

AN INTRODUCTION TO... NEO-PAGAN, HEATHEN AND RECONSTRUCTIONIST RELIGIONS

A Brief Introduction:

The following introduction is offered to help to dispel many of the myths surrounding Neo-paganism, Witchcraft and the Heathen and Reconstructionist religions. This 'overview' is a generalized rendition of some Neo-Pagan, Wiccan, Witch, Heathen and Reconstructionist religions and may not necessarily reflect the beliefs of all Pagan or Heathen individuals, religions or traditions.

Pagans:

Paganism is not a single religion, but an umbrella term for all those religions other than the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. A Pagan is a person who follows one of those "other" faiths and who self-identifies as Pagan.

Many Witches, Wiccans, Reconstructionists, and other Neo-Pagans simply identify themselves as "Pagan" or "Neo-pagans" when talking with others who may not be familiar with the complexity of the different belief systems. This can make it sound like "Paganism" is a religion instead of a collection of religions. Neo-paganism should also not be confused with the "New Age" movement, as Pagans are usually involved in distinctive religions while New Age spirituality draws from many sources and esoteric spiritual techniques which are generally added as an extra layer on top of whatever religion one normally follows.

Witchcraft and Witches:

A "Witch" – as the word is commonly used – is a practitioner of a nature-based/revering or folk belief system, art or religion. Not all Witches follow the same belief system, and many Witches are not Pagan. Some practice what is called the "Old Religion" which has its roots in Pagan pre-monotheistic folkways and beliefs and which usually follows seasonal cycles. There are also family groups or traditions that trace their practices and beliefs within the same close group throughout several generations. Some Witches practice a form of Witchcraft that incorporates a religious beliefs system, while others simply practice witchcraft as a magical art in addition to any other religious beliefs or practices they may have.

Wicca

Wicca is a nature-oriented (not nature-worshipping), initiatory pagan mystery religion based on the traditions and beliefs of tribal Europe, with significant influence from Western magical traditions and a ritual structure based on the writings of Gerald Gardner and the practices of the New Forest area covens. There are many 'traditions' (or denominations) in Wicca. (Please see our article on the beliefs of Wicca for more information.)

Since modern Wicca is by far the most well known of the Neo-pagan religions or belief systems, many people incorrectly assume that all Pagan or Heathen religions are very much the same as (or follow closely) particular tenets or ritual structures that are commonly considered to be part of Wicca. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each Pagan or Heathen religion has its own ritual structure, its own core beliefs, and there is often little that can be said to hold 'true' as a universal belief held by either all Neo-pagans or Reconstructionists.

Reconstructionist Religions:

Reconstructionism is a general term used to describe those religions (sometimes designated as 'Heathen', with many groups having their own preferred term) that are the continuation of a cultural spiritual tradition into the modern era. Great emphasis is placed upon scholarship, the use of classic texts (such as 'The Eddas' in Ásatrú and the ancient Egyptian texts in Kemetism) and the revival of traditional modes of worship. Magic plays much less of a role in most Reconstructionist religions than it usually does in Wicca or Witchcraft. Cultural relevance is stressed, but this should not be confused with either nationalism or racism, as most Reconstructionists, while protective of their cultural heritage, are neither racists nor bigots. Some of the major Reconstructionist Religions are:

Ásatrú:

Ásatrú is a reconstructionist, polytheistic faith based on pre-Christian Northern European beliefs, Gods and Heroes. Most adherents of Ásatrú (Ásatrúar) put much emphasis on historical accuracy and the heroic tales as recorded in texts such as the Icelandic sagas and 'The Eddas'. Ásatrú has a rich and complex ethical system in which personal honor, truth and integrity are considered to be some of the highest virtues.

Celtic Reconstructionism:

Celtic Reconstructionism is an umbrella term for those who follow the cultural and religious practices of the Gaelic, Brythonic or Continental Celtic peoples. Beliefs and ritual practices vary from one ethnic or tribal group to another, but almost all place great store in history, language, the surviving literature and cultural relevance/context (with the emphasis being placed upon linguistic and cultural, rather than DNA or religious, ties to those regions). As in most other Reconstructionist religions, personal honesty, integrity, honor in both word, deed and scholarship are very important and highly valued.

Druidism:

A reconstruction and/or a reweaving of the spiritual threads of the wisdom and ritual framework of the ancient Druids. Druids are generally polytheistic and follow a calendar based upon the astronomical yearly stages of the sun, the earth and the moon. Modern or Neo-Druids can be either male or female. Since the ancient class of Druids passed along their lore and wisdom through a closely guarded oral tradition, little is known of the actual rites themselves. However, Modern Druidism considers itself as a mainly spiritual path wherein the old knowledge is still accessible through insight and revelation, as well as the careful study of the archeological and historical records.

Hellenismos:

Hellenic or Greek Reconstructionists (Hellenists, Hellenes, Hellenism) are generally polytheists who worship and revere the ancient Greek Olympian gods. It is primarily a 'votive' religion where 'offerings' or gifts to the Gods are an important element of ritual practice. Hellenismos has a highly developed ethical system based upon moderation, hospitality and reciprocity, place great value on scholarship and specifically on the use of classical texts.

Kemetism:

A modern religion based upon the ancient Egyptian family of gods/goddesses and the concepts of Ma'at (all) and Netjer (the divine force). While many gods and goddesses are revered or acknowledged, the Kemetite religion is not polytheistic in the same sense that many other Pagan or Heathen religions are. In many sects of Kemetism, the concept is better described as a 'monolatry' or one god manifesting as many distinct personalities and divinities. Rituals and offerings are often elaborate and great value is placed upon both ancient texts and modern archeological discoveries and research.

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