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See also: Animism: Humanity's Original Religious World-view; Ecofascism; Fascism; Israel and Environmentalism; Jewish Environmentalism in North America; Kabbalah and Eco-theology; Neo-paganism and Ethnic Nationalism in Eastern Europe; Odinism; Redwood Rabbis; The Sacred and the Modern World.

Paganism – Contemporary

Paganism labels a set of religions centered on the celebration and veneration of nature that understand and engage it in one way or another as sacred. To fully understand the natural dimension of contemporary Paganism we must apprehend its origins and diversity. Scholars who study such religion generally use "Pagan" or "Paganism" (with a capital P) to denote a religion as identified by its adherents, and "pagan" or "paganism" (lower-case) to refer to more general phenomena such as the pre-Christian religions of ancient Europe.

The origins of the name and of the revival of Paganism in the twentieth century arise from earlier cultural trends and movements. Many Pagans think that "pagan" derives from a Latin word meaning villager or "country-dweller" as opposed to a city-dweller. They associate it not only with rural and traditional values, but also with being close to nature or the land. Of course, this makes it difficult to speak of classical Roman "paganism" since that term must refer to temple-based religious observances in cities and towns. In reality the term originally meant something more like "parishioner," a member of a community living in a particular place – rural or urban – who is therefore obligated to respect sacred places and people in that area. The term "paganism" was created by Christians in the fourth century in order to contrast (negatively) their religion with the religiosity they hoped to replace.

The mere addition of "-ism," however, misdirected attention from cult (the performance or observance of traditionally defined duties toward persons, places and powers worthy of respect) toward beliefs about deities. Despite this, the polemics of the medieval churches against popular religion, including beliefs about anti-Christian

activities, maintained a focus on actions rather than ideas, at least as the locus of transgression. With the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the body and its needs and desires became associated not with temptation and sin but with the possibility of good and health. The meaning of "nature" altered from "not yet sanctified" to "as it should really be." Thus "pagan desires" could be valorized as noble and worthy. This exemplifies trends that resulted in the creation of a set of religions, the members of which called themselves Pagans.

In the early to mid-twentieth century Gerald Gardner and companions declared themselves to be members of a Pagan Witchcraft religion. Their ideas were rooted in academic understandings that the alleged witches persecuted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been continuing ancient pre-Christian fertility religions. However, alongside the theories of Margaret Murray about such witches, and the musings of Robert Graves about the inheritance of Celtic knowledges, were other forms of real but diffuse connections with the ancient religions of Europe. Ronald Hutton has documented four such connections: high ritual magic (ceremonial engagements with "supernatural forces and beings," such as among Hermetic orders and the Rosicrucians), hedge witchcraft (e.g., the low-level folk magic of "cunning men" and Horse Whisperers), the general love affair of the Christian centuries with the art and literature of the ancient world, and folk rites. Thus, Gardner and the Witches that gathered with him blended aspects of previously esoteric ceremonies (e.g., those that invoked elemental beings and guardians of the directions) with the use of herbal remedies, veneration of classical deities (e.g., the Moon and/or Earth as Goddess), and seasonal and lunar festivals. Immediately, therefore, their spirituality focused attention on human relationships with the Earth, places and physical reality.

Witchcraft was not the only form of Paganism to be revived or created. In almost every century since the Roman invasion of Britain there have been claimants to the title "Druid." Until the twentieth century most such Druids were Christians of one sort or another. There were exceptions such as the Gallic-inspired polytheism of Breton Druids since the period of the French Revolution. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, a plethora of mostly Pagan Druid Orders formed. They share with Witches (or Wiccans as some name themselves) a calendar including eight annual seasonal/solar festivals alongside those marking phases of the lunar cycle, a delight in ceremony, and a reverence for nature that sometimes results in environmental activism. Witches and Druids now tend to name deities from ancient Celtic cultures, although some venerate a more eclectic pantheon. It is partially true that Wicca and other Witchcraft traditions are mystery religions enabling the discovery and expression of the individual's higher self in relation to nature, whereas Druidry is a more public or accessible

nature religion encouraging a wider population to celebrate.

A third group of Pagans name themselves variously Heathens or Ásatrúar, “those who honor deities.” They are inspired by Germanic, Norse, Icelandic and/or Anglo-Saxon cosmologies and literatures. They too engage in magic and ritual, celebrate seasons and venerate deities.

While there has been considerable feminist influence on the various Paganisms, this is most explicit in Pagan branches of Goddess Spirituality and in versions of witchcraft such as that of the Reclaiming covens initiated by Starhawk in San Francisco. Similarly, many Pagans have been influenced by shamanism. Some Heathens, for example, are experimenting with trance techniques and performances rooted in understandings of ancient literary references to “seidr.” Both feminism and shamanism have affected the celebratory practices of Pagans and have sometimes encouraged even more direct encounters with nature, including environmental direct action. Paganisms of various other kinds have been revived in different parts of Europe, typically drawing on knowledge of ancestral literatures and traditions and blending them with environmentalism and other contemporary concerns.

Each Pagan tradition, or “path,” is divided into myriad local, regional or global affinity groups and networks of various kinds. Sometimes a focus on a particular deity or pantheon distinguishes a group from others. Sometimes a particular teacher or initiator introduces alternative ways of working magic that attract attention and result in the formation of a new lineage of groups. Sometimes a group’s stress on a particular sacred place, or the intensity of their commitment to a threatened ecosystem, leads them to identify more strongly together than they do with any previous affiliations. Shifts to different countries, climates, cultures or continents causes significant changes in style or flavor (e.g., “Wicca” refers to a restricted group of covens in the UK, but is a more general term in North America). Only occasionally do such Pagan diversities result in hostilities between groups over morality, politics, and other issues. Generally, Pagans celebrate diversity in self-identity as they do in ecology. Certainly no central authority or hierarchy has emerged that is persuasive to or representative of all Pagans. However, more localized hierarchies can develop when charismatic leaders and powerful inner circles are criticized by others in the community. At such a time small groups may split off and begin their own Pagan communities. In this way the larger Pagan culture remains fluid and malleable, allowing for participants to follow their preferences for community structure and leadership style.

One of the preferences some Pagans exercise is to conduct rituals alone as what are termed “Solitary” Pagans, or to participate in discussions and rituals with other Pagans over the internet as well as, or instead of, in face-to-face groups. The internet has also provided new means of net-

working and of experimentation with ritual and identity, but generally speaking it simply replicates the modes of affiliation and discourse typical in pre-internet Paganisms.

The common ground among all Paganisms is literally physicality or nature. As ever in religions, it is primarily in relation to engagement with the common ground that diversity is most evident. For Pagans, then, the key questions are about ontologies and epistemologies of other-than-human beings and places and appropriate modes in which humans might relate to them.

It is not irrelevant that the contemporary revival of Paganism has emerged from and is rooted in European cultures and landscapes. Even if Pagans and others are wrong about the origins of the word, it is important that “Pagan” is linked with countryside rather than wilderness. That is, traditional paganisms enabled people to make religious sense of living and working with places and their surrounding community of life. They did not demand pilgrimages that transcended ordinary reality by long treks to distant places less altered by humanity. Indeed, it is doubtful that such true wildernesses have existed anywhere in Europe for a very long time. Even in North America, Africa and everywhere else inhabited or visited by humans, “wilderness” has sometimes been created recently by evicting previous occupants. Everywhere, the Earth is at least partially the result of human interaction with other life and other influences. Thus Paganisms can engage powerfully with the world as it is. Sometimes Pagan celebration of nature takes place in the heart of cities, sometimes it requires confrontation with economic interests transforming ecologically diverse ecosystems, sometimes it encourages organic husbandry, and sometimes results in evocative and playful ceremonies. However, it is certainly true that most Pagan celebrations involve journeys to woodlands, coastal areas or other more “natural” locations. For example, most large Pagan festival gatherings in the U.S. are held in forested areas where the emphasis on getting away from the city to commune with nature is emphasized.

The most obvious sense in which Paganism is centered on the celebration of nature is in its various calendar festivals. The majority of Pagans celebrate a cycle or wheel of eight annual solar/seasonal festivals marked by the two solstices, two equinoxes and the four intervening “quarter days” that mark the beginnings of northwest European seasons. These festivals provide opportunities not only to acknowledge the relationship of Earth and sun, and to celebrate the changing seasons of the natural world, but also to focus attention on individual and communal human life cycles. At summer solstice, for example, Pagans might honor the sun at the height of its (his or her) powers, conduct marriages or other rites of love and commitment, facilitate carnivalesque celebrations of summer, and conduct the energies of the season (and of places) toward the enhancement of the well-being of all life.

The names given these festivals by particular groups of Pagans concomitantly links them to ancestors, reinforcing understandings that challenge modernist individualism, suggesting links with indigenous religions, and reinforcing divergences within the broader religion. The centrality of seasonal celebrations (especially when they require some adjustment to suit local/regional seasonal variations – and temporal ones in the case of the Southern Hemisphere) always insistently roots Paganism in positive engagement with this-worldly rather than transcendent realities.

A focus on this world is true too, however, of Pagan dealings with deities. Although the Christian theological dichotomy transcendent/immanent is referred to by Pagans in discussion with other religionists, their own discourse suggests very different conceptions of the relationship between deity and physicality. Along with many members of polytheistic religions, many Pagans understand that while discrete deities are beings in their own right they may also manifest themselves within various other physical modes. These might include statues or artistic representations, but more commonly deities manifest themselves within particular humans. Thus a central rite of Wicca is “Drawing Down the Moon” when the Goddess, whose reality is incarnated in the moon is invited “into” a priestess, who then speaks words and perform actions taken to be those of the Goddess. (Pagans often speak of “the Goddess” without necessarily meaning that there is only one divinity, or of “the Goddess and the God” without meaning that there are only two.) Again, this fluidity of form and permeability of boundaries is indicative of Pagan notions of the nature of persons. Even while celebrating nature “as it is,” Pagans understand that what is visible is not the whole story. The divine is accessible in material, indeed in human, form. Everyday, ordinary life is taken up into divinity and demonstrated to be important and worthy of celebration. Transcendence (the divine) does not transcend the mundane, but rather returns celebrants to their daily lives with renewed insight into the value of ordinary material.

This Pagan polytheism is allied to a pervasive animism, seen in practices that aim to establish respectful communication with a wide range of significant other-than-human living beings. For example, Pagan festivals might include veneration of particular deities, but they will almost certainly acknowledge the importance and invite the participation of other celebrants in the “natural” world. Trees and rocks are commonly understood to be persons in some sense, but Pagans also claim to encounter elemental beings (of Earth, air, fire and water) and those named, by various folk traditions, “faeries” or “elves.” Acknowledgement of the priority of the “spirit of place” and other inhabitants of particular places again grounds Pagan environmentalism in engagements with material reality and the everyday world.

Reincarnation has become popular among Pagan and in wider cultural notions of what might happen after death. In the Pagan version reincarnation is not considered to entangle people in the unpleasantness of physicality, animality and sensuality that cannot be escaped. Far from proffering a solution to such “problems” Paganism celebrates embodiment. Physical nature in all its forms is “good” and Pagans rarely speak as if being human were preferable to any other kind of embodiment. In considering environmental threats, some Pagans might actually say the opposite: it would be better not to be human if being human required such assaults on all other life. The Pagan answer to that problematic equation of humanity with eco-pollutant is to encourage respectful action toward the world. No manifesto details what this must mean for all Pagans, let alone all humanity, but inspiration and encouragement is offered toward the pursuit of an adjustment of human control over the world. Many Pagans believe that if Earth were understood to be humanity’s permanent home (whether because of the sense of reincarnation as continuous embodiment within Earth’s ecosystem or for whatever other this-worldly ontology) and embodiment our eternal state, this should provide a solid foundation for a more respectful and humble participation in the processes of being than is currently typical of humanity.

One of the ways Pagans try to facilitate this kind of participation is through the practice of magic. Various definitions of magic have been inherited from esoteric and traditional sources, but the most common are “the art and science of causing change according to will” and “the art and science of changing consciousness according to will.” Both of these indicate that nature (human and beyond) is malleable and that it is, at least sometimes, permissible to manipulate it. Both definitions require ontological similarity between human intention and other purposeful agencies or powers in nature. That is, particular expressions of human will (when sufficiently and appropriately empowered, expressed and performed) can cause changes either in the magical practitioner or in that which they wish to change. For most Pagans, magic’s plausibility is rooted in a metaphysics of relationship (inter-influence or inter-dependence between humans and other life). Certainly, Pagans typically hedge the teaching and performance of magic around with ethical injunctions (e.g., the Wiccan Rede) which says that so long as none is harmed it is permissible to enact one’s true will (once that is known of course). Warnings are often offered that magic is just like all other actions in that it causes results for the magician as well as beyond them, and that care is required in the statement of intention (uncertainty might lead to chaos). Pagans usually share wider cultural vilification of those who might use magic to harm others (a perspective that underlies most traditional ideas about witchcraft, and thus is somewhat uneasy in this case). The notion that

magic is effective also indicates that there are powers in nature that might be controlled, with some effort, for the benefit of others.

Magic and embodiment also invite consideration of sexuality. In the Wiccan “Great Rite” a high priestess and high priest make love as Goddess and God (some do so symbolically rather than “in true,” and now always in private). This sacramental sex has roots in the ancient mystery religions of Eleusis and Isis, but also and more importantly in pervasive Pagan understandings of the goodness of sex, desire, bodies, physicality and the natural world. Paganism celebrates life as generated by ordinary sexual processes of evolution, and encourages people to value sexuality positively, and sometimes even as sacred. Pagans do not find religious problems in that which is “natural,” nor do they offer a religious solution in denial of desire and embodiment. Instead, its “problems” are perceived threats to the diversity of life, and its “solutions” are the rediscovery of the goodness of the natural.

Tendencies central to Pagan self-understandings might lead to suspect interests. For example, respect for ancestral traditions has led some Pagans toward racist notions of ethnicity and identity. Or perhaps it is that some discourse about ancestors or ancestral tradition dovetails with elements of racist essentialisms that use constructions of the past to claim “authenticity.” Such tendencies and temptations are rejected by the majority of Pagans. Many Pagans also reject any belief in a devil or evil-principle, sometimes asserting that Satan is actually part of the monotheistic or specifically Christian pantheon. However, some do find “Satan” useful to symbolize the “dark side” of nature, its forces and processes of death and decay. Even in such discourse, however, these processes are not demonized but revered as vital for the continuity of life. Most Pagans find plenty of scope in non-Christian cosmologies for such discussion, some referring to the “dark side of the Goddess” or to Kali as creator and destroyer. It may also be important to note that Satanism is properly considered a self-religion, whereas Paganism is a nature religion.

Paganism is, therefore, the label for a diversity of spiritual movements and practices focused, in a variety of ways, on the celebration of nature. These certainly include festive gatherings and ceremonies, but might also entail eco-activism and ecologically sensitive lifestyles. Few if any of these practices and lifestyles are unique to Pagans, however, and it is the particular accretion of worldviews and lifeways that define something as Pagan rather than something else. Diversity itself is essential to the self-understanding of most Pagans, both when they think about what “nature” means and how it might be encountered and engaged, and when they think about the character of their religion. Even in uses of the internet, fantasy literature, imaginative storytelling and ritualizing, Pagans pursue greater intimacy with the ordinary,

physical world. Indeed, even encounters with deities, which in some religions might encourage the transcendence of embodiment and physicality, are experienced as invitations to be more rather than less human and, thereby, natural. Paganism is world-affirming even, or especially, when it confronts what it perceives as threats to ecological diversity or the sanctity of natural life. Its engagement with physicality re-enchants the world not as resource or environment but as community. Its spirituality does not efface or conflict with physicality but finds it not only meaningful but also worthy of celebration and even revelatory of that which is sacred and of lasting value. In these and other ways, Paganism intersects with significant currents in contemporary society (environmentalism, feminism and postmodernism for example). Its self-construction and presentation encourages the perception that nature is more than a context for self-discovery, it is engaged with as a community of co-celebrants.

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- See also: Animism (various); Bioregionalism; Druids and Druidry; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Elves and Land Spirits in Pagan Norse Religion; Gaia; Gimbutas, Marija; Goddesses – History of; Graves, Robert von Ranke; Greco-Roman World; Greece – Classical;