

What Is Wicca?

In this page, we are going to talk about just what is Wicca. To do this, we will also discuss what is Paganism and Witchcraft and what separates Wicca from these other paths.

To start with, let's establish a working definition for Paganism. Paganism usually can be seen as a nature based path and is often polytheistic. It is ironic that modern dictionaries tend to define Paganism as any spiritual path that is not Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. That leaves quite a few people in the world today who are pagan by their standards!

Originally, the word "pagan" came from Latin and referred to one who was a country dweller. Pagan comes from the word "paganus" and referred to any one not living in the cities of the day. Today, the word "pagan" refers to anyone who is a follower of a host of nature-based religions. In a more poetic vein, a pagan may be said to be someone who practices awe with every breath, someone who sees the Divine in a grain of sand and in a mountain.

In these times, we see many people who are returning to paganism as a spiritual path. As these people often come from more established faith systems, they are often referred to as being Neo Pagan. Neo Pagan, or, literally, "New Pagan," refers to a rekindling of old beliefs. Many Wiccans would fall into the category of being Neo Pagan (all fall into the category of being pagan).

In other words, paganism is split into Paleo Pagan (Paleo meaning "old") and Neo Pagan. Paleo Pagan religions have a continuous presence since before Christianity. Shamanism, Animism, Shintoism and more are Paleo Pagan.

From paganism, we may now branch into a discussion of witchcraft. Most of us have seen the popular stereotype of what a witch is supposed to be. Who isn't familiar with the ugly hag that loves to do mischief and harm from the Wizard of Oz or from Macbeth? Witches are famous for having warts, green skin, and black cats that work mischief with them!

Witchcraft is a form of paganism that utilizes magick in its workings and, possibly, into its forms of worship. Most are familiar of the concept of African witch doctors and Voodoo priests practicing magick. In Europe, there are still the Strega, an Italian form of Witchcraft. Being a witch does not imply a particular spiritual path that is pagan, however. Indeed, many witches are still members in good standing of their local Christian church! Many witches tend to follow what are called Family Traditions, or FamTrads, in modern Wiccan slang.

Watch your television some time or watch a good movie. Notice if there are any

Pagan or "Witchy" themes in the show. Some good examples of movies with Pagan themes include "The Dark Crystal" and "Fern Gully." See if you might know of any other shows that also include such a positive theme.

Branching from this, we may now come to Wicca. Wicca is a spiritual path that involves witchcraft and modern paganism. All Wiccans are witches and pagans, but not all pagans and witches are Wiccan. So, what is Wicca exactly? Wicca is a religion of witches and has been called the Old Religion. Wicca is a religion that uses nature and is also a religion of Goddess and God worship (although some Wiccan paths may appear to not honor the God). It is a religion that also has a reverence for nature. Wicca follows the aspects of the moon. Wicca has also been defined as the practice of bending will to make changes. One difference between Wicca and paganism in general is that Wicca is an Initiatory Religion, though Self Initiation is Valid, most "Eclectic Pagans" have never been Initiated.

A thumbnail definition of Wicca may be that Wicca is the descendent of every Old World Pagan religion that ever existed. In the early Twentieth Century, Gerald Gardner took the beliefs that had survived the centuries of persecution, forming it into what is today "Wicca." Some would say that Wicca has been around for thousands of years. They're wrong. However, the basic beliefs on which Wicca is founded are as old as mankind. Wicca believes in a Goddess and a God Who work together to create the light/dark, life/death, male/female balance that is present throughout nature.

EXERCISE: Now might be a good time for you to consider which of the above do you really see yourself leaning more towards. Write down whether you see yourself as a Witch, as a Pagan, or as a Wiccan. Why does the choice you made reflect your true self better than the other two choices? Write down your choice and the reason(s) for this choice. Review what you wrote down three months down the road, six months down the road, and one year down the road. Note any changes that you may have made in your feelings here.

Here's an aside... Are Wiccans a part of the "New Age" movement? Why or Why not?

For myself, New Agers are still based in a hierarchical system but use some of our tools to expand themselves and their faith. Wicca is based on pre-Christian beliefs. A huge part of the New Age Movement is still based in a hierarchical belief in a Supreme Male entity. Too many of the New Age followers appear to be scared to make the big jump to the Divine in ALL life. New Age is more to do with the metaphysical stuff, to do with a new philosophy, while Wicca is a religion. It seems that most people who follow the New Age philosophy still follow Christianity as their spiritual path or religious path and do not elect to follow some form of paganism. Because of these reasons, I will have to say

that Wicca is not a part of the New Age movement!

Wiccans tend to see things in polarity. An example of this is that Wiccans generally define divinity as being both male and female, God and Goddess. Indeed, one may even say that Wiccans see all life (including Deity) in terms of yin and yang.

Most Wiccans work within a framework of pantheons of deities from various cultures. Pantheons are groups of Gods and Goddesses specific to a particular culture, generally speaking. Some of these pantheons are:

Celtic, Greek, Egyptian, Native American, Roman, Teutonic, Nordic, Sumerian, Russian, Babylonian, Chinese, Judaic, Chinese, Hindu

Is there a "central authority" or group heading Wicca (like the Pope with the Roman Catholic Church)? NO! That would be totally contrary to Wiccan belief! So, if there's no centralized group of folks to tell us what to do, how do we decide what to do?

First, Wiccans by and large tend to follow the belief of "an' it harm none, so mote it be." Second, Wiccans tend to realize that they, as individuals, need to be able to learn from others. In short, we are lead by our hearts and what we hear Her whisper is what we try to do! Follow your own heart ... and mind ... and what the Lady shows us is a pretty reliable guide of what to do. If we do that, then what need have we of an outside, centralized authority? We have no need for this outside authority!

To those Wiccans who are familiar with Gerald Gardner, the late English man who had done so much to help revitalize Witchcraft in the Twentieth Century? Mr. Gardner does have his fair share of importance in Wiccan circles, but Wicca is also about freedom! Every Wiccan re-invents Wicca! Every Wiccan is responsible for being his or her own mortal central authority. (I felt the need to put this in after reading some postings on a Wiccan newsgroup on the net that asserted that to be Wiccan, one must be initiated into a coven that can trace its roots back to the late Gerald Gardner. Of course, the question arises as to what made the coven that Mr. Gardner was initiated into the only Wiccan coven in the whole world?)

What do Wiccans mean when we speak of "Traditions?" The various systems we use to celebrate the holidays and invoke the god/dess, the various "sects" that Wiccans belong to, these things help to define different Traditions. A specific Tradition speaks of set of specific beliefs and rituals. Different paths dictated by ethnic traditions such as Celtic, Teutonic, Strega ... these paths speak of some of the possible different Traditions that can exist and speak of the practicing of certain actions, certain thoughts, certain beliefs. A specific

Tradition consists of the things that make up your chosen path.

Many people are familiar, thanks to television, Shakespeare, and the movies, that witches and Wiccans often work in groups, often called covens. What is a Coven?

The word "coven" comes from the English word "covenant." One way to look at a coven is to see it as the family you choose. Your coven, if you choose, is a circle of like minded Wiccans sharing like beliefs and who work magic together and support each other. Many people say that a coven should have no more than thirteen people for various reasons, reasons including the number of full moons in the pre-Christian calendar and the chance that any more people would just make a group too unwieldy to work with.

If you have decided that Wicca is the path for you, how did you come to Wicca as your path? There have been many people who have chosen to become Wiccan (not as many have been into Wiccan families as have been born into families from more established religions and belief systems). Because many have chosen to be Wiccan, there have been as many routes to Wicca as there have been people coming to the Old Religion. Consider for yourself how you may be choosing this path and write it down in a journal.

Some have described their journey to Wicca as a long convoluted path. They may have come from other religious faiths, they may have "inherited" their belief from a family member (my own mother introduced me to Paganism and then to her Wiccan "friends." I even inherited her wand that was carved for her by her former High priestess!) Some Wiccans simply say that Wicca "came to me." Others have felt the call of the Goddess in their life. Many Wiccans report having been drawn to the ancient mythologies as children, devouring books of myths every chance they had. Some state that they discovered that Wicca reflected their inner most beliefs and gave name to their feelings.

When a Wiccan speaks of the "Wheel of the Year", what is she (or he) referring to? Generally, when a Wiccan refers to the Wheel of the Year, that person is using a picturesque term to describe the turning of the year, starting at Samhain (October 31) and going through the eight Wiccan Sabbats. Wiccans tend to see the year moving in a never-ending circle that begins and ends at the same place, thus beginning anew.

Since we mentioned the Sabbats in the description for the Wheel of the Year, just what are the Sabbats? The Sabbats mark times in the year for the agricultural festivals for Ancient Europe, the times of planting and harvest, the change of the seasons. This was important events to mark as these could very well affect a farmer's chance at survival. The Sabbats reflect the God's following of the Earth's natural cycle and are solar festivals to mark the

changes of the sun, the lengthening and shortening of the days, the creation of new life as shown in the natural world. There are eight Sabbats in the Wheel of the Year and they are:

Samhain (October 31)

The God dies at this festival, the third of the harvest festivals, and the Goddess reigns as the God sleeps.

Yule of Winter Solstice (December 21)

The God is born of the Goddess.

Imbolg (February 2)

The young God grows and comes to young adolescence.

Ostara (March 20, 21, or 22)

The God reaches Manhood as the Goddess reaches full fertility.

Beltane (May 1)

The God impregnates His Mother/Lover.

Litha, Summer Solstice, MidSummer (June 20 or 21)

The reach reaches the peak of His powers and then begins to wane.

Lammas (July 31 or 15 degrees into Leo)

The God's powers begin to noticeably weaken at this harvest festival and the days are noticeably shorter.

Mabon (September 21, 22, or 23)

The Goddess and God prepare to depart from each other.

The Sabbats are not to be confused with the Esbats. An Esbat is a Moon celebration. The Goddess is personified in the Moon, which goes through its Waxing (Maiden), Full (Mother), and Waning (Crone) phases. Esbat rituals are most often held on the Full Moon, but some Wiccans also celebrate the Dark and New Moons as well. It has been suggested that one way to test if a person

may be a bit more natural for Wicca is how much they love nights when there is a clear full moon. It just seems to fill them with magick.

Some night, on a nice warm and clear evening, walk outside of the place where you live. Look up into the sky and look at the moon. Don't just pay it a passing glance! Actually notice and observe the moon. Study the moon. Note if it is full or not. Look inside yourself and note any feelings that you may be experiencing at the moment. Record these feelings in a journal.

Let's talk about some beliefs common to "most" Wiccans ... What is the Wiccan Rede? The Wiccan Rede clearly states, "An' it harm none, do as ye will." This may be roughly translated as, "Do what ya want, just don't hurt anyone - including yourself!"

How might you apply the Wicca Rede to yourself? Do you see this as a way of imposing artificial limits or restrictions on what you may want to do? What are some of the advantages that you may see from the Wiccan Rede?

What counts as harm according to the Wiccan Rede? Anything that is obviously hurtful or damaging is an obvious answer. Additionally, however, anything that controls or manipulates another is a form of harm in that those actions restrict another's free will and chance to evolve from learning from their own actions. This means that spells to make a specific person love you are also a form of harm and violate the Wiccan Rede!

What about after a Wiccan dies ... do most Wiccans believe in an "afterlife"? Yes, most Wiccans accept the concept of reincarnation. After a Wiccan passes on, he or she goes to a place called the Summerlands. There, that individual may rest and review the lessons that they learned in the previous life. If they determine that there is more that must be learned, then they may be reincarnated into another body to continue learning, to continue the opportunity to further evolve spiritually.

Most Wiccans believe in reincarnation. Cunningham defines this as: "The doctrine of rebirth. The process of repeated incarnations in human form to allow evolution of the ageless, sexless soul." RavenWolf writes: "The belief that one has lived before in another lifetime." By the way, personally I believe that animals are cognizant beings and they have souls and reincarnate.

OK... last "prepared" question ... What is the "Rule of Three"? How does it relate to the concepts of karma and personal responsibility in the Wiccan philosophy? The basic Threefold Law states, simply, "Ever mind the rule of three. Three times what thou givest returns to thee." In everyday English, the Threefold Law might be put as, "What goes around comes around!" Whatever you send out comes back threefold. If you do good, you get good threefold; if

you do negative things, you get negative consequences back threefold. Whatever energy you pass on comes back to you three fold. The Threefold Law is simply the Law of Return - whatever you give - good or bad - returns three times as strong. This basically means that whatever energies you put OUT, be it of a positive or negative nature, will RETURN to you threefold, in like kind! So, it's better in general to plant moonflowers than to murder people. Remember this.

How does that ask us to be self responsible as witches? The Threefold Law makes us responsible for our own actions because the end result is that what we're doing to the world is exactly we're doing to ourselves! We must always check our motives. We must consider what is on the inside as well as the outside.

Of course, most people are already familiar with the concept that Witches practice magick (including Wiccans). So, naturally, the logical question is, "what is magick?" Magick is the manipulation of natural energies to achieve desired results or goals. It is as simple as that! It is not some unnatural summoning of demons to do our bidding. If anything, it is simply a form of prayer that we send to the Goddess and God for assistance. Magick is simply a way of seeking intercession in the "natural" course of events from "higher" power.

Magick is often performed during rituals. Rituals are the forms of worship that are used to better put one's self in the right state for communion with the Goddess and God. To perform or conduct a ritual, you do not have to have the most expensive, designer tools available in the world, just the right intent and state of mind! This works well for rituals and for magick and, as such, are important to learn.

A major belief for Wiccans is the belief in Immanence. To put this belief simply, immanence refers to the belief that the divine is in everything around you. Every living thing, every gust of wind, every babbling brook all contain the divine within it. If everything is in some part divine, what extra responsibility should we feel and show towards our surroundings in the world?

One of my favorite things in Wicca is what is called the "Charge of the Goddess." The Charge is the words of the Goddess to us, telling us Who She is and what She is and telling us who we and what we are. It is an enactment, in poetic form, of the Goddess being present with us and guiding us through Her words. It is also a statement or affirmation of truth in that if whatever you seek in Wicca must be found within yourself first before you can find it outside of yourself.

An interesting point about Wicca is that Wicca does not have a sacred text or a

set of scriptures to rule it. As mentioned earlier, Wicca trusts its followers to use their intelligence and their intuition to grow and to develop.

Hopefully, at this point and time, you have decided whether you presently consider Wicca to be right for you. If you have made this decision for Wicca, I pray that you will find your path bathed in silvery moonlight and will let Nature be your friend and guide!

<http://users.codenet.net/megastu/whatis.html>
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