

Wicca is a modern pagan religion classified as a new religious movement. It's currently the most largely practiced form of paganism, with the number of participants ranging from 100,000 to over a million members in the US alone. It was outlined in the 1950s by Doreen Valiente and Gerald Gardner, and brought to the public by Gerald's book *Witchcraft Today*. It differs from mainstream religions by prioritizing freedom and equality over dogmatic rules.

The Wiccan religion is largely decentralized and consists of many independent groups of beliefs and practices, referred to as traditions. While most traditions are similar to the original British Traditional Wicca, some can vary widely in beliefs and practices. To practice their religion, most Wiccans will form groups called covens, ideally consisting of 13 people. Most covens follow a specific tradition, although some will modify traditions as they see fit. Some people choose to practice independently, and are referred to as solitary practitioners.

Covens are broken into three degrees, each requiring some form of initiation. In the first degree, people are simply considered part of the coven. First degree initiation traditionally requires the initiate to wait a year and a day, followed by a ceremony. In the second degree, Wiccans are approved to initiate others into the coven and achieve a craft name. To become part of the second degree, one must have knowledge of the tools and processes of various rituals. The third and highest degree enables people to form their own coven, and involves participating in the Great Rite, whether that be literally or symbolically.

Wiccans celebrate up to 8 sabbats, forming the Wheel of the Year. All traditions celebrate the four cross quarter days of Imbolc, Beltane, Lughnasadh, and Samhain. Imbolc occurs the 1st or 2nd of February. It celebrates the anticipation of spring, as well as excitement for the new year. Beltane occurs on May Eve, and is celebrated from April 30 to May 1. Beltane celebrates

youthfulness and the flowering of spring. Lughnasadh occurs July 31 or August 1, and celebrates the importance of harvest. The last cross quarter sabbat is Samhain. Samhain occurs October 31st (Halloween), and celebrates death and the ancestors. There are four more sabbats, each occurring on a solstice or equinox. They are deemed minor sabbats and are not celebrated by all traditions.

Almost all Wiccans share the belief of both a god and goddess, referred to as the Horned God and the Triple Goddess. In common Wiccan traditions the Horned God is dualistic, representing opposing forces such as dark and light. He is associated with nature, hunting, and the cycle of life. He's often seen as the ideal male role-model, and is a consort to the Triple Goddess. The Triple Goddess is viewed as a trinity, consisting of the figures Maiden, Mother and Crone. She's often associated with life and fertility. She is seen as the ideal role model for women, and is of equal status to her male counterpart.

While most Wiccan traditions visualize and worship the two deities in a duotheistic manner, there are many other interpretations on the manifestations of the deities and their characteristics. Some traditions take a monotheistic approach, and believe the deities to be part of a singular pantheistic god. Other traditions are polytheistic and believe there are many smaller deities, each of which can be grouped into part of the two original deities. There are some Wiccans that don't believe in a literal existence of deities at all, and view them as unbiased patterns of repeating archetypes and symbols. While there are many beliefs regarding the physical manifestations of the Triple Goddess and Horned God, all Wiccans base their faith on the characteristics of the two deities and what they stand for.

Although identifying as strictly a positive force, Wicca contains no intractable rules regarding morality and ethics. A commonly followed code is known as the Wiccan Rede, stating

“an it harm done, do what ye will”. The Wiccan Rede supports complete freedom of choice, while reminding that all actions have resulting consequences. Another commonly followed concept is the Law of Threefold Return, stating that any action one takes on another is returned with three times the force. Many groups follow Doreen Valiente’s eight virtues of mirth, reverence, honour, humility, strength, beauty, power and compassion. Because of the emphasis on freedom of will, Wiccans will attempt to teach their children of religion in a way that won’t impede on their spirituality. Women are seen as of equal status to men, and there is no hierarchy within covens; when initiated into a degree of a coven, your status is equal to your peers.

Since its origins, Wicca has been met with a large amount of opposition and is frequently given a negative connotation. Due to its practice of magic and usage of the pentagram, it’s often mistaken as Satanism, resulting in discrimination from many Christian organizations. Because of societal stigmas, some Wiccans practice their religion in secrecy, and refer to publicizing their religion as “coming out of the broom closet”.

In recent years, there have been several laws accepting Wicca as a religion. In the 1986 court case *Dettmer vs Landon*, Dettmer sued a prison for denying him religious objects used for Wiccan rituals. Dettmer won his case, classifying Wicca as a valid religion. In 2007, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs allowed the pentagram to be engraved on government issued gravestones. In 1995, a Wiccan high priestess campaigned against the British Columbian Government, enabling people to perform legally binding Wiccan weddings.

Despite its controversy, Wicca is a rapidly growing religion with an alternative outlook on spirituality. The beliefs of Wicca include many diverse perspectives and interpretations. Wicca’s spread has been aided by its values of free will and equality, along with its life affirming morality. Different covens can choose what to practice and believe, allowing many to worship in

a way that suits them. The positivity and flexibility of Wicca is what makes it so influential, and is the reason it's the world's largest form of paganism.

## Bibliography

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