



SOMERSET PAGANS



An Introduction to Paganism

This booklet contains some of the basic facts about the Pagan religion. They are by no means comprehensive but explain in general terms what it means to be a Pagan, the Festivals commonly celebrated and includes some suggested titles for further reading.

What is Paganism?

At its most basic Paganism is an Earth based religion, which has its roots in most, if not all, of the pre-Christian religions of the world and branches out from there to embrace, amongst others modern day Druidry, Wicca, Traditional Witchcraft, Shamanism and Heathenry. There are no official statistics about the number of Pagans in the UK since the last Census did not include Paganism as a religious category.

Although essentially Pagans don't 'worship' anything it is generally acknowledged that the primary deity is feminine, the Earth Mother, the Mother Goddess, with her consort the God, and can embrace numerous other Goddesses and Gods. The Goddess is revered and honoured, but She does not depend on worship to exist as she is regarded as being present in all things. Pagans also respect all nature and many revere the Earth as a living being.

Many Pagans hold re-incarnation as a fundamental belief and view life as being a continuous cycle of birth, death and re-birth, with the same soul being re-incarnated many times over as part of its journey to supreme enlightenment. And, whilst like anyone else they are deeply saddened at the loss of a friend or loved one, death is never seen as an ending, rather a new beginning. Pagan marriages take the form of a Handfasting where a couple are symbolically and spiritually bound together in a ceremony conducted by a Pagan Priestess and Priest. It is worth noting that priests and priestesses are not formally addressed as such.

Paganism has no written rules, no holy books; it is free-flowing and innovative with no dogma. The emphasis is on the individual and the personal development of that individual and Pagans may choose to follow their Path independently, or one of the more structured branches such as Druidry or Wicca, both of which are considered in a little more detail here.

Wicca

Pagans in general, but witches in particular have and still do suffer from intolerance and persecution by those who do not understand their faith. Look no further than the depiction of witches at Halowe'en for evidence of this. Traditional Witchcraft in one form or another has existed since pre-Christian times and is considered by many to be the indigenous religion of the British Isles. This is also known as Hereditary Witchcraft and is more likely to be followed by whole families for whom it is quite literally a way of life.

Following the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951 modern day Wicca emerged in the 1950s, the brainchild of Gerald Gardner and developed by his High Priestess Doreen Valiente. This highly ritualised form of witchcraft is usually coven based and in common with most other Pagan paths celebrates eight Festivals annually which track the progress of the seasons. The moon is also central to Wiccan practises. As she waxes and wanes each month she is seen to be symbolising the passage of life from birth to death to re-birth.

Stone circles, such as Avebury and Stonehenge are sacred to most Pagan paths, but Pagans do not generally have buildings in which they conduct their ceremonies. 'Sacred space' therefore has to be constructed. This space will be circular and visionary rather than physical. It is 'cast' in a variety of ways but most commonly by the use of a ceremonial knife. The circle can exist anywhere, whether it be indoors or out and should be treated with due reverence, taking care not to step into or walk across it. Likewise ceremonial tools should be treated with reverence and not handled without permission.

A circle is symbolically seen as never ending and therefore forms part of the most commonly used symbol of Wicca and indeed Paganism in general, the sacred five point star or Pentagram, which

is enclosed in a circle. The five points represent the five elements that make up life – Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Spirit – and the attributes of which are used in ritual practises.

Druidism

Druidry holds strong links with ancient Celtic traditions and is in essence a divine worship of nature. As with Paganism in general, Druidry is not fixed with rules and dogma, and there is no one sacred text (as with religions such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam). Instead Druidism offers believers a spiritual path and guidance. Druids may either be monotheistic (belief in one God/Goddess) or polytheistic (belief in many Gods/Goddesses).

There are some common beliefs amongst Druids that help to define their faith, and central to this is the belief that humans are spiritual beings. Druids worship nature and the spiritual nourishment that can be drawn from the natural world. However Druids also believe that an alternate world exists, the 'Otherworld', and people can visit the 'Otherworld' through alternate states of consciousness (dreams, meditation, etc) and also in death. Many Druids share the view that the Celts believed that to be born in this world, we have to die in the Otherworld, and that when we die here, we are born into the Otherworld. For this reason, Druid funerals try to focus on the idea that the soul is experiencing a time of birth.

Some Druids may also believe in reincarnation. Most Druids believe that the soul undergoes a process of successive reincarnations – either always in human form, or in a variety of forms that might include trees and rocks as well as animals.

According to the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, there are three goals in Druidry: wisdom, creativity and love. A common symbol in Druidry is the Awen, which comprises three lines / \ . These have many interpretations, which include: earth, sea and air;

body, mind and spirit; or love, wisdom and truth.

The Pagan Calendar

In common with most forms of Paganism, both Wiccans and Druids recognise eight seasonal festivals per year. Of these, four are solar and four are based on the ancient Celtic agricultural calendar. The dates of the solar festivals vary slightly from year to year due to the positioning of the planets. The transition from season to season is known as the Wheel of the Year and some notes explaining this follow next. Different traditions will have different names for the festivals but they are celebrated on the dates given. In addition, most forms of witchcraft will celebrate the moon when she is Full and also Dark Moon, which is the night before she appears again as a New Moon.

The Wheel of the Year

As Pagans, we acknowledge the cycle of life, with the continuous progress from birth, to death, to re-birth, flowing constantly, like an ever-turning wheel. This cycle is evident all around us, not only in our own lives, but also in the phases of the moon each month, when she waxes and wanes and on an annual basis in the progress of the sun through the skies, influencing our seasons and hence the whole of nature. As Pagans we also celebrate the stages of the lives of our Goddess and God at significant points in the year.

The annual path of the sun is mapped out by the eight festivals which we celebrate through the year, at approximate six-weekly intervals. There are four major, or Greater Sabbats and four minor, or Lesser Sabbats, but each one is acknowledged as being part of the continuous cycle of life.

The major festivals are generally accepted as being Celtic in origin and closely tied to the agricultural year of our ancestors. Festivals, which would have marked important stages in the sowing, growing

and harvesting of crops and livestock, and would - to them -, have literally been a matter of life and death. Hence we celebrate Imbolc at the very beginning of spring, Beltane at the start of summer, Lughnasadh at the beginning of autumn and Samhain at the start of winter.

Interspersed between these are the solar festivals, of the two equinoxes and two solstices, which celebrate the annual rise and decline in the strength of the sun throughout the seasons.

Imbolc - 1 February

Like all the Greater Sabbats Imbolc is a fire festival, but here the emphasis is on light rather than heat, being very much the way of things in the Northern Hemisphere at the beginning of February! Imbolc celebrates the first stirrings of spring. It is a festival predominantly of green and white, the world as yet lacking a great deal of other colours; of green shoots emerging through frosty ground, of snowdrops, the first lambs, hazel catkins shedding their pollen on the cold wind, of weak winter sunshine and the first signs of lengthening hours of daylight.

Our thoughts as always are with our Goddess, at this time of year in her youth; virginal, fresh, full of new life and expectations, just like the coming season.

Ostara - 20/21 March

Ostara, the Spring Equinox, is one of the Lesser Sabbats and marks the halfway point between the winter and summer Solstices. It is a solar festival, celebrating the sun gaining in strength; bringing light back to the land and at this time the hours of daylight and darkness are seen as being in balance.

In the past, before the days of autumn sown wheat, this festival would have marked the beginning of the sowing season, with the earth warmed by the strengthening rays of the sun and watered by the soft showers of springtime rain, giving perfect growing conditions and would have been a time of celebration for all who had survived the trials of the winter past.

The shops of today will be full of chocolate eggs, being symbols of new life and fertility and hot cross buns depicting an equal armed cross, symbolic of the four seasons, the four cardinal points of the compass and the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, necessary for life.

As a maturing young maiden our Goddess holds all the promise of new life, but it will be the next festival of Beltane before she and her consort the young God actually bring that promise to fulfilment.

Beltane - 30 April

With its themes of fire and fertility Beltane is one of the year's greatest festivals. There is much to be celebrated here. Marking the beginning of summer, we are on the threshold of the warm weather, with long days and short nights ahead, and all around us the energy of growing things can be almost tangibly felt, adding to the feelings of vitality.

In some places the ancient traditions are still upheld, perhaps the most famous being dancing around the Maypole, with its obvious connotations of a phallus being inserted into the earth. The traditional colours of the ribbons are white, red and blue, representative of the phases of our Goddess; white for maiden, red for mother and blue, (or more appropriately black,) for her wisewoman or crone stage.

Traditionally also, the night would have been celebrated with fires, with cattle being driven between two to ensure a good milk yield in the summer ahead.

In the life of our Goddess, she is now a beautiful young woman, and tonight she will conceive her son, who will be born at the time of the winter solstice. Her consort the God is now a strong and virile young man at the height of his powers, a Hunter of the Wildwood and a worthy suitor for our fair Goddess.

The Summer Solstice

The Summer Solstice is probably the most well known of all Pagan Festivals, although as it is a solar festival it is regarded as one of the Lesser Sabbats. It is however a pivotal point in the year as the sun has now reached the height of his powers and although in the UK

temperatures have probably not yet reached their peak, the Sun has reached his highest point in the sky and from this time forward will decline until the time of the Winter Solstice.

This is a good time for looking backwards and celebrating things achieved, but also for looking forwards and planning things ahead.

Lughnasadh - 1 August

Lughnasadh or Lammas is one of the four Great Sabbats and marks the beginning of the harvest and the first signs of autumn, just as its counterpart Imbolc celebrated the first signs of spring.

It is a festival of fullness and bounty, which has been bestowed by the strength of the Sun, yet as we cut down the corn we are aware of the waning power of the Sun and the death of the Corn Spirit.

As ever, the circle of life continues and the sacrifice of the corn will give new life in the seeds it bestows and it is traditional at this time to bake a special loaf of bread as symbolic of this transformation

The Autumn Equinox - 20/21 September

Just as at the Spring Equinox, light and dark are now regarded as being in balance. But this festival has a very different feel to it. Now is a time of fruition, the harvest being gathered in and just as this has happened in a physical sense, so too does this happen to ourselves.

Just as our ancestors would have gathered in their crops in preparation for the darker days of the coming winter, now is a time of preparation for ourselves with maybe some introspection and reflection upon what we hope to achieve in our lives.

This time of year is very important as with the sense of winding down comes perhaps the opportunity to look inside ourselves and 'know thyself'.

Samhain - 31 October

Cast your mind back six months, to the end of April. At that time we stood on the threshold of summer, looking forward to the warmth and light of the months ahead. The wheel has turned several cycles since then, the harvest has been sown, grown and reaped and we

now stand on the threshold of winter.

This is one of the Greater Sabbats and justly so, for it is a very special time. Tonight the veil between this world and the Otherworld will be at its most ethereal and it may be that whilst we are honouring our ancestors and friends who have already departed this world that we shall feel their presence at our celebrations.

It is true that we are now in the midst of decaying vegetation and the closing down of the natural world for its winter sleep, of cold hard rain, sleet and frosts. Our thoughts will naturally turn back to the sunlight of the summer that has passed, but we must also look forward to the new season ahead, to the new life that will ultimately spring from the death of the year. For this is the continuous cycle of life, which as Pagans we acknowledge and embrace.

Yule - The Winter Solstice

The days have grown shorter and shorter, the nights longer and longer – we all probably wish we could hibernate. But. There is hope, for round about the 21 December; we reach a pivotal point in the year. We reach the Winter Solstice. After this, the sun will no longer decline in his passage across the skies, he will instead begin to increase in power as the wheel of the year turns and we head once more into the warmth and light.

Having been reduced to the very lowest point of his power, the sun is reborn, just as our Goddess now gives birth to her son, who heralds the return of the light to the world.

The period of time leading up to the winter solstice, is a very important one. It is a time of darkness, but just as a baby develops in the darkness of the womb, or a seed germinates underground, so we must use this time for planning and considering, and preparing to be ready to emerge out into the light of spring.

Book Reviews for Starters

Frequently the many paths of Paganism begin with a reaching out and searching for something, even though at this stage you are not really sure what it is you are searching for.

Talking to other people will sometimes help, but the people you know may not always be able to answer your questions and it is then that you will begin to search out books. But which, of the bewildering array should you choose?

Below is a selection of books that we have found useful and believe to be well written and informative.

You will have to judge for yourself. You may be fortunate enough to find them in your local library, otherwise they may turn up regularly enough in second hand bookshops or on-line, but at this stage it is important not to waste money on books that you may read only once and then decide that what they said was not really for you.

These are some books which we found useful in our searching.

Basic Witchcraft:

'Witches' by Erica Jong

Sadly this book is now out of print, but if you can get hold of an old copy, especially the large format hardback one, it is worth the effort of finding. In a book of stunning artwork the author takes us through the common misconceptions and stereotypes of the Witch, revealing the reality with the request that we 'strip away all the preconceptions our culture has heaped upon our bowed heads'. It is an excellent beginning to anyone who is becoming aware of the witch awakening within them, recognising that perhaps she has always been there but we have until now ignored her, hoping she would go away. But as this book demonstrates, she has always been with us, part of our heritage, and maybe now it is time to acknowledge her and set the record straight.

'Hedgewitch' by Rae Beth - 'A Guide to Solitary Witchcraft'

This is an excellent book for anyone who is just starting out, maybe having heard something about Paganism, something about Witchcraft and wanting to know more. It sets out the basics, taking us through a year in the life of a solitary, or 'Hedgewitch', as the seasons unfold and pass, and the moon waxes and wanes. It is very easy to read, each chapter taking the form of a letter, and is friendly and sensitive to the understanding of a novice without being patronising.

'What Witches Do' by Stewart Farrar - 'A Modern Coven Revealed'

This was written by Stewart Farrar when he was a newly initiated member of a Wiccan coven and so as well as quite literally telling us 'what witches do' it does so from the perspective of someone who is still very much at the beginning of their path. It takes us through the basics of beliefs, training, initiation and how a coven is run and is also a general introduction to the Alexandrian tradition of witchcraft.

'A Witch Alone' and 'The Elements of Natural Magic' - Marian Green

These books are again covering the basics, written in a friendly, clear, non-patronising style, both on the subject of 'natural magic'. They will add another strand to your information and hopefully get you thinking about what it means to live the life of a witch.

'The Triumph of the Moon' by Ronald Hutton - 'A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft'

In many ways this is not a beginner's book, but read it and you will be informed. It has been meticulously researched by an expert in his field and the tiny print and 416 pages do not make for light reading.

But I cannot recommend anything better for doing what it says on the front cover. It is easier to read second time around, when you have maybe become better acquainted with the names and the history, but it offers so many paths for further investigation that it is worth the slightly more effort it takes to read it.

If you read nothing else then read chapter 20, 'Grandchildren of the Shadows', which summarises the features of 'Modern Pagan Witchcraft'.



