

# Wicca & Paganism

## Basic Facts

For our purposes, “Paganism” refers to the newer, contemporary forms of Paganism, sometimes called “NeoPaganism.” “Pagan” can also refer to traditional religions dating back thousands of years (for example, Native American religions; polytheistic religions of South America and Asia). Contemporary Paganism draws some of its beliefs from these traditional religions, but is usually considered a separate religion.

### Founded

Wicca and modern Paganism arose during the late 19th and early 20th centuries out of a renewed interest in the religions of pre-Christian Europe.

### Key Figures

**Gerald Gardner (1884 - 1964):** A British author who published *Witchcraft Today* in 1954. This book is credited with popularizing Wicca. Gardner claimed to have been initiated into a coven of witches in 1939 and led the creation and spread of new Wiccan covens.

**Starhawk (Miriam Simos, 1951 - ):** Starhawk is a popular writer and theorist of Paganism and Wicca. She is one of the best known feminist Pagans.

### Geography

Primarily Europe and North America. Traditional pagan or animist religions elsewhere in the world are generally regard as a separate religions.

### Adherents

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of Pagans and Wiccans, since the religions are often practiced in secret, lack central organization, and were not studied by academic researchers until recently. Estimates suggest perhaps 1 million Pagans and Wiccans worldwide, with perhaps 300,000 in the United States. The British Census counted 42,000 self-identified “Pagans,” out of a population of 59 million.

## Basic Beliefs

### Gods and Goddesses

Paganism and Wicca reject the “patriarchal” view of God seen in Christianity. While different traditions differ in the details, Paganism and Wicca tend to believe in both a male God and female Goddess, who may appear in forms from ancient mythology (e.g. Isis, Diana, Odin). Many Pagans see these deities as primarily symbolic, representing an aspect of nature rather than being an actual living deity. Some forms of Paganism and Wicca lean towards *pantheism*, the belief that everything is divine. Additionally, many feminist forms of Paganism and Wicca focus exclusively on the goddess aspect of divinity.

### Nature and fertility

Paganism and Wicca are nature-centered religions, sometimes called “Earth-centered.” They emphasize the connection between human beings and the earth, celebrating the changes between seasons as major religious events. Many of their rituals are based around fertility symbolism, and sex is sometimes involved in expressions of religious belief.

### Ritual and Magic(k)

Paganism and Wicca are heavily ritualistic, often centering around natural annual events like solstices. Many Wiccans practice “magick,” the idea that symbolic actions (“spells”) can affect the material and spiritual world, as well as a variation on *karma* called the “Rule of Three” - whatever energy you send out into the world will be returned to you three-fold. Wiccans stress that they practice “white magick,” purely for good outcomes. They are often offended by suggestions that “magick” is harmful or evil.