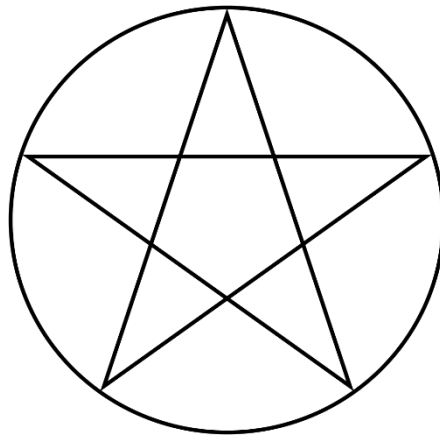




**inform**



## **A Brief Introduction to Wicca**

### **What is Wicca?**

Wicca is a term commonly used to describe modern Pagan Witchcraft - also known as the Craft of the Wise. Among the many traditions within Witchcraft, the better known include: (1) Gardnerian, which derives from the teachings of Gerald Gardner (1884-1960); (2) Alexandrian, which follows the ideas of Alexander Sanders (1929-88) redeveloped from those of Gardner in the late 1960s; (3) Traditional, which professes to trace its lineage back to 'ancient wise women' and 'cunning men'; (4) Hereditary, in which the lineage is claimed within a family, (5) Dianic, which is based upon feminist principles and (6) Hedge Witches, who are solitary practitioners. Most people refer only to the first two traditions as Wicca, using 'Witchcraft' for the others.

### **History of Wicca**

Wicca began to emerge in public in the early 1950s (after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951). It is widely accepted that Gardner, a retired civil servant, was responsible for the creation of the religion as it exists today, and as such, can be seen as the founder of the movement. Gardner, who claimed to have been initiated into a coven in 1939, was familiar with various esoteric and alternative religious ideas such as those found in Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Spiritualism and Psychic Research, as well as in Folklore, Archaeology and Anthropology. He was also greatly influenced by the work of Egyptologist Margaret Murray, who, in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), suggested that Pagan Witchcraft had survived from the pre-Christian

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period until, at least, the Witch trials of the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his books, *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), Gardner argued that Wicca is a direct continuation of pre-Christian religious practice – a claim that has given rise to considerable questioning and debate both within and outside of the religion.

### **How is Wicca organised?**

Wicca has no formal organisation. There is no overarching body which has control over Wiccans. Instead, the majority of Wiccans belong to covens, small groups of 6-13 people who meet regularly for the practice of rituals. It is experience that is valued within Wicca, and in theory, as a mystery tradition, all practitioners must be initiated into a Wiccan coven. Wicca does not seek converts and thus initiation must have been actively sought by the initiate. Traditionally, the initial training period is said to take a year and a day from the point when the neophyte asks for initiation to the point where s/he is initiated into the first degree. Most Wiccans will not initiate anyone who is below 18 years of age.

There are three degrees of initiation; the first accepts the neophyte into a coven; the second marks the completion of the training necessary to be a recognised priest or priestess; the third, which possibly involves the Great Rite (either symbolic or actual sexual intercourse), usually only involves an established couple. Any Wiccans initiated to the second degree can start their own coven. For this reason, there tend to be informal links of friendship between different covens, as members 'hive off' to form their own covens. A high priestess and/or a high priest leads the rituals of the coven, but is not meant to have authority over other members. As a growing number of people have become interested in Wicca, however, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain entry into a coven, resulting in the emergence of solitary practitioners, who have resorted to self-initiation.

### **Who joins Wicca and where is it to be found?**

Wiccans are to be found in most European countries, North and South America and Australia and New Zealand. Due to the lack of organisation, it is difficult to know the exact number of practitioners. The 2011 Census of England and Wales shows that over 56,000 individuals identified themselves as Pagans on the Census, in addition to over 11,000 identifying themselves as Wiccans specifically and over 1,000 listing their religion as Witchcraft. Scholar and practising Wiccan, Vivianne Crowley, suggests that in the UK, Pagans number around 180,000, about 0.3% of the population (Crowley 2014). There are over one million Pagans in the United States, a similar population percentage to the United Kingdom (Pew Research Center 2008). The majority of Wiccans in the UK are white and middle class and are approximately two thirds female to one third male. There are also an increasing number of young people (particularly 'millennial' women) who dip in and out of some Wiccan beliefs and practices without self-identifying as Wiccan. This is particularly popular on social media platforms, such as Instagram, where the #WitchesofInstagram has over 5.3 million posts in 2020.

### **What do Wiccans believe?**

The majority of Wiccans hold a pantheistic worldview in which the Divine/Life Force is seen as present in Nature. Nature is therefore venerated as an expression of divinity

and much of Wiccan practice is concerned with celebrating the human connection with Nature. A range of beliefs concerning divinity can be found within Wicca. Some see it as an impersonal, non-gendered life force, others hold a monotheistic view of it as a single God(ess); others hold a polytheistic view of the Divine as numerous separate deities. But most Wiccans see The Divine as encompassing both female and male aspects, personified as the Goddess and the God (duotheism). For many, the Goddess has pre-eminence. She is often seen as representing the Earth and the Moon. She has three aspects: Maiden, Mother and Crone. While the Goddess is eternal and immortal, the masculine aspect – the God – is time-bound and mortal. As the Horned God, He is both the lover and the son of the Goddess, depending on the time of year.

There are a number of ethical statements to which the majority of Wiccans adhere. '*An it harm none, do what you will*', is known as the Wiccan Rede. This is interpreted not as a licence to live in anyway one sees fit, but as a way of living by the principle of 'least harm'. Coupled with the belief in the divinity of Nature, this is often expressed in such practices as vegetarianism/veganism, campaigning for environmental issues and making sustainable and ethical consumption choices. Young Pagans, in particular, are involved in environmental and social justice campaigns, such as Extinction Rebellion in the UK and, in America, 'hexing' public figures who do not stand for gender equality such as Brett Kavanaugh and Donald Trump. The hex is a spell designed to limit the figure's power and can be done alone or in a group ritual – in 2019 and 2020, it is mostly conducted via social media on a set date and time.

Wiccan practice, particularly magic, is also governed by the law of three-fold return – the belief that any action a person takes will return to them three-fold.

### **What do Wiccans practice?**

*Festivals:* Wiccans practise eight seasonal festivals (sabbats). These festivals are known as the Year Wheel as they celebrate the changing of the seasons. The Year Wheel is expressed as the relationship between the Goddess and the God, as well as between light and dark. It is a cycle of birth, life and death. The festivals are; 31<sup>st</sup> October (Samhain); 21<sup>st</sup> December (Winter Solstice); 1<sup>st</sup> February (Imbolc); 21<sup>st</sup> March (Spring Equinox); 1<sup>st</sup> May (Beltane); 21<sup>st</sup> June (Summer Solstice); 1<sup>st</sup> August (Lughnasadh); and 21<sup>st</sup> September (Autumn Equinox). Wiccans also hold rituals on each full moon (esbats), of which there are thirteen a year.

*Ritual:* As well as the observances of sacred time marked by festivals, Wiccans hold rituals for a number of other purposes. Initiation rituals are performed either to bring new members into the coven or for existing members to gain a higher status and a deeper understanding of the divine. Rituals are also held to mark rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death; and they may be performed for specific intentions, such as healing or eco-magic, and most share some common characteristics. Wiccan rituals can take place anywhere. Some rituals take place outside and some covens have purchased woodland specifically for this purpose. Some Wiccans have a room in their house set aside for ritual. Rituals for larger groups may take place in rented halls. The majority of covens perform rituals within a circle, which represents the equality of all present. Before the ritual begins, the sacred space is created. The boundary of the

circle is marked with a ritual knife (athame), and the Gods and Goddesses are invoked. After the ritual, food and drink is shared. Some Wiccan groups perform their rituals naked in the belief that clothes inhibit the energy flow in and out of the body.

*Magic:* The majority of Wiccans practise magic. This is based on the principle of interconnectedness, and the idea that changes at the individual/micro level can effect changes on the greater/macro level. Wiccan magic generally uses properties (such as candles, poppets, cords, crystals, mirrors) and/or actions (such as dancing, chanting and drumming) to focus the mind and alter the state of consciousness. Most Wiccans state that there is no such thing as black or white magic as magic is neutral – it is the intentions and actions of the practitioner that colour it. Many would, therefore, state that they have the ability to practise magic for either good or ill, but will only practise good as they are bound to the ethics of least harm and the laws of three-fold return.

### **Controversies:**

Throughout history, one popular image of the witch has been that of an individual associated with evil, darkness, illness, misfortune and death; some critics have claimed that witches have been in league with the Devil, and pose a threat to both individuals and the society as a whole. This is not an accurate image of modern Wiccans, who emphasise the life-affirming nature of their practice and their adherence to moral and ethical codes. It is, however, true that modern witchcraft has, to some extent, developed as an alternative to Christianity, which some within Wicca may view somewhat stereotypically. Wicca celebrates certain aspects of life which it perceives as having been suppressed by Christianity. Wiccans tend to have an accepting attitude towards sensuality and sexuality and some covens express this through their rituals, with the mutual consent of all present. Wiccans argue, however, that it is not the act of sex itself which is celebrated, but rather the act of creation; the spiritual union of male and female is believed to keep the cycle of the year turning.

Witches believe that the practise of magic is a technique for contacting powers and energies of the earth, which, whilst having different characteristics, are basically amoral. It is believed that the witch can channel these forces for good or for ill and although the overwhelming majority of witches say that they only work for good purposes, inevitably the way a coven works depends on the morality of its members.

Wiccans themselves have voiced concern about unscrupulous individuals who may claim to offer initiation into Wicca on the condition that the neophyte follow a certain set of instructions, which may include sexual intercourse with the self-professed 'leader'. This could be exacerbated by the lack of a central regulatory body within Wicca.

### **Further Information**

#### ***UK organisations:***

The Pagan Federation: <http://www.paganfed.org>

The UK Pagan Council – <http://www.ukpagancouncil.org/>

Children of Artemis: <http://www.witchcraft.org>  
British Reclaiming: <https://wil141.wordpress.com/>  
Glastonbury Goddess Temple: <https://goddess temple.co.uk/>  
Treadwells Bookshop, London (which, in addition to books, has many events and online resources): <https://www.treadwells-london.com/>

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, Cornwall (has online resources, including a journal): <https://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/>

**Independent websites:**

World Religions and Spirituality Project: <https://wrlldrels.org/2016/10/08/wicca/>

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance:

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/witchcra.htm>

The BBC:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/subdivisions/wicca.shtml>

RE Online: <https://www.reonline.org.uk/subject-knowledge/paganism/>

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- o By providing reliable, up-to-date information about minority religions
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- o By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- o By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal

experience with a particular group.

*New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including [amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk) and [abebooks.co.uk](https://www.abebooks.co.uk)

Every care is taken to provide as accurate and balanced an account as possible, but we welcome corrections and comments.

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