

Traditions, Texts, and Values

Summary: A series of academic studies on Paganism in the mid-20th century, some of which have since been challenged, helped to revitalize the tradition and provided inspiration for contemporary practice. Pagan beliefs differ, but many uphold the pluralistic view that there are many valid religious paths. In addition most Pagans privilege an individual's spiritual knowledge and experience over any organized form of religion or spirituality.

The modern Pagan resurgence that began in the 20th century was stimulated by academic and semi-academic research and is sustained by individual practices and the many shared values of the movement. The work of folklorist Margaret Murray, beginning in the 1920s, caught the imagination of many with its theories of persistent Goddess worship and Pagan traditions in the Christianized West. In 1948, Robert Graves published *The White Goddess*, a massive compilation of folklore, poetry, and theories about the worldwide worship of the Great Goddess.

In the 1950s, the repeal of British laws prohibiting witchcraft allowed amateur anthropologist Gerald Gardner to publish the story of his initiation into a hereditary lineage of witches. Gardner called this religion “Wicca,” and his work sparked a wave of Gardnerian covens in England. Wicca came to the United States in the 1960s, where it met the California counterculture and quickly produced a variety of politically active, feminist, and ecologically focused offshoots. Since Wicca was the first widely publicized Pagan religion of the modern revival, it continues to inspire and influence the Pagan movement as a whole, to the point that many people treat “Paganism” and “Wicca” as being synonymous. As a result, even Pagans who are neither Wiccan nor witches must still deal with witchcraft stereotypes. While many outside of the tradition today, as in times past, have understood witchcraft to be a malevolent practice, Wiccans and other Pagan witches use the term for earth-centered practices of spirituality and healing and for worship of the Goddess, goddesses, or gods.

The archeological work of Marija Gimbutas was also important in inspiring feminist Pagan traditions. Gimbutas produced massive studies of Neolithic figurines discovered in what she called “Old Europe” (centered in Malta and the Balkans). She believed that these diverse figurines represented the many

faces of a single Great Goddess, who was worshipped thousands of years ago by a pacifistic, matriarchal society. In Gimbutas' narrative, the migration (or invasion) of Indo-European peoples from the East destroyed this matriarchal culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Pagans embraced Gimbutas' work as a source of hope for a peaceful, modern Goddess-worshipping society.

Contemporary scholars see the work of Murray, Graves, Gardner, and Gimbutas as academically flawed. Although they drew attention to important parts of European history, the evidence is not strong enough to support their frequently sweeping claims; today, parts of Gardner's work are thought to be straightforwardly fictional. Their work, however, resonated with a need for alternative religious expressions and sparked a revival of Paganism in the West. Since the 1970s, there has been an explosion of Pagan writings, both in books and periodicals. The year 1979 marked two important milestones in Pagan literature: Margot Adler published her journalistic exploration of Paganism in America, *Drawing Down the Moon*, and Starhawk published *The Spiral Dance*, a combination theological and instructional text for contemporary witches.

Currently, there is a lively academic debate over whether ancient European religious practices could have survived in a direct lineage from ancient to modern times: How much has been lost? How much went underground? And how much can be reclaimed through ritual? Pagans are now rediscovering and renewing ancient religious ways. Some Pagans choose to call themselves "witches" in solidarity with medieval European heretics, whom they believe were practicing an indigenous religion. For some, to be a witch is also a way to recover women's power, since witchcraft was once associated with practical women's knowledge of healing, birth, and death. Other Pagans are reconstructing non-European religions based on historical and archaeological study, and reconstructionism is a strong minority voice in the Pagan movement. Most Pagans, however, are less concerned about historical links to the past. Although they draw on pre-Christian traditions for inspiration, they are most likely to look within themselves and to the land for a connection to divinity.

There is no single text or scripture to which Pagans look for authority. Text is an important source of practice for Heathens, who look to the Icelandic sagas and Eddas, oral poems originally recorded in the 13th century. Other Pagan traditions have formal bodies of liturgical material, generally gathered or written during the last century. For Pagans who identify as witches, these collections of materials are

known as a tradition's Book of Shadows. A Book of Shadows often includes material written by Pagans who practice the tradition, as well as material drawn or adapted from folklore, ancient and medieval poetry, Western mystical traditions, and more. Although these books may be added to, once a tradition has been formed, material is usually never deleted. Academic studies of ancient religions may serve as authoritative texts for reconstructionist Pagans. For others, authoritative texts in any form smack uncomfortably of organized religion. These Pagans often prefer to draw freely on the myths and poetry of various cultures, and sometimes on modern fiction, to create a highly individualized practice and spirituality.

The many strands of Paganism share some attitudes in common. Many Pagans see divinity as both present in the physical world and as multiple, whether in the form of separate gods and goddesses, as aspects of a Goddess and/or a God, or as archetypes (recurring symbols that are thought to be inherent in human cultures). Many also believe in the principles of magick—the idea that performing sacred acts and altering consciousness can have a wider effect on the world. Finally, most Pagans are pluralistic and individualistic, believing that there are many valid religious paths, and that personal religious experience is the most important source of spiritual knowledge. Although not all Pagans share all of these characteristics, most Pagans affirm most of them.