

Similarities and Differences Between Heathenry and Wicca

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http://ansuz.worldash.org/asatru/articles/intro/wicca_compar.html

This article discusses the similarities and differences between Heathenry and Wicca.

It is not the first article that's been written comparing the two religions. In particular, Devyn Gillette and Lewis Stead wrote [The Pentagram and the Hammer](#) to compare and contrast the two faiths, and try to facilitate communication between them.

That article's only real flaw is that the authors don't really seem to empathize with Wiccans. They focus on the questions that Heathens care about, rather than those that tend to catch the attention of Wiccans. And their discussion of history has a tendency to irritate many people with Wiccan backgrounds.

The present article is an attempt to provide information from a more Wiccan viewpoint. It is intended for those with a Wiccan or partially Wiccan background who find themselves interested in Heathenry. It attempts to explain the similarities and differences between Wicca and Heathenry in familiar terms, since the terms Heathens use when talking to each other may be quite confusing.

Like all general descriptions, it will be only partially correct. Like Wiccans, there are many different groups of Heathens, each with different beliefs and practices. On the extremes, Heathens may be as different from each other as (e.g.) lesbian separatist feminist egalitarian Dianic Wiccans are different from hierarchical initiatory Gardnerian Wiccans, or as either of these are from eclectic humour loving Discordian Wiccans.

However, just as with Wiccans, there are common elements most agree on, and it is these common elements I will attempt to convey.

Let's start with some commonalities. Both are modern polytheistic religions that draw on older pre Christian roots. Both often feel a strong connection

with the earth and the creatures that share the earth with humans. Both tend to believe the gods are active in the world, and interact with their worshippers.

Both believe that anyone can make their own connections with the gods; no one needs a specialist to contact the gods for them. Many Wiccans, especially the older traditions, initiate everyone as priest/priestess, so there are no specialists. Other Wiccans, and most Heathens, have a role for specialized clergy, but it's as advisers, teachers, leaders of big/fancy rituals, organizers of small groups, and interfaces with the public, not as having some privileged pipeline to the gods, or mediating between lay people and gods. In particular, a lay Wiccan or lay heathen can do just about anything, except where there's an issue of legal recognition, or, in the case of Wiccans, of initiation. (Wiccan initiation *is* seen as conferring special powers, but they are not needed for basic connections and communication with the gods.)

Now some big differences. While neither religion is monotheistic, Heathens tend to be much more strongly polytheistic. Heathens see the gods and goddesses as individuals; Thor and Odin are no more seen as aspects of the same god than Tom and Joe are seen as aspects of the same human. (Wiccans, on the other hand, often see all gods as aspects of the Horned God, and all goddesses as aspects of the Great Goddess.)

Many Wiccans also see polarity, especially gender polarity, as one of the key organizing principles of their worldview. In particular, most worship rituals include a symbolic union of the God and Goddess (athame and chalice). Heathenry does not include any such concept.

Wiccan circles tend to have a ceremonial magic flavor. Sacred space is created and protected, power is raised, and the gods are invoked. Magic or some sort of guided meditation may be done. Heathen blots, on the other hand, have more of a flavor of inviting a friend over for a drink or a meal.

In fact, that seems to be one key aspect of the Heathen attitude to our gods ... they are our kin, or our friends. Like us, but more experienced and able to do things we cannot. ... Some believe they are literally our ancestors. Wiccans tend to have a more "conventional" attitude to the gods, being much more likely to worship them than to invite them to a party.

Wiccan circles pretty much always involve some attention to the four elements, generally seen as earth, air, fire, and water. Some Heathens

may pay some ritual attention to the 4 or 6 directions, but many do not, and very few associate the directions with elements.

Many branches of Wicca are initiatory, with secrets reserved only for initiates. Moreover, there are commonly three grades of initiation, with initiates passing through the three degrees one by one. Heathenry is not initiatory, and there are no secrets. Moreover, while a distinction is made between clergy and laity, and some heathen organizations have some kind of rank or status within the organization, there's no shared idea of a progression between levels, with ever growing wisdom and spiritual insight.

Some things are deceptively similar. It would be possible to compose a table of correspondance for Heathen and Wiccan terminology. It would have entries like "coven" = "kindred"; "priest" = "godhi"; "circle" = "blot". It would also be quite misleading. Kindreds aren't generally organized like covens, though there are commonalities, and don't serve quite the same purpose. A Wiccan priest or priestess has somewhat different training and responsibilities than a Heathen godhi or gythia. A "blot" is strictly religious, whereas a "circle" can be for worship, magic, or both.

Then there are the social similarities and differences. In general (with at least as many exceptions as any stereotype) Wiccans tend to be socially and politically liberal, while Heathens tend to be socially and politically conservative. Wiccans tend to a consensus seeking non-confrontational communication style, whereas Heathens tend towards emphatic statements of their opinions. Heathens also tend to be a lot more independent and forceful than Wiccans, and tend to expect the same from each other; a polite introvert is likely to completely fade into the woodwork, and leave, feeling unwanted and ignored ... whereas Wiccans are more likely to freeze out a newcomer who is not sufficiently polite and deferential.

Another big difference is the attitude to historical research. While there is a huge range in both communities, Wiccans are, in general, much more likely to be interested in mythological or emotional rightness (how something feels), where Heathens are more likely to focus on scholarly research (what sources can be documented, and how reliable are they). In particular, Heathens *care* about consistency with recorded material. They tend to distinguish carefully between things recently invented and things derived from the recorded lore. A person who cannot identify their sources is likely to be laughed at or at least be somewhat forcefully educated ... often by someone citing primary sources or recent scholarly work.

Wiccans, on the other hand, may or may not care about scholarship, but very commonly consider it extremely rude to point out the improbability of someone's claimed "historical" tradition.

Both communities have a certain amount of interest in connecting with historical and cultural roots. Many Wiccans are very interested in all things Celtic, and heavily identify as Celts. Heathens, on the other hand, take this a lot farther. At one extreme, there are those who believe that the Heathen gods are only interested in those humans who are descended from them, i.e. the descendants of those who worshipped them in pre Christian times, and no one else can or should be Heathen. Whether or not Heathens share that view, or feel the gods call whomever they wish, they still tend to be very interested in their ancestral heritage. Blots are done to ancestors (physical and spiritual) as well as gods. Many dress up in Viking costume to worship, or take an interest in pre-industrial crafts. I personally have found myself taking up sewing as a connection with my female ancestors.

Wiccans (especially relative newbies) often think that all pagans are basically similar to Wiccans, with perhaps a different pantheon. or some minor changes. Heathens, on the other hand, often feel like they are sharing a (neo-pagan) tent with a (Wiccan) elephant ... they feel like they're being constantly misunderstood and misrepresented as "Wiccans worshipping Norse gods" and consequently often refuse to accept the name "pagan" at all, treating "pagan" and "neopagan" as referring only to Wiccan-derived religions.

This can cause a lot of misunderstanding and resentment. The Wiccans and Wicca-derived Pagans see the Heathens as natural allies ... and get rebuffed with a confusing insistence that Heathens have nothing to do with paganism, or have nothing in common with Wiccans. Heathens who attempt to approach Wiccans and Wicca-derived Pagans often treat them as "just like Heathens" ... and wind up shaking their heads in bewildered anger when rebuffed as rude, aggressive, and generally unfriendly.