

## Public Paganism

*Summary: While Pagan practice is sometimes kept private, it is also made public through open rituals and festivals, interfaith dialogue, involvement in civil rights campaigns, and organization at conferences like the Parliament of the World's Religions. Such publicity, to some degree, has helped Paganism shed its negative reputation in contemporary America.*

Pagans have become much more open in their practices in the 21st century. Sponsoring public rituals in urban parks, attending week-long annual gatherings, running websites, and supporting numerous Pagan non-profit religious organizations are just a sample of the diverse ways in which the Pagan movement is visible today. Some Pagans promote education of the public about Paganism to help dispel negative stereotypes, and often spokespeople are available to talk to local churches and schools about their beliefs. Pagan symbols like the Pentacle and Hammer of Thor have even been added to the list of images that can be placed on U.S. military gravestones. At the same time, many Pagans still keep their faith and practices private; due to religious prejudice, some might face repercussions on the job or at their children's schools if their practices became known. The threat of being fired or losing one's children in a custody dispute is, for these practitioners, an ever-present fear. The faith of Pagans who are active in public life can also become a focus of political attacks. For example, Alice Richmond, a pagan who ran for the Board of Supervisors in Page County, Virginia, was publicly attacked and derided for her religion during her run for office.

At the same time, Pagans hold open, public gatherings in many cities, and Pagan discussion groups, teachers, and schools advertise freely on the Internet. Among the largest public rituals offered by Pagans is the San Francisco celebration of Samhain on October 31, which culminates in a Spiral Dance led by Reclaiming tradition witches. Over 200 volunteers are required for the highly theatrical ritual, which includes original music and liturgy developed over 30 years of performance. First performed in 1979, the ritual is structured so that all attendees—as many as 1,500 people—can actively participate. Led by priestesses and priests, participants invoke the spirits of the four directions and the center, then the spirits of deities. In this public ritual, as in many private ones, Pagans are guided through the difficult passages of life: all those present are invited to remember and mourn their beloved dead, as well as to

envision a bright and peaceful vision for the future. The ritual culminates in a lively spiral dance in which all participants hold hands, weaving into the center, out to the periphery, and back into the center to the sound of singing and drumming.

Festivals also remain a vital part of contemporary Paganism. The Starwood Festival, held annually each summer in Ohio, is the largest outdoor Pagan gathering in North America. It features a week-long camp-out that includes workshops, rituals, vending, live music, and more. PantheaCon, held annually in February at a convention center in San Jose, California, offers similar activities as well as lectures and panels to its 2,500 attendees. Many smaller regional festivals also help Pagans learn about their religion, meet other Pagans, and deepen their spirituality.

In 1993, Pagans had—for the first time—a significant presence at the Parliament of the World’s Religions. Although their participation was met with resistance from some other religious groups represented, Pagans used the gathering as an opportunity for educating others about their religion. Through panels and presentations, Pagans explained their faith in their own terms, answered questions, and disarmed negative stereotypes. By the 2009 Parliament in Melbourne, Australia, three Pagans had been elected to the Executive Council of the Parliament: Andras Corban-Arthen, Angie Buchanan, and Phyllis Curott. The 2009 Parliament also benefited from the leadership of Pagan and interfaith advocate Grove Harris, who served as Program Director for the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions. In Melbourne, Pagans also engaged practitioners of indigenous traditions around the world about their shared concerns, including exploitation and degradation of the environment. Pagans served on interfaith panels, including two on feminine divinity, and dozens of people from many faiths participated in the “Dancing the Seven Directions” workshop held by Pagan teacher T. Thorn Coyle.

Despite their relatively small numbers, Pagans continue to have a powerful influence on interfaith dialogues in America around issues of environmentalism, sexuality, and minority religious rights. This, along with their growing visibility in cities across the nation and their ongoing engagement in civic life, are just a few of the many ways in which Pagans continue to make important contributions to America’s diverse religious landscape.