**Defining Paganism**

Paganism, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is defined as Pagan beliefs or practices, and the quality or state of being Pagan.

 I have been a practicing Pagan for almost 16 years now, and in that time I have gained much knowledge into the history and culture of this set of belief systems. Specifically, I am a practitioner of Wicca, which is an earth based religion formed by many of the old traditions and beliefs from Western Europe. As a culture, the majority of knowledge is passed down orally and almost nothing of the beliefs’ was written down due to violent persecution. Pagans of all sorts went into hiding from approximately 1750A.D. until almost 40 years ago, which I will address later.

The term Paganism is generally associated with the term Pagan, which is a very broad term that is used to describe multiple faiths. This term has lost its true meaning and definition throughout centuries of misguided church opinions and views. The term pagan has its roots deep in Greek history as the Latin word “*Paganus”*, and was originally defined as a “rural” or “rustic” person who lived alone. This is a far cry from the way it used in modern society. Paganism is often viewed in a negative way with many misconceptions about not only its origins, but about the people who practice Pagan views and beliefs. (http://www.ourladyswarriors.org/dissent/defpagan.html)

 The history of Ancient Greece is strewn with beliefs of Gods and Goddesses that came down from Mt. Olympus and would provide for the needs of, or interfere with, the lives of everyday people. This belief in multiple Deities is called Polytheism, Poly meaning more than one. Some examples of commonly known Deities are Zeus, Aphrodite, Hades, and Persephone. Greek mythology is the most well known culture for most people, and is what I find the majority of people reference to when speaking about Polytheism. Greece was not the only place that practiced polytheism though. Around the world multiple cultures believed, and still believe, that the elements and their day to day lives are provided for by multiple Gods or Goddesses. (http://library.thinkquest.org/28111/newpage2.htm)

 This term is many times associated with any religion except for Christianity, which the Vatican vehemently defends. Some examples of these faiths are: Wicca, Buddhism, Taoism, Satanism, Druidism, most Native American beliefs, and neo-paganism. Many times the term used to describe these cultures who do not share the traditional “Church (in this case Catholic)” beliefs are generally labeled as Heathen. Heathen is another term that has lost its meaning through the centuries. This term comes from Latin origins and means “hearth” or “one who lives close to the hearth or earth”. The definition “close to the hearth or earth” is something I learned through oral knowledge, and was actually unable to find a definition to this effect. As defined by an online dictionary, a Heathen is a practitioner of the Old Germanic or Norse Religions. The beliefs mirror those of the Ancient Greeks in that each God, Goddess, spirit, or manifestation was its own separate being and performed and had a specific purpose. ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com))

 Polytheism compared to Monotheism is completely different. While Polytheism has a belief in multiple Deities, a Monotheistic belief system has only one God or Spirit that is believed to provide for all their needs. Monotheistic Religions are not solely based in Christianity or sanctioned by the Church in any way. Examples of Monotheistic Religions would be Judaism and Islam. Both of these Religions have beliefs that are similar to Christianity, but also different. In Judaism for example, it is believed that the Laws were passed down from God to Abraham, Moses, and the Hebrew Prophets. In Islamic beliefs it is accepted that Mohammad received the direct orders from God and passed on the Laws. It is believed the Prophet will someday return.

 A common term heard in modern society is “Devil Worshipper,” which is not accurate at all, unless you practice “*Devil Worship*.” A term that is not very common, at least in public settings, is witch. A person who practices the belief system of “*Wicca*” will commonly refer to themselves as a “witch” around other like minded people. This term has been used to persecute many witches over the Centuries. There was a period of time the Church specifically hunted down and killed “witches,” known as the Burning Times (1300A.D.-1750A.D.), which lasted for more than 300 years. People who were presumed to be “witches” were arrested and tried by a local magistrate or council; if they were found guilty, as most were, they were sentenced to either life imprisonment or burning at the stake. Almost none of the over 60,000 women and men burned at the stake practiced any kind of Paganism. Any person at this time who objected or spoke out in any way would have been considered a heretic and tried as a witch. Joan of Arc is an example of someone who was tried and convicted, of being a witch. She claimed that God spoke to, and helped her. She was found guilty of witchcraft and heresy, and burned at the stake on May 30th, 1431. (http://www.summerlands.com/crossroads/remembrance/burning.htm).

The one major misconception with people who practice “wicca” is that they “*Worship the Devil*”. This is not, nor ever was, the case. Even “*Devil Worship*” and “*Satanism*” are two different belief systems. Devil Worship I am not very familiar with, but my understanding is that it is very ritualistic and society may have a good interpretation of it. Satanism is based in the concept of Free Will, the idea that what they do is up to them and that is how it was meant to be. I have several friends who practice Satanism, and through first hand observation I can say that it is not evil, in my opinion. Satanism does have a belief in God, and is considered a form of Christianity. The primary difference being that it is opposite from what the standard church believes. The idea that free will is given to Man is the core tenant of “*Satanism*”. They still have a reverence for nature and spirituality, and someone may never even know the person they are talking to is of this belief system, unless it is flamboyantly exhibited.

 Wicca, in itself, is a relatively modern Religion based on much older belief systems. Wicca was developed in England through the first part of the 20th Century, and around 1950-1960’s was introduced to American Society by Gerald Gardner (Buckland, Raymond. *“Buckland’s Complete Book of Witchcraft*”). There are divisions, as I call them, which make this similar to almost every other Religion in the world. There is a sect that chooses to only Worship the female Deities (this is Dianic Wicca), as well as general belief in male and female entities, or all male entities. Wicca has its code of morality which states, “*And it harm none, do as thou will*,” meaning that you are free to do what you want as long as it does not hurt, in a malicious manner, any person or creature.

Native American paganism is polytheistic. They have a belief that the earth, sky, and nature all have spirits. They give thanks to these spirits for all that they receive, believing it to be a gift. They have very spiritual practices, even some that can be considered ritualistic because of the specific order of events that must be performed. One of these is a “*Ghost Dance*,” which was incorporated into their belief system (s) in the late 1800’s. This dance was meant to signify a peaceful resolution to the white expansion across the nation (http://www.hanksville.org/daniel/lakota/Ghost\_Dance.html). A Medicine Man, or Shaman, is believed to be able to communicate with the Spirits and is considered a Holy Man. When healing a person or thing a Medicine Man will attempt to get help from the Spirit world in order to do so. Several ways they will show reverence is to call the earth, sky, and spirit by name. The terms used for this, that I have learned are: Mother, Grandmother, Grandfather and Great Spirit.

Overall, the development of Paganism over the centuries has taken on astounding changes, yet remained the same in its core aspects. It has been persecuted, secluded, slaughtered and ridiculed, yet it still thrives today. Pagans and Neo-Pagans today strive to fit into a society which still widely rejects them because of misunderstanding, misinformation, and bias. Some things have not changed though. Some churches seem to think that Pagans are “*Waging a War on Christianity*,” when in fact the only thing they want is to be accepted into society as a whole, without questioning their spiritual beliefs or being told they are wrong. Personally, I do not understand why other religions, namely the Christian faith, feel how other people’s beliefs are a threat to them. As a practicing Pagan I choose to be open and honest, and will defend my views. I will never try to force you to believe what I do, nor will I tell you you’re wrong. Everyone is allowed to believe whatever makes them comfortable and feel good, not what someone else believes is right or wrong.

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A Definition

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