

A Seeker's Guide to Modern Witchcraft and Paganism

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It is Samhain, Halloween, when the door between the worlds is open. At midnight, a group of people sit down to dinner. The table is laden with potluck dishes. There is a placesetting for each person present, as well as one in front of an empty chair. This place is for the Beloved Dead, who are being honored by this meal. The first plate filled is given to them. The living eat in silence, thinking about their ancestors and others they cared about who have passed on. When the meal is over, the leftover food, including the food that was on the plate for the spirits of the dead, is taken outside and placed on the ground. [1](#)

It is Beltane, May 1st. In a public park, a group of people chant as they take turns digging a hole. Soon other people arrive, bringing the Maypole from the woods. The pole is wound about with many-colored ribbons from previous Beltanes. This year's ribbons are tied to the top. The people accompanying the May pole circle the group around the hole once, before bearing the pole to the center of the circle. The pole is raised and everyone cries out The dance begins. Each dancer holds a ribbon and the ribbons weave downward around the pole as the dancers wind in and out. Some dancers become tired and hand off their ribbons to people watching. As the dance draws towards its close, all the dancers turn so that they are moving deosil, clockwise, the direction of the sun. They run, winding the ribbons around the pole. When the ends of the ribbon are very short, the dancers tie them to the pole.

After the dancing is over, people come forward, individually, or in couples or family groups. They place their hands on the pole, and announce pregnancies, births, completion of major projects, graduations, publications. A few people ask the other participants to "send energy" to them to help with particular problems. Afterwards they eat, sharing the food that they have brought. [2](#)

Beltane and Samhain are two of the eight seasonal holidays celebrated by most contemporary Pagans. The other holidays are the solstices, the equinoxes, Imbolc (February 2nd), and Lammas (August 1st). Beltane, Samhain, Imbolc, and Lammas are called the "cross-quarters," because they fall roughly halfway between the solstices and the equinoxes. Although the holidays themselves are practiced by most Pagans, the specific rituals and customs performed by different Pagans on these days are quite diverse. In fact, even the names of the holidays vary, with most of the holidays having several different names. Samhain, for instance, may also be called Halloween, Hallowmas, or Hallows.

What Is Modern Paganism? Where Does it Come From?

In keeping with the Pagan celebration of seasonal holidays, contemporary

Paganism is a nature-religion-or a set of related nature religions. There are many different religious paths to choose from within Paganism. These paths are called "traditions." Many Pagans are also Witches, but there are many different traditions of Witches, for instance, the Alexandrian, Gardnerian, Dianic, Minoan, and Faery traditions, among others. Pagans can also practice several different traditions of Druidism, a variety of Norse paths, and so on. Some Pagans belong to CUUPs (Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans) chapters attached to Unitarian churches. There are also many Pagan individuals and small groups that belong to no specific tradition, but instead draw upon many different sources and their own imaginations to create their own practice.

How is it that a nature religion, something many people associate with tribal peoples without modern technology, is being practiced in the United States, Britain, and many other developed countries in modern times? Does this mean that contemporary Paganism has survived since ancient times or that modern people have created it? The origins of Paganism are obscure and no one knows the answer for certain, but Pagans hold a variety of different opinions. Many early leaders of contemporary Paganism asserted that their religion reached them through a line of practitioners reaching back to prehistoric times, but the evidence to support this is slim. Some believe that Paganism has survived underground for centuries and is now re-emerging as a religion. Others believe that Paganism has been created--or re-created--fairly recently, although much of the source material used in the creation is, in fact, ancient . Some believe that the history of the religion is not particularly relevant, but that what matters is the experiences that the participants have. Scholars also have a range of opinions, but usually lean towards a relatively recent origin for contemporary Paganism.

What is clear is that Witchcraft, which is probably the most prevalent form of Paganism and is a major influence on some of the other forms, can be traced back to Britain in the 1950's, when Gerald Gardner published books about it. Gardner's books sparked interest in Witchcraft as a religion and increasing numbers of people began to practice it and, eventually, to write about it. Witchcraft was imported to the United States no later than the 1960's.

Paganism began to coalesce as a particular subculture in the United States during the late 1960's, when Tim Zell (now Oberon Zell-Ravenheart) began to use the term "Paganism" as a word to describe a number of already-existing traditions, including Witchcraft and other traditions that revived pre-Christian religions or used them as a source. 1979 was another a milestone year for Paganism in the United States, as two very influential books - Starhawk's *Spiral Dance* and Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*-were published then. Both books were read widely and had a larger audience than previous books on Paganism. Since that time, the number of practitioners and groups has grown exponentially. New traditions have been started and a very large number of books by and for Pagans have been published. Over the years, as the number of Pagans has increased dramatically, Pagans have developed ways to communicate, celebrate, and work with each other.

How are Pagans Organized?

One of the most significant developments within Paganism has been the creation of a broader range of structures by which Pagans from different groups and traditions can interact with each other. The most important unit within Paganism has always been the *small group*. Small groups have particular advantages, such as intimacy and the opportunity for individuals to work intensively in a supportive setting on their own personal and spiritual development. They also have particular disadvantages. There is a limit to

the number and size of the projects that a small group can take on, and it is hard for it to provide many services to its members.

Traditions have probably existed for almost as long as Paganism has. Typically, the leaders of groups belonging to a tradition have all (with the exception of the founder) had training in groups belonging to that tradition. The teachings and practices of these groups are relatively similar and the groups all have a sense of connection to each other. They may share specific ritual material that they do not pass on to people outside their tradition. If a number of different groups in the same locality belong to the same tradition, then the tradition as a whole may begin to take on projects that a small group could not handle, such as running major festivals, while still affording its members the advantages of small-group practice. Traditions also provide leaders of small groups a peer group of people to whom they can go for advice.

More recently, Pagans have developed *networking organizations* that allow groups from different traditions to work together. These organizations may be regional or, like Covenant of the Goddess, they may be national. These groups are probably less cohesive than specific traditions, but they may still work together on major projects and may be able to offer services to their members that individual covens might not be able to provide. For instance, Covenant of the Goddess, which is a legally-recognized church, is able to grant official clergy status to appropriately-trained people belonging to its member covens.

Land-based Pagan communities are becoming increasingly common. Although only a very small number of Pagans live in them, these communities often host events. A few communities are able to make their land available to other organizations for festivals. Sometimes religious structures, such as stone circles, are created on the land. (Of course, land-based communities need to balance their desire for service against their needs for privacy as a community and the stress on the land and facilities that large numbers of visitors can cause. When visiting a land-based community, Pagan or not, it is polite to make arrangements for the visit in advance and respect whatever limitations the community places upon visitors.)

What Kind of Activities Do Pagans Sponsor?

The number of events taking place within the community has also increased dramatically. Some groups organize "*open circles*," which are events open to people who are not members of those groups. For small groups, this may mean that the group will invite members' children and spouses or perhaps a few close and trusted friends. A networking organization giving an open circle may rent a church hall and send out announcements to a lengthy mailing list. In an area with a large and organized Pagan community, attendance at such an event may number in the hundreds. Networking organizations sometimes sponsor other sorts of events, such as *concerts*.

Occult and metaphysical stores also sponsor many events. Sometimes they hold small open circles to celebrate the seasonal holidays. Often they give classes on Witchcraft, magic, or on particular topics (such as Tarot, astrology, or herbs) of interest to Pagans. They also often frequently sponsor workshops, talks, or slide shows by local and out-of-town presenters.

A different sort of event is the *festival*. Festivals are gatherings that last for several days—at least a weekend and often a week or more. They are usually camping events, taking place at outdoor sites or campgrounds. Some festivals take place in open fields with few facilities, so that all participants must make their own arrangements for tenting and cooking.

Other festivals are held at sites with cabins, dining halls, and indoor space for events. At festivals, Pagans attend workshops, rituals, concerts, and other cultural events. They participate in work shifts (such as child care or kitchen prep) to help the festival run smoothly. They also socialize, go swimming, walk in the woods, and go shopping. Most festivals have space set aside for merchants, who sell clothing, magical supplies, books, tapes, and art work.

What Do Pagans Believe?

So, you now know something about the social structures of Paganism, but what about the religion itself? How do Pagans understand the Divine? Like almost everything else in this community, the answer varies from person to person, from group to group, and from tradition to tradition. Probably the majority of Pagans believe that the divine is immanent in everyone and everything. Beyond that, many Pagans see the Divine as being both female and male, the Goddess and the Horned God. In some traditions, the Goddess is more important. Some feminist groups, particularly in the Dianic tradition, focus on the Goddess exclusively.

Often the Goddess is perceived to have three major aspects: Maiden, Mother, and Crone. The Maiden is associated with the new moon, beginnings, youth, and personal independence. The Mother incorporates the nurturing and loving aspects of the Goddess. She is associated with the full moon. The Crone is associated with the waning moon, old age, death, and harvest.

Pagans vary in their understanding of the nature of other goddesses and gods. Some Pagans believe that all goddesses and gods are aspects of the Goddess and the God. Some Pagans, however, feel strongly that specific gods and goddesses have their own specific identity. Pagans may incorporate specific gods and goddesses into their practice in different ways. Some groups and traditions emphasize the gods of a particular culture. For instance, the Norse groups focus on the Norse deities. Some individual Pagans develop a strong interest in one particular goddess or god.

Among Pagans you can take very little for granted, however. Some Pagans are not particularly deistic in their spiritual practice. Pagans may also believe in, worship, meditate on, or do rituals for beings who are not gods. For instance, they may make offerings to the fairies, create altars for their ancestors, or invoke elemental spirits at the beginning of ritual.

Who Are the Pagans?

What are Pagans like as people? Well, in the first place, even though this appears in the "Youth Issue" of the Impromptu Journal, Pagans are not necessarily young. Many Pagans have practiced their religion for years. People who were in their 20's or 30's in the 1960's are now in their 50's or 60's. Many people who were Pagans then still practice Paganism. People from non-Pagan backgrounds have continued to come into the community over the years. Some of these people were relatively young when they became Pagans, but others were not. All, obviously, have continued to age. A fair number of Pagans are raising children and a number of books written for Pagan parents are on the market. Increasing numbers of Pagans have adult children; some have grandchildren. In the past few years, several Pagan books on dealing with death and dying have been published.

Pagans are a diverse lot. Most are both very individualistic and tolerant of the individuality of other people. As in any other community, however, there are a range of different personality types. Some people are friendly and some are shy. Some are consistently pleasant; others tend to be irritable or

moody. Some are pretty calm and others quite emotional. Some are very practical; others lead lives of constant chaos. Since Paganism is a spiritual practice, most Pagans have an introspective side, but in some Pagans this side is not immediately obvious. Most Pagans are pretty decent people. As in any community of any size, however, there is a small number of people who treat other people badly or who may even be dangerous. For this reason, it is important for people trying to make contact with the Pagan community to be careful and to use common sense.

Although Pagans can and do hold just about any type of job, they are particularly attracted to certain fields. Many Pagans are in the healing professions. Some have traditional medical jobs (such as doctor or nurse) and others practice various alternative kinds of healing. Even Pagan medical practitioners with very conventional medical jobs sometimes use alternative healing techniques. A strikingly large number of Pagans are computer programmers. Many Pagans are involved in the arts and a fair number earn at least some income through their art work or performances.

Pagans also exercise their creativity in the practice of their religion. Creating new rituals and rewriting existing ones is a widespread Pagan practice. Pagans use many sources to create rituals. Among these are other Pagan rituals, folklore and religious practices from European and other cultures, mythology, and traditions from their families of origin. Pagans also write and sing chants and other religious songs, paint pictures of their deities, and hand craft magical tools.

Like people in most communities, Pagans have many different individual interests and hobbies. There are some types of activities which Pagans seem to be drawn to in unusually large numbers, however. For instance, even Pagans who have no particular interest in making a living through art often have artistic hobbies. Pagans seem more likely than other people to practice traditional skills which have largely died out, such as spinning or mead-making. Many Pagans enjoy reading sci fi and fantasy. Some go to science fiction conventions or get involved in the Society for Creative Anachronisms. And, of course, Pagans often are interested in particular magical skills.

How Can I Learn More?

So, how would an interested person find out more? Well one good way is to read. The bibliography below is not intended to be comprehensive. I have tried to include a few useful works, with an emphasis on material that discusses in more detail some of the topics I have addressed here. Much of the material is fairly readable, and at least some is relatively easy to find, but I have included some academic material simply because it is particularly good source material for some of the topics addressed. Most of these books have bibliographies and some have resource sections with contact material for various groups and journals. Just for fun, I have also included some Pagan-related fantasy.

Bibliography

Adler, Margot. 1986[1979]. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. Boston: Beacon Press.

This is a good, if somewhat dated, overview of Paganism, as well as being one of the major contributors to the growth of contemporary Paganism. Includes information about the history of Witchcraft and Paganism, creativity among Pagans and (in the appendix) the types of jobs that Pagans have. Can often be found in local libraries and

bookstores.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. 1983. *The Mists of Avalon*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Fantasy.

This is an imaginative reworking of the Arthurian legend. The central character is Morgaine, Arthur's half-sister and a Pagan priestess.

Circle Network News. Available from Circle Sanctuary, P.O. Box 219, Mt. Horeb, WI 53572.

One of the most widely circulating national Pagan journals. In addition to invocations, meditations, and articles, this journal is a good source of national and international news about Paganism. Unlike many Pagan journals, it comes out reliably.

Lackey, Mercedes. *Burning Water, Children of the Night, Jinx High*. DAW Books..

These books make up a fantasy series, whose central character is a Witch. Her role in this series is to deal with the problems caused by evil magicians and nasty, supernatural creatures. These books may not be for everyone, as they can be rather scary. Lackey has also written a number of fantasy novels that are not particularly focused on religion, but are set in an alternative world whose religions seem to be partially modeled on contemporary Paganism.

Magliocco, Sabina. 1996. "Ritual is My Chosen Art Form: The Creation of Ritual as Folk Art among Contemporary Pagans". In *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, edited by James R. Lewis, pp. 93-119. Albany: State University of New York Press.

This is an academic article about Pagan ritual construction. Includes one of the better explanations I've read of Pagan ritual structure and discusses in detail the types of material that Pagans draw on as sources for their rituals.

Orion, Loretta. 1995. *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived*. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc.

An academic overview of Paganism, with particular emphases on creativity among Pagans and in approaches to health care among Pagans. Also includes information about different types of jobs held by Pagans.

Paxson, Diana. *The Mistress of the Jewels, Silverhair the Wanderer, The Earthstone, The Sea Star, The Wind Crystal, The Jewel of Fire*.

These books make up a fantasy series set in a very Pagan culture in the far future. Many of the books focus on spiritual quests and spiritual development.

Serith, Ceisiwr. 1994. *The Pagan Family: Handing the Old Ways Down*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications.

One of a number of recent books aimed at Pagan parents. Includes rituals, prayers, and activities suitable for children, as well as rites of passage for various stages of human life, including puberty rituals. This would also be a good book for beginners, as many of the rituals and other suggested activities are relatively simple and use materials commonly found around the house.

Starhawk. 1989. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. 10th Anniversary Edition. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, HarperSanFrancisco.

This book is one of the major influences on modern Paganism in this country. It is a practical (but often poetic) guide for people interested in the practice of Witchcraft. It is an excellent book for beginners, as it does not assume prior knowledge. In addition to spells, meditations, and seasonal rituals, Starhawk includes considerable information on the theoretical and philosophical attitudes that underlie her vision of Witchcraft. She also addresses the ethical issues involved in the practice of magic. Her approach to Paganism is more political than that of many other writers. Starhawk has also written a number of other books.

Starhawk, M. Macha Nightmare, and the Reclaiming Collective. 1997. *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying: Practical Rituals, Prayers, Blessings, and Meditations on Crossing Over*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, HarperSanFrancisco.

A useful book on death and dying, including rituals, meditations, chants, prayers, personal accounts of the death of loved ones, and articles on various issues related to death and dying.

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Notes

[1.](#) The dumb supper (or ritual meal honoring the dead) is a composite loosely based on the ethnographic interviewing and reading I did for my thesis.

[2.](#) The Beltane ritual is the one annually organized by the EarthSpirit Community in Massachusetts. For more information about the EarthSpirit Community and the events they put on, check out their web site at www.earthspirit.com.