

Ancient Roots, Historical Challenges

Summary: Although ancient Pagan religious practices, including deity worship and seasonal rituals, have been syncretized for millennia with Christian and other religious traditions, witchcraft was outlawed and persecuted in early modern Europe and America. A series of accusations of witchcraft and investigations involving torture led to the killing of thousands, if not millions.

Over the course of human history, deities associated with human, animal, and plant fertility have been worshipped around the world. Some scholars and many Pagans believe that the “root religion” of humanity—the religion from which all other religions eventually evolved—must have been based around fertility and natural cycles, knowledge of which was necessary for survival. The small figurine known as the Venus of Willendorf, named for the area of Austria in which she was found, dates as early as 30,000 BCE. Pagans often see its ample female body as representing a goddess of plenty, and replicas of the figurine can be found on many Pagan altars.

Early agricultural societies arose during the Neolithic era, beginning around 10,000 BCE. Nature-based Pagans look back to prehistoric and historical agricultural societies for myths and rituals to enhance their relationship with the land. Rites of birth and death, planting, harvest, and thanksgiving are among the most ancient known human religious expressions and often involve singing, dancing and feasting. In the West, practices connected to the cycle of life and the seasons of the year preceded Christianity; for instance, in England and Ireland, stone circles oriented to astrological and solar events were built and probably used in worship as early as the third millennium BCE.

Pagans also look to ancient religions for alternative values and the deities associated with them. For some polytheist Pagans, the gods are paragons of neglected virtues such as honor (the respect and social status gained through effective leadership) or sensuality (the ability to take delight in physical pleasures, and especially to share that delight). For others, the gods are associated with natural forces such as creation and growth, or with human processes such as commerce, communication, diplomacy, or learning. Polytheist Pagans honor their gods in the hope that a deeper relationship will help them become more effective in their lives, as well as for the joy of the relationship itself. Such Pagans often draw myths, imagery, and ritual practices from the ancient religions of Greece, Egypt, Mesopotamia,

Ireland, and more, or from contemporary polytheistic traditions, such as Hinduism or Afro-Caribbean religions.

After Christianity came to power in the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE, non-Christian religions were gradually outlawed in empire-controlled lands. However, Christianity seems to have coexisted with indigenous polytheistic religion in the villages and the countryside for many centuries. Pagan practices were syncretized, or combined, with Christian ones. Popular indigenous festivals and holy days were adapted to Christianity, and some goddesses and gods were gradually incorporated into the world of Christian saints. Although the Irish St. Brigid (based on the goddess Brighid) is the most famous example of this syncretism, probably the most influential piece of Christian-Pagan syncretism was the incorporation of Hellenistic Isis imagery into the veneration of the Catholic Mary; images of Mary and the baby Jesus still resemble portrayals of Isis and the baby Horus. Some indigenous religious shrines were destroyed, but others were converted into Christian places of worship by building churches around them. As the Roman Catholic Church grew in power in the West, it tried to stop what it could not assimilate; indigenous religious practices were displaced from the public sphere, although some must have continued, privately and in secret.

Scholars are skeptical that any kind of organized indigenous European religious practice lasted into the medieval period. However, stories of the goddesses and gods survived—sometimes as stories about saints—as did seasonal festivals and folk magic practices for fertility and healing. Among the educated elite, “high” magic intended to contact angels, demons, and spirits was also practiced. Many, perhaps even most, of these practitioners considered themselves to be Christians, although some undoubtedly resented the control of the Church. Christian authorities, in an attempt to maintain doctrinal and political control (or, perhaps, in genuine fear of indigenous beliefs), began associating fragments of ancient religions with malevolent “witchcraft.” The horned gods of fertility that appear in ancient Greek and European religion mutated into the Christian Devil, and the practices of folk magic and sorcery were conflated with heresy and Satanism. Stories of naked witches dancing secretly in forests, having licentious sex, and using magic to take revenge on their enemies titillated medieval Europeans, many of whom lived short, proscribed lives filled with difficult physical labor and few comforts.

In the 14th century, the practice of witchcraft became defined as a crime of heresy, punishable by death. The rubric of witchcraft included a wide range of practices, including the folk healing and herbalism

used by midwives. Women who were healers were particularly vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. In the medieval and Renaissance periods, medicine was in the process of being professionalized, to the exclusion of female practitioners. Eventually, even the practice of midwifery, long the domain of women, was deemed illegal if the midwife had no formal institutional training, yet access to these institutions was available only to men. The use of women's healing skills, often the only ones available to the rural poor, was outlawed.

Charges of witchcraft were brought against women and men, sometimes for political reasons, and sometimes out of fear of Satanic influences. Inquisitors and witch hunters visited rural communities to seek out heresy and witchcraft. In some, residents were unable to protect their neighbors from being accused and executed; in others, however, residents took advantage of the witch hysteria to falsely accuse their enemies. Torture methods were used to extract confessions, leading many of the accused to describe lurid acts and accuse their neighbors in order to stop the pain. Estimates of the number of people executed for witchcraft during these centuries of persecution vary from the hundreds of thousands into the millions.

Puritan colonists also brought their belief in witchcraft with them when they crossed to the New World. The American colonies of the 17th century saw one significant outburst of witchcraft hysteria: in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, twelve women and seven men were hanged as witches, and many more were jailed, some for years. Since then, the families of those who were executed have sought to have their ancestors legally cleared of wrongdoing, with the last six formally exonerated only in 1957.