

Sacred Bodies

Summary: Today, many people are drawn to Paganism for its affirmation of female, LGBT, and queer people. Prominent queer practitioners like Zsusanna Budapest and T. Thorn Coyle have helped pioneer the tradition for the modern era.

Many people have been drawn to Paganism because it affirms the sacredness of their bodies, their sexuality, and their gender expression. This belief has been shaped, to some extent, by various political liberation movements. Beginning in the 1960s, feminism provided an important impetus for the growth of contemporary Paganism as large numbers of women began to seek out forms of religious expression that felt more empowering than those of their inherited traditions. Two modern movements grew out of this exploration: the ecofeminist movement, which emphasizes the relationship between environmental issues and spirituality, and the Goddess spirituality movement, which employs feminine language and images for divinity. Both movements have been influential in shaping American Paganism.

Like many populist reform movements, the feminist movement begins with lived experience and affirms that “the personal is political.” In feminist Paganism, the personal and political are also spiritual. Many women are drawn to the way Paganism helps them put spiritual ideals into practice and how Goddess imagery in particular can be used for both spiritual and social liberation. Ancient mythologies include goddesses who are powerful, nurturing, and protective as well as those who are wrathful, destructive, and warrior-like. According to those in Wiccan and other Pagan traditions, these images of divinity enable women to honor multiple aspects within themselves. For example, the Wiccan Triple Goddess embodies the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone, sanctifying each stage of a woman’s life and experience. The Maiden is honored for her physical strength and initiative, the Mother for her generativity and nurturance, and the Crone—the wise old woman in the third and final phase of her life—for her insight and endurance. As a Crone, a woman may offer guidance to less experienced women and provide a positive model for the middle-aged, celebrating the wisdom of the old in a society often focused on youth. In feminist Paganism, every woman can be a leader, for every woman embodies the power and creativity of divinity.

Pagan priestesses and priests are people who have practiced a Pagan spiritual path for some time and have trained in group ritual. Although in some groups, especially in women-only feminist groups, the role of leading rituals is rotated among members, others recognize high priests and priestesses, who have an additional level of training and experience. Zsusanna Budapest, for example, served as High Priestess of the Susan B. Anthony Coven #1 in Los Angeles, the first visible women's coven in the United States.

Describing herself as a hereditary witch born into a long line of traditional healers, Budapest is a controversial figure in the movement for a variety of reasons, including her use of spells to stop rapists. In 1975, her arrest and conviction for reading Tarot cards politicized the local community of Venice, California which fought for nine years to overturn unconstitutional laws declaring divination illegal.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer-identified people have also found empowering religious practices in Paganism. Because most Pagans believe that the body and sexuality are holy, Pagan communities tend to affirm all loving, consensual adult sexual relationships. In contrast to many other religions, LGBT and queer Pagans can hold positions of leadership and be open about their sexual orientation and gender expression. In Paganism, gender fluidity is associated with shamanic talents, and unusual gender expression may be considered valuable in priests and priestesses.

Many prominent Pagans today are LGBT or queer-identified. T. Thorn Coyle lives in the California Bay area, where they combines the feminist heritage of her Reclaiming witchcraft background with the queer theology of the Anderson Feri tradition, among other influences. Coyle is a spiritual director and founder of Solar Cross Temple and Morningstar Mystery School and has championed transgender inclusion in single-gender rituals at PantheaCon, one of the largest annual Pagan conferences in the United States. Raven Kaldera lives on a farm in Hubbardston, Massachusetts, where he practices Northern Tradition shamanism, honoring the gods of the Norse or Northern European pantheon. Kaldera, who identifies as transgender, explores gender fluidity and transgender themes in ancient and contemporary stories of the gods in his work *Hermaphrodeities* (2002). Kaldera is a founder of Asphodel Press, a writer's collective and publisher serving a polytheist Pagan audience, and of the First Kingdom Church of Asphodel, which offers participatory sacred dramas and rituals to the public. Although Paganism offers special opportunities for women and sexual minorities, it is not unfriendly to heterosexual men. American Druidry, for instance, has produced a number of highly respected male leaders including Isaac Bonewits and John Michael Greer. Men seeking a community that embraces

more conventional gender roles have also found a home in various branches of Heathenry (Northern European Paganism). As a movement, Paganism continues to embrace an enormous diversity of gender expressions and roles.