



Paganism

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May 2018

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Charity registration number: 1169562



General Points

- Everything in this sheet is a generalisation. There is great variety not only between, but also within the various Pagan traditions. Some scholars refer to Paganisms rather than Paganism.
- The information in this briefing sheet refers specifically to Paganisms in Britain and Northern Ireland. There are contemporary Pagan religions in Europe, Australia and the Americas and indeed elsewhere and these may differ significantly from Paganisms in the UK.
- There is no single definition of Paganism to which all Pagan religions or traditions would assent. Not all regard their path as religious as such. For many “religion” has a negative connotation and they prefer to refer to their path as “spiritual” or as a “philosophy”.
- As a generalisation only, Pagan religions tend to be characterised by a veneration of the natural world or as “Nature” as divine; by an engagement in some way or another with a feminine aspect of the divine and with a concern for ecology. These are not without exceptions. There is no sacred text and no consensus regarding divinity.
- Some Pagans are “hard polytheists”, believing in the real and separate existence of a multiplicity of gods and goddesses who are separate from each other and with whom humans can enter into reciprocal relationships. Some are “soft polytheists”, using images and language relating to gods and goddesses but regarding these as symbolic, as anthropomorphisms of natural phenomena such as wind and sun, or as projections of aspects of a person’s psyche or subconscious. Others are duotheists, believing in a God and Goddess, of whom individual gods and goddesses are aspects. Some are monotheist, seeing all gods and goddesses as aspects of a single reality, which may be conceived as male, female or neither. Some Pagans are atheist, or animist, or combine Paganism with another path such as Christianity or Buddhism. Any of these views can exist within any Pagan tradition. Belief is not the central unifying idea.
- The Pagan Federation is an umbrella organisation representing Pagans of all traditions in England and Wales (The Pagan Federation Scotland covers Pagans in Scotland). They act as advisors to the government, the Religious Education Council and offer advice and legal support to Pagans who are experiencing discrimination. They should be the first point of contact for the media. It should be noted, however, that many pagans are not affiliated to the PF and do not believe that it represents their concerns.

- About 50% of British Pagans are solitary and are not affiliated to any particular tradition. They may have very vibrant online communities and may attend festivals during the summer but otherwise have no contact with other Pagans.

Wicca

- Wicca is the most widely known Pagan tradition and the one which is most often represented in the media.
- Wiccans often refer to themselves as witches. It should be remembered, however, that not all people who self-identify as witches are Wiccans.
- Wicca was founded by Gerald Gardner, based, he claimed, on the teachings of the New Forest Coven into which he was initiated in 1939. In 1949, he published *High Magic's Aid*, a fictional book intended to introduce the teachings of Wicca to the world. In 1954, he published *Witchcraft Today*, sometimes seen as a foundational text of modern Wicca.
- Wicca is an initiatory tradition, usually based in covens, which are often closed. Wiccans often regard their teachings as secret and to be revealed only to the initiated, although some groups hold open/public rituals either within their covens or wider Pagan Moots they may be associated with.
- Many Wiccans trace their lineage of initiation back either to Gerald Gardner (Gardnerian Wiccans) or to Alex Sanders, who formed a breakaway movement in the 1970s (Alexandrian Wiccans). Alex Sanders' former wife, Maxine, continues to play a major role within Alexandrian Wicca.
- Broadly speaking, Wiccans acknowledge a God and a Goddess, who may or may not be attached to a particular pantheon. Covens may have a High Priest and High Priestess.
- Some forms of Wicca (sometimes called Dianic Witchcraft) elevate the Goddess to the status of supreme deity, either omitting or minimising the role of the God.
- Many Wiccans keep a so-called Book of Shadows based on a book kept by Gerald Gardner. This is usually a collection of thoughts, recipes, spells etc and functions as a spiritual journal.
- A major text within Wicca is *Charge of the Goddess*, attributed in its present form to Doreen Valiente, who was a priestess within Gardner's original coven.

- Some Wiccans believe, as did Gerald Gardner (drawing on the work of Margaret Murray) that the witch trials of the Middle Ages and Early Modern period were persecuting the practitioners of a pre-Christian European religion that honoured a Goddess. Because of the works of Prof. Ronald Hutton, who has written extensively on the history of Paganism, many (but not all) have abandoned this belief, seeing Wicca as a modern religion, albeit inspired by the past, that holds great relevance to the modern world.
- Most Wiccans celebrate the Wheel of the Year, a cycle of eight seasonal festivals: Yule-Imbolc-Ostara-Beltane-Summer Solstice-Lughnasadh-Mabon-Samhain (although the names Ostara and Mabon are not universally used).
- These festivals are celebrated by Wiccans, Druids and most other Pagans in the UK. The order is reversed in the Southern Hemisphere.

Druidry

- Druidry is very hard to define.
- Broadly speaking there are two distinct kinds of Druid order. Cultural Druidry (such as the Ancient Order of Druids) is a cultural group with its roots in the Celtic Revival of the 18th and 19th centuries. It organises the Eisteddfod in Wales and it is this group that various dignitaries such as Winston Churchill and the Queen have been involved with. It is based on Celtic identity and “bardic skills”, with its roots in Iolo Morgannwg (Edward Williams), as does pagan Druidry, but it has no connection with religion, Pagan or otherwise.
- The other category of Druidry can be more closely identified with Paganism, although not all who are associated with it would identify as Pagan. This category of Druidry has its roots in the writings of Ross Nichols but can be most clearly identified from the 1970s and 80s onwards.
- Druids may regard Druidry as a religion, a spirituality, a philosophy, a way of life, or, a cultural aesthetic. There is no universally held set of beliefs, but factors that are common in Druidry are a reverence for nature, a connection with ancestors, however this is understood, a concern for scholarship and a sense of the importance of creative skills (such as music, poetry and writing). Many forms of Druidry try to cultivate “awen” or poetic inspiration.
- Many Druids have a concern with ecology and feel a connection to ancient sacred sites.

- All forms of Druidry draw inspiration from the Druids mentioned in classical sources from the Iron Age. Some reconstructionist groups attempt to recreate the religious and cultural life of this period as closely as possible. Others look to the model of Druids as scholar priests but claim that as little can be known of the original Druids we must reinterpret the vision for the modern world.
- The largest Druid Order in the UK is the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids which was re-founded in 1988 by Philip Carr-Gomm. He is stepping aside as the 'Chosen Chief' to be replaced by Eimear Burke in 2020. OBOD regards itself as a modern wisdom tradition and is split into three different grades (Bard, Ovate and Druid). It offers a distance learning course in each grade.
- The second largest order is the British Druid Order, founded in 1979 by Philip Shallcrass (Greywolf). This order is also divided into the three grades of Bard, Ovate and Druid and offers a distance learning course. The BDO regards Druidry as the indigenous shamanic religion of the British Isles.
- Many other Druid orders, networks and organisations exist in the UK, notably the Druid Network, now a registered religious charity; and the Anglesey Druid Order. There are also many solitary practitioners who would identify as Druid.
- Like Wiccans, most Druids in the UK celebrate the eight seasonal festivals of the Wheel of the Year.

Heathenry

- Heathenry is a branch of Paganism that is specifically concerned with the Norse or Germanic pantheon and culture.
- Heathens tend to be organised in small family or localised groups called hearths or kindreds and may not affiliate with larger organisations. Heathens may, however, join with other local Pagans in moots or other initiatives. The Pagan Heathen Symposium has recently been established.
- The main practices within Heathenry are the blot (offering, generally of mead) and symbel, in which the gods are toasted. Unlike other neo-Pagan groups, Heathens do not tend to cast circles or call the quarters.
- Heathens are usually polytheists, believing in the real and separate existence of multiple deities.

- There have been accusations of racism levelled against some Heathen groups due to claims that only those of Germanic/Norse heritage can follow this path, however, most Heathen groups have been quick to clearly and publically distance themselves from this viewpoint.
- The oldest Heathen group in the UK is the Odinic Rite, founded in 1973. This was granted Registered Charity Status in 1988. Controversy over this led to the group splitting into two factions, with the Odinist Fellowship maintaining charitable status.
- Heathen ethics tend to be based on the Nine Virtues and the aphorisms of the Havamal, a book of wisdom and advice for living first written down in the 14th century although the contents are much older.

Goddess Spirituality

- This is a tradition that emphasises the feminine aspect of the divine, either by worshipping particular goddesses from a variety of traditions around the world, or by honouring a single Great Goddess or Mother Goddess. Individual goddesses are sometimes seen as aspects of this Great Goddess.
- The Goddess Movement arose in the 1970s and was both influenced by, and influenced second wave feminism.
- Practitioners of Goddess spirituality may be drawn from any Pagan tradition. Many are Wiccan or witches, but by no means exclusively. Many identify only as worshippers of the Goddess. There are Christians and Jews who likewise seek to emphasise the female energy of the divine in an attempt to “redress the balance” of thousands of years of patriarchy. These people may, or may not identify themselves explicitly with Goddess Spirituality.
- The study of the Goddess has come to be known as theology.
- Many, but not all adherents subscribe to the theory that there was an ancient Matriarchal culture in the Mediterranean during the Bronze Age in which the divine feminine was revered as the Supreme. This theory is not widely credited by modern archaeology but continues to have significant ideological power. This idea is largely based on the books, *The First Sex* (Elizabeth Gould-Davis, 1971) and *When God was a Woman* (Merlin Stone 1976).

- Probably the largest and most influential expression of Goddess Spirituality in the UK is the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury, established in 2002. This is the first Pagan body in England licensed to conduct weddings.
- Dianic Wicca is a specific branch of Wicca, which honours only the Goddess, rather than a Goddess and a God, and which often excludes men from its rituals and ceremonies.
- Another well-known and influential Goddess Movement is the Fellowship of Isis, founded in 1976 by Olivia Robertson, her brother Lawrence Durdin-Robertson and his wife, Pamela. Originally based in Ireland, this is a multi-national body that has members from all Pagan paths and none, as well as some who would see themselves predominantly as Christian.

Non-Wiccan Witchcraft

- Not all people who identify as witches are Wiccan. Wiccan usually refers to the Gardnerian and Alexandrian lines of initiation. However people may also identify as traditional witches, unconnected to Gardner or Wicca.
- A large number of Pagans identify as ‘Hedge witches’. These are solitary practitioners who often specialise in herbal remedies and magic. They may or may not use rituals derived from Wicca such as casting circles and calling the quarters.
- Some traditional witches claim hereditary lineage going back several generations, often to a village midwife or traditional herbal healer.
- Non-Wiccan witches usually celebrate the traditional eight festivals of the year that are common to many types of Paganism in the UK. This is generally referred to as the Wheel of the Year and traces its origins to Gerald Gardner and Ross Nichols, although most of the festivals can be traced back to ancient origins somewhere. There is no evidence that any ancient culture ever celebrated all of them as a single system.
- There are also growth areas such as kitchen witchcraft and Fairy or Faerie witchcraft
- Traditional or non-Wiccan witches may be solitary or may meet in covens not unlike Wiccans. They may attend generic local Pagan Moots or festivals and they may or may not affiliate with the Pagan Federation.

Eclectic Paganism

- There are a number of Pagan traditions that do not fit into any of the categories mentioned above.
- Many of these would identify with Paganism in general, acknowledging the sacredness of Nature and the significance of the Divine Feminism, but would not necessarily describe themselves as any particular type of Paganism.
- These may connect through online communities, may attend local moots or festivals and may subscribe to the Pagan Federation, or they may be completely solitary.
- Others may belong to a particular tradition such as Hellenic (based on the ancient Greek pantheon) or Kemetic (drawing on the religion of ancient Egypt). There are a very large number of smaller Pagan traditions.

Sources – Websites

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