

Acknowledgement of the principles of magick. Many Pagans believe that ritual acts performed with intention can alter consciousness, and therefore, reality. Such rituals function similarly to prayer in other religions. Pagans who practice *magick* (sometimes spelled with a 'k' to differentiate it from stage magic) often refer to themselves as *witches* or *magicians*.

Pluralism. Pagans usually consider the traditions of other religions to be equally legitimate as their own. No one spiritual path can be right for everyone because people have different spiritual needs. Even within a Pagan group, members' beliefs may vary widely.

Contemporary Paganism has been growing rapidly since Wicca was first publicized in England in the 1950s.



Pagans are forming nonprofits and educational institutions and participating in interfaith groups in increasing numbers. Cherry Hill Seminary hopes that the distribution of accurate information about contemporary Paganism will encourage positive interfaith dialogue and

For Further Reading:

Adler, Margot. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*. Revised and Updated. Penguin, 2006.

Harvey, Graham. *Contemporary Paganism: Religions of the Earth from Druids and Witches to Heathens and Ecofeminists*. NYU Press, 2011.

Strmiska, Michael, ed. *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*. ABC-CLIO, 2005.

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P.O. Box 212804
Columbia, SC 29221
888.503.4131

www.cherryhillseminary.org
CHS@cherryhillseminary.org

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What Is Contemporary Paganism?

For Clergy and Students of Religion



Cherry Hill Seminary

Contemporary Paganism is an umbrella term for a variety of loosely associated religious paths.

The word “Pagan” comes from the Latin *paganus*, meaning a person from a rural area. For many contemporary Pagans, the word *Pagan* reflects a nature-oriented spirituality.

Wicca is the largest contemporary Pagan tradition and contains many paths and lineages. Other traditions include Asatru or Heathenry (Northern European Paganism), Druidry, feminist Goddess worship, non-Wiccan forms of religious witchcraft, and reconstructionism (the attempt to recreate ancient religions such as those of Greece and Egypt).

Current estimates put the number of North American Pagans at about one million. There are other significant populations of Pagans in Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa, and Brazil.

Pagan religious practice focuses on ritual. Rituals may celebrate the seasons or the cycles of the moon; honor a deity or deities; or mark life transitions such as births, deaths, and weddings. Rituals may also attempt to raise energy for healing or to otherwise improve the lives of Pagans or their loved ones.

Pagan rituals often employ drumming; dance; ceremonial fires; incense; physical representations of earth, air, fire, and water; and other sensory elements.



Most Pagans use personal experience as the basis for their beliefs, and they resist doctrine and dogma. Pagan ethical principles often focus on relationships, and ethics are tailored to individual situations. Virtues and values are considered more important than rules.

Most Pagans value cultivating the self, one’s community, and the earth while avoiding harm to others. Celebration, community service, creativity, harmony, and love are often emphasized. Pagans who look to ancient warrior traditions, such as Germanic and Celtic cultures, may stress honor, truth, courage, and fidelity.

Pagan beliefs and practices are diverse, but there are still some recurring themes among individuals and between traditions.

Pantheism, panentheism, or animism. Pagans experience the divine in the physical world. Pantheists see the world itself as divine (“All is God/dess”). Panentheists see the divine as more than the world, and the world as immersed in the divine (“God/dess is in all things, and all things are in God/dess”). Animists see a spirit or soul in all things (or sometimes, all natural things), and may or may not acknowledge a unifying deity.

A Pagan does not have to hold these attitudes to be Pagan, but most Pagans hold most of them.

Polytheism. Pagans honor multiple gods and goddesses in their religious practice. Some Pagans are *soft polytheists* and see the many gods as aspects of one God/dess, as aspects of a Goddess and a God, as Jungian archetypes, or as metaphors for natural forces. Others are *hard polytheists* and understand the gods as individual beings, separate and unique in the same way that human beings are.

Reverence toward nature and the body. Pagans often celebrate natural cycles and may be passionate environmentalists. The body and sexuality are treated as a sacred part of nature.



Reference to pre-Christian myths and traditions and/or indigenous traditions. Pagans look to pre-Christian religions, or to religions that have resisted conversion to Christianity, for a more authentic connection to the land, to themselves, or to the divine.

Trust in personal experience as a source of divine knowledge (sometimes called *gnosis*). With some exceptions, Pagans give personal experiences more authority than texts or received tradition. They emphasize intuition and knowledge felt in the body.



Paganism can be part of an ethnic or national identity, as in Eastern Europe, where Baltic Pagans are reviving the religious elements of folk traditions. Some practitioners of Afro-Caribbean religions also identify as Pagan, though most do not.

Not all Pagans belong to traditions. Pagans can practice as *solitaries* (by themselves) or *eclectics* (drawing from many traditions). North American Pagans tend to be innovative and creative while also studying ancient and indigenous religious traditions for inspiration.

