

Neo-Paganism

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Neo-paganism, or modern paganism, is a religious movement inspired by ancient, pre-Christian pagan traditions, rituals and religions. Neo-pagans include individuals who practice witchcraft and magic privately, Wiccans (followers of the modern witchcraft religion called Wicca), shamans (self-appointed priests who practice magic and claim to interact with the spirit world), druids (followers of ancient Celtic religion) and goddess worshipers.¹

Founder(s):

None

Statistics:

Since neo-paganism is not a single organized religion, but a movement that includes many religions and practices, it is difficult to know exact numbers for the various groups. Many people practice pagan rituals privately and may not be counted in surveys. A Pew Research Center survey in 2014 estimated that about one million people in the United States identified as pagan or Wiccan.² A British group called the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids has more than 30,000 people worldwide enrolled in its course for druids. A popular account called “@thehoodwitch” has 434,000 followers on Instagram, and the hashtag “#witchesofinstagram” is widely used.³

History:

The term “pagan,” from a Latin word for a villager or country-dweller, was originally used for those who did not follow Christianity, Judaism or Islam. By the 19th century, the term was used for people who believed in the religions and “old gods” from pre-Christian cultures. Early groups that borrowed beliefs from pre-Christian mythology included the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the Theosophical Society, various Germanic folk religions, the Adonistic Society and the Church of Aphrodite. As early as the 1920s, the Nazi party in Germany promoted early

¹ Emma Beddington, “Dawn of the new pagans: ‘Everybody’s welcome—as long as you keep your clothes on!’” *The Guardian*, April 27, 2023, [theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/27/dawn-of-the-new-pagans-everybodys-welcome-as-long-as-you-keep-your-clothes-on](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/27/dawn-of-the-new-pagans-everybodys-welcome-as-long-as-you-keep-your-clothes-on). The article’s title comes from the fact that clothing is required at the Beltane festival in North Yorkshire in England.

² Beddington, “Dawn of the new pagans.”

³ Molly Hanson, “Could neo-paganism be the new ‘religion’ of America?” *BigThink*, Sept. 30, 2019, bigthink.com/the-present/modern-paganism.

Germanic paganism to replace Christian teachings and support their theories of racial superiority.⁴

Interest in spiritualism during the 1960s caused paganism to grow in popularity. New movements included the Church of All Worlds (dedicated to the earth goddess Gaia), Feraferia (a movement that celebrated nature and goddess worship), and the Goddess Movement (followers worshiped “the divine feminine” in opposition to religions such as Christianity and Judaism, with their use of masculine pronouns for God and their supposed patriarchal views). In England and America, members of some neo-pagan groups called themselves “druids.”⁵ Wicca is the most significant group in modern paganism.⁶

Neo-paganism influences today’s secular culture with its attention to “Mother Earth” and environmental issues and its belief that “the pre-Christian religions of Europe were more life-affirming, more compassionate, and even more ‘rational’ than Christianity.”⁷ Neo-paganism is also popular among those who are involved with the feminist, gay, lesbian and transgender movements. In 2023, an image of a popular pagan figure from British folk tales, the Green Man (symbolizing spring and rebirth), was used in King Charles’ official coronation invitation.

Texts:

Neo-pagans do not have sacred texts because they reject the idea that absolute truths can be contained in a written text. Certain writings are considered important for some pagan groups, such as a devotional text for Wiccans, *Charge of the Goddess* by Gerald Gardner and Doreen Valiente, and *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* by W.Y. Evans-Wentz. Instead of using sacred texts to support their beliefs, pagans prefer to appeal to the natural world, science and personal experience.⁸

Beliefs and Practices:

Gods and Goddesses

Neo-pagans hold a variety of beliefs concerning a divine being or beings: pantheism, monotheism, polytheism or atheism. Many neo-pagans reject belief in a deity referred to by masculine pronouns. Some argue that since nearly all animals include two genders, male and

⁴ Amy K. Hall, “Nazi Paganism,” *Stand to Reason*, Nov. 20, 2013, str.org/w/nazi-paganism.

⁵ Ethan Doyle White, “Modern Paganism,” *Britannica*, March 5, 2026, [britannica.com/topic/modern-Paganism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/modern-Paganism).

⁶ LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Wicca: An Evaluation from a Lutheran Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2005), resources.lcms.org/reading-study/ctcr-library-religious-organizations-movements-and-lodges.

⁷ Francis Young, “The Real History of Paganism,” review of *Queens of the Wild: Pagan Goddesses in Christian Europe: An Investigation*, by Ronald Hutton, *First Things*, June 1, 2022, [firstthings.com/the-real-history-of-paganism](https://www.firstthings.com/the-real-history-of-paganism).

⁸ “Paganism: Sacred Texts,” *Patheos Religion Library*, accessed March 11, 2026, patheos.com/library/pagan/origins/scriptures.

female, God could never be limited to just one sex.⁹ Neo-pagans may revere human beings, regarding them as divine beings. Personal goals such as pleasure or success may also serve as modern pagan idols.

Many neo-pagans emphasize the idea of a goddess, or the “divine feminine.” Neo-paganism is female-dominated, as reflected in popular shows and movies about young women and magic, such as “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” “Charmed,” and the “Addams Family” spin-off “Wednesday.” A Wiccan priestess named Starhawk believes that reclaiming the word “witch” is a way to reclaim a woman’s right to be powerful and celebrate feminine divine aspects such as creativity, mystery, emotions and natural cycles.¹⁰ Several goddess figures associated with paganism include Mother Earth (or Mother Nature), the Fairy Queen (a ruler of the supernatural world), the Mistress of the Night (a supernatural being who rules the night) and the Old Woman (a legendary figure associated with mountains and wild places).¹¹

Moral Standards

Neo-pagans do not accept the idea of an objective moral code, whether natural law (Rom. 2:15) or a written code such as the Ten Commandments. They believe that morality is situational and based on personal experience. Modern paganism believes in individual freedom and does not include teachings about sin.¹² Ronald Hutton, a British professor of pagan studies, describes paganism as “a religion in which deities don’t make rules for humans or monitor their behaviour — humans are encouraged to develop their full potential.”¹³ History for the pagan has meaning and direction, but it is the story of human progress rather than the story of God’s involvement in the world.¹⁴ Religious teachings, such as those found in the Christian Scriptures, are regarded as myths or tales for children. Christian apologist Peter Kreeft describes paganism as “the natural gravity of the human spirit, the line of least resistance, religion in its fallen state.”¹⁵

Rituals and Festivals

Some neo-pagans do not believe that human beings have souls. Others believe in the existence of the soul and, as a result, believe in life after death or reincarnation. But many pagans are more interested in ritual practices than beliefs. Rituals may be held outdoors or in homes with offerings of food and drink.¹⁶ Magic, the use of spells and incantations to manipulate

⁹ “Paganism: Sacred Texts,” *Patheos*.

¹⁰ Hanson, “Could neo-paganism be the new ‘religion’ of America?”

¹¹ Young, “The Real History of Paganism.”

¹² Peter Kreeft, “Comparing Christianity and the New Paganism,” *Catholic Education Resource Center*, May 1987, catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/comparing-christianity-amp-the-new-paganism.html.

¹³ Beddington, “Dawn of the new pagans.”

¹⁴ J. Budziszewski, “This Time Will Not be the Same,” *First Things*, March 2014, firstthings.com/article/2014/03/this-time-will-not-be-the-same.

¹⁵ Kreeft, “Comparing Christianity and the New Paganism.”

¹⁶ Doyle White, “Modern Paganism.”

supernatural forces or beings, is important in paganism. Tutorial videos on practicing magic can be found on TikTok and Instagram. Walmart and Amazon sell witchcraft-themed jewelry, divining tools and dried herbs for spells. One modern pagan who practices folk magic prays to the archangel Michael for protection, with offerings of wine, bay leaves and cloves. At every full moon, he lights candles for the goddess Diana (the ancient Roman goddess of the moon) and places bundles of rosemary on a personal altar to honor the dead. He believes these rituals allow him to “see the world through a more balanced lens.”¹⁷ Another individual still attends Quaker meetings, but includes pagan rituals along with his private Christian prayers.¹⁸

A common belief within neo-paganism is a reverence for nature. Many pagans follow animism, the idea that things such as trees, plants and animals have souls. The earth itself is revered as a living being. Everything in the universe is seen as interconnected, and magic and occult practices are thought to tap into links within nature.¹⁹ Neo-pagans may follow a “Wheel of the Year” calendar with festivals that correspond to the earth’s seasons.²⁰ Festivals include Beltane in the spring, which may include the burning of the “Wicker Man” (a wicker image that is a reminder of ancient pagan human sacrifice), Samhain in October and the Winter Solstice in December.

A Lutheran Response

Modern pagans may believe in a god or goddess, in many deities or none at all, but there is only one God, the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is spirit (John 4:24), but we use masculine pronouns for Him because He reveals Himself to us in His Word as our Father (Mal. 2:10; Matt. 6:9). We worship God’s Son, Jesus our Lord, who became true man for the sake of our salvation. God commands: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). God created all things by His Word (Gen. 1:1; Heb. 11:3). Neo-pagans, in their worship of other deities, the earth, nature or self, have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Rom. 1:25). Pagan worship reflects the truth of the apostle Paul’s words, “What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God” (1 Cor. 10:20).

Neo-pagans reject the idea of an objective standard of morality. Individuals are free to create personal codes of morality based on their own desires and experiences. Yet even though they may not know God’s revealed Law from Scripture, “the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness” (Rom. 2:15). God’s moral standards are written on the hearts of all people, and all people are accountable to Him. In the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–17) and throughout Scripture, God reveals His will for us. God created all things and

¹⁷ Antonio Pagliarulo, “Why Paganism and Witchcraft are Making a Comeback,” *NBC News*, Oct. 30, 2022, www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/paganism-witchcraft-are-making-comeback-rcna54444.

¹⁸ Matthew Streib, “Are the Quakers Going Pagan?” *Christianity Today*, April 28, 2008, christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/aprilweb-only/118-11.0.html. The article includes a quote from a Quaker Pagan blogger, who notes that some pagans are drawn to Quaker beliefs because this allows them to appear more mainstream.

¹⁹ Hanson, “Could neo-paganism be the new ‘religion’ of America?”

²⁰ Hanson, “Could neo-paganism be the new ‘religion’ of America?”

daily sustains His creation and provides for our needs. For all of these gifts of our Creator, it is our duty “to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.”²¹

Rituals and magic spells are important for most modern pagans. The Lord forbids such practices. In the explanation to the Second Commandment in his Small Catechism, Martin Luther writes, “We should fear and love God so that we do not curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.”²² Anyone “who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead” must not be found among God’s people. Those who do such things are “an abomination to the LORD” (Deut. 18:10–12).

Modern pagans often combine various beliefs and different spiritual traditions, practicing rituals and magic together with Christian prayers and ceremonies. Pagan and Christian beliefs cannot be held together as if there were no difference between them. As Paul writes concerning the Lord’s Supper: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1 Cor. 10:21). In the Early Church, after hearing and believing the Good News of salvation in Christ, “a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all” (Acts 19:19). Concerning His glory and majesty, God says, “I am the LORD; that is My name; My glory I give to no other, nor My praise to carved idols” (Isaiah 42:8).

As Christians, we observe various rituals and ceremonies in our worship, but these things are not done to earn God’s favor or manipulate Him. Through our worship and liturgical practices, we receive and celebrate the gifts of God for us, His Word and Sacraments. Throughout the Church Year we remember the life and work of Jesus our Savior — His birth, life, death and resurrection — and the growth of the Early Church. We respond to paganism, ancient or modern, with the Word of God: “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve” (Matt. 4:10; Deut. 6:13).

Links and Websites

Evaluations from a Lutheran Perspective by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, available at : [Religious Organizations and Movements - Commission on Theology and Church Relations - The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod \(lcms.org\)](https://www.lcms.org/religious-organizations-and-movements-commission-on-theology-and-church-relations-the-lutheran-church-missouri-synod).

Wicca (2005)

The Occult (2014)

²¹ Martin Luther, Explanation of the First Article, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 16.

²² Luther, Explanation of the Second Commandment, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation*, 13.