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Wicca's Degree System

There are some exceptions, but most Wiccan Traditions (denominations) use a three-degree system of initiation. Though the material associated with each degree varies from Trad to Trad, the significance of each degree is *roughly* similar in each.

A few Traditions and some individual teachers initiate students to First Degree as soon as the student has committed to train with the coven. That way, everything the student learns is "oathbound;" nothing can be shared with non-initiates. In most cases, though, students take First Degree when they have mastered the Tradition's or the teacher's basic lessons. Often, it is up to the student to ask for initiation, usually after training for a year and a day.

Generally, someone who takes a Second Degree has wider and deeper knowledge, and is authorized to teach Traditional material. In many cases, Seconds are allowed to lead their own covens, under the supervision of their Initiator(s). In some Traditions, they are authorized to initiate others, sometimes to First and sometimes to their own degree.

Most of the time, people who take Third Degree are "on a career path." They intend to lead a coven, to teach, and to serve as a fully qualified "minister" of the faith. They are ready to perform public rites such as Wiccanings, handfastings, and requiems, and private ones such as initiations.

Usually, the color of an initiate's cord – the belt s/he wears over a robe – indicates the degree s/he's attained. The most commonly used colors are red, white, and blue; but other colors *are* used, and the correspondences of color to degree vary among Traditions.

Training for the Priest/esshood

At the beginning of the 21st century, there are few accredited Wiccan seminaries. It's still up to each Tradition to specify training curricula and procedures. These generally include information about the history and customs of the Tradition, and of the coven; study of wider Neo-Pagan history and current Traditions; practice in creating and leading ritual; and lessons about magic.

In some Traditions, the concept of "lineage" is important. Lineage is a record of who initiates whom; ideally, a line of initiation can be traced back to the founder of a Tradition. For example, Gardnerians introduce themselves to each other as "initiated by _____, who was initiated by _____, who was initiated by _____ . . . who was initiated by Gardner [or one of his priestesses]." To anyone part of or familiar with the Tradition in question, lineage reveals a great deal about a Wiccan's training, perspective, and competence.

Eclectic Wiccans, though many use the three-degree system, are generally not very concerned with lineage, for eclectic Wicca doesn't depend much on handed-down material. Eclectic priest/esses are often self-trained, and learn from many books and individuals.

In most cases, whether a witch can claim a Traditional lineage or not, his or her credibility depends on what s/he does. It's whether and how we write and lead ritual, discuss theology, cosmology and philosophy, teach, offer counseling, and serve the community – and sometimes how well our magic works – that indicates how well we're trained.



Covens and Solitaries

Many Wiccans belong to covens. But it's rumored that there are 10 solitary witches for every one that belongs to a coven.

For various reasons, some people – most people at some time in their lives – feel they can work more effectively, or are forced by circumstances to work, on their own. There are "solitary couples," too, who work exclusively with each other.

Unlike some religions, Wicca recognizes solitary practice as valid. It is not uncommon for solitaries to meet together or with established groups for Sabbat celebrations. In Tucson, TAWN sponsors open Sabbat rituals that offer solitaries an opportunity to enjoy public observances as well as private ones.

Covens generally have between five and eight members; three is usually considered a minimum membership. Most covens meet and do magic on the full and new Moons, celebrate the Sabbats, and observe passage rites. In some groups, High Priestess and High Priest are permanent roles, and in some they rotate among the members.

There are closed covens (not accepting new members), open covens (seeking new members), and teaching covens (accepting students into classes that may lead to initiation).

If you're looking for a coven, be patient. Get to know a group well before you commit to it. Remember that it's up to you to adapt to the rules and style of practice of any coven you hope to join, just as it's up to you to voice any concerns you have. If you're not taken seriously, or feel pressured, leave and don't go back.

Starting a coven? Read up on it first. Research and planning are offerings to the Gods, and solid foundations for your group's work. Good luck!

Duties of Wiccan Clergy

The most obvious of Wicca's clerical duties are liturgical. Many Wiccans consider every initiate a priest/ess, so it's every initiate's duty to know the basics of Circle casting and how to celebrate Sabbats and Esbats. Leaders of covens are generally expected to be able to conduct rites of passage, and teach, too.

Additional duties that Wiccan priest/esses may accept or be assigned include writing ritual, taking new roles in ritual, designing spells, and participating in group rituals. Auxiliary duties can include sewing (designing?) robes, painting altars, and fashioning Tools. Many Wiccan priest/esses are cross-trained, qualified to participate in or even officiate at Ásatrú or Druid rites as well as in Wiccan Circles.

Coven or community leaders have fairly obvious administrative duties, too: most covens and community groups keep records of their proceedings. Leaders may also need to undertake some civic duties, ranging from working with local networks to serving on interfaith councils. And as spokespersons, community leaders also need to be "out of the broom closet" and familiar with the Neo-Pagan scene beyond the local community.

Pastoral counseling is also a duty. It consists of clarifying tenets of the faith, guiding interpretations, applying the Rede and the Law to real-life questions and concerns, visiting the sick, and so forth. Just as when a teaching priest/ess needs to have read the books s/he assigns to students, we each have a duty to do for ourselves the inner work we may be guiding others through.

But – pastoral counseling does *not* include psychiatric treatment, co-dependency, or enabling. Our initiatory oaths to "help our brothers and sisters in the Craft" do *not* keep us from recognizing and respecting limits.

Becoming a Priest/ess

In most Wiccan communities, self-initiation to First Degree is accepted, and as all initiates are considered priest/esses, a First Degree Wiccan is a priest/ess. However, what most people want to know is how to become a High Priest/ess, the leader of a coven or a community.

If you follow a specific Tradition of Wicca, you must consult with a High Priest/ess of that Tradition and discuss the requirements and your own eligibility to advance. If you are a member of an unaffiliated coven, you need to speak with its leader about your aims. (Mail-order initiations don't carry any weight with people who don't know the issuing group.)

If you are an eclectic solitary, you can start your own coven – yet to be taken seriously, any priest/ess or coven has to be part of a community, known and respected. This generally requires at least the leaders of the coven to be actively involved. A collection of degrees or certificates – even a list of good teachers – is almost meaningless if a priest/ess' or coven's real-time, real-life experience doesn't back them up.

For the most part, there's no glory in leading a coven. It takes a lot of time and energy, administrative and social skills, and access to resources as well as creativity and patience. If you are inclined and called to pursue a "career" (in quotes because Wicca's clergy are unpaid!) as a priest/ess, local networks, classes, and open rituals are good places to begin your community involvement.

Mother Earth Ministries-ATC is a Tucson-based Neo-Pagan prison ministry. Our mission is to provide accurate information about Wicca and other Pagan faiths to interested inmates, prison staff, and members of the public. We are affiliated with the internationally known and recognized Aquarian Tabernacle Church.

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An Introduction to the Wiccan Priest/esshood



This brochure offers a brief overview of

- ⊗ Wicca's Degree System
- ⊗ Training for Priest/esshood
- ⊗ Covens and Solitaries
- ⊗ Duties of Wiccan Clergy
- ⊗ Becoming a Priest/ess

It might look easy to be a Wiccan priest/ess. There are plenty of "30-day wonders," people who read a few books and proclaim themselves experts, ready to lead a coven and teach. Often obviously, their dedication tends to be to ego rather than to God/dess, faith, and community.

In most Traditional and Eclectic groups, it takes study for a least a year and a day to be considered for initiation to First Degree or elevation to a higher degree. For a deeper understanding, read on.