

A Brief Introduction to Paganism

What is paganism?

The term was first used by Christians in the Roman Empire to refer to people who were observers of polytheism or ethnic religions other than Judaism. It comes from the Latin *paganus*, meaning roughly “country dweller” or “people of the earth/land.” It has taken on many meanings through the centuries, and has gone through periods when it was considered negative. Today we use the term “pagan” to broadly describe those who practice — in one form or another — the pre-Christian traditions of Europe (or are principally inspired by them), as well as modern traditions rooted in them. This includes, but is not limited to, animists; polytheists; practitioners of Hellenistic, Egyptian, and other ethnic traditions; and others. Our contemporary use of the term “pagan” includes many traditions. Historically, “paganism” is the remnant of indigenous pre-Christian European traditions. However, these ancient traditions share much in common with other indigenous traditions throughout the world. Some include Heathens (far Northern European traditions) and non-European indigenous traditions such as Vodun (Voodoo), Santería, Hinduism, etc., as well as other polytheistic traditions. Despite the similarities in beliefs and practices, some members of these traditions, as well as many Indigenous Americans, do not identify as pagan. From the perspective of Pagan Pride Day, we will never impose any labels, but we do welcome anyone who identifies as pagan, or is pagan-friendly, and invite them to celebrate with us.

Modern forms of paganism

Generally speaking, there are three groups of pagans today. The first are those who have maintained unbroken traditions (either intact or partial), such as some among the Celts, Slavs, Germanic and Scandinavian groups, the Balts, the Basque, and others. A second category is what is often referred to as Reconstructionist or Revivalist pagan groups, which is an effort at reconstructing or reviving ancient traditions based on surviving evidence (archaeological, textual, linguistic, etc.). And third, the Neo-Pagan movement is a modern attempt to develop forms of paganism within Western culture.

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Witchcraft

Many, but certainly not all, witches today identify as pagan of one sort or another. But by itself, witchcraft is a magical practice that can be found not only in paganism, but as subcultures in other religious traditions, including mainstream ones. The negative view of witchcraft dates from the attempt during the Middle Ages by the Christian church to spread their own beliefs throughout Europe.

Beliefs

There is no one set of beliefs that defines paganism. Some pagans believe in many gods (of many genders), and some (like animists, for example) have a more generalized belief in “Divinity” or “the Mystery.” Nevertheless, many, maybe most, pagans share a reverence for the Earth as sacred, and a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things.

Pagans Rituals & Ceremonies

Pagan rituals tend to take place outside (though many in urban settings in particular may practice indoors), when possible at special sites. We take time to recognize the sacredness of all life; to honor our ancestors; to sing, chant, drum, and play music; to share food as we nourish one another and the land; and more. Many — but not all — modern pagans and witches celebrate according to the seasons of the year and/or the cycles of the Moon.

There is also a growing interest among many pagans in recreating or recovering Rites of Passage in a pagan context, such as birth, coming of age, marriages, funeral rites, and more.

Who pagans are not

Pagans do not believe in the Christian devil, and are not racists or supremacists of any kind.

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