

Pagan Worldview Traditions

In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay



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This in-depth subject knowledge essay is also available on our website. We also have an accompanying glossary, available both on our website and for download.

In-depth subject knowledge essay: reonline.org.uk/religion-worldview/pagan/pagan-table-of-contents/

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Introduction

The Pagans described in this section refer to contemporary, living religious practices in Western culture. These are however inspired by ancient forms of European faith such as those found in ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt and Celtic or Germanic countries, or other 'indigenous' or 'primary' traditions. Contemporary Paganism (sometimes called 'Neo-Paganism', especially in the USA) is a general label for a variety of traditions and individual personal religion, united by the concept of the sacredness of nature. Pagans may be pantheist, polytheist, duotheist, or animist but are rarely monotheist in the sense found in the Abrahamic religions.

The resources contained in the list of subjects below are a basic introduction to the traditions of contemporary Paganism. They are a window into the world of Paganism and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more about this family of religions.

The information can be found under the six headings below which are based on the Areas of Enquiry found in the non-statutory frameworks for Religious Education (2004, 2013). It provides not only a guide to the factual and belief structures of Paganism but also addresses the issues that Paganism encounters as it engages today's world.

Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Basic beliefs

Paganism is an umbrella term for a range of traditions, often rooted in ancient European sources. They are related to the landscape and climate of their origin and have been reconstructed or recreated for the modern world, using archaeological discoveries, folklore and any still existing contemporary texts. Paganisms are often polytheistic or pantheistic and frequently associated with encountering the sacred in nature, although not in all cases.

A convention has grown up to use Paganism with a capital P for contemporary 'Western' Paganism seen as a current religion, and paganism with a small p for the various traditions so labelled in the past. It is important to distinguish between Paganism as considered here and other uses of the word, such as the pejorative use found in Abrahamic traditions with overtones of idolatry, immorality and meaningless ritual. Sometimes 'pagan' is used to mean any religion other than Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

Paganisms include Druidry, Wicca, Goddess spirituality, as well as those traditions which seek to reconstruct ancient paganisms such as modern Heathenry and Asatru (Norse traditions), Religio-Romano (Roman), Hellenismos (Greek), Kemeticism (Egyptian) and contemporary forms of animism and shamanism.

The following takes the view that Paganism, although drawing upon elements of what is known about ancient paganisms, is basically of recent, recreated or reconstructed origin rather than being 'the old religion', predating Christianity, as sometimes claimed. Historians, notably Ronald Hutton, have shown that there is little or no evidence for the idea of a continuing tradition, surviving underground during the Christian centuries of Europe.

In addition, Paganism is typical of a new form of contemporary religiosity that is different from the format of traditional 'religions' that have existed for thousands of years, especially from the concept of 'religion' derived from Christianity. So Paganism is not centrally about 'beliefs' or 'faith' except in the case of some reconstructed Pagan traditions, but is based on personal experience and a general outlook on life. There are aspects of ancient European traditions that would now be rejected such as animal sacrifice.

With regard to Heathenry, Ancient Heathenry refers to the way of life of the pre-Christian Germanic-speaking peoples of much of North and Western Europe, from the Iron Age through until the conversion; such as the Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Goths, and Norse. These ancient Heathen cultures died out, so there are no ethnic Heathens today. The ways are slowly being reconstructed by small communities of enthusiasts from what can be known of the originals, and it may be that within a few generations there will be living Heathen communities again.

There is no list of doctrines that must be assented to, and Pagans may have a variety of beliefs. It is up to the individual. This new form of religiosity has been described by Paul Heelas and others as the 'spiritual revolution', a 'subjective turn' from organised religion, external authorities, a theistic deity 'out there' to a looser form of spirituality which is personal and undogmatic. The individual can take elements from a variety of traditions eclectically, and one does sometimes hear Pagans talk about, for example, 'karma'. It could be described as 'i-religion', where 'i' stands for individual, interactive, information and internet. Having said that, there are generalisations that can be made about beliefs, and organisations that have meetings and websites. Paganisms are living traditions that are constantly evolving through the input and expression of the individuals following Pagan traditions, remembering the core of those traditions. It will be interesting to see if Paganism becomes more 'organised' as it develops or whether this is a permanent alteration to our concept of 'religion'.

A fundamental tenet of much of Paganism is the sacredness of nature. Paganism has been jokingly described as 'the Green Party at prayer' and certainly the Pagan worldview generally fits very well with environmentalist and ecological concerns. The divine is often seen as immanent in nature, rather than transcendent. This may be expressed in a variety of ways – pantheistically as the creative life force or energy within all things, animistically as respecting all 'other-than-human-lives' as sacred, polytheistically as different deities being responsible for different aspects of life, or seeing the whole of nature as the Goddess. However expressed, it is an affirmation of the physical, often a denial of a spirit/matter dichotomy and a celebration of the interdependence of all things.

When it comes to deity or deities, Pagans differ. Some may use polytheistic language, referring to ancient deities such as Isis from Egypt, Diana from Rome, and Rhiannon from Wales. Some may prioritise 'The Goddess'. Wiccans may speak of the God and the Goddess, but may also speak of the universal energy behind both, which is neither male nor female. Occasionally a Pagan might accept the concept of God, but a deity understood as immanent rather than the transcendent deity of Abrahamic traditions. There is a tendency, also found in Hinduism, of reconciling polytheism and pantheism through an idea of levels of truth – thus for example, followers of Goddess spirituality may name many goddesses, but at a deeper level all are aspects of the one Goddess with a capital G. 'Hard' polytheists would disagree, believing in a pantheon of deities, each with their own, individual existences. Kemetics, who are reconstructing Egyptian polytheism, may see deities as individuals that also merge together.

There is also something of a spectrum of belief as to how 'real' Deity or deities are. The spectrum is partly because Paganisms draw from a variety of ancient traditions, which varied in landscape and climate and therefore distinctiveness of deities, and also from a variety of factors in our contemporary culture. There is a growing number of Pagan atheists, for example.

Heathenry is a modern religion reconstructed from an ancient one. Reconstruction is a methodology, and varies in application. At root it simply involves looking at sources to learn about the ways of the heathens of old, and then implementing elements of that in the here and now. It may just mean learning the names of the gods from ancient poems and writings, such as the Edda, but in the main it means studying all relevant sources from which an underlying ancient worldview can be discerned (explaining *why* actions were taken), and then endeavouring to live that worldview in the most practical and effective sense in the here and now. Different Heathen communities will lay different emphasis on different elements of the ancient worldview, and live them differently, creating communities with recognisable similarities and variations, much as would have been found in pre-Christian Europe.

However 'real' the deities are perceived to be, there is a strong commitment to the power of myth to express truth, and many Pagans interpret the language of gods and goddesses, spirits and fairies as poetic, metaphorical, psychological or other non-realist ways of expressing important truths about life. Others may have a more realist approach, with various in-between or agnostic positions.

Paganism tends to focus on living this life rather than speculating about life after death. However, many Pagans believe in some form of reincarnation, as the ancient Druids did, according to Roman writers. Others have a more humanist approach, seeing death as our return to the earth, our physical body returning to the elements and any continuation being through the memories of those who loved us and the influence of our achievements. There is also the concept of the Summerlands as a destination after death in some traditions, which could be compared with an "Elysian fields" final destination as found in Greek

mythology. There are a range of perspectives and beliefs about death and what comes next, varying from Pagan tradition to Pagan tradition.

One notable side of a Pagan outlook, especially animistic Paganism, is that humans take less of a central role in the universe, but are seen as equal partners in an interdependent ecology with other life-forms such as animals and plants.

Sources of authority and (lack of) scriptures

The main source of authority in Paganism is experience, personal and shared. The ultimate authority is yourself and your own experience of life, rather than a deity that demands obedience, a definitive holy book, a divinely appointed leader, or hierarchy of priests. In traditional religions most of the founders, leaders, and composers of texts tend to be male, so the prioritising of experience is particularly attractive to women and those whose views lean more towards equality of genders. Feminist writers have emphasised the importance of women's experience, both individual and shared, as authoritative. Paganism thus generally reflects the assumptions of democracy and equality in contemporary thought, though of course not in all manifestations. Some Reconstructionist traditions, for example, have very specific views on gender roles.

Paganism is not a 'religion of the book' and there is no holy book. If revelation – as Harvey points out, not a central concept in Paganism – is said to occur, it is not in the form of sacred text revealed to prophets and messengers but insights granted from observing nature or interacting with deities, animals, plants, mountains and rivers. The word 'inspiration' is more commonly found, and Druid bards speak of accessing 'awen', the creative force flowing through all nature.

Nevertheless, some authority may be given to leaders and authors within particular traditions of Paganism who are respected because of their long experience and ability to teach and/or take leadership roles, and there are people recognised as High Priestesses and High Priests within Wicca, Archdruids within Druid orders, or priestesses within Goddess spirituality. Books and articles, as well as blogs and internet sites, or distance learning courses, authored by respected Pagans may also be said to have a certain authority.

Unlike some other forms of Paganism, there is relevant source material available for Heathen study drawn from historical texts and inscriptions, archaeology, linguistics, comparative religion and mythology, folklore researches and so on. From this, the following are commonly understood as important elements of the Heathen worldview:

- World-accepting, rather than world-rejecting
- Time perceived as cyclical, rather than linear
- Family and community-centred, rather than individualistic
- Deeds are crucial, rather than beliefs
- Polytheistic, rather than monotheistic
- Order carved out of primal chaos, rather than world created out of nothing

- All things subject to wyrd (causality), rather than subject to the will of a creator
- Humanity shares this world with others, rather than being the pinnacle of creation.

Founders and exemplars

If Paganism is seen as the ancient human response to the sacredness of nature then it is as old as humanity and no founder can be identified. However, contemporary Paganism, or at least strands within it, can point to people who could be seen as founders, for example Gerald Gardner (1884-1964) is often seen as the founder of Wicca in the 1950s, although he himself claimed to be publicising an ancient tradition, and Ross Nichols (1902-1975) founded the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids in 1964. Gardner and Nichols were friends, which to some extent helps to justify linking Wicca and Druidry together in the category of contemporary Paganism. Both men were drawing on earlier groups and traditions, such as the 18th century romantic revival of Druidry, secret societies such as Freemasonry, and the esoteric practice of magic within Christian and Jewish cultures. Doreen Valiente (1922-1999), another younger companion of Gardner, is sometimes seen as 'the Mother of Witchcraft'.

In the present, although it unlikely that they would claim to be exemplars, well-known Pagans in Britain include Philip Carr-Gomm, leader of the worldwide Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids; Philip Shallcrass (Greywolf), chief of the British Druid Order; Vivianne Crowley, who has written many books on Wicca; Kathy Jones, co-founder of the Glastonbury Goddess Temple; and Emma Restall-Orr, who founded the Druid Network (although on her current website she states that she no longer identifies as Druid). Prudence Jones, who was President of the Pagan Federation from 1979-91, is an important spokesperson for Paganism. In the USA, Starhawk, Wiccan and founder of the Reclaiming Collective, has been very influential with her feminist, environmentalist and politically activist form of Wiccan Paganism. Other influential spokespersons for Pagan traditions in the USA might include Selena Fox of Circle Sanctuary and Isaac Bonewits. It is perhaps significant that these leading figures are all authors. Books, and to a lesser but increasing extent websites, are important ways in which Pagan ideas are spread. There are also several academics who both write about and would identify as or in some way sympathise with Paganism, such as Ronald Hutton, Graham Harvey, Michael York and Joanne Pearson and there are authors including Philip Heselton, who has researched and written biographies of both Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente.

In addition to the UK and the US, mention should be made of the Wiccan organisation, "Silver Circle", founded in 1979 in the Netherlands, by Merlin & Morgana, who have been producing the magazine Wiccan Rede. Silver Circle and Pagan Federation International have been supporting the spread and growth of Pagan traditions in Europe and further afield. They have been producing the magazine Wiccan Rede www.wiccanrede.org since 1980, which presents articles that are now translated into German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Russian and Turkish.

Ways of Living

Guidance for life

There is no holy book that sets out how to live, and there are many different ways of living a Pagan life, which is seen as the choice of the individual. Nevertheless, some generalisations can be made. Contemporary Pagans tend to have a life-affirming attitude, life as something to be enjoyed rather than endured. The body and sexuality are viewed positively, and there is little talk of renunciation or asceticism, although in practice Pagans may endure hardships as a necessary part of something that needs to be achieved, for example sleeping outside as part of a protest against ecologically damaging 'development'. Pagans seek to live in harmony with the rest of nature, and may choose lifestyles that minimise their use of natural resources and harm done to other beings and the natural environment. Thus in practice they may live lives of simplicity resembling those of renunciates in other traditions, but with different motivations. In general there is a love of freedom, respect for plurality and a non-judgemental approach to individual ways of living, so that people with less conventional lifestyles feel welcome in Pagan communities. There is a strong connection between Paganism and various 'countercultural' movements such as the 'hippies' of the 1960s, and later anti-war and environmental protestors, though there are also Pagans within 'mainstream' occupations such as schoolteachers or the police force.

With regard to modern Heathenry, to be Heathen you simply need to endeavour to adopt the worldview and do Heathen things. There is no limitation based on origin or background, all heathens will give worth to their ancestors, wherever they come from. There is also room to manoeuvre. Whilst most Heathens are polytheists, some are pantheist, or even atheist, and belief can happily remain a personal matter, with priority given to custom.

The central concept is reciprocity, or fair exchange for mutual benefit. Heathens will tend to be active in their community, even if it isn't a Heathen one per se. Reciprocity is not solely important for family and community matters, but extends to other-than-human persons as well. Heathenry is embedded in a mythopoeic view which places importance on ancestors, landwights (spirits of the land), and gods, usually in that order. Ancestors are generally understood to come in three types, which may overlap: genetic, cultural, and those humans who dwelt on the land in past times, yet about whom we know little (prehistoric mound dwellers, for instance).

One way or another, ancestors, landwights, and gods are all worshipped. The first two groupings tend to be addressed as personal or family matters, the last more as a community matter, but there are no fixed distinctions. Worship tends to focus around the making of appropriate offerings in a sacred space. For ancestors and housewights the home itself is sacred, whereas landwights are understood to dwell at particular features of the landscape. The gods are the most widely known amongst Heathen communities, and the major ones and their iconography will be recognised everywhere, though there is yet no network of community temples for their worship.

Some Heathens will endeavour to work 'magic' for spiritual development or material effect, though this is a minority endeavour, generally not as high profile as such practices are in Paganism.

Pagans and Heathens are aware that there are always some people in every community who might try to take advantage of others sexually or in other ways. To that end, Pagan and Heathen organisations who are members of the Pagan and Heathen symposium have drawn up a code of conduct for use at events that outline what they collectively feel constitutes unacceptable behaviour and give some guidance on how they might address issues. It would be important to note that, whilst there is a great deal of freedom within Pagan traditions, this comes with the requirement of personal responsibility to act within a self-defining level of personal ethics that might also be judged by one's peers within the Pagan community: pagansymposium.org/code.html

Ritual practice

Ritual or ceremony is an important part of Pagan practice, and varies depending on the particular tradition of Paganism followed. Some forms of Paganism have rituals that are only shared with those who have reached a particular level of their path, and so are not disclosed to outsiders. This requirement for initiation they have in common with other esoteric traditions, such as the mystery religions of the Graeco-Roman world, or Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices. There are even echoes of such requirement for initiation in Christian practice, such as the ancient instruction for the 'catechumens' or the not yet baptised to leave the ceremony before the Eucharist, which has survived in the Christian Orthodox liturgy. One problem for esoteric traditions is that secrecy gives rise to rumour, and Pagans are keen to emphasise that they do not sacrifice babies and very few would say they worship Satan.

A particularly important part of this aspect of the mystery/esoteric traditions, is that the nature of the mystery is a personally revelatory one. Therefore, the nature of the revelations will vary from person to person, but also depending on the 'level' of revelation the person has experienced. So the 'secrets' are not something that can be shared due to the personal nature of the revelations gained.

Some Pagan ritual is described as 'magic' (spelt 'magick' by those who wish to distinguish it from stage magicians who perform tricks for entertainment). 'Magic' is a word that has many meanings, but the best way of understanding its meaning in this context is the use of symbolic action to bring about change or transformation.

Many contemporary Pagans tend to stress that the desired transformation is in ourselves, in our consciousness, giving magic a spiritual or psychological meaning. Some may believe that there is a power or powers in nature and/or ourselves that can actually bring about change in external reality such as healing. Roderick Main defines magic as 'ritual activity intended to produce results without using the recognised causal processes of the physical world' (2002:220), suggesting a contrast with scientific ways of achieving change. Some definitions

of magic stress the imposition of the practitioner's will upon events, and since the time of James Fraser (the beginning of the twentieth century) 'magic' has tended to be distinguished from 'religion' by the idea that in magic humans aim to control 'supernatural' forces, whereas in religion humans can only petition such forces for assistance. This is less of a modern Pagan perspective and more of a 'High Magick', occultist perspective.

It is difficult today with developments in the natural sciences and psychology as well as in religious and philosophical thinking to maintain such clear distinctions between magic and religion and even science. All three expect results of some kind and involve human interpretations. Understanding of how magic works depends upon prior metaphysical assumptions, as does understanding how prayer works. An interesting point made by Ronald Hutton (1999) is that magical practice may well be the one aspect of contemporary Paganism that can claim a continuity with the past, as some features such as the use of circles, the pentagram, the elements and the points of the compass, may indeed go back to Greco-Roman/Egyptian customs, filtered down the centuries through medieval Jewish and Christian practitioners of magic, and modern occultists.

However it is understood, ritual is an important part of many Pagan lives. Pagans may engage in rituals privately or in groups. It can take place indoors or outside to be closer to nature, perhaps in an ancient sacred site such as a stone circle or in a favourite place such as a wood or on the seashore, or much less commonly in a dedicated temple such as the Goddess temple in Glastonbury.

Ritual both expresses and establishes relationships between humans and the natural world, including any deities or spirits that may be recognised. Common features often include the casting of a circle, which establishes the sacred space and provides protection, or can be seen as symbolising eternity and equality.

Rituals often include invitations to 'spirits of place' and ancestors of blood (genetic) and of spirit (with whom members of the group identify). The four points of the compass and the four/five traditional elements may be marked. Often food and drink will be shared. What happens within the ritual can be simple or complicated, scripted or spontaneous.

Examples of some 'open' Pagan rituals can be found described by Viannah Rain (2015). She stresses the importance of casting a circle, of everyone involved participating, and the influence of mythology. One ritual she describes involves dressing up as and performing the part of a deity, symbolically 'becoming' the deity for the duration of the ritual. 'Cakes and ale', or the offering and sharing of food expresses our dependence on the earth and each other.

An important feature of contemporary Pagan ritual is that the individual or group can design the ritual themselves, to suit the occasion, or use or adapt something from an existing source. One interesting example of adaptation is that words from a ceremony composed by Philip Shallcrass and Emma Restall Orr for an inter-faith gathering at Avebury in 1993 were used for the closing ceremony of the Paralympics in 2012.

This ritual framework is not consistent in all Pagan traditions, and ritual can be markedly different in some.

The journey of life

It seems to be a common human desire to use ritual to mark important stages in life, and life-cycle rites tend to be found in most religions. Pagan rituals may include those for new babies, 'handfasting' for couples who want to publically acknowledge their partnership, and funerals. In addition, there may, especially in Goddess spirituality, be ceremonies to mark stages in women's lives such as first menstruation and its cessation.

For those traditions that have different degrees or levels of attainment, there will be ceremonies to mark those stages. A local Pagan priestess commented that she is often called upon to celebrate weddings and welcome babies, even by those who do not call themselves Pagan, an attraction of a Pagan ceremony being that it can be customised to suit those involved. See, e.g., www.liferites.org.uk/ and www.pagan-transitions.org.uk/

Festivals and celebrations

One thing that unites many contemporary Pagans (excepting reconstructionist traditions) is celebrating the Wheel of the Year, eight festivals that mark the changing seasons. Although some of the individual festivals are ancient Celtic/Irish in origin, the current combination of four Celtic festivals with the two solstices and two equinoxes (these events celebrated in many pagan and other religions worldwide) into a pattern of eight equally important festivals does not seem to be traceable back earlier than the 1950s, when put together by Gardner and adopted by Nichols in 1964 (Hutton, 1999). Wiccans, Druids and Goddess devotees all celebrate the Wheel of the Year.

The year begins with the Celtic New Year of Samhain, 'summer's end', (31st Oct/1st November), a time when the veil between the human world and the other world of the spirits is said to be thin. It is a time to remember the dead. It may have been adopted for the Christian celebrations of All Saints (1st November) and All Souls (2nd November). It has also mutated into contemporary celebrations of Halloween (which means the night before All Saints Day) and Pagan, Christian and secular/commercial elements are now very hard to disentangle, as they are in many of the seasonal festivals. Bonfires (perhaps Bonfire night is older than Guy Fawkes) are lit to remind the sun to return, and apple-bobbing may symbolise death and rebirth or may be just a fun folk custom.

Yule, or the winter solstice (21st December) marks the rebirth of the sun. Candles, lights, round sun-shaped decorations and evergreen plants remind people in mid-winter that warmth and life will return. It seems a highly appropriate time of year for Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus, with similar symbolism.

Imbolc, 1st February, marks the very beginning of spring, when snowdrops and early lambs appear. Candles are lit to strengthen the lengthening days. The Christian festival of Candlemas on the same day celebrates the presentation of the child Jesus in the temple. The goddess Brighid, or Christian St. Bridget is also celebrated at this time.

The Spring Equinox or Ostara (c.21st March), when day and night are equal, celebrates the new life of spring, symbolised by spring flowers like daffodils, eggs and rabbits or hares. This is close in time to the Christian celebration of Easter, the new life of the resurrection of Jesus. Some Pagans believe that Eostre was the Anglo-Saxon goddess of fertility, and that her name preserved in the English name for the Christian festival. However, there is some debate about the accuracy of that claim within the Pagan community.

Beltane (30th April/1st May) celebrates the beginning of summer and fertility. The choosing of May Queens in folk tradition may symbolise the goddess, and in Roman Catholic tradition Mary is celebrated a 'Queen of the May'.

The Summer Solstice or Litha (c. 21st June) marks the longest day, and is celebrated notably at Stonehenge. This festival is celebrated either on the actual longest day (usually 21st or 22nd June) or on 24th June which was the date of midsummer in earlier times and is favoured by the British Druid Order (see, e.g., <http://greywolf.druidry.co.uk/2015/06/merry-midsummer/>). In Christian tradition 24th June is St. John's Day (John the Baptist), not so much noticed in England, but very important in Scandinavian countries where midsummer bonfires are lit.

Lughnasadh (31st July/1st August), named after the Irish god Lugh, is the beginning of the harvest, with a theme of the death and rebirth of crops. The equivalent Christian festival is Lammas. The Autumn Equinox marks the turn to the dark half of the year.

<http://druidsegg.reformed-druids.org/newslughnasadh10-24.htm>

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/29/paganism-part-3-wheel-year-dates>

Many of the Pagan festivals coincide with Christian ones as noted above, and this seems in part due to deliberate policy on the part of Christian authorities to 'baptise' existing celebrations and make use of the seasonal symbolism. However, the story is a complex one and influences may have worked both ways, remembering that the pattern of eight festivals is recent rather than ancient. Some customs may be Pagan adaptations of Christian ones, rather than the other way round.

Many seasonal folk traditions around the country are based on (or possibly more likely, given their often relatively recent origins) have gained a Pagan element in contemporary practice, examples being the 'Jack in the Green' celebrations for May day in Hastings, Rochester Sweeps, and wassailing the cider apple trees in Somerset.

Scriptures

As stated above, Paganism is not a revealed religion 'of the book' and there are no sacred scriptures as such. Perhaps the natural world could be said to be the sacred text. Some writings from the founders of contemporary Paganism have become well-known, with Doreen Valiente's 'Charge of the Goddess' having become something of a sacred text for Wiccans. The following quotation gives a flavour of the language:

I, who am the beauty of the green Earth, and the white Moon amongst the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the desire of the heart of man, call unto thy soul, arise and come to me.

For I am the soul of Nature who giveth life to the universe; from me all things proceed, and unto me all things must return.

www.shop.doreenvaliente.org/books/charge-of-the-goddess-expanded-edition

Modern Heathens often draw on the prose and poetic Eddas (medieval Icelandic manuscripts), and reconstructionist eclectics might draw on other texts contemporary with their origins.

Ways of expressing meaning

Stories and mythology

Pagans make great use of stories and myths, particularly from sources such as the Welsh Mabinogion, or classical Rome and Greece, but also from the heritage of the whole world. A myth in this context is a significant story, often ancient, which deals with ultimate issues in life such as how the universe arose and why things are as they are. Such stories explore deep feelings and express important truths. Whether the story 'really happened' is not important and indeed asking such a question is missing the point. Some Pagan stories or motifs turn out not to be ancient myths but taken from nineteenth or twentieth century literature, such as Leland's Aradia or Robert Graves The White Goddess or even novels. This is not seen as a problem, and some younger Pagans are happy to draw upon images and storylines from film, television, and digital media.

One popular story for Druids is the tale of Ceridwen's cauldron from the Mabinogion. This explains how the Bard Taliesen gained poetic inspiration and magical powers by ingesting three drops from a potion brewed by Ceridwen meant for her own son. Symbolically the cauldron stands for the source of all poetic and artistic inspiration (awen) which often seems to come from somewhere outside of ourselves and/or deep inside us. The cauldron is also a symbol of the womb and thus of birth and new life. Druids and other Pagans seek to be open to this fount of creativity.

Ancient Druids left no written texts but Hellenics and followers of Religio-Romano might draw upon classical Greek or Roman authors and Kemetics can draw on archaeological research material for their myths.

Symbols

With both ritual and myth being so important in Paganism, symbolic artefacts, actions and persons also feature largely. A symbol in a religious context is something that stands for or points to something else, but often a 'something else' which cannot easily be expressed in non-symbolic language, being profound and ineffable. Symbol, myth and ritual help to 'express the inexpressible'. Often symbols are not arbitrarily chosen, but seem to have some innate or perhaps psychologically powerful connection with the truth symbolised.

Many symbols used by Pagans, especially Wiccans, are taken from the history of magical practice. The importance of the circle has already been mentioned. Casting a circle was done in traditional magic to protect the practitioner from negative forces while engaging in ritual, but the circle also symbolises eternity and the cycle of the seasons or birth and death. A modern interpretation adds that when people stand in a circle they are all equal. The four directions – north, south, east, west – and the four elements earth, fire, air and water – have importance in ritual and are given a variety of meanings, but link human ritual clearly to the physical world. Candles and incense are used in rituals, again different flavours of incense may be used for different purposes.

Wiccans use a ritual knife or athame, not to sacrifice anything, indeed, it is not meant to cut anything in the physical world, but to direct energy, such as when casting the circle, and cutting a portal in the circle to allow admission or exit during ritual, thereby retaining the sacred nature of the space. It also symbolises the masculine in relation to the chalice or cup which symbolises the feminine.

The five-pointed star or pentagram is an ancient symbol identifying the human (four limbs and the head) with the universe (the five elements, adding 'ether' to the four). It was also a symbol of the star Venus. If within a circle, the star is usually called a pentacle. The pentacle is often worn as a pendant or earrings or on a bracelet by Pagans to announce their identity. Sun, moon and stars, flowers, trees, animals and birds are also important in expressing the connections between the human and the rest of nature.

Symbols for other Pagan and Heathen traditions might include: Mjolnir (Thor's hammer), the Awen symbol in Druidry, and the double-headed axe symbolising the Goddess. The Egyptian Ankh is a very popular symbol, among Pagans and non-Pagans, although it rarely means that the wearer practises Kemeticism.

Art, music, drama and creativity

Creativity is very important to Pagans, as a general approach to life as well as ritual and story. Many Pagans are poets, artists and musicians and use these skills in Pagan ceremonies. Pagan ritual is a form of dramatic performance, often using scripts, costumes and 'props'. Drumming is a very important part of Pagan practice when influenced by Shamanic practice (a 'shaman' is a general term used by scholars of religion to indicate a person, originally from an 'indigenous' society, who is able to reach altered states of consciousness, and for example discover the cause of an illness or communicate with spirits). Dancing is often a part of Pagan ceremony. Artefacts from ancient pagan societies such as copies of goddess figurines discovered by archaeologists may be collected. Art from 'indigenous' culture such as native Americans or Australian aboriginal people and Celtic and Germanic art forms may be admired. All the arts are used to stimulate emotion and inspiration, and ultimately bring about change and transformation in the individual, the community and the wider world.

Places of worship and architecture

Contemporary Pagans, unlike ancient pagans, tend not to have temples or dedicated places of worship, but conduct rituals wherever seems appropriate. This could be in a favourite woodland or (for individuals) your own bedroom. Sites associated with the ancient pre-Christian past, such as stone circles or hilltops with a local legend may be favoured. One exception to the rule is the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury. This was the first new temple to the Goddess in Europe, but there are now several more. The temple has many statues and paintings of goddesses and is decorated in different colours to reflect the Wheel of the Year (for example, Green and Yellow for the Spring Equinox and Red for Beltane).

Pilgrimage

The concept of pilgrimage as such is not really developed in Paganism, though Pagans may well visit places associated with Pagan practice such as Stonehenge, Avebury, or Glastonbury, especially at festival times.

The British Druid Order (BDO) promotes pilgrimage in their courses. Philip Carr-Gomm's book, 'The Druid Way', also promotes the concept of pilgrimage. Some Pagans who visit Stonehenge for the solstice will engage in a pilgrims' walk from Avebury to Stonehenge. With the placing of blue plaques on the homes of Doreen Valiente in Brighton and Gerald Gardner in Dorset, there is the possibility of pilgrimages to visit those sites.

Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Paganism as a religious, cultural and spiritual identity

Identifying as Pagan is an important step for many Pagans. It is not long since this would be a brave thing to do, and some Pagans may still be concerned about the reactions of other people. After all, it was only in 1951 that the anti-Witchcraft law was repealed. Also, the

Satanic Ritual Abuse myths of the 1980s and 90s created a dangerous environment for people to disclose their Pagan beliefs as this could result in people losing their jobs, their homes and having their children removed by social services. Those myths were finally found to be without substance through a government commissioned investigation. In very recent times Paganism has become more accepted by the wider public, for example The Druid Network was accepted as a registered charity in 2010, and the Pagan Federation joined the Religious Education Council of England and Wales as a legitimate religious group in 2011. Both the Pagan Federation and the Druid Network were accepted as members of the Interfaith Network in 2015. Nevertheless, there is still something of a 'countercultural' feel about Pagan identity, and some Pagans may enjoy being a bit 'alternative', in spite of the presence of Pagans in many 'respectable' social positions. However, Pagans are generally fully engaged members of wider society.

Many Pagans talk about the sense of relief that came with discovering that others shared the beliefs and feelings they already had, and speak of 'coming home'. Many women in particular have found a Pagan identity, whether as witch, Druid, or goddess devotee very empowering in contrast to patriarchal tendencies in more established religions. The same is true for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, who often do not feel welcome in longer established religions. Young people are often characterised as searching for an identity of their own, and teenage witches and other young Pagans have found strength in identifying as Pagan (see Cush, 2007). This particularly helps those who feel a bit 'different' from what passes as 'normal' as Paganism celebrates difference. You can be proud to be different rather than anxious, and this can be a protection against bullying.

The Pagan view of a human being tends towards a holistic one rather than a dualistic body/soul divide. The physical body should be celebrated. Humans are interdependent with each other and the rest of the natural world rather than being separate. For some Pagans, death means our body returning to the earth and the molecules becoming part of the ongoing natural cycle. For those who believe in reincarnation, or the realm of the ancestors in which the spirits of the dead reside, an element of dualism seems to be introduced into the concept of a human being, but there is still an interdependence between the living and the dead, human and nature, and one may be born again in a physical form. At the deepest level, for Pagans who are pantheist, all beings, including humans, are part of the one divine energy that lies behind the physical world. This resembles some forms of Hindu non-dual philosophy, except that the physical world is perhaps given a greater value in Paganism.

Individuals and communities

Paganism celebrates individuality, and personal experience is the main authority. It is possible to be a Pagan by oneself, celebrating rituals in private, and not necessarily letting anyone know. However, most people find strength in belonging to a group of like-minded people, even if it is a virtual rather than physical community. Wiccans typically belong to a 'coven' and Druids to a 'grove' and enjoy meeting together for rituals and festivals. Increasingly Pagans are forming 'a community' in the sense used in contemporary 'identity politics', that can interact with other 'communities'. Organisations such as the Pagan

Federation can represent Pagans in the wider world, and campaign if necessary for Pagan rights.

In a sense, the Pagan belongs to a wider than human community, in that an important aspect of Pagan identity is to feel at home in the world, as a part of the living universe, not separate from animals, plants and other life forms, but as part of an interdependent community of all life.

Reconstructionists can be solitary or be members of formal temples structures such as Fellowship of Isis, or Kemetic Orthodox. Eclectic Pagans tend to be largely solitary practitioners.

Family

As Paganism in the form described here is a relatively new religion, most adult Pagans were not born into Pagan families, but 'found' Paganism at some stage in their lives. However, as the decades go by, an increasing number of children are born to Pagan parents. These tend to be very cautious about putting any pressure on children to follow any particular practice or belief, as Paganism is an individual choice. Some Pagan groups will not accept members under 18, and the Pagan Federation only recently lowered its age of membership from 18 to 16. Nevertheless, many under 16s find Paganism for themselves, and many children in Pagan families will naturally be familiar with Pagan practices, beliefs, symbols and festivals as practised by their parents.

It is important that teachers familiarise themselves with the religious backgrounds of Pagan children and respect the beliefs and values of the family in the same way that they would for children from more familiar traditional faith backgrounds. 'My mum's a witch' could be quite an unremarkable statement from some children, meaning that their mother practises modern Pagan witchcraft.

However, there have been concerns in recent years about beliefs in spirit possession and in witchcraft in the sense of malevolent sorcery, that can lead to abuse of children or adults believed to be practising malevolent sorcery or possessed by spirits. These beliefs are usually held by people who have migrated to the UK from nations and cultures where witchcraft is a label applied to practices believed be harmful. A government guidance document has been created to help teachers and those who have responsibility for children to address potential safeguarding issues connected with beliefs in spirit possession which can lead to child abuse: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175437/Action Plan - Abuse linked to Faith or Belief.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175437/Action_Plan_-_Abuse_linked_to_Faith_or_Belief.pdf)

Modern Pagan witchcraft does not have any connection with beliefs in spirit possession of that kind, or with child abuse as a means to remove that possession.

Diversity

As stated earlier, 'Paganism' is an umbrella term covering many different groups as well as non-aligned individuals. Major traditions include Wicca, Druidry, Heathens, Shamans and Goddess devotees.

Wicca refers primarily to the initiatory tradition of witchcraft founded by Gerald Gardner in the 1950s, which focuses on the Goddess and the God, although there are polytheist practitioners. There are however other forms of Wicca, such as 'Alexandrian' Wicca, which refers to followers of Alex Sanders who were separate from Gardnerian tradition, or Dianic Wicca which is usually for women only. 'Wicca' is also used in a more generalised way to mean any contemporary practitioners of Pagan witchcraft, who may prefer the term 'wiccan' to that of 'witch' in order to avoid negative associations of that word. It also refers to those who have developed their tradition by drawing upon published works about Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca.

There are several different Druidry groups, the most well-known in the UK being the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), the British Druid Order (BDO) and the Druid Network. There are also more political groups such as the Loyal Arthurian Warband, and the Secular Order of Druids, as well as non-Pagan Druids who are connected with Welsh cultural identity. Druids draw upon Celtic traditions, and celebrate nature, especially the local landscape and the sun. Some Druids focus on solar festivals. Most have a broader focus, picking up on the Wheel of the Year, which includes four solar festivals. Indeed, it could be argued that Druids and Wiccans both work with solar and lunar calendars, and have done so for some time.

The term 'Heathen' applies to groups focused on the Germanic gods and mythology, which are sometimes called 'Northern' traditions, or Asatru. Again, there are several different Heathenry groups. Heathenism differs from other forms of Paganism in that there is more evidence for the old tradition which was still practised in some countries into the second millennium – for example Lithuania was only converted to Christianity in the fourteenth century, and in that it is based on a distinctive pantheon of polytheistic deities. It is recognised as a state religion in Iceland. Heathenism is sometimes seen as coming under the umbrella of 'Paganism' as being nature-worshipping and polytheistic, although as Heathenry has a largely different origin and content from modern Paganism, around half of modern Heathens do not identify as Pagan, nor prioritise involvement in Pagan socialising over others.

Heathen movements started independently in England, Iceland, and the USA during the 1970s. The small population of Iceland has enabled the maintenance of a largely centralised Heathen community, but in the UK and USA there are a number of communities, based on geographical distribution and/or particular approaches.

Most communities are aware of the breadth of source material, but tend to focus on one cultural instance, such as the Norse or Anglo-Saxon. Ultimately these are jumping off points, as the aim is not static re-enactment, but a living and vibrant religious and cultural stream.

Like Pagans, Heathens are generally strongly in favour of protecting the environment and supporting healthy ecosystems, though otherwise they come in all political flavours.

Shamanism, in the contemporary 'Western' sense, often refers to those who explore ways to interact with the realm of spirit through one of a variety of indigenous traditions such as 'Native American', Buryat, Huichol or Sami, or drawing on Michael Harner's contemporary 'Core Shamanism', which identified common practice among many of the world's shamanic cultures. Others might draw on the Celtic Shamanism identified in the work of John Matthews. The term shamanism is an anthropologists' term for a wide range of indigenous cultural traditions from around the world involving trance like states to interact with spirits. The word has its origins with the Evenki in the Tungus region of Northern Asia and Siberia whose word saman is used to identify their 'shaman'.

The purposes for entering into a trance like state in order to 'journey' to the spirit realm or the otherworlds are many, and may include seeking personal revelation, guidance for healing the self and others, a means to combat possible spiritual attack, or guidance on potential courses of action. A shamanic worldview incorporates concepts of animism and shamanic journeys will usually include working with plant or animal spirit allies.

There has been criticism of some 'Western' shamanism, arguing that it is cultural appropriation. However, many indigenous shamanic cultures have also acknowledged and respected the work of Western shamanic practitioners in their use of shamanic techniques from other cultures as a means of identifying potential elements for a reconstructed shamanic tradition such as Celtic shamanism.

Goddess spirituality celebrates the divine feminine. Goddesses from ancient traditions such as the Egyptian Isis, the Babylonian Ishtar, the Sumerian Inanna, the Roman Diana, the Phrygian Cybele/Artemis, or the Welsh Rhiannon and Ceridwen, are worshipped but generally seen as different forms of the one Great Goddess, Mother of all. It is argued from the archaeological evidence in places like Turkey that Goddess worship is the oldest form of religion, and this is often connected with the idea of a golden age of peace and harmony under a matriarchal society. Although there is little evidence for this lost paradise, the myth can act as inspiration for a better future. Goddess spirituality is empowering for women, but there are also male followers. The Goddess is not just a female version of the God of theism, in that the Goddess is not a transcendent deity but immanent in nature, indeed, the Goddess IS nature (see Reid-Bowen, 2007). The physical body is valued as is everything connected with female sexuality. Adherents of Goddess spirituality celebrate the Wheel of the Year and rituals very similar to Wiccans and Druids, and there is quite an overlap between feminist Wicca and Goddess spirituality, as can be seen for example in the writings of Starhawk.

Although there have been disagreements and schisms, generally there is little tension between different forms of Paganism as it tends to be seen as up to the individual to choose the tradition that most suits them. There is a very positive attitude to plurality, not just

toleration, but a positive welcoming of diversity that Prudence Jones (1996) calls 'strong pluralism'.

Other religions and beliefs

Pagan relations with other religions and beliefs are complicated in that there is a general positive attitude to plurality and diversity but some tensions with both Abrahamic faiths and Scientific Humanism in particular, although those tensions are in decline due to interfaith activity and involvement. Polytheistic or pantheistic traditions such as Hinduism are usually welcomed under the Pagan umbrella as are nature-revering 'indigenous' spiritualities from all over the world. Buddhism has a long and diverse history, with teachings that are both world-renouncing and world-engaging, but many of its traditions have over centuries co-existed with, and incorporated practices from, indigenous religions which are similar to modern Paganism and its precursors. When it first became known in the West it was often portrayed as a rational religion combined with meditation, and the aspects involving ritual and magic were seen as a degeneration, but they are often intertwined in the East. Because of this historical portrayal, some of the perceived tensions between Pagans and Buddhists are reflections of those between Pagans and some Humanists (see below.)

Most contemporary Western Pagans were not born into Pagan families, but into Christian or secular (and sometimes Jewish) families. Thus their Pagan identity was constructed in reaction to and over against the inherited tradition, so there is a natural tendency to be critical of the rejected faith found in some Pagan attitudes in the early stages of their departure from the traditions they were born into. But this often seriously diminishes over time. As early Christianity defined itself over against the pagan 'other', so contemporary Pagans may sometimes define themselves over against a Christianity seen as dogmatic, life-denying, patriarchal and planet-destroying. However, interaction between contemporary Pagans and Christians, in interfaith settings, is helping to forge greater understanding and respect between modern Pagans and Christians.

Historically, interactions between Jews, Christians and pagans have been mostly negative. In Abrahamic traditions generally the word 'pagan' has pejorative associations of worshipping idols, immoral behaviour and meaningless ritual ('do not babble as the pagans do' said Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Ch.6, v.7). Christians and Muslims sought to convert the 'pagan' world. Christians remember the martyrs of the early church put to death by 'pagan' emperors for refusing to worship the emperor as god. Contemporary Pagans may identify with witches and heretics put to death when Christians were the ones in power.

Actual history is exacerbated by what Steve Hollinghurst calls 'mythic history' – the exaggerated or simply untrue accusations levelled by Christians and Pagans against each other. For example, some Pagans have used the now discredited theories of Margaret Murray to claim that many of those put to death as witches by medieval and early modern Christian authorities were actually Pagans, who had kept their pagan beliefs as an unbroken underground tradition during the Christian centuries. This claim is referred to as 'the myth of the "Burning Times"'. It is a myth that is now fairly harshly criticised in the Pagan community.

On the Christian side, some have updated the traditional view of pagans as idolatrous, immoral and possibly engaging in human sacrifice, to accuse contemporary Pagans of things like negative magic and child abuse, often linked to unfounded allegations of Satanic Ritual Abuse. However, there has been a lot of work done from both sides to rectify such errors, as Steve Hollinghurst would attest, and many Pagans and Christians are learning to put their fears and prejudices aside.

Although there are distinct theological differences between Pagans and Christians, or the Abrahamic faiths more generally, there are also areas of agreement, and historically the two faiths have influenced each other. Both assert the importance of recognising the divine and the spiritual dimension to life. They share an understanding of the value of ritual, and even the same seasonal festivals. Contemporary Christians are developing a more feminist and earth-friendly approach, and can join with Pagans in environmental activism. They share an ethic that is based on love and caring for others. Even in theology, links can be found for example between Pagan ideas of divine immanence and the Christian concept of incarnation.

Interfaith meetings now take place between Christians and Pagans, and shared worship has taken place on several occasions.

The tension with scientific Humanism arises with the Humanist denial of 'supernatural' elements such as deities, spirits, ritual and magic. Humanists may view Pagans as living in a world of fantasy, whereas Pagans may see Humanists as denying the fundamentally spiritual dimension of nature and not understanding the power of myth and symbol. However, apart from some Humanists' interpretations of Pagan practices, there is a great deal of agreement between Pagans and Humanists. They can and do join together in social and ethical action for the betterment of the world.

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Pagans prioritise the experiential dimension of religion, and individual experience as a source of authority. Belief in the sacredness of nature often springs from numinous or mystical experiences which have happened to Pagans when in special places or as part of a ritual or of meditation. Such experiences are not just passing feelings but can be deeply personally transformative, if hard to talk about. Graham Harvey talks about the fundamental characteristic of Paganism being 'enchantment', the recognition of a world full of myriads of amazing life-forms, with whom we can develop relationships that recognise our mutual dependence. Paganism puts the wonder back into life.

Citizenship

Citizenship is a key part of religious practice – in fact Jains are supposed to have the highest sense of responsibility and accountability to the planet, and hence citizenship and the observance of law is a key component of this. There are hardly any Jains in prison

throughout Britain and on the contrary, their values have inspired many citizenship initiatives throughout the country – making them good role models in many instances.

Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Religious experience

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Answers to ultimate questions

'Ultimate questions' tend to be asked from within a Christian versus 'Western' atheist framework – is there a God, is there an afterlife, where did the universe come from, why is there evil and suffering? In both 'Eastern' traditions and Paganism, these may not be the most important issues. So on God, Pagans may have a variety of answers, including polytheism, duotheism, the Goddess, pantheism, nature as divine, or a metaphorical non-realist understanding of deity.

On the possibility of an afterlife, Pagans may believe in reincarnation, or in the otherworld of the spirits, or an Elysian fields or Summerlands kind of paradise, or a Valhalla, depending on their Pagan tradition, or union with the divine life-energy. Other Pagans believe there is no life after death and that we should concentrate on living this life on earth.

The origin of the universe is often something to be pondered, with no definitive answer. But such ponderings are not generally central to Pagan traditions. Some traditions, such as Hellenism and Heathenry might also include creation stories.

Many Pagans accept that life includes suffering as well as joy and we have to learn positive ways of dealing with this for all living things. Pagans may say that they accept the existence of a dark side of life, but this should not be confused with any idea of encouraging 'evil'.

Pagans to date have not much engaged in systematic theology or philosophy, but a few people are trying to develop both, such as Michael York (2003) and Paul Reid-Bowen (2007). Although this enterprise is just beginning, some 'answers to ultimate questions' can be discerned. The sacred, holy or divine is not something separate from the physical world, but is immanent within nature, or more straightforwardly, is nature. The divine is either female as well as male (or genderless), or in Reid-Bowen's analysis of Goddess-based thought, sacred nature is primordially female. If everything is divine, then everything is holy and the world is a place of enchantment, with sacred energy available to all.

Life on this earth is affirmed, and the body and sexuality are celebrated. The interconnection and co-dependence of all things, human, animal, plant, divine is a fundamental truth, giving a priority to relationality and relationships.

The diversity of life, and even the messy or painful aspects are to be accepted and made the most of. Experience is the main source of knowledge, and in Goddess spirituality, particularly the experience of women.

Religion and science

Pagan views of science are quite complicated, in that scientists (or rather 'sciencists', those who see scientific empirical evidence as the only truth) are criticised by many Pagans for having a limited materialist, mechanistic picture of life, denying the reality of the spiritual and the magical. The sociologist Max Weber famously claimed that science and modernity 'disenchanted' the world as experienced in medieval times, whereas Paganism seeks to bring 're-enchantment' and to put the magic and wonder back.

Science is sometimes blamed for setting up a dichotomy between humans and the rest of the natural world, and thus seeing nature as something to be used and exploited by humans rather than recognising our kinship with all living things, and indeed all matter. On the other hand, there are Pagans who are scientists. Scientific thinking shares with Paganism an emphasis on the physical world available to the senses, and valuing human experience as a source of authority. There can be a shared wonder at the amazing diversity of life on our planet, and the patterns revealed by physics and chemistry. Where scientists are not too positivist, and where Pagans interpret such things as deities and magic more metaphorically or psychologically, there can be much agreement. It is often claimed that more recent science such as quantum physics is starting to sound more like a Pagan worldview than earlier Newtonian physics, but one would probably have to have considerable in-depth knowledge of both to come to a verdict on this.

Some practitioners of magic may integrate metaphors from modern science, such as particle physics and quantum mechanics as a means to explain how magic works, and also to bridge the gap between mysticism and hard science.

Ethical guidelines

Ethical guidelines

Pagan ethics tend to the libertarian. There are no commandments revealed by a deity or list of precepts recommended by an enlightened teacher. Decisions are very much up to the individual and there is a faith in human ability to behave well when free to do so. Pagans tend to dislike notions of sin and guilt as having negative effects on human flourishing. Life is to be enjoyed, in ways that respect the rights of other beings to enjoy their lives too. Michael York (2003) characterises Pagan ethics as based on 'honor, trust and friendship'.

The Pagan perspective that all life is a connected part of the sacred, including all human life and all of nature, has implications for ethical thought about how Pagans interact with the world.

Some Pagans will quote what is known as the 'Wiccan Rede': 'an it harm none, do what thou wilt' (possibly coined by Doreen Valiente in 1964, and perhaps a response to Crowley's 'do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law'). However, harming none (which has echoes of the ahimsa of Jain, Hindu and Buddhist traditions) can put considerable limits on the notion of doing what you like. Some Pagans are vegetarian or vegan to avoid harming animals or exploiting them in any way, whereas others think eating meat is natural, but that we should be fully aware of and thankful for the life that has been sacrificed to give us nourishment. An ethic not based on codified rules is actually quite difficult as it involves making constant judgments about what is the most loving and least harmful course of action in any given case.

Some Pagans believe that there is a natural justice in the way the universe is organised, and that 'what goes around comes around'. They may even use the Indian term karma for this idea. Some Wiccans talk about the 'threefold return' that applies to magick – everything wished for others will come back to the practitioner three times as much, which is a deterrent to using magick for negative ends. Others dismiss these ideas and hold that we should behave well towards other beings without any thought of reward or punishment.

There have been a number of books published recently, that examine ethics from a Pagan perspective. Two good examples are:

Myers, B., 2008. *The Other Side of Virtue*. Alresford: O Books.

and

Restall Orr, E., 2012. *Living with Honour – a Pagan Ethics*. Alresford: O Books

Most Pagans also strongly believe in taking personal responsibility for one's actions, and that taking personal responsibility should be highly visible as an indication of an ethical approach to life.

The environment

As Paganism is largely rooted in the idea of the sacredness of nature, environmental issues are a crucial part of much Pagan ethics. Pagans may be involved in forms of direct action or other political activities, campaigning for the future of the planet against the many ways in which this is threatened. Others will focus on deepening respect for and relationship with the earth through ritual and meditation rather than politics. Some Pagans blame Christianity and Abrahamic faiths more generally for having an attitude that sees humans and the divine as separate from nature, and that nature can be conquered and exploited as humans wish. This is sometimes justified by reference to the scriptural concept of human being having been given 'dominion over' nature. Other Pagans recognise alternative messages of care for,

and stewardship of, or partnership with, nature within the history and present practice of Christians, Muslims and Jews.

Celebrating planet earth and ethical action avoiding harming the environment can be areas where Pagans can fruitfully work with those from all religions and none.

Rights and responsibilities

Pagans generally support human rights as understood in such documents as the United Nations Declaration, but limited by our responsibilities towards other people, other-than-human beings, and the planet as the whole. Commitment to equality and diversity is strong – whether in relationship to gender, sexual orientation, disability, age or any other characteristic.

Moral issues: some examples

As well as environmental concerns and human and animal rights, issues important to Pagans include war and peace, gender equality and sexuality. Many Pagans campaign against war and nuclear weapons, and were very involved in protests such as the women's peace camp at Greenham Common in the 1980s, alongside Quakers, Catholics and other Christians, but others may see circumstances where war might sadly be the best option.

Gender equality and feminist thought is very influential in Paganism, especially Goddess spirituality, and the image of a witch as a powerful woman is very important. However, some forms of Paganism may stress traditional roles. Reconstructionists, for example, might often be aiming for as close a representation of historical traditions as possible. This will often conflict with modern life, leading to a need for a degree of compromise. The notion of the triple Goddess: 'virgin, mother and crone', derived from Robert Graves, is very important in Goddess spirituality, but can be criticised for defining women in terms of their fertility if taken too literally.

Respect for all sexual identities, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or the rejection of the constructs of sex as well as gender represented by the term 'queer', is very much part of contemporary Paganism, and people feel much more welcomed than they do in some other religions. Having said this, some Heathen and reconstructionist groups stress traditional roles and do not approve of homosexuality. Early Gardnerian Wicca had elements of heteronormativity, and Gardner himself has been accused of homophobia – but that was over half a century ago, and attitudes (as well as the law) have changed considerably. Sexual activity is celebrated and may be seen as sacred.

On moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia, Pagans tend to think it is up to the individual to make the right decision in the given circumstances. Pagans can be critical of medical practice where it is over-dependent on mechanical science and pharmaceuticals, preferring a holistic approach that treats mind, body and spirit as inter-related. Thus

traditional and complementary medicine such as using herbs and healing rituals are valued in addition to modern medical science.

Social justice is important to Pagans. PaganAid is a registered charity that 'puts equal value on ending poverty and protecting Mother Earth', pointing out that poverty in marginalised communities such as tribal peoples can be intrinsically linked to environmental damage and exploitation caused by industrialisation.

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