

## Contributing to the Common Good

*Summary: Pagans recognize a relationship between ancient religious cultures and many aspects of contemporary American society, including the holiday of Halloween. Issues of concern for today's Pagans often include environmentalism, religious liberty, personal ethics and the rights of minorities.*

In English, the days of the week are named after the sun, the moon, and the gods and goddesses of European mythology. For instance, the Germanic and Scandinavian god Thor gave his name to Thursday, and the Goddess Freya to Friday. These names are part of the generally unacknowledged legacy of ancient religious cultures. On Halloween, children dress in ghostly costumes and knock on neighborhood doors demanding “treats” or threatening “tricks.” Adults masquerade in fantastic costumes and dance all night. Conscious or not, these community expressions are distantly related to the old Celtic holiday of Samhain. Halloween revelers experience the transformation that a mask can offer and explore taking on another form, even if it is just for a single night. This autumn holiday occurs during nature’s annual season of death, when ancient Celtic cultures remembered their ancestors, as many modern Latin American ones still do through El Día de los Muertos. Although death is only implicitly and playfully acknowledged by Halloween’s bedsheet ghosts and paper skeletons, many people still intuit the deeper meaning of the season, which contemporary Paganism celebrates openly. All phases of life are sacred to Pagans, even the descent into the dark.

Today’s American Pagans can articulate many other ways their faith has contributed to contemporary society, such as environmental consciousness. Stewardship in Paganism does not rest on the claim of human dominion over the Earth, but on respect for all life as part of an interdependent web of relationships. Devotion to the Earth and to the land on which they live motivates many Pagans, and for them, its pollution is akin to the desecration of a sanctuary. Some Pagans enact human interconnectedness with the land through the cycle of the seasons and the ritual calendar; others seek to form relationships with the other-than-human beings that live around them by growing their own food, learning about the plants and animals of their bioregions, or simply spending time outdoors. Not

surprisingly, many are avid environmentalists, actively working on programs to halt the degradation of the environment.

A second contribution Pagans make to the world today is a holistic view. Just as the tides ebb and flow and summer is no more sacred than winter, so it is with life, which includes both growth and decay. Light and darkness are both part of the cycle of the moon and the cycle of nature, each needing the other for completion. Some Pagans would affirm that honoring life and death, age and youth, dark and light undermines the deep divisions, the alienation, and the racism of modern society.

Contemporary Pagans are committed to diversity and to an understanding that all people—indeed every living thing—should be treated with reverence. Although Pagan communities, like other religious groups in America, sometimes struggle to fully address the needs of practitioners who are sexual minorities, differently abled, economically underprivileged, or members of other historically oppressed groups, conversations about all these topics actively occur in the Pagan movement.

This tolerance for diversity is grounded in ethics. For some Pagans, ethics are based on the cultivation of personal virtues, shaped by a religious community that holds individuals morally accountable. Values such as community harmony, honor, courage, compassion, fairness, and strength are developed through ritual and group practices that emphasize relationship and personal responsibility. Individual Pagan traditions have different frameworks for their values. In Wicca, the primary ethical principle is called the Wiccan Rede, which states, “If it harm none, do what you will.” Wiccans think about the implications of “harming none” in relation to questions of abortion, vegetarianism, religiously motivated violence, and all the economic and political issues of the day. In addition to avoiding harm, Wiccans also feel an obligation to discover their own “will,” or their divinely given work in the world. “Doing what you will” is not as simple as doing whatever you want; discovering and enacting one’s will is an ongoing process of discovering one’s deeper purpose in life. Individual Wiccans may reach different conclusions about how to behave ethically, but the Rede helps them to balance difficult issues of freedom and responsibility.

Pagans are involved in service, volunteer programs, and public affairs. Some Pagan groups participate in the civic and religious life of their cities and towns and are involved in prison ministry, local clothing and food drives, AIDS action programs, the Walk for Hunger, and local Adopt-a-Highway programs.

Pagans have also taken advantage of web-based crowdfunding technology to support causes. In 2011, for example, Peter Dybing led the Covenant of the Goddess in raising \$30,000 for Japanese tsunami disaster relief.

Religious freedom is a critical issue for America's new Pagan communities, and many have long been actively involved in work to protect it. Pagans believe that freedom denied to any faith puts the freedom of all faiths at risk. Pagan journalists, such as Jason Pitzl-Waters of The Wild Hunt blog and the local news bureaus of the Pagan Newswire Collective, seek to protect religious freedom through providing media coverage of discrimination. These news sources report on the status of legal cases and inform Pagans about the activities of Pagan groups like Circle Sanctuary in Madison, Wisconsin, where Selena Fox and the Lady Liberty League offer networking, resources, and referrals to Pagans facing discrimination. One of the League's co-founders, chaplain Patrick McCollum, has gone to court to challenge the Five Faiths policy of California prisons, which currently allows paid chaplains only from five approved religions: Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and Native American. McCollum's effort has garnered support from a diverse interfaith coalition. While Pagans are obviously the direct beneficiaries of this work in defense of religious freedom, the struggle benefits people of all faiths and none.

Many Pagans believe that American society can learn from the internal plurality that exists within the Paganism movement, a plurality that honors both the freedom of the individual and the freedom of distinctive religious traditions while still offering a sense of community. Groups that bring together Pagans of different traditions and paths in larger community in this way include Circle Sanctuary, Our Lady of Earth and Sky (OLOTEAS), EarthSpirit, Come as You Are (CAYA), Four Quarters Interfaith Sanctuary, and the Church of the Sacred Earth. These examples may provide models of engagement applicable far beyond the Pagan community.