

Paganism 101

Author unknown but available at http://members.tripod.com/pagan_relief/Pages/pagan_faq.htm



Wow, so much confusion about one simple word. Okay, here is the result of my personal research into the subject. Take it as you wish.

First a little simple elementary school grammar for everyone. The suffix *-ism* means that you are talking about a distinctive doctrine, system, or theory. When it comes to Pagans there is no one unifying distinctive doctrine, system, or theory.

There are over 2500 different religions, theosophies, and belief systems, as well as a variety of individual practices that are classed as being Pagan. Which is why people get the idea that there are no rules to being a Pagan.

Now, each of those 2500 paths has their own "rules" and some have a lot more than others. There are some Pagan paths that you cannot practice alone, their rules forbid it. This does not stop a lot of people from inventing their own versions of these paths.

Gypsies are the most common example. The Roma people, the caravan dwelling travelers of lore, share an ethnic heritage. We are a mostly olive skinned people who trace our history back to India, and we are still hunting for where we actually began. We do not call ourselves Gypsies. The ones you meet at Pagan festivals and Renaissance fairs are most often Gaje (non Roma) who are so in love with our history and lore that they have styled their beliefs around what they think the Roma are.

We have to begin to find some common ground among ourselves. Without some true community among Pagans, we will always remain a fringe group. The Roma people (yes I am a Roma) had to do the same thing. Though we are literally all over the planet now, we formed a union among our peoples through the use of the Internet. We come out in large groups to protest not only ills against our people, but since 1999, when our ways were officially listed under the heading of "pagan beliefs" we began reaching out to help the pagans who honor us at least in the inventiveness of their ideas about us.

Organization among us is not necessarily going to be a bad thing either. Look at the Native Americans, they had to organize under the rules of their conquerors to be able to rise in the new systems. Some changes cannot be fought, and organization among our paths is something we have to figure out.

I have heard so many times on so many other boards what people are not willing to give up. Great, got those notes. Okay, what I would like to hear from you folks who are so passionate is what would you consider a good way for pagans to be organized. What would it take to thaw you out?

Now, please, no one get offended by my comments, no offense is meant. I am not on a high horse or a soapbox, I just have high ideals and my hobby is trying to reach them. I put it all my research and results on the website I have linked in my banner, check it out if you get bored. Anyway, the point I am trying to get to is that maybe if we start on the small level to talk about what we would like to see organized among Pagans and what we must not organize at all (with Discordians and a few others we will have to confuse what we want organized, they are about a contrary bunch but we love em at parties). So give me your best shots folks, I love a challenge.

1) WHAT IS PAGANISM? Stated simply: Paganism is an umbrella term for a myriad of religions that are not easily classified. In some places the term has been applied to any religion, pseudo-religion, or lifestyle of an alternative nature that has tied itself to a past civilization in some way. However, this definition does not come close to really defining what paganism is because there are over 2500 different religions that are classed as Pagan including religions that started out as part of many of the

mainstream religions.

The word *pagan* comes from the Latin word *paganus* which has many times been loosely translated to mean 'country dweller'. Actually *paganus* was a noun derived from the word *pagus* which originally meant 'something stuck in the ground as a landmark'. The root *pag* means "fixed" and is also the source of the words "page", "pale (stake)", and "pole", as well as "pact" and "peace". In later years it was metaphorically extended to 'rural district, village'.

It was then that the noun *paganus* was coined to mean 'country dweller, villager', and unlike what many may think, this term was not mean as an insult at first. As the Roman Empire strengthened *paganus* came to mean 'civilian'. It was only after the Roman introduction of the aqueduct system of transporting water throughout the Roman cities that it began to have negative connotations, and did not actually become a slur until it was adopted by Middle English speaking Christians to refer to those who would not embrace Christianity.



The above etymology gives us our greatest clues as to what "paganism" is for quite literally it is the religions of the common folk, the country dwellers who, rather than travel miles to the nearest church or temple, would practice the rites and rituals of their faith within more familiar surroundings. The arrangement was acceptable in ancient times because the "upper class" churchgoers who lived in town did not want to worship beside the country dwelling churchgoers who did not wear fancy clothes to worship (mostly because they had none), and who often smelled of the fields they toiled in (which may have been a noble thing in poetry and prose but is a little less inspiring on a hot morning in a crowded temple). Modern Pagans are those who have chosen to make their religion "something stuck in the ground as a landmark". Many of them are "eclectic" meaning they mix and match what suits them.

2) ARE THERE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PAGANISM? Yes there are. Even in ancient times "pagans" were of a variety of paths. This was due to the fact that allowed to practice their religion at home, they were able to make changes in the rites based on necessity and convenience that churches would not make for decades, possibly centuries. Over time, these "paths" developed into different religions.

At the end of any given century, or during times of great societal distress (such as the Great Depression) historians have noticed that there always seem to be certain upheavals in the mindset of a populace, especially in the area of religion. These upheavals (such as the period from 1870 to 1900) are often the birthing points for recreations of past religions. Wicca and Neodruidry are the two largest examples of religious recreations born out of societal distress.

The following are some of the larger classifying groups under the Pagan umbrella:

PALEO-PAGANISM

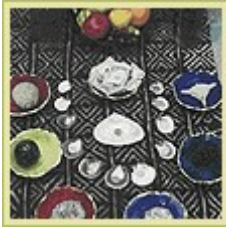
Cultural/mythological progenitor of Neopaganism. This refers to those paths that have been preserved by handing the traditions down, generation after generation, through family lines and/or communal lines. These paths are highly restricted according to ethnicity, and birth and have been preserved throughout the ages and resisted becoming "civilized". This is also the classification for the "dead" paths even if the paths are being reconstructed. The classification does not apply to the Reconstructed path, only to the dead path that inspired Reconstruction. Examples are the Australian bush men (Aborigines), ancient Celtic religions (Druidism), the religion of the pre-'patriarchal' cultures of Old Europe (Romany), Norse religion (Odini), and the pre Colombian tribal paths of North and South America.



CIVILO-PAGANISM

The religions of "civilized" communities which evolved in Paleo-pagan cultures. Examples are the

Greco-Roman mythoi, the Egyptian mythoi, Middle-Eastern mythoi, Aztec, Mayan, and other South American tribal paths.



MESO-PAGANISM

Groups which may or may not still constitute a separate culture, which have been influenced by a conquering culture, but have been able to maintain independence in religious practice. This is the classification for most of the modern Native American tribal paths.

SYNCRETO-PAGANISM Similar to Meso-paganism but has had to submerge itself into the dominant culture, and has adopted the external practices and symbols of that other religion. Examples of this are the various African traditions (Voudoun, Santeria), Culdee Christianity, most of the lesser know family traditions. Some of the paths under this heading over time have become more a focus on the rites and rituals used and have lost a lot of the focus on the deities they once worshipped. Also included in this category are reconstructed Paleo-Paganistic paths.



NEO-PAGANISM The paths under this heading are those that are modern attempts at the reconstruction of the other forms of paganism, in an attempt to reconnect with nature. The paths under this heading have selected the imagery of the other classes of paths but have adjusted them to the needs of modern people. Examples of this are: Wicca in all its many forms, Neo-Shamanism, Neo-Druidism, Asatru, Vanatru, and all other forms of Norse neo-paganism (this does not include Odini, which is Paleo-paganistic), "Women's Spirituality paths", Sabaeen religious order,

Church of All Worlds, Discordianism, Radical Fairies and other "Men's Spirituality" movements, Some of Ecofeminism, Eclecticism (which some neo-pagans have termed Paganism with a capital P), and the list goes on and on...

3) IS THERE 'ONE TRUE PAGANISM'? No there isn't, nor is there one path that is better than all the others. However, except among the Neopaganistic paths, the concept of mixing paths is heavily frowned upon as it is considered disrespectful to those who are of that path. An example of this is performing a Native American sweat lodge ceremony and allowing both genders, menstruating women, or house pets into the lodge. Among many of the Native Americans, allowing any one of these to happen at a ceremony is an offense punishable by death, and to do such things is considered spitting on the very path that one claims to be honoring. Amongst the Neopaganistic paths however, almost anything is acceptable. This causes a lot of friction between neo-pagans and all other pagans, such as the friction that exist between parents and children. This is not really a question of which is right and which is wrong, but that which is tradition. To be truly accepting of all things means that you must accept the tradition as it stands, not just the parts that seem cool.

4) ARE ALL PAGANS WITCHES? No they are not. Though many paths have rites, rituals, and/or practices that may be considered magic(k)al and/or witchy, not every path includes spell casting. For many that do, such casting is not practiced by all members of that path. For example, the Odini, though they set up altars for their deities, these altars are not used for the casting of spells. The altars are their way of making a place in the home for their chosen deity or deities.

Throughout the ages there have been many words applied to Pagan of both genders. Though some of the terms were once gender specific, most have been adapted in modern times to both genders. A single person may have more than one of these titles. Here are some of the more commonly described "types" of Pagans:

Alchemist: Alchemy was the forerunner of modern chemistry, blending Egyptian metallurgy with Greek philosophy and Middle Eastern Mysticism. The goals of Alchemists were the discovery of the "Philosopher's Stone" that would transform "base metals" into gold and the "Elixir of Life" that would heal all ills and allow one to live forever. Modern Alchemists still lean heavily on the hard science approach to their magic(k) but now see the Philosopher's Stone as a spiritual quest more than a search for a physical object.



Bard: In Ancient Celtic traditions, Bards were the poets, singers, and musicians that were headed by the Druids. Bards used their gifts of rhyme and rhythm for the glory of whatever deity inspired them. With over 400 Celtic deities to choose from, that a lot of inspiration! Modern Bards are often found at the Gatherings, any public Pagan event where they can play for a meal and a night's entertainment draws them like butterflies to buttercups. Their magic(k) is their music and/or poetry. When they write rituals of their own they are more like stage productions, but their flair is part of their way.

Cunning Man/Woman: From Norse cunna "to know" and Old English kenning "understanding". The term was applied to resident spiritualists and healers of small towns in England since the late Middle Ages. Modern counterparts are wise men/women, crones, hedge witches, and kitchen witches. They fulfill the same functions as Shamen but they are usually self taught or family taught.

Cybermancer: Also known as a Technopagan or Technomage. These are most often the Webmasters for the groups they are in. You call them when you need advice for you own computer. They have the equivalent of the Library of Alexandria stored on their hard drives and know their way around the Internet as if by magic(k). They often do not lead inrits but they put together all the handouts and probably did the planning for much of the ritual.

Druid: Druids were the highly trained priest class of the Celtic tribes. They were the intellectual elite of their people. If you are going to claim this title you should remember to be as physical as you are bookish.

Enchanter/Enchantress: Their magic(k) and spirit is that of a social nature. You will never find them as solitaires simply because they have too much fun in crowds. They are "bewitching", fascinating, charming, and appealing. Theirs is the magic(k) of attraction, and they seem to know how to make themselves into candle flames to attract others.

Mage: Masters of magic(k)al arts. Practitioners of many forms of magic(k). Mages are as content with formal ritual as they are with informal hedge witchery. Some title themselves Magi as they style themselves as "priests" of some form. Sages were students of life in their youth and their magic(k)al style reflects the places they have traveled.

Magician: Basically, anyone who practices either magic or magic(k) as well as those who practice both.

Mystic: From Greek mystai "initiated into Mysteries". A person whose profound spiritual or "otherworldly" experiences have given them a deep intuitive comprehension or vision of hidden truths and awareness. Their form of magic(k) is often chaotic and hard for them to teach to others but it works very well for them. Often Mystics have undergone great trauma in their lives which strengthens them spiritually.

Necromancer: One who conjures up the spirits of the dead to learn from them. Necromancers often are

able to foretell the future in some limited ways. Modern terms for the Necromancers would include *Channellers* or *Mediums*, however there is a growing number of students of these arts that prefer the classical term.

Philosopher: Those who endlessly contemplate the underlying principles and nature of "life, the universe, and everything". They seek to apply wisdom, reason, and knowledge to every aspect of life and society, and are well known for being great teachers.

Prophets: Yes there are Pagan prophets. They are great teachers known for their visions and revelations. They speak as if inspired by someone else, and some of them even assert they are inspired by the Divine. The variety of aspects of the Divine by which it chooses to inspire the prophets can often be entertaining to others. The best ones often transform their small corners of the world into something better.

Priest/Priestess: These folks have pledged themselves to the service of a specific God/dess. They often model themselves after a particular manifestation or aspect of their chosen deity.

Sage: From Middle Ages Latin *Saga* "Sorceress". Elder Pagan of sound judgment who achieved wisdom through reflection and experience. Some may call themselves Sages, but often Sages are past the point of caring about a title. Call them what it suits you to call them and they will agree with it while educating you as to why it doesn't exactly fit them. Sages are often savants in multiple areas, a scholar, and often a philosopher and/or teacher.

Seer/Soothsayer: An old word for visionaries and fortunetellers; basically anyone that could "see forward" as well as seeing behind. Modern Soothsayers are students of multiple forms of divination.

Shaman: Spiritual leaders of traditional tribal cultures. Also known as medicine men/women, and in a few places as "Witch Doctors" who are both gifted and learned in skills of divination, herbalism, hypnosis, psychic work, and sorcery. They are the village teachers, magicians, spirit guides, healers, and midwives.



Sorcerer/Sorceress: These folks are charmers, both magic(k)ally and in the mundane world. They do not always use their talents in a manner that is positive for others, but things always seem to work out well for them. The folks often have a strong tie with both the many people and animals they surround themselves with.

Vizier: From Arabic "bearer of burdens". This title was once reserved for the chief minister or top advisor to the king. This title often is used as a synonym for "Court Wizard". In all ways a Vizier is identical to a Wizard, though many modern Viziers include hand etched scrolls in their libraries, while other styles of Wizards prefer intricate Grimoires and Compendiums.

Witch: Most common title. Can be applied to any student of any field of magic(k).

5) DO PAGANS WORSHIP DEVILS AND/OR DEMONS? As has been stated before, there is no one set path for all pagans. However, as demons and devils are mostly a Christian concept, then it is safe to say that no they do not. There are groups that are classed as Satanic, based on the Anton Lavey created religion of Satanism which is actually Hedonism given a new name designed to "piss people off that judge books by their covers".

6) WHAT ARE THE BASIC PAGAN BELIEFS? Since, as stated above, there is not one religion but many classed as being Pagan, it would be hard to state a basic set of beliefs that all Pagans adhere to. There are, however several beliefs that many Pagans adhere to:



RESPECT FOR NATURE

As many Pagan religions advocate worshipping their deities in the cathedral created by the deities (in other words, outdoors and close to nature), many pagans have a great respect for nature. This is translated in many ways: gardening, conservation, recycling, preservation and protection of natural areas.

RESPECT FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Many Pagans, though they may word it differently, that one cannot shift blame, share blame, or distribute blame, that blame, guilt, and responsibility take place within the individual. They try to live perfectly in an imperfect world and accept in advance that their efforts will be less than perfect. Each person is solely responsible for their own actions. Unlike Christianity, which allows the individual to shift blame for actions onto "Satan" or "The Devil".

LACK OF ABSOLUTES

This simplification is often mistaken to mean that there is no right or wrong to Pagans, which is as far from the truth as one can get. Pagans accept that there are certain ills which cannot be treated amongst humankind. However, in talking about right and wrong, it is accepted that circumstances can turn what might normally be a wrong act into a right one. (For example, a person might believe killing animals for sport or food is wrong and yet still be able to put an end to a rabid animal through forced necessity. Thus many of the great wrongs of other religions are often more accepted amongst Pagans (homosexuality, illegitimacy, non-traditional families, etc).

7) DO ALL PAGANS FOLLOW THE "REDE"? No, the Rede (An it harm none, do as ye will) is a tenet of Wicca and any path based in or evolved from Wicca. the Rede evolved from Crowley's statement "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" which implied many ideas that Wiccans found distasteful into something that implied a certain civility among its members. Though several other Pagan paths have similar beliefs, they vary greatly on just how much harm is acceptable from the followers.

8) CAN ONE BE BOTH PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN? Of course! Santeria and Culdee are but two examples of paths that mix Christian and Pagan beliefs into one functioning religion. Culdee took the approach of converting the many gods of Celtic beliefs into one god and many saints. Santeria mixes both Catholic beliefs with the folklore and rites of MesoPagan religions into a very energetic form of worship. A more recent creation of a Christian/Pagan is Christian Wicca in which the teachings of Jesus Christ from the New Testament have been blended with Wiccan beliefs and in rituals Jesus represents the male aspect while Mother Mary represents the female aspect.

9) I THINK I AM BEING DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BECAUSE OF MY PAGAN BELIEFS. WHAT CAN I DO? First you need to look at what you term as discrimination and then see if there might be an alternate cause. The reason is that 94% of the "religious discrimination" cases we have been asked to assist on have fallen into the following categories:

CHILD WELFARE/CUSTODY Most of these end up not being about religion but about the cleanliness of the house, the atmosphere of the home, the treatment of the child or bitterness because things did not go the way the complaining parent wished for. There are no religious excuses to beat children, have a sloppy house (in fact most Pagan religions require cleaner and more organized spaces), or any of the other things that Children's Welfare (DCS, DCFS, CPS, among others) would be interesting in taking children out of the home for. The most memorable case we assisted on was a woman who had been neglecting the special needs of her physically challenged child, endangering his health, and claimed

that her ex had reported her as an unfit mother because she was a Pagan. (She thought that being a slobbish neglectful mother was part of her religion as a Thelemic).

SCHOOL: Failing classes, skipping school, lying, stealing, violence, are just some of the activities that teens have tried to cover up by claiming the school is religiously harassing them. The most famous case of religious harassment in schools was the death of Tempest Smith, a 12 year old girl who had newly discovered Wicca, she was teased mercilessly by her classmates because of her black clothes (not a required wardrobe of Wiccans) and her Wiccan beliefs. Tempest could not take the teasing anymore and hung herself in her bedroom in February 2001.

WORK: Late for work, skipping assigned tasks, bad attitude towards coworkers, company theft, and scores of other violations have been committed by people who have tried to claim they were being discriminated by their religion. One case filed by a woman working in a law office stated that her employers were persecuting her and inhibiting her religious freedom because they would not let her light candles and incense at her desk (she neglected to mention that her boss was asthmatic and incense and perfumed candles caused greater breathing troubles for him).