

There is no singular definition of modern Paganism (Neo-Paganism). It is an umbrella term referring to a diverse and ever-evolving tapestry of beliefs. Some Pagan paths are organised and well-established; others are unique and personal.

Words such as 'Pagan', 'Witch' and 'Heathen' have been reclaimed from any negative taint history may have given them. All Pagan paths are positive and life-affirming, despite the vast and diverse population the word Pagan or Witch covers. These explanations are not conclusive but provide a general sense of the diversity of Pagan beliefs:

Wicca

A modern Pagan spiritual path founded in Britain in the early 20th century, now spread worldwide. Wicca has a distinct set of rituals, customs and beliefs that differentiates it from other forms of Paganism. It has itself influenced a lot of other paths and is possibly the biggest and most publicly visible kind of Paganism in the western world. Wicca covers a vast spectrum, from the strictly traditional to free-form eclectic variants, with a mutually shared core structure of belief and practice used at individual or coven discretion. These include a God and Goddess, Casting Circles, Drawing Down the Moon, Sabbats, Esbats, Skyclad, and Law of Three-Fold Return.

Traditional Wicca - refers to Gardnerian, Alexandrian or another form of Wicca, usually predating the 1970s. Traditional Wiccans are often oath-bound, requiring formal training and initiation to participate in a coven.

Eclectic Wicca - uses the core structure of Traditional Wicca and incorporates non-Wiccan components. The eclectic elements might come from other Pagan paths and beyond. A lot of Eclectic paths, both Wiccan and Pagan, have their origins in the 1970s, a time when there growing interest in alternative beliefs and resultant cross-pollination between Paganism, the New Age movement and Eastern ideas.

Reclaiming Tradition

One of the most famous traditions to come out of North America. Founded by Starhawk in the 1970's, this is a very organic Pagan path which, in its early days, overlapped with the Women's Spirituality and Goddess movements. Like many eclectic Pagan traditions it uses the core structure of Wicca as a base for an ever-evolving, progressive tradition.

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For more information, please contact PAN Inc.



**Pagan Awareness Network Inc.
Australia**

PO Box 1062, North Sydney, NSW 2059

w: www.paganawareness.net.au

e: info@paganawareness.net.au

ABN: 23 055 701 170 491

PAN Inc.

Pagan Paths: An Overview

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Witches & Witchcraft

Witchcraft is a broad and complex term. Generally, a modern Witch is a person who uses the craft of the witch—simple rituals, folk magic, herbal knowledge—for healing, blessing and personal growth. Practitioners might refer to themselves as Kitchen Witches (food magick) or Hedge Witches (garden magick). Witches might also be Wiccans. There have been many different ‘witchcrafts’ throughout history and throughout the modern world still. No one has exclusive claim on the word. Historically, workers of witchcraft didn’t call themselves ‘witches’. Usually such non-English words were translated universally as ‘witch’ despite differing beliefs, cultural backgrounds and geographic distance between practitioners.

Druids & Druidry

Druidry is another complex term with a variety of meanings that could refer to historical Druids of ancient Celtic Europe or a variety of contemporary spiritual paths. Historically, Druids functioned as priests, judges and teachers. During the 18th century the notion of Druidry became heavily romanticised and thusly reinvented. This revival influenced modern Pagan Druidry. Druidry is not exclusively ‘Celtic’, nor is it an ongoing ancient practice.

What is a ‘Druid’?

- Some Druid paths continue what the 18th-century Druid revival began, however such groups are not strictly Pagan.
- Some Druid paths are eclectic and syncretic and use a variety of elements—particularly Shamanism—to create a new body of rituals and lore. The focus is on personal experience and progressiveness.
- A third example, overlapping with Celtic Reconstructionism (see ‘Reconstructionism’), uses contemporary academic thought to gain insights into practicing a historically-conscious kind of modern Druidry.

There are a wide variety of modern Druidic groups all with their own aims and intentions. Two well-known organisations are the North American ADF (Ár nDraíocht Féin), founded in the 1970s by Isaac Bonewits, and the British OBOD, founded in the early 20th century by Ross Nicholls. There is speculation of a cross-pollination of ideas between Nicholls and Gerald Gardner. While Nicholl’s Druidry did not really take off until after Gardner’s Wicca, there is an overlap between the two paths today.

Celtic Paths

Celtic, in a modern sense, refers to the cultures of Scotland, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, Wales, Ireland and Brittany (north coast of France) and can also refer to the historical Celtic Europeans.

Not all Celtic Pagans are Druids. Some paths are pan-Celtic and eclectic, influenced by Arthuriana, Wicca, Druidry and the New Age. Others are Reconstructionist, strongly identify with modern Celtic culture, and are polytheistic.

Northern European (‘Heathenry’)

This covers a wide variety of cultural groups: Scandinavia, Germany, the Netherlands, the Baltic regions, and England—indeed anywhere where a Germanic tongue (such as English) is spoken. The most well-known of the modern Northern paths is Ásatrú (meaning essentially, ‘true to the Aesir’), however there are many more ever-evolving paths. Followers of such paths generally identify as ‘Heathen’ as it is a Germanic word. These are usually strongly polytheistic and devoted to the Aesir and/or Vanir. Honour, truthfulness and hospitality are considered as important character traits. Runes also play an important cultural role. Despite the stereotypical portrayal of ‘macho’ Vikings, the male and female are equally important in Northern paths.

Reconstructionism

Reconstructionism uses modern scholarship across a wide variety of subjects (archaeology, philology, anthropology, and history) in an attempt to understand as much as possible about a particular culture and their historical Pagan beliefs. These paths refer to themselves as Reconstructionist, Revivalist or Traditionalist—they are not always the same. Generally they adhere to religious/spiritual beliefs, practices, and world-views that existed within a specific culture and aim to be modern-day counterparts to the older beliefs. Reconstructed religions are neither quaint curiosities nor historical re-enactments but dynamic, progressive and as adaptable to the modern world. Also, there is often a strong and healthy sense of cultural identity and equal importance placed on male and female.

Some examples of Reconstructionist religions are:

- Religio Romana: Roman Paganism.
- Hellenismos: Ancient Greece
- Celtic Reconstructionism; Gaelic Traditionalism
- Ásatrú: Norse/Germanic
- Theodisc Geleafa: Anglo-Saxon
- Slavic, Baltic, Egyptian (Kemetic) and other forms.

Goddess Traditions

A general term used to refer to any modern path where there is an emphasis on Goddesses and female divinity. There is often an overlap between Paganism and Women’s Spirituality; which means that the practitioners of Goddess traditions are not always exclusively Pagan. A well-known Goddess path is Dianic, through there are many

variations and approaches. The notion of a Goddess can be considered from an animistic, duotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, henotheistic, or panentheistic perspective.

God Traditions

Less common, but happening concurrently with Goddess Traditions, are paths where there is a strong reverence for Gods and masculine divinity. This is not an oppressive movement but a parallel approach to that of the Goddess, a rediscovering of positive male energies and practices for the benefit of all Pagans. Like the Goddess traditions, Pagan Gods can be considered from an animistic, duotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, henotheistic, or panentheistic perspective.

GLBT Paganism

The inclusive and non-discriminatory nature of Paganism results in a representation of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Pagans right across the spectrum. There are many Pagan groups dedicated to address the needs of GLBT Pagans. The Radical Faeries is a well-known men’s group from North America. Dianic paths are very popular amongst women.

Shamanism

Shamanistic activities have existed throughout the world since prehistoric times. Shamanism referred originally to the healing and religious practices of Siberia. Today it refers to a set of practices found all over the world. Shamans heal, communicate with the spirit realms, control the weather, interpret dreams, perform divinations and engage in out-of-body travel. Western Shamanism is often influenced by Michael Harner’s ‘core shamanism’, however it relies on personal experience as much as written sources.

Ceremonial Magic

Ceremonial Magic has a very long history and a complex set of theories and practices. Some well-known historical figures are Dion Fortune, Aleister Crowley and Eliphas Lévi. Its body of work is inspired largely by Hermeticism (the study and practice of occult philosophy and magic) and includes the Golden Dawn, Goetic magick, Enochian Magic, Tarot, Astrology, Qabalah (which relates to Jewish mysticism) and Thelemic ritual. Ceremonial magical societies are found throughout the world and often provide training and initiation.

Although Ceremonial Magic is not Pagan, it heavily influenced the early development of 20th-century Paganism, primarily Wicca and some Druidic traditions. Many modern Pagans study Ceremonial Magic in order to enrich their understanding and experience.