

## Handout 2

### “Natural Religion”: Paganism and Wicca - *Richard Smoley*

#### From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Paganism** (from Latin *paganus*, meaning "country dweller", "rustic") is a blanket term used to refer to various polytheistic religions. The group so defined includes most of the Eastern religions, Native American religions and mythologies, as well as non-Abrahamic folk religions in general. More narrow definitions will not include any of the world religions and restrict the term to local or rural currents not organized as civil religions. Characteristic of pagan traditions is the absence of proselytism and the presence of a living mythology which explains religious practice.

The term "pagan" is a Christian adaptation of the "gentile" of Judaism, and as such has an inherent Abrahamic bias, and pejorative connotations among Western monotheists, comparable to heathen, and infidel also known as kafir (كافر) and mushrik in Islam. For this reason, ethnologists avoid the term "paganism," with its uncertain and varied meanings, in referring to traditional or historic faiths, preferring more precise categories such as polytheism, shamanism, pantheism, or animism.

Since the later 20th century, "Pagan" or "Paganism" has become widely used as a self-designation by adherents of Neopaganism. As such, various modern scholars have begun to apply the term to three separate groups of faiths: Historical Polytheism (such as Celtic polytheism and Norse paganism), Folk/ethnic/Indigenous religions (such as Chinese folk religion and African traditional religion), and Neo-paganism (such as Wicca and Germanic Neopaganism).

## Etymology

### Pagan

The term *pagan* is from the Latin *paganus*, an adjective originally meaning "rural", "rustic" or "of the country." As a noun, *paganus* was used to mean "country dweller, villager." The semantic development of post-classical Latin *paganus* in the sense "non-Christian, heathen" is unclear. The dating of this sense is controversial, but the 4th century seems most plausible. An earlier example has been suggested in Tertullian De Corona Militis xi, "*Apud hunc [sc. Christum] tam miles est paganus fidelis quam paganus est miles infidelis,*" but here the word *paganus* may be interpreted in the sense "civilian" rather than "heathen". There are three main explanations of the development:

- (i) The older sense of classical Latin *pāgānus* is "of the country, rustic" (also as noun). It has been argued that the transferred use reflects the fact that the ancient idolatry lingered on in the rural villages and hamlets after Christianity had been accepted in the towns and cities of the Roman Empire; cf. Orosius Histories 1.

Prol. "*Ex locorum agrestium compitis et pagis pagani vocantur.*" From its earliest beginnings, Christianity spread much more quickly in major urban areas (like Antioch, Alexandria, Corinth, Rome) than in the countryside (in fact, the early church was almost entirely urban), and soon the word for "country dweller" became synonymous with someone who was "not a Christian," giving rise to the modern meaning of "Pagan." This may, in part, have had to do with the closeness to nature of rural people, who may have been more resistant to the new ideas of Christianity than those who lived in major urban centers and were cut off from the cycles of nature and the forms of spirituality associated with them. However, it may have also resulted from early Christian missionaries focusing their efforts within major population centers (e.g., St. Paul), rather than throughout an expansive, yet sparsely populated, countryside (hence, the Latin term suggesting "uneducated country folk") until a bit later on.

- (ii) The more common meaning of classical Latin *pāgānus* is "civilian, non-militant" (adjective and noun). Christians called themselves *mīlitēs*, "enrolled soldiers" of Christ, members of his militant church, and applied to non-Christians the term applied by soldiers to all who were "not enrolled in the army".
- (iii) The sense "heathen" arose from an interpretation of *paganus* as denoting a person who was outside a particular group or community, hence "not of the city" or "rural"; cf. Orosius Histories 1. Prol. "*ui alieni a civitate dei. pagani vocantur.*" See C. Mohrmann, *Vigiliae Christianae* 6 (1952) 9ff.

-- Oxford English Dictionary, (online) 2nd Edition (1989)

The post-classical Latin *paganismus* gave rise to both *paganism* and to its synonym *paynimry*. *Paynimry* may be used of *paganism*, its practices, and pagans, as well as for the domain or realm of pagans.

"Peasant" is a cognate, via Old French *paisent*.

In their distant origins, these usages derived from *pagus*, "province, countryside", cognate to Greek *πάγος* "rocky hill", and, even earlier, "something stuck in the ground", as a landmark: the Proto-Indo-European root *\*pag-* means "fixed" and is also the source of the words *page*, *pale* (stake), and *pole*, as well as *pact* and *peace*.

While *pagan* is attested in English from the 14th century, there is no evidence that the term *paganism* was in use in English before the 17th century. The *OED* instances Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776): "The divisions of Christianity suspended the ruin of *paganism*." The term was not a neologism, however, as *paganismus* was already used by Augustine.

Less than twenty years after the last vestiges of *paganism* were crushed with great severity by the emperor Theodosius I Rome was seized by Alaric in 410. This led to murmuring that the gods of *paganism* had taken greater care of the city than that of the Christian God, inspiring St Augustine to write *The City of God*, alternative title "*De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*: The City of God against the Pagans", in which he claimed

that whilst the great 'city of Man' had fallen, Christians were ultimately citizens of the 'city of God.'

## Heathen

*Heathen* is from Old English *hæðen* "not Christian or Jewish", (c.f. Old Norse *heiðinn*). Historically, the term was probably influenced by Gothic *haiþi* "dwelling on the heath", appearing as *haiþno* in Ulfilas' bible as "gentile woman," (translating the "Hellene" in Mark 7:26). This translation probably influenced by Latin *paganus*, "country dweller", or it was chosen because of its similarity to the Greek *ethne*, "gentile". It has even been suggested that Gothic *haiþi* is not related to "heath" at all, but rather a loan from Armenian *hethanos*, itself loaned from Greek *ethnos*.

## Terminology

Both "pagan" and "heathen" have historically been used as a pejorative by adherents of monotheistic religions (such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam) to indicate a disbeliever in their religion, although in modern times it is not always used as a pejorative. "Paganism" frequently refers to the religions of classical antiquity, most notably Greek mythology or Roman religion, and can be used neutrally or admiringly by those who refer to those complexes of belief. However, until the rise of Romanticism and the general acceptance of freedom of religion in Western civilization, "Paganism" was almost always used disparagingly of heterodox beliefs falling outside the established political framework of the Christian Church. "Pagan" came to be equated with a Christianized sense of "epicurean" to signify a person who is sensual, materialistic, self-indulgent, unconcerned with the future and uninterested in sophisticated religion. The word was usually used in this worldly and stereotypical sense, particularly among those who were drawing attention to what they perceived as being the limitations of paganism, for example, as when G. K. Chesterton wrote: "The pagan set out, with admirable sense, to enjoy himself. By the end of his civilization he had discovered that a man cannot enjoy himself and continue to enjoy anything else." In sharp contrast Swinburne the poet would comment on this same theme: "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath; we have drunken of things Lethean, and fed on the fullness of death."

Christianity itself has been perceived at times as a form of paganism by followers of the other Abrahamic religions because of, for example, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the celebration of pagan feast days, and other practices – through a process described as "baptizing"<sup>[18]</sup> or "C". Even between Christians there have been similar charges of paganism leveled, especially by Protestants,<sup>[19][20]</sup> towards the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches for their veneration of the saints and images.

## Classifications

Pagan subdivisions coined by Isaac Bonewits:

- Paleopaganism: A retronym coined to contrast with "Neopaganism", denoting a Pagan culture that has not been disrupted by other cultures. The term applies to Shinto, pre-Migration period Germanic paganism as described by Tacitus, Celtic polytheism as described by Julius Caesar, the Greek and Roman religion. The term can even be used towards Hinduism, although there is a controversy of which forms of the vast variety of Hindu beliefs can be assigned as having pagan characteristics.
- Mesopaganism: A group, which is, or has been, significantly influenced by monotheistic, dualistic, or non-theistic worldviews, but has been able to maintain an independence of religious practices. This group includes aboriginal Americans as well as Australian aboriginals, Viking Age Norse paganism. Influences include: Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Spiritualism, and the many Afro-Diasporic faiths like Haitian Vodou, Santería and Espiritu religion. Isaac Bonewits includes British Traditional Wicca in this subdivision.
- Neopaganism: A movement by modern people to revive nature-worshipping, pre-Christian religions, or other nature-based spiritual paths. This definition may include anything on a sliding scale from Reconstructionism at one end to non-reconstructionist groups such as Neo-druidism and Wicca at the other.

# Wicca

## From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Wicca** is a neopagan, nature-based religion. It was popularized in 1954 by Gerald Gardner, a retired British civil servant, who at the time called it a "Witch cult" and "Witchcraft", and its adherents "the Wica".

Wiccans, as followers of Wicca are now commonly known, typically worship a Goddess (traditionally the Triple Goddess) and a God (traditionally the Horned God), who are sometimes represented as being a part of a greater pantheistic Godhead, and as manifesting themselves as various polytheistic deities. Other characteristics of Wicca include the ritual use of magic, a basic code of morality, and the celebration of eight seasonally based festivals.

There is dispute as to what actually constitutes Wicca. Initially, this spelling may have referred to the lineage of one of Gardner's rivals, Charles Cardell, although from the 1960s it referred only to lineages stemming from Gardner and operating as initiatory Mystery Priesthoods (such as Gardnerian and Alexandrian Wicca). These are now collectively known in North America as British Traditional Wicca. A third usage, which has grown in popularity in recent years, considers Wicca to include other forms of Goddess-oriented neopagan witchcraft that are similar to but independent of that lineage, including Dianic Wicca and the 1734 Tradition; these are sometimes collectively termed Eclectic Wicca.

## Theology

## Wiccan views of divinity

Although Wiccan views on theology vary, the vast majority of Wiccans venerate a Goddess and a God. These are variously understood through the frameworks of pantheism (as being dual aspects of a single godhead), duotheism (as being two polar opposites) or polytheism (being comprised of many lesser deities). In some pantheistic and duotheistic conceptions, deities from diverse cultures may be seen as aspects of the Goddess or God.

### **The God and the Goddess**

For most Wiccans, Wicca is a duotheistic religion worshipping both a God and a Goddess, who are seen as complementary polarities (akin to the Taoist philosophy of yin and yang), and "embodiments of a life-force manifest in nature." The Goddess is sometimes symbolized as the Moon, and the God as the Sun.

The antlered god from the Gundestrup cauldron, dated to the 1st century BC, depicting the Celtic pagan god Cernunnos.

Traditionally the God is viewed as a Horned God, associated with nature, wilderness, sexuality and hunting. The Horned God is given various names according to the tradition, and these include Cernunnos, Pan, Atho and Karnayna. At other times the God is viewed as the Green Man, a traditional figure in art and architecture of Europe, or as a Sun God (particularly at the festival of Litha, or the summer solstice). Another depiction of the God is as the Oak King and the Holly King, one who rules over Spring and Summer, the other who rules over Autumn and Winter.

The Goddess is usually portrayed as a Triple Goddess with aspects of 'Maiden', 'Mother' and 'Crone', though she is also commonly depicted as a Moon Goddess. Some Wiccans see the Goddess as pre-eminent, since she contains and conceives all; the God is the spark of life and inspiration within her, simultaneously her lover and her child. This is reflected in the traditional structure of the coven. In some traditions, notably feminist Dianic Wicca, the Goddess is seen as complete unto herself, and the God is not worshipped at all, though this has been criticized by members of other traditions. Secondly, the God is also sometimes viewed in a triple form (possibly in a reflective religious homage to the triple Goddess, referencing their complementary polarity) that being the aspects of 'Son', 'Father' and 'Sage'.

According to Gerald Gardner, the deities of Wicca are prehistoric gods of the British Isles: a Great Mother goddess and a Horned God. Modern scholarship has cast doubt on this claim; however various different horned gods and mother goddesses were worshipped in the British Isles in the ancient and early mediaeval period.

### **Polytheism**

## The Hindu Goddess Kali

The duotheism of the Goddess and the God is often extended into a type of dual pantheism through the belief, in the words of Dion Fortune, that "all gods are one god, and all goddesses are one goddess" —that is, the gods and goddesses of all cultures are, respectively, aspects of one supernal god and goddess. For instance, a Wiccan may regard the Germanic Eostre, Hindu Kali, and Christian Virgin Mary each as manifestations of one supreme Goddess—and, likewise, the Celtic Cernunnos, the ancient Greek Dionysus and the Judeo-Christian Yahweh as aspects of a single, archetypal God.

A more polytheistic approach holds the various goddesses and gods to be separate and distinct entities in their own right. Pantheistic systems may conceive of deities not as literal personalities but as metaphorical archetypes or thoughtforms. While these conceptualizations of deity—duotheism, polytheism and pantheism—may seem radically different from each other, they need not be considered mutually exclusive: Some Wiccans may find it spiritually beneficial (or magically practical) to shift among one or another of these systems, depending upon time and circumstance.

Wiccan writers, Janet Farrar and Gavin Bone, have postulated that Wicca is becoming more polytheistic as it matures, tending to embrace a more traditionally pagan worldview.

### **Godhead**

Gardner stated that a being higher than the god and the goddess was recognized by the witches as the Prime Mover, but remains unknowable. Patricia Crowther has called this supreme godhead *Dryghten*, and Scott Cunningham called it "The One". This pantheistic or panentheistic view of God shares similarities with beliefs such as the Hindu Brahman.

### **Animism**

Wicca is essentially an immanent religion, and for some Wiccans, this idea also involves elements of animism. A key belief in Wicca is that the Goddess and the God (or the goddesses and gods) are able to manifest in personal form, most importantly through the bodies of Priestesses and Priests via the rituals of Drawing down the Moon or Drawing down the Sun.

### **Afterlife**

Beliefs in the afterlife vary among Wiccans, although reincarnation is a traditional Wiccan teaching. Raymond Buckland said that a soul reincarnates into the same species over many lives in order to learn and advance one's soul, but this belief is not universal. A popular saying amongst Wiccans is "once a witch, always a witch", indicating that Wiccans are the reincarnation of earlier witches.

Typically, Wiccans who believe in reincarnation believe that prior to this, the soul rests for a while in the Otherworld or Summerland, known in Gardner's writings as the

"ecstasy of the Goddess". Many Wiccans believe in the ability to contact the spirits of the dead who reside in the Otherworld through spirit mediums and Ouija boards, particularly on the sabbat of Samhain, though some disagree with this practice, such as High Priest Alex Sanders, who stated "They are dead; leave them in peace." This belief was likely influenced by Spiritualism, which was very popular at the time, and which Gardner had had experience with.

Despite some belief in it, Wicca does not place an emphasis on the afterlife, focusing instead on the current one; as the historian Ronald Hutton remarked, "the instinctual position of most pagan witches, therefore, seems to be that if one makes the most of the present life, in all respects, then the next life is more or less certainly going to benefit from the process, and so one may as well concentrate on the present".

## **Magic**

Wiccans believe in magic that can be manipulated through the form of witchcraft or sorcery. Some spell it as "magick", a term coined by occultist Aleister Crowley, though this spelling is more commonly associated with the religion of Thelema than Wicca. Wiccans cast spells during ritual practices inside a sacred circle, in an attempt to bring about real changes (which are further explained in the "Ritual practices" section). Common Wiccan spells include those used for healing, for love, for fertility, or to banish negative influences.

Many Wiccans agree with the definition of magic offered by ceremonial magicians. Aleister Crowley, for instance, declared that magic was "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will", and MacGregor Mathers stated that it was "the science of the control of the secret forces of nature". Wiccans believe magic to be a law of nature, as yet misunderstood by contemporary science. Other Wiccans do not claim to know how magic works, merely believing that it does because they have seen it work for them.

Many early Wiccans, such as Alex Sanders and Doreen Valiente, referred to their own magic as "white magic", which contrasted with "black magic", which they associated with evil and Satanism. Some modern Wiccans however have stopped using this terminology, arguing that the color black should not have any associations with evil.

The scholars of religion, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, claimed, in 1985, that Wicca had "reacted to secularization by a headlong plunge back into magic" and that it was a reactionary religion which would soon die out. This view was heavily criticized in 1999 by the historian Ronald Hutton, who claimed that the evidence displayed the very opposite, that "a large number [of Wiccans] were in jobs at the cutting edge [of scientific culture], such as computer technology."

## **Morality**

Wiccan morality is largely based on the Wiccan Rede, which states "an it harm none, do what ye will". This is usually interpreted as a declaration of the freedom to act, along with the necessity of taking responsibility for what follows from one's actions and minimizing harm to oneself and others. Another common element of Wiccan morality is the Law of Threefold Return which holds that whatever benevolent or malevolent actions a person performs will return to that person with triple force, similar to the eastern idea of karma.

Many Wiccans also seek to cultivate a set of eight virtues mentioned in Doreen Valiente's *Charge of the Goddess*, these being mirth, reverence, honor, humility, strength, beauty, power and compassion. In Valiente's poem, they are ordered in pairs of complementary opposites, reflecting a dualism that is common throughout Wiccan philosophy. Some lineaged Wiccans also observe a set of 161 Wiccan Laws, commonly called the *Craft Laws* or *Ardanes*. Valiente, one of Gardner's original high priestesses, argued that these rules were most likely invented by Gerald Gardner himself in mock-archaic language as the by-product of inner conflict within his Bricket Wood coven.

Although Gerald Gardner initially demonstrated an aversion to homosexuality, claiming that it brought down "the curse of the goddess", it is now generally accepted in all traditions of Wicca.

## **The Five Elements**

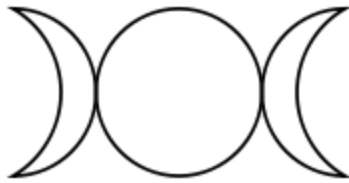
Wiccans believe in the five classical elements, although unlike in ancient Greece, they are seen as symbolic as opposed to literal; that is, they are representations of the phases of matter. These five elements are invoked during many magical rituals, notably when consecrating a magic circle. The five elements are: Air, Fire, Water and Earth, plus Aether (or Spirit), which unites the other four.

Various analogies have been devised to explain the concept of the five elements; for instance, the Wiccan Ann-Marie Gallagher used that of a tree. A tree is composed of Earth (with the soil and plant matter), Water (sap and moisture), Fire (through photosynthesis) and Air (the creation of oxygen from carbon dioxide). All these are united through Spirit.

Traditionally, each element has been associated with a cardinal point of the compass; Air with east, Fire with south, Water with west, Earth with north and the Spirit with centre. However, some Wiccans, such as Frederic Lamond, have claimed that the set cardinal points are only those applicable to the geography of southern England, where Wicca evolved, and that Wiccans should determine which directions best suit each element in their region, for instance, those living on the east coast of North America should invoke Water in the east and not the west because the colossal body of water, the Atlantic ocean, is to their east.

The five elements are symbolized by the five points of the pentagram, the most prominently used symbol of Wicca.

## Symbols



Triple Goddess symbol of waxing, full and waning moon

Various different symbols are used by Wiccans, similar to the use of the crucifix by Christians or the Star of David by Jews. The most notable of these is the pentagram, which has five points, each representing one of the five classical elements in Wicca (earth, air, fire, water and spirit) and also the idea that the human, with its five appendages, is a microcosm of the universe. Other symbols that are used include the triquetra and the triple Moon symbol of the Triple Goddess.

## Scripture

In Wicca there is no set sacred text such as the Christian Bible or Islamic Qur'an, but there are various texts that were contained in Gerald Gardner's *Book of Shadows*. Many of these texts he claimed to have at least partially rewritten, since the rituals of the group into which he was initiated were fragmentary. The most notable among these is the *Charge of the Goddess*, which contained material from Charles Godfrey Leland's *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899) and the works of 19th-20th century occultist Aleister Crowley. Other texts which are important to Wiccan beliefs and rituals include *Eko Eko Azarak* and the Wiccan laws.

A black handled athame and a white-handled boline, two ritual knives in Wicca with quite different purposes.

When practicing magic and casting spells, as well as when celebrating various festivals, Wiccans use a variety of rituals. In typical rites, the coven or solitary assembles inside a ritually cast and purified magic circle. Casting the circle may involve the invocation of the "Guardians" of the cardinal points, alongside their respective classical element; Air, Fire, Water and Earth. Once the circle is cast, a seasonal ritual may be performed, prayers to the God and Goddess are said, and spells are sometimes worked.

Common tools in the Wiccan practice include a special set of magical tools. These usually include a knife called an athame, a wand, a pentacle and a chalice, but other tools include a broomstick known as a besom, a cauldron, candles, incense and a curved blade known as a boline. An altar is usually present in the circle, on which ritual tools are placed and representations of the God and the Goddess may be displayed. Before entering

the circle, some traditions fast for the day, and/or ritually bathe. After a ritual has finished, the God, Goddess and Guardians are thanked and the circle is closed.

A sensationalized aspect of Wicca, particularly in Gardnerian Wicca, is the traditional practice of working in the nude, also known as *skyclad*. This practice seemingly derives from a line in *Aradia*, Charles Leland's supposed record of Italian witchcraft. Skyclad working is mostly the province of Initiatory Wiccans, who are outnumbered by the less strictly observant Eclectics. When they work clothed, Wiccans may wear robes with cords tied around the waist, "Renaissance-faire"-type clothing or normal street clothes. Each full moon, and in some cases a new moon, is marked with a ritual called an Esbat.

## **The Wheel of the Year**

Wiccans also follow the Wheel of the Year and celebrate its eight festivals known as Sabbats. Four of these, the cross-quarter days, are Greater Sabbats, coinciding with Celtic fire festivals, and these were initially the only four sabbats. The other four are known as Lesser Sabbats, and comprise of the solstices and the equinoxes, and were only adopted in 1958 by the Bricket Wood coven. The names of these holidays are often taken from Germanic pagan and Celtic polytheistic holidays. However, the festivals are not reconstructive in nature nor do they often resemble their historical counterparts, instead exhibiting a form of universalism. Ritual observations may display cultural influence from the holidays from which they take their name as well as influence from other unrelated cultures.

The eight sabbats, beginning with Samhain, which is thought to have been the Celtic new year:

- Samhain - Greater Sabbat of the dead
- Yule - Lesser Sabbat, the Winter solstice
- Imbolc - Greater Sabbat
- Ostara - Lesser Sabbat, the Spring equinox
- Beltane or May Eve - Greater Sabbat
- Midsummer, or Litha - Lesser Sabbat, the Summer solstice
- Lughnasadh, or Lammas - Greater Sabbat of the Harvest
- Mabon - Lesser Sabbat, the Autumn equinox

Gardner made use of the English names of these holidays: "The four great Sabbats are Candlemass [*sic*], May Eve, Lammas, and Halloween; the equinoxes and solstices are celebrated also."

## **Rites of passage**

### **Initiation**

When a person joins a coven and begins to study the craft, they go through an initiation ritual. In this way, all British Traditional Wiccans can trace their initiatory lineage back

to Gerald Gardner, and from him to the New Forest coven. Gardner himself claimed that there was a traditional length of "a year and a day" between when a person began studying the craft and when they were initiated, although he frequently broke this rule with initiates.

In British Traditional Wicca (BTW), initiation only accepts someone into the first degree. To proceed to the second degree, an initiate has to go through another ceremony, in which they name and describe the uses of the ritual tools and implements. It is also at this ceremony that they are given their craft name. By holding the rank of second degree, a BTW is therefore capable of initiating others into the craft, or founding their own semi-autonomous covens.

The third degree is the highest in BTW, and it involves the participation of the Great Rite, either actual or symbolically, as well as ritual flagellation. By holding this rank, an initiate is capable of forming covens that are entirely autonomous of their parent coven.

The Cochranian tradition, based upon the teachings of Robert Cochrane, does not have the three degrees of initiation, merely having the stages of novice and initiate.

Some solitary Wiccans also perform self-initiation rituals, to dedicate themselves to becoming a Wiccan. Several self-initiation rituals have been published, in books designed for solitary Wiccans such as in Scott Cunningham's book *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*.

### **Handfasting**

Handfasting is another celebration held by Wiccans, and is the commonly used term for their weddings. Some Wiccans observe the practice of a trial marriage for a year and a day, which some traditions hold should be contracted on Lammas (Lughnasadh), as this was the traditional time for trial, "Telltown marriages" among the Irish. A common marriage vow in Wicca is "for as long as love lasts" instead of the traditional Christian "till death do us part".

The first ever known Wiccan wedding ceremony took part in 1960 amongst the Bricket Wood coven, between Frederic Lamond and his first wife, Gillian.

### **Wiccaning**

Infants in Wiccan families may be involved in a ritual called a Wiccaning, which is analogous to a Christening. The purpose of this is to present the infant to the God and Goddess for protection. Despite this, in accordance with the importance put on free will in Wicca, the child is not necessarily expected or required to follow a Pagan path should they not wish to do so when they get older.

### **Book of Shadows**

In Wicca a private journal or core religious text known as a Book of Shadows is kept by practitioners, similar to a grimoire used by magicians. In lineaged groups, such as Gardnerian Wicca, the Book's contents are kept secret from anyone but the members of the lineage concerned (i.e., those initiating and initiated by a particular coven). However, several proposed versions of the Book have been published. Sections of these published versions, such as the "Wiccan Rede" and the "Charge of the Goddess", as well as other published writings about Wicca, have been adopted by non-initiates, or eclectic Wiccans. For many eclectics, they create their own personal books, whose contents are often only known by themselves.

## **Traditions**

See also: List of Wiccan organizations and Category:Wiccan traditions

A "tradition" in Wicca usually implies the transfer of a lineage by initiation. There are many such traditions and there are also many solitary or Eclectic Wiccans who do not align themselves with any particular lineage, some working alone, some joining in covens. There are also other forms of witchcraft which do not claim origins in Wicca. Traditions within the United States are well described in Margot Adler's *Drawing Down the Moon*, Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance*, and Chas S. Clifton's *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wicca and Paganism in America*.

The lack of consensus in establishing definitive categories in Wiccan communities has often resulted in confusion between lineaged Wicca and the emergence of Eclectic traditions. This can be seen in the common description of many Eclectic traditions as traditional/initiatory/lineaged as well. In the United States, where the confusion usually arises, Wiccans in the various lineages extending from Gardner may describe themselves as British Traditional Wiccans.

## **Covens and Solitary Wiccans**

Lineaged Wicca is organized into covens of initiated priests and priestesses. Covens are autonomous, and are generally headed by a High Priest and a High Priestess working in partnership, being a couple who have each been through their first, second and third degrees of initiation. Occasionally the leaders of a coven are only second-degree initiates, in which case they come under the rule of the parent coven. Initiation and training of new priesthood is most often performed within a coven environment, but this is not a necessity, and a few initiated Wiccans are unaffiliated with any coven.

A commonly quoted Wiccan tradition holds that the ideal number of members for a coven is thirteen, though this is not held as a hard-and-fast rule. Indeed, many U.S. covens are far smaller, though the membership may be augmented by unaffiliated Wiccans at "open" rituals. When covens grow beyond their ideal number of members, they often split (or "hive") into multiple covens, yet remain connected as a group. A grouping of multiple covens is known as a grove in many traditions.

Initiation into a coven is traditionally preceded by a waiting period of at least a year and a day. A course of study may be set during this period. In some covens a "dedication" ceremony may be performed during this period, some time before the initiation proper, allowing the person to attend certain rituals on a probationary basis. Some solitary Wiccans also choose to study for a year and a day before their self-dedication to the religion.

In contrast, Eclectic Wiccans are more often than not solitary practitioners. Some of these "solitaries" do, however, attend gatherings and other community events, but reserve their spiritual practices (Sabbats, Esbats, spell-casting, worship, magical work, etc.) for when they are alone. Eclectic Wiccans now significantly outnumber lineaged Wiccans, and their beliefs and practices tend to be much more varied.

## History

The origins of Wicca are much debated. Gerald Gardner brought the religion to public attention in the early 1950s. He claimed that, after returning to England on his retirement from a career spent in Asia, he encountered a coven of witches located in the New Forest in southern England, (the "New Forest coven") and was initiated into it. In line with the popular Witch-cult hypothesis, he claimed that the religion practiced by the coven was a survival of a pagan religion of pre-historic Europe, known as Witchcraft to its adherents. Subsequently fearing that the religion would die out, he published details of its beliefs and practices in a series of books: his novel *High Magic's Aid* (1949) and his non-fiction works *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959). These books helped to attract many new initiates to a coven that he formed, the London-based Bricket Wood coven.

Gardner reported that the rites of the New Forest coven were fragmentary, and that he substantially rewrote them. Many of the rituals and precepts that he promoted can be shown to have come from the writings of earlier occultists (such as Aleister Crowley) and other writers (including Rudyard Kipling and Sir James Frazer). The remaining original material is not cohesive, and mostly takes the form of substitutions or expansions within unoriginal material. Roger Dearnaley describes Gardner's texts as a "patchwork".

The veracity of Gardner's statements cannot be independently proven, however, and it is possible that Wiccan theology began to be compiled no earlier than the 1920s. Even the very existence of the New Forest coven has been called into question. It has been posited by authors such as Aidan Kelly and Francis X. King that Gardner invented the witch rituals in their entirety, incorporating elements from the writings of Dr. Margaret Murray, incantations from *Aradia* and practices deriving from ceremonial magic. Some of Gardner's historical claims are consistent with ideas that were current in the earlier part of the 20th century but are in conflict with later scholarship. The idea of a supreme Mother Goddess, for example, was common in Victorian and Edwardian literature: the concept of a Horned God—especially related to the gods Pan or Faunus—was less common, but still significant. Both of these ideas were widely accepted in academic literature and the popular press at the time.

Some writers, such as Isaac Bonewits, have been unwilling to believe either that Gardner fabricated his religion out of nothing or that it represented a genuine survival of a historical pagan cult. They have suggested instead that it was constructed at some point in the 20th century prior to Gardner's initiation, perhaps by the New Forest coveners. Bonewits writes:

“ *Somewhere between 1920 and 1925 in England some folklorists appear to have gotten together with some Golden Dawn Rosicrucians and a few supposed Fam-Trads to produce the first modern covens in England; grabbing eclectically from any source they could find in order to try and reconstruct the shards of their pagan past.* ”

Although some have described Wicca as a twentieth century phenomenon—"the only religion that England has ever given the world," many Wiccans themselves disagree, claiming it stems from very ancient practices." There is, however, no archaeological evidence at this time to support these claims.

## **Later developments**

Gardnerian Wicca was an initiatory mystery religion, admission to which was limited to those who were initiated into a pre-existing coven. Wicca was introduced to North America by Raymond Buckland, an expatriate Briton who visited Gardner's Isle of Man coven to gain initiation. Interest in the USA spread quickly, and while many were initiated, many more non-initiates compiled their own rituals based on published sources or their own fancy.

In the United Kingdom, initiates of Gardner had begun to perform their own initiations, and a number of lines of Gardnerian descent began to arise. From one of these (although it was originally claimed to derive from a traditional, non-Gardnerian source) came the line known as Alexandrian Wicca. Increasing popularity on both sides of the Atlantic, and in other countries, along with the increasing availability of published material, meant that many people started to practice a form of Wicca without being part of a coven or having participated in an initiation. In response to this, traditionally initiated Wiccans in North America began to describe their version as British Traditional Wicca.

Another significant development was the creation by feminists in the late sixties and seventies of an eclectic movement known as Dianic Wicca, or feminist Dianic Witchcraft. Dianic Wicca has no connection of lineage to traditional Wicca, and creatively interprets published materials on Wicca as a basis for their ritual structure. This specifically feminist, Goddess-oriented faith had no interest in the Horned God, and discarded Gardnerian-style hierarchy and lineage as irrelevant. Rituals were created for self-initiation to allow people to identify with and join the religion without first contacting an existing coven. This contrasts with the Gardnerian belief that only a witch of opposite gender can initiate another witch.

## Demographics

Isaac Bonewits points out some of the practical problems in establishing the numbers of any neopagan group. Nevertheless some estimates have been attempted. The 2001 American Religious Identification Survey estimated that at least 134,000 adults identified themselves as Wiccans in the United States, compared to 8,000 in 1990. In the UK, census figures do not allow an accurate breakdown of traditions within the Pagan heading, as a campaign by the Pagan Federation before the 2001 Census encouraged Wiccans, Heathens, Druids and others all to use the same write-in term 'Pagan' in order to maximize the numbers reported. For the first time, respondents were able to write in an affiliation not covered by the checklist of common religions, and a total of 42,262 people from England, Scotland and Wales declared themselves to be Pagans by this method. These figures were not immediately analyzed by the Office of National Statistics, but were released after an application by the Pagan Federation of Scotland. Adherents.com, an independent website which specializes in collecting estimates of world religions, cites over 30 sources with estimates of numbers of Wiccans (principally from the USA and UK.). Their median estimate for Wiccan numbers is 800,000 worldwide.

## Etymology

The spelling *Wica* first appears in the writings of Gerald Gardner (*Witchcraft Today*, 1954, and *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, 1959). He used the word as a mass noun referring to the adherents of his tradition of witchcraft ('the Wica'), rather than the religion itself. He referred to the religion as *witchcraft*, never *Wica*. The word seems to be based on the Old English word *wicca* (pronounced [ˈwɪkə]); similarly, *wicca* and its feminine form *wice* are the predecessors of the modern English *witch*.

Gardner himself claimed he learned the term from existing members of the group who initiated him into witchcraft in 1939: "I realized I had stumbled on something interesting; but I was half-initiated before the word *Wica* which they used hit me like a thunderbolt, and I knew where I was, and that the Old Religion still existed."

The spelling *Wicca* was not used by Gardner and the term *Wiccan* (both as an adjective and a noun) was not used until much later, but it is now the prevalent term to refer to followers of Wicca.

## Wicca and paganism

Wicca is a neopagan religion with distinctive ritual forms, seasonal observances and religious, magical, and ethical precepts. Wiccans practice a form of witchcraft, but not all witches are Wiccans—other forms of witchcraft, folk magic and sorcery exist within many cultures, with widely varying practices.

Most Wiccans call themselves Pagans, though the umbrella term *Paganism* encompasses many faiths that have nothing to do with Wicca or witchcraft. Wicca is commonly

described as a Neopagan faith, though Isaac Bonewits, the influential Neo-druid, has claimed that early Wicca (at a time when it was still called "Witchcraft") was in fact a Mesopagan path. Since there is no centralized organization in Wicca, and no single orthodoxy, the beliefs and practices of Wiccans can vary substantially, both among individuals and among traditions. Typically, the main religious principles, ethics, and ritual structures are shared, since they are key elements of traditional teachings and published works on the subject.

As practiced by initiates in the lineage of Gerald Gardner, Wicca is a variety of witchcraft founded on religious and magical concepts. As such it is distinguished not only by its beliefs, but by its practice of magic, its ethical philosophy, initiatory system, organizational structure and secrecy. Some of these beliefs and practices have also been adopted by others outside of this lineage, often termed Eclectic Wiccans, who generally discard the institutions of initiation, secrecy and hierarchy, and have more widely varying beliefs. Some Eclectic Wiccans neither perform magic nor identify as witches. Within traditional forms of Wicca there are three degrees of initiation. First degree is required to gain membership of a coven; those who aspire to teach may eventually undergo second and third degree initiations, conferring the title of "High Priest" or "High Priestess" and allowing them to establish new covens. At initiation, some Wiccans adopt a craft name to symbolize their spiritual "rebirth", to act as a magical alter-ego, or simply to provide anonymity when appearing as a witch in public (see *Acceptance of Wiccans* below).

## Acceptance of Wiccans

The use of the inverted pentagram by the Church of Satan has led to the misidentification of Wiccans as Satanists.

Main article: Religious discrimination against Neopagans

In the United States, a number of legal decisions have improved and validated the status of Wiccans, especially *Dettmer v. Landon* in 1985. However, there is still hostility from some politicians and Christian organisations.

According to the history of Wicca given by Gerald Gardner, Wicca is a survival of the European witch-cult that was persecuted during the witch trials (sometimes called the *Burning Times*). Modern scholarly investigations have revealed, however, that these trials were substantially fewer than claimed by Gardner, and seldom at the behest of religious authorities. Theories of an organized pan-European witch-cult, as well as mass trials thereof, have been largely discredited, but it is still common for Wiccans to feel solidarity with the victims of the witch trials.

There have been Christian assertions made that Wicca is a form of Satanism, despite important differences between these religions, such as the lack of a Satan-like figure in Wiccan theology. Due to negative connotations associated with witchcraft, many Wiccans continue the traditional practice of secrecy, concealing their faith for fear of persecution. Revealing oneself as Wiccan to family, friends or colleagues is often termed "coming out of the broom-closet".

Some people have accused Wicca of being anti-Christian, a claim disputed by Wiccans such as Doreen Valiente, who stated that whilst she knew many Wiccans who admired Jesus, "witches have little respect for the doctrines of the churches, which they regard as a lot of man-made dogma".

Some have asserted that Wicca is simply an off-shoot of the New Age movement, a claim which is fiercely denied by Wiccans and also by historians such as Ronald Hutton, who noted that Wicca not only predates the New Age movement but also differs in its general world view.