

What is Paganism?

The term Pagan is derived from the Latin term 'paganus', which is usually translated to mean 'country-dweller'. Pagans were those who worshipped the gods of the 'pagus' – the locality. Modern Paganism, in keeping with this definition, is a religious movement very much tied to ideas of place and Nature. As such, over the past few decades, specific forms of Paganism have been arising in different countries around the world as people have sought, (sometimes as a reaction against Christianity), to retrieve what they perceive to be a more 'authentic' religious tradition, one closely tied with the culture and mythology of their nation. In the UK, the most popular ancient traditions drawn upon are those of the Celts and of the Norse and Anglo-Saxons.

What is Druidry?

It is generally accepted that the Druids were the priestly class of Celtic society that flourished in Britain before the arrival of the Romans. The inspiration for Druidry is therefore drawn from the traditions and mythology of the Celts. A revival of Druidry began in the 18th c when the idea that the Druids were responsible for building such monuments as Stonehenge and Avebury became popular. This revival took the form of an interest in studying ancient Celtic (usually Welsh) literature and culture and was not necessarily religious in nature. Indeed, today there are both secular and Christian Druids. The majority of contemporary Druids, however, are Pagan. They see their religion as the native, pre-Christian spirituality of Britain.

How is Druidry Organised?

There is no formal organisation within Druidry and no overarching body to which all Druids belong. Rather there are a number of national and international Druid orders to which individual Druids can choose to affiliate. *The Druid Directory*, published by the British Druid Order, states that there are about 2 dozen such orders in the UK to which about 8000 initiated Druids belong. This does not include the countless number of Druids or Celtic Pagans who do not join an established group.

Many Druid orders follow three levels of initiation; those of Bard, Ovate and Druid. At each level different aspects of the Druidic tradition are taught. Druidic training begins with the stage of the Bard in which creative skills such as poetry, storytelling, music and art, are developed. The Ovate learns the skills of divination, prophecy and healing. The Druid combines these skills to become a priest/ess and a teacher. A Druid may lead a grove (a small gathering for ritual practice).

What do Druids Believe?

Druidry, like most other traditions within Paganism, is a polytheistic religion that sees Nature as divine. The deities it works with are those of the Celtic tradition, such as the Welsh and Irish pantheons. Many Druids believe in the transmigration

of souls, an idea similar to the Eastern concept of reincarnation. This is based on the idea that there are three circles of existence; life begins in the realm of Annwn; once the spirit takes physical form it enters the realm of Abred, the realm of life as we know it. The spirit may then return to Annwn to be reborn, or continue to the realm of Gwynvid, the dwelling place of the enlightened ones. Ceugant is the realm of the great spirit, the one source of all being, to which all will eventually return.

What do Druids Practice?

The central teaching of Druidry is the 'quest for inspiration' (Awen). Awen is a Welsh word meaning 'flowing spirit', and it is often described as a force of divine poetic inspiration. Much of Druid ritual practice is concerned with connecting with this force, creating a relationship with the divine. During ritual, the force can be invoked through the recitation of the word Awen (pronounced Ah-oo-en) as a mantra. This force can then be directed towards such practices as healing, divination, or creative performance in the form of music and poetry.

Many Druids engage in some solitary practice on a day-to-day basis. This may involve a ritual to greet the sun, creating an altar to chosen deities, composing a piece of creative work, or meditation. As with other Pagan traditions, Druids will hold rituals with fellow practitioners. The life cycle is marked in rites of passage and the seasonal cycle is marked with the 8 festivals of the Year Wheel (see Paganism 1: Wicca). Some Druid groups hold their seasonal celebrations at sacred sites around the UK and are well known for their gatherings at Stonehenge (and occasional clashes with the authorities over right of access). At these open rituals, many Druids will dress in long ceremonial robes - frequently white in colour. Rituals may also be performed for such specific purposes as healing, a request for inspiration or divination. The Druid form of divination is that of the Ogham (the Celtic tree alphabet).

Like Wiccans, Druids have no fixed place of worship, preferring to hold rituals outside. A sacred space is created in the form of a circle and the elements of Nature as well as the deities are invoked for protection and blessing. A central act of most Druid rituals is the *eisteddfod*, a sharing of creativity in the form of poetry and song, and rituals, such as the *gorseddau*, are held specifically for this purpose.

What is Heathenry?

Heathenry is a branch of Paganism which seeks to revive the pre-Christian traditions of Northern Europe. It draws upon Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythology as recorded in such texts as the 13th century Icelandic *Eddas*. Heathenry is sometimes known as Odinism, Asatru and, less commonly, Vanatru, depending on which group of deities are worshipped.

How is Heathenry Organised?

As with other traditions of Paganism, there is no formal organisation within Heathenry. Individual practitioners may choose to affiliate to a number of national or international groups. There are about twenty such established groups in the UK. Some groups require the prospective member to make the Pledge of Faith in which allegiance to the tradition is sworn upon an oath-ring. This is kept on the altar, and when sworn upon the Gods act as witness.

A group of about 10 to 12 practitioners may be referred to as a 'hearth' or 'kindred'. These groups may be egalitarian or be led by a gothi (a male or female priest). However there is no centrally recognised priesthood within Heathenry. Hearths meet to perform rituals, which may take place outside, or in specially created temples, usually within a home, known as hofs.

What do Followers of Heathenry Believe?

Followers of Heathenry draw on the mythology of Scandinavia and Germany. This tradition is centred around two groups of deities – the Aesir and the Vanir. The Aesir are sky Gods and include Odin (often seen as the High God), his wife Frigga and son Balder. The Vanir are earth Gods, Gods of agriculture and fertility, and include Frey and Freya. Heathens may choose to work with one deity, one group or all of these deities. In addition, Heathens recognise other spiritual beings ('wights'), such as housewights and landwights. Ancestors (whether literal or inspirational) also have a central place within Heathenry.

The mythology of Heathenry provides a complex cosmology. It is believed that human life takes place on Middle Earth, which is just one of the 9 worlds that make up Yggdrasil - the Tree of Life. Man has an eternal soul/spirit which contains a spark of the divine. On death it is reunited with the ancestors in the halls of the Gods. Man's destiny is decided in the Web of Wyrd.

What do Followers of Heathenry Practice?

As with other Pagan traditions, followers of Heathenry perform rituals to mark rites of passage, to mark the turning of the seasons and for specific purposes, such as healing, divination and the performance of magic. Heathens use the Runes as a means of divination. The Runes can also be combined to create 'sigils' and as such are the primary method in the performance of magic. However, the practice of magic is not central to Heathenry, as it is in other Pagan religions such as Wicca.

The 'Blot' (a sacrifice to the gods) can be performed by itself or as part of a larger ritual, such as during a seasonal festival. In the past this may have involved animal sacrifice, today it generally involves a libation of mead followed by a feast. The 'Symbel' is a drinking ceremony in which a vessel

of mead is blessed and shared amongst all present in a toast to the gods and wights.

Heathens do not follow the 8 festivals of the Year Wheel as Wiccans and some Druids do. The festivals most commonly marked by Heathens are Winter Nights (in October or November), Yule (a 12 day festival starting on the Winter Solstice) and a festival for the Goddess Eostre in the spring. Some Heathens also celebrate Einherjar (Hero's Day) on 11th November to commemorate the dead.

Heathens state that the tradition is a way of life as much as a religious practice. Many try to adhere to what are known as the Nine Noble Virtues: Courage, Truth, Honour, Fidelity, Discipline, Hospitality, Industriousness, Self-reliance and Perseverance. Family values are strongly emphasised.

Controversies

In the past, Heathenry has been male-oriented, with females occupying only a secondary place, due to an emphasis on Odin as the High God. This orientation is changing now as more women are becoming involved. Also, due to the emphasis on family values, some members take a negative view toward homosexuality.

Some are attracted to Heathenry in the belief that this is the 'original' religion of their ethnic group. Some groups thus aim to promote the Tradition as the 'national faith' of a people. It has been claimed that the destiny of the Odinist religion is to eclipse Christianity as the religion of the state, nation and people. This can be tied to political ideology - during the early 20th century, Hitler and The National Socialist Party appropriated some ideas and symbols from Heathenry to support Aryan racism, and modern neo-Nazis have continued in this vein. The majority of Heathens reject such ideas, however.

Further information

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance

http://www.religioustolerance.org/neo_paga.htm

The Religious Movements Homepage

<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/drud.html>

The BBC

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/subdivisions/heathen.shtml>

Carr-Gomm, Philip (ed.) (1996) *The Druid Renaissance*, London: Thorsons.

Crowley, Vivianne (1994) *Phoenix from the Flame: Pagan Spirituality in the Western World*, London: Aquarian

Harvey, Graham and Charlotte Hardman (eds.) (1995) *Paganism Today*, London: Thorsons.

Pennick, Nigel (1989) *Practical Magic in the Northern Tradition*, London: Aquarian Press.

Shallcrass, Philip and Emma Restall Orr (2001) *A Druid Directory*: British Druid Order.

Worthington, Christine (1999) *Druids: A Beginners Guide*, London: Headway.

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Website: <http://www.paganfed.org>

The Druid Network, PO Box 3533, Whichford, Shipston on Stour, Warwickshire, CV36 5YB

Website: <http://druidnetwork.org>

The British Druid Order, PO Box 635, Halifax, HX2 6WX

Website: <http://www.druidorder.demon.co.uk>

The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, PO Box 1333, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 3ZG

Website: <http://www.druidry.com>

UK Heathenry

Website: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ukheathenry>

Midgard's Web, PO Box 16071, London, SE16 3EZ

Website: <http://www.midgardsworld.f2s.com>

Odinshof, BCM Tercei, London, WC1N 3XX

Website: <http://www.gippeswic.demon.co.uk/odinshof.html>

The Odinist Fellowship, BM Edda, London, WC1N 3XX

Odinic Rite, BM Runic, London, WC1N 3XX

Website: <http://www.odinic-rite.org/>

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- * by putting you in touch with ex-members or families who have personal experience of a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction

(London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information.

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