

5 minute guide

to

PAGANISM

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Introduction

Paganism is a broad term encompassing religions that are polytheistic – the belief in multiple gods and goddesses – and based on nature. It includes religious communities of indigenous people around the world. There are one million adherents of modern paganism or neo-paganism.

In historical context, paganism includes the traditions of polytheism of Greco-Roman, Europe and North Africa before the dawn of Christianity, which promotes monotheism or the belief in one God. In a broader sense, it includes contemporary Eastern religions, indigenous customs of Native America, Central Asia, Australia and Africa, and non-Abrahamic folk religions. These customs generally include performing magical rites, celebrating the solstices and equinoxes, and worshipping nature.

Paganism came from the Latin word *paganus*, which means “rustic,” “rural,” or “of the country,” when used as an adjective. As a noun, it means “country dweller.”

History

Paganism has a long history because it is the ancestral religion. People were nomadic and had to hunt for food. When agriculture was discovered, they were able to stay in one place, grow their own crops and breed their own animals. The people become pagans, or country dwellers.

It started in the Bronze Age in the ancient Near East, which was composed of Mesopotamia, Levant, Arabia, and Egypt. The ancient Near East is now known as Middle East. Paganism in ancient Near East stretched well into the Iron Age, spanning two millennia.

Paganism continued well into the Classical Antiquity – the period of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, which is the period known as the Greco-Roman world. Classical Antiquity is the period when the Greek and Roman societies thrived and had tremendous influence all throughout the Middle East and Europe.

The Greek and Roman mythologies include the teachings about their gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines and the nature of the world. The mythologies are part of the Greek and Roman literature. The gods and goddesses were featured on different artifacts, including pottery.

It was in Late Antiquity when the early Christianity was developed. Christianity is a monotheistic religion, as opposed to Paganism’s polytheistic traditions. It was on this period when the term *pagan* became a pejorative term and became synonymous with the term *gentile*.

Aside from the Greco-Roman paganism, the polytheistic tradition was also observed in other parts of Europe before the Christianization. The other ethnic religions are Armenian, Baltic, Celtic, Finnic, Germanic, Slavic and Vainakh paganisms.

Paganism dwindled due to Christianization; however, the interest in paganism was revived in the Renaissance and Romantic periods. In the 19th century, scholars became interested in reconstructing pagan mythologies through fairy tales or folklores.

The contemporary period further saw the revived interest in Paganism, which was termed as Neo-paganism. This revived interest in Paganism is a symbol of the purpose of several religious movements to reconstruct pre-Christian religion.

Because the term *pagan* became a pejorative term, modern ethnologists prefer to use the terms *polytheism*, *pantheism*, *animism* and *shamanism* when referring to paganism.

Paganism does not have any founder nor does it have a scripture or single set of beliefs, practices, philosophies, and rituals. Although there are nuances in various pagan traditions, Paganism is collectively described as an Earth religion.

Beliefs and Practices

Paganism is not an organized religion. It does not have an official doctrine. It has a variety of paths and beliefs. There are common beliefs, however, that are followed by most pagans.

The most fundamental belief of Paganism is the acknowledgement of the divine in nature. This recognition includes reverence of the cycle of the seasons, which is seen as an expression of the divine. The changing of the season is regarded as a model for spiritual renewal and growth.

Pagans hold the Earth as sacred and they have profound concern for nature. They live in a way that minimizes damage or risk to the environment. The reverence given to the Earth is seen on pagan's practice of calling it as the Mother Earth.

They believe that spiritual growth is connected with the cycle of the seasons.

Pagans do not believe in heaven and hell.

Pagans believe in reincarnation. They believe that a body can be reincarnated in another form.

Pagans believe in gods and goddesses, who are the personifications of the force that is at work in the world.

They also worship spirits, which represent national and local heroes, and deceased relatives. Worshipping spirits of deceased relatives is a way to honor their ancestors and ancestry.

Pagans believe that if what one will do will not harm anyone or anything, one can do what he or she wants.

They believe in the equality of the sexes. This is shown in their worship of gods and goddesses.

They have a holistic view of the universe, in that it is interconnected. The divinity, material universe, and spiritual universe are one and the same. Thus, divinity cannot be separated from nature and the deities are inherent in nature. Pagans believe that each one is linked to the cosmos and is part of one organism, and what affects one will affect all. This is the pantheistic side of paganism.

Another side of paganism is animism. There are two views of animism within paganism. The first one is the belief that everything in the universe has a spiritual universe or a life force. The other view is that there are spirits that live in different features of the natural world and that people can communicate with them. There are pagans who reported communications with spirits inhabiting trees, rocks, and animals. They also reported that there are animal spirits, who can serve as spiritual guides.

The practice of sacrifice is central to Paganism. The purpose of sacrifice is to show gratitude and give something back to the gods and goddesses. It is also a way to strengthen the bonds between the divine and the members of the community. Before contemporary Paganism, pagans offered food, drinks, different objects and the lives of animals. The ritual slaughter and sacrificing of animals were common in many pagan groups because blood sacrifices were believed to be the most powerful offering. Contemporary Paganism switched to sacrificing herbs, grains, wines, incense, minerals, and others. During feasts, the inedible parts of the animal are burned as offerings, while the rest are shared and eaten. The sacrifices are usually offered to gods and goddesses through burning them. Some bury and leave the offerings in the open.

Rites

As there are many pagan groups, here are the general categories of their rites:

1. Celebrations of the divine nature – Pagans celebrate seasonal changes through poetry, myth, drama, music, prayer, dance, pouring of libations, and sharing of food and drink. These celebrations are joyful celebrations and acts of worship. These are also geared towards

facilitating heightened states of consciousness, that's why they utilize visualization, drumming, chanting, singing, dancing, and meditation.

Since Paganism has no buildings for worship, celebrations are done outdoors to fully experience the oneness with nature. Paganism has high emphasis on the equality of the sexes that's why men and women worship together, and some celebrations are headed by women. The ceremonies are usually done with the participants forming a circle, which is a symbol of the sacred space that has no beginning and end, and everyone stands as equals.

2. Magical rites – These are the ways to make contact with the deeper powers of awareness and broader spiritual powers that can help in healing and resolving problems. Magical rites are guided by Paganism's fundamental ethic that it should cause no harm to others. These are usually done in specified phases of the lunar cycle. Magical rites have two categories:
 - a. Thaumaturgy – This is practically oriented, or with a specific purpose in mind – growing crops, banishing illness, or losing weight. This can be done for oneself or on behalf of another person.
 - b. Theurgy – This is spiritually oriented, or with devotional purpose – fostering intimacy with gods or goddesses, achieving oneness with deities, or transforming oneself into a godlike state.

Different pagan groups have their own customs in performing and participating in magical rites. There are prohibitions or taboos associated with magical rites. In contemporary times, wearing watches or using electronic devices are prohibited in the ritual. There are also tools used like candles, incense, and essential oils; drums, bells and other musical instruments; and ritual foods, which are offerings to the gods and goddesses. Most rituals are done outdoors like in a forest, hilltops, woods or around a bonfire, although there are also rituals performed indoors.

The Pagan Year

Paganism's cycle of the seasons is called the Wheel of the Year. The Wheel is composed of eight festivals that are celebrated by almost all pagans. Each festival is every six or seven weeks, dividing the Wheel of the Year into eight segments. The specifics of the celebration depend on folk traditions or each pagan group.

Four the festivals are points in the solar calendar: Spring and Autumn Equinox, and Summer and Winter Solstice. Solar festivals are celebrated when the length of the day and the night are the same. The other four have Celtic origins, thus known by their Celtic names: Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh and Samhain.

1. Spring Equinox

This is the celebration of the renewed life of the Earth, as symbolized by the spring season. Pagans attribute the seasonal changes to an increase of the powers of their gods and goddesses.

2. Summer Solstice

The Summer Solstice is the longest day and the shortest night of the year. The celebration of the Summer Solstice focuses on the themes of enlightenment, fulfillment, abundance and sharing. The ceremonies include lighting a fire, saying prayers of gratitude and supplication, and forming a circle with the purpose of sending love to others that encircles the globe of the Earth.

3. Autumn Equinox

The Autumn Equinox is a ritual of thanksgiving. The harvest season is winding down, and pagans express their gratitude to the Earth for the abundance of fruits and crops that they are able to harvest and store for the winter. This is also an acknowledgement that they need to share the harvest to others to ensure the blessings of the gods and goddesses during the coming winter.

4. Winter Solstice

The Winter Solstice is the most celebrated in pagan traditions. This is the symbol of the rebirth of the solar god and signals the return of fertile seasons. The common practices during the Winter Solstice are feasting, sacrifices and gift-giving. Some also decorate trees and bring in sprigs and wreaths of holly, ivy, yew, pine, and mistletoes.

5. Imbolc

Imbolc marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring. This is a celebration of purification and spring cleaning, which symbolizes hope for a new life and the good things to come. It also is the time for resolutions for the coming year.

Pagans call on the goddess who symbolizes the seeds of life that are planted on the Earth and on each pagan. These seeds of life blossom when nurtured, and revive hope and life. Some rituals performed are lighting candles in the homes to bring clarity and burn off negative energy; placing white flowers, which symbolize purity, at the center of the home; sharing dairy products, which invokes warmth and love; placing a silk ribbon on a window sill overnight, which is blessed by the goddess and can be used to wrap herbs; and leaving an offering of bread for birds and other creatures.

6. Beltane

Beltane is the celebration of the coming of spring, which is the time when crops begin to grow, animals bore their young, and during ancient times, allowed the people to go out after being confined in the homes during winter. This is celebrated by picking flowers, going around the village to give the flowers at each house, which offers food and drink, and giving blessing to the owner of the house for the generosity or ill-will for selfishness.

7. Lughnasadh

Lughnasadh is the one of the three autumn harvest festivals. The other two festivals are the Autumn Equinox and the Samhain. This is celebrated by baking bread in the figure of a god and eating it. This is

to symbolize the importance and sanctity of the harvest. This is another celebration of thanksgiving for grains, which are the first fruits of harvest.

8. Samhain

Samhain is the celebration to honor the lives of people – ancestors, relatives, elders of Paganism, friends, pets, and other loved ones – who have passed away. Pagans believe that during Samhain, the boundary between the world and the afterlife is at the thinnest point; thus, it is easy to communicate with the departed.

Timeline

10,000 BCE	People were still nomadic and hunted for food. They worshipped nature, which gave them their food. They believed that there is a god for hunting, which is critical to their survival. They also believed in other gods that helped in their survival.
8,000-7,500 BCE	Agriculture was discovered and people were able to settle in one place. They began to explore the mysteries of life – birth, death and rebirth.
1,200 – 3,600 BCE	This is the Bronze Age in the ancient Near East when people practiced Paganism.
3,750 – 600 BCE	People started to settle in Europe, bringing with them the use of copper and the practice of paganism.
c325 AD	Christianity was starting to develop and pagans were converted.
3 rd century	Pagans were experiencing persecution.
906	The persecution continued. Those performing magical rites or creating magical spells were labeled as witches.
1275	The first witch was put to death in Toulouse, France.
1374	Pope Gregory XI declared that magic was performed with the help of a demon.
1782	The last known trial of witchcraft was documented in Switzerland.
1885	Gerald Gardner was born. He was the founder of Wicca, a Neo-pagan movement.
18 th century	Neo-druidism or Druidry, another pagan movement, was revived in Britain.
19 th century	Druidry started to be seen as having religious connotations.
2010	Druidry was recognized as an official religion in the United Kingdom.
2011	Neo-paganism became the largest non-mainstream religion.

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