

Paganism is not alien from Western culture. For many people it exists less as an active religion than as the source of beloved elements of our popular culture. Halloween costumes and treats, Christmas trees and mistletoe, Easter bunnies and eggs, maypole dances, harvest festivals and hundreds of other folkways began as Pagan customs. Modern-day Pagans seek to restore the religious meaning of these practices.

WHAT, EXACTLY, IS PAGANISM?

Paganism is a general term for all the ancient and modern religions which identify Nature as the embodiment of the Divine. Pagans are people of every age and race who seek to develop an "I-Thou" relationship to Nature.

The word, "Pagan" comes from the Latin and originally meant village-dweller. In late antiquity, the opposite of "Pagani" was "*Milites*" -- soldiers, who after the late 2nd century were far more likely to be Christian and urban than the provincial peasants who had retained their ties to ancestral lands and rites. The Christian Soldiers' contempt for the Pagan populations on the edge of the empire suggests that a colloquial translation for "*Pagani*" could be "gooks." The English word "heathen" means someone who lives on the heath, or out in the country. It carried the same pejorative connotations as "hayseed," "hillbilly," and "hick."

In spite of the efforts of missionaries to crush them, many indigenous peoples have retained their own traditional religions: Hinduism is the Paganism of India; Taoism the Paganism of China; Shinto the Paganism of Japan; Santeria, Vodou & Macumba are the Paganisms of the African Diaspora; etc.. Paganism has helped many peoples and cultures throughout time to understand their world and their place in it, and to develop an understanding of Divine energy woven through their experiences.

Modern America Pagans are generally eclectic and identify with pre-Christian European, African, Asian, and/or Native American religious peoples. We are

citizens of a global culture, experimenting with worship and other religious practices to meet the needs of the Third Millennium. Rather than deny our connections with those who have been the victims of more recent missionary efforts, we claim the term "Pagan" for ourselves, honoring those others who have loved the God and Goddess in diverse forms, and learning from their legacy when it has survived.

DEFINING PAGANISM

Early Pagan religions originated in a time when people lived close to the land. Pagan theologies reflect an awareness of nature with its cycles of the seasons, as well as the cycles and seasons of human life. Such awareness is a common thread among Pagans today. Few modern Pagans can fully know or follow how our ancestors worshiped. Instead we invent and reinvent our religious practices, and even our beliefs, as we determine how they resonate with our contemporary lives. Some people prefer to use the word "Neopagan" to describe this form of modern Paganism.

We capitalize the words Pagan and Paganism in accordance with standard practices for religious names, e.g., Buddhist and Buddhism, Muslim and Islam. Paganism is a vital, genuine -- and growing! -- spiritual movement.

Paganism was overwhelmed by Christianity 2700 years ago, in large part because of decentralization and lack of large-scale organization. Today, most Pagans are not members of a coven or any religious other organization, preferring to be "solitaries."

Like modern Unitarian Universalists, Pagans have never had a creed, a statement of beliefs used as a test of religious identity, Pagans never had a council with the authority to impose or enforce a creed, and never needed heresy trials.

WHAT PAGANS BELIEVE

Modern Pagan theology is like a great tapestry with strands originating in many distinct religious traditions. Contemporary Pagans may embrace all or part of the Pagan tapestry. Some Pagans explore their ethnic roots and discover the religious practices of their ancestors. Others incorporate indigenous practices that belong to a wide variety of cultures. Still other Pagans follow newly created practices. Common among all Pagans is a desire to tie to nature in a way that resonates with their inner spiritual voice.

Some Pagans believe in the Goddesses and Gods of the old religions and others do not. Many Pagans understand the Divine as immanent, embodied in everything, and believe revelation is found primarily in nature and only secondarily in sacred writings and other traditions.

In ancient and modern times, Pagans have honored both feminine and masculine images of the Holy. Pagans often speak of many Gods and Goddesses. This polytheistic imagery may be meant metaphorically, since many Pagans are pantheistic, meaning that the God and Goddess can take many different forms.

Pagan ideas about the afterlife have been widely divergent throughout historical times. Some Pagans believe in Reincarnation. Others don't but believe that their actions in this life will determine their place in the next. Some Pagans believe in an active spirit world while others do not. Because Paganism is a non-creedal religion such divergent beliefs can exist together under one religious name -- just like in Unitarian Universalism!

Many modern Pagans find their beliefs are very much in harmony with Unitarian Universalist Principles. The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, (CUUPS, Inc.) is a 501c-3 non-profit organization which has been an independent affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association since 1987.

