

## Paganism and Neo-Paganism

Paganism and Neo-Paganism are religions that practice, reclaim, or experiment with non- and pre-Christian forms of worship. The term *pagan*, from the Latin word *paganus* (country dweller), was used by early Christians to describe what they saw as the backward, unsophisticated practices of rural people who continued to worship Roman gods after Christianity had been declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in 415 CE. The term maintained a negative connotation until it was reclaimed by Romantic (relating to a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the eighteenth century) revivalists in nineteenth-century Europe. Inspired by the works of early anthropologists and folklorists, who attributed spiritual authenticity to pre-Christian Europeans and the indigenous people of the Third World, revivalists coined the term *neo-pagan* to characterize the religions they were creating. Today the terms *pagan* and *neo-pagan* are often used interchangeably by Neo-Pagans to emphasize the historical and cultural continuity they claim with their spiritual forebears.

Some Neo-Pagans distinguish between their own revival movement and what they call “paleo-paganism” and “meso-paganism.” According to this distinction, paleo-paganism includes pre-Christian religions, whereas meso-paganism includes the religions of indigenous groups who were never fully Christianized and thus never lost contact with their polytheistic traditions. Thus, for example, the Roman state religion is paleo-pagan; indigenous Native American religions are meso-pagan; and the religion

practiced by the Reformed Druids of North America is Neo-Pagan.

Contemporary Neo-Pagan traditions are diverse and include groups who reclaim ancient Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman practices as well as those dedicated to reviving Druidism (the priesthood of the ancient Gauls) and the worship of Norse gods and goddesses. Traditions also include hermetic (relating to the works attributed to Hermes Trismegistus) groups such as the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), an occult society founded in Germany in the late 1800s to revive magic and mysticism; cabalistic groups who study ancient Hebrew mysticism; and alchemists, who practice the spiritual refinement of the will. By far the largest subgroup within Neo-Paganism is made up of revival witchcraft traditions, including Wicca (revival witchcraft). Some Neo-Pagans may mix elements from these traditions with others borrowed from Native American and Afro-Caribbean spiritualities, yielding highly syncretic (combining different forms) traditions. It is therefore almost impossible to generalize accurately about Neo-Pagan ritual practice.

### Ritual in Neo-Pagan Religions

Ritual is the most important form of religious expression common to Neo-Pagan religions. Neo-Pagans emphasize ritual because of the tremendous attention it received from early anthropologists, folklorists, and religious scholars, who saw it as a set of patterned behaviors intended to regulate humans’ relationships with supernatural agents such as deities or ancestor spirits. Neo-Pagans have adopted this early



Stonehenge in southern England is probably the best-known symbol of pagan religion. Its location on a slight rise in the Salisbury Plain and mysteries about its origin and meaning add to its allure. COURTESY OF KAREN CHRISTENSEN.

anthropological concept; but because they generally see divinity as present in every living thing, ritual becomes a vehicle to achieve communion not only with deities, but also with nature, community, and the inner self. Neo-Pagan rituals are a form of communally created artistic expression that strives to give participants direct, transcendent experiences of the sacred.

Neo-Pagans use a variety of techniques to bring about these experiences. These techniques include meditation, music, dance, poetry, drumming, costumes, and handmade objects, as well as symbolic action and speech. The stimuli are designed to communicate with participants' unconscious minds, moving them toward both religious ecstasy and new cognitive understandings. The planning and coordination of a successful ritual become an art form in and of themselves, and participants may contribute by making objects for use in a ritual, playing instruments, singing, dancing, reciting poetry, or engaging in other art forms within the ritual context. Most Neo-Pagan rituals are participatory experiences; there is little separation between clergy and laity in these religions, and all who are present play a part in the ritual performance.

### Structure of Neo-Pagan Rituals

Most Neo-Pagan rituals have a three-part structure: setting the stage for the primary action, performing the actual work of ritual, and reintegrating partici-

pants into the everyday world. This structure is grounded in the work of twentieth-century ritual scholars such as the French sociologist Arnold Van Gennep, who identified three principal stages of ritual, and Victor Turner, who described ritual as "liminal" (existing outside ordinary time and space). Most Neo-Pagan groups do not have regular meeting places such as churches or temples. Their rituals take place in private homes or in public parks and meeting places. Rituals usually begin by consecrating the space: a series of actions designed to put participants in a frame of mind that Neo-Pagans call "between the worlds," that is, between the sacred world and the everyday, mundane world. Neo-Pagan traditions differ in how they accomplish this, but they may use incense and saltwater to symbolically cleanse the space or mark the area in which the ritual will occur with a knife or sword blade drawn through the air or with a line of chalk on the ground. These actions symbolically separate the ritual world from the everyday world. Ritualists may then summon the spirits of the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west) and the elements associated with each one (earth, fire, air, and water). When the space and the participants are ready, other spiritual entities, such as deities, nature spirits, or ancestors, may be summoned into the sacred space to honor them, give thanks, or request their help for the ritual's principal goal.

The middle part of the ritual constitutes its core. It is here that the participants commune with the gods



A collection of ritual objects used in worship by a follower of Neo-Paganism in western Massachusetts in 2002. COURTESY OF KAREN CHRISTENSEN.

through dance, music, movement, and a technique called “guided meditation,” in which a narrator tells a story that participants follow in their imagination. The story may feature a journey to an imaginary temple where participants encounter gods and goddesses and receive personal messages from them. During this part of the ritual participants may raise energy with their bodies by dancing and singing and direct it toward a prearranged goal, such as world peace.

The final part of the ritual is designed to thank and dismiss the entities with whom participants have communed and to prepare the participants to return to ordinary reality. Sometimes food and drink are shared by all present as a symbol of fellowship. In some traditions this act is said to help participants return to an ordinary state of consciousness after having experienced religious ecstasy. After the spirits have been honored and saluted, the sacred circle (the spiritually purified space wherein Neo-Pagan and Wiccan rituals are usually held) is opened, and participants return to ordinary time and space.

## Types of Rituals

Neo-Pagans tend to value variety in their ritual experience, and no two rituals are ever quite the same, even within the same tradition or group. Nevertheless, rituals can be divided into several categories. These categories include calendrical rituals, initiations and other rites of passage, and rites of crisis.

Calendrical rites are those that mark changes in the seasonal cycle of the year, for example, the transition from winter to spring. These rites tend to recur around the same time each year. They are important in Neo-Pagan theology because pagans venerate the sacredness of nature, and the natural world is considered a metaphor for the human condition. Although many Neo-Pagan traditions follow the

Wiccan yearly cycle of eight sabbats (holy days, usually corresponding to the solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter days between each solstice), there no single calendrical cycle is common to all forms of Neo-Paganism; rather, each tradition follows a yearly cycle linked to the religion or spirituality that it emulates. For example, members of the Fellowship of Isis in Los Angeles commemorate the Navigium Isidis, a historical ritual in which boats were launched in the Nile River delta to honor the goddess Isis during the month of March. At that time in old Egypt the Nile flooded its banks, bringing water and fertility to the land. In the absence of the Nile, U.S. practitioners gather at a beach along the Pacific Ocean, where they release into the waves small boats made of ice (which is nonpolluting) imbued with their wishes and dreams. Practitioners of Asatru, a form of Norse paganism, celebrate Walpurgisnacht, a feast sacred to the Teutonic goddess Walpurga, on the night between 30 April and 1 May. This feast, which marks the return of spring, is characterized by drinking, dancing, feasting, and jumping over a bonfire (*bale-fire*) for good luck.

Rites of passage mark changes in the life cycle and status of the individual. These rites include child-blessing rites, puberty rites, marriages and funerals. Neo-Pagan traditions have developed rites for all these occasions. For many Neo-Pagans the most significant rites of passage are initiations. Some traditions require members to undergo an initiation in order to become full participants; in other traditions, initiates gain status as they progress through a hierarchy of initiatory “degrees.” During these rites, esoteric knowledge is communicated to the initiates by elders in the tradition, and often by the gods themselves through visions. Initiation rites are secret in that their structure and esoteric teachings are never communicated to outsiders; however, they have some common elements. Sometimes initiates are required to undergo physical, psychological, or spiritual testing, taking on tasks that are challenging to prove their commitment to a spiritual path. They may learn new religious material, spend a night camping under the stars, swim naked in the cold ocean, or be challenged to overcome a bad habit or face an irrational fear. Upon initiation initiates often assume a new ritual name that symbolizes their evolving religious identity. They emerge from these challenges strengthened in their faith, often with profound mystical experiences that affirm the rightness of their religious practice.

Rites of crisis are created in response to a perceived threat in the life of the community or the individual. During such threats Neo-Pagans believe that through ritual they can tap into divine energies and channel them toward a goal. They may rally to work for peace if it appears that a war is imminent or assemble to stop environmental degradation in a specific area; but they also gather around friends and family who face a serious illness, the loss of a job, or a personal transition. Their response on these occasions is to create rites to restore the balance between the human world, the natural world, and the divine. They perceive the crisis as evidence that this balance has been disrupted, and they see themselves as vehicles to bring about healing on many levels.

### Sources of Neo-Pagan Rituals

Despite Neo-Pagans' attempts to recapture the authenticity of ancient religions in their rituals, most of their ritual materials are of fairly recent origin. Anthropological, folkloric, and literary texts provide many of the raw materials they weave into their new art forms. Individuals seeking to reconstruct a particular tradition may research libraries, journals, and ethnographies (cultural studies) for information about a past culture's rituals. In other cases living traditions provide elements to which Neo-Pagans give new meanings and interpretations consonant with their values and beliefs. Some groups, for example, color eggs for the spring equinox, arguing that the egg was a natural symbol of fertility and regeneration associated with the Teutonic goddess Eostar long before Christians adopted it for Easter. Neo-Pagans may also borrow elements from the mass media and popular culture for their rituals, although sometimes these elements are used tongue in cheek. One group enacted a series of rituals based on the television series *Star Trek* and its Klingon characters, complete with costumes and language. In this light-hearted spoof, the juxtaposition of tough warrior space aliens with the usually romantic language and structure of ritual made for a humorous performance. This kind of reflexivity (taking material out of its original cultural context) is typical of many Neo-Pagan rituals; practitioners maintain an awareness that they are reviving and recombining traditions and are always ready to comment on its inherent absurdity.

Neo-Pagans have been criticized by some Native Americans, who feel that Neo-Pagans are stealing and profiting from their cultural traditions. Although

Neo-Pagans do borrow from many other cultures in creating their rituals, the majority do so without intent to profit from their actions or to defraud the public into believing that they are authentic practitioners of the ethnic traditions they borrow. Some apparent similarities between Neo-Pagan ritual and Native American spiritual practice stem from parallels between the European tradition of high magic, with its sacred circles and four cardinal directions, and certain Native American practices and beliefs. Other similarities are more clearly cases of appropriation, for example, the non-Native American "sweat lodges" that are popular at some Neo-Pagan festivals. In such cases, although Neo-Pagans may actually intend to honor Native American cultural traditions by imitating them, the decontextualization of Native American sacred practice can be irritating to its original practitioners, who perceive such decontextualization as disrespectful.

In general Neo-Pagan rituals are artistic, life-affirming performances that create a sense of community and connectedness for their largely white, sophisticated, middle-class practitioners.

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See also Crisis Rituals; Passage, Rites of; Wicca

### Further Reading

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