is most often the root of the misunderstandings that form between Christians and Pagans.

Because most monotheists believe that their god is both all-powerful and all-good, the existence of evil must be explained. For pagans the workings of natural law and the conflict between the needs and desires of various beings explain the existence of what some would perceive as evil without the need to postulate a being who causes bad things to happen.

Pagan concepts about good and evil vary. Generally speaking, the farther removed from Christian practice a person is, the less he is inclined to believe in "evil" as an independent agent. The most commonly held belief among the older practitioners is that no evil exists in the universe (outside the mind of man) that lurks about waiting for a chance to do ill to someone just for the joy of it. Snakes will bite and some will kill, but none for the sport of the kill. They bite to kill food or protect

themselves from danger even cats who have been observed to “play cruelly” with their prey are really only sharpening their skills as hunters. Do many of us do less?

This article could not possibly hope to cover all of the differences that exist within the variations of Neopaganism. It was written merely to provide an overview of Neopaganism within the larger framework of Western religious practice. The articles that follow will continue to clarify the differences in religious ethics, ideals and practices which serve to define us as a religious movement.