

A Little Bit About Wiccan Traditions And Covens

First, let's get our terms straight. When we talk about Wiccan Traditions with a capital T, we're talking about denominations of the religion of Wicca. When we talk about small-t traditions, we mean "customs" or "habits."

There are covens in every Tradition, for a coven is a Wiccan congregation. But not every coven is associated with a Tradition; and to *be* a Tradition, most Wiccans agree, in addition to having a cogent and comprehensive Book of Shadows, a way of practicing has to be shared by more than one coven for more than one year.

Something else you need to know is that Ásatrú and Druidry, the other two major Neo-Pagan religions, are just that: separate and distinct religions, not Traditions of Wicca. There are other Neo-Pagan religions, too, lesser-known but equally valid; and Ásatrú is not the only Heathen faith.

We'll say this again because it's important: Wicca is just one of many Neo-Pagan religions. Within Wicca, there are many denominations, called Traditions. There are also many ways to follow Wicca that are unnamed, and practiced by only one coven or by an individual (a solitary practitioner).

Wiccan congregations are called covens, and usually have between three and 13 members; and covens may or may not follow an established Tradition. It is not necessary to join a coven to be Wiccan or to worship properly. Wicca recognizes solitary practice – and for every Wiccan who belongs to a coven, there may be as many as 10 who practice on their own.

While you don't have to belong to a coven or be initiated to be a Wiccan, it *is* necessary to be initiated by an authorized priest/ess of a Tradition to say that you follow it. It is much worse to claim a Tradition into which you have not been initiated than to be an uninitiated solitary practitioner.

Self-initiation (into Wicca, but not into a particular Tradition) is accepted by most eclectic Wiccans – but only to First Degree. Self-initiates are expected to "start over" if they choose to follow a specific Tradition.

Choosing a Wiccan Tradition

Not every Wiccan wants or needs to follow a specific Tradition; individuals and covens who don't are called Eclectic. They have in common the basic beliefs of Wicca (outlined in Mother Earth Ministries' An Introduction to Wicca), but are not bound to the fixed forms of practice that define particular Traditions.

Some Traditions are open about the details of their beliefs and practices – the names they use for the Goddess and God, the wording of their Calls and Invocations, the theory behind their practice of magic and the spells they use. Other Trads call much of that information "Oathbound" and don't share it with the uninitiated. It's possible to research some Traditions on line or in books; others must be learned in person. (Self-taught Wiccans are by definition Eclectic, and cannot claim other Traditions without initiation into them.)

Although most Wiccan clergy will explain the basics of Wicca to anyone who asks, the Elders and teachers of a Tradition are not obligated to take every student who applies for training or initiation. Some Trads are more exacting and dictate more details of practice than others. All Traditions expect newcomers to follow their established procedures, even if their new students have Degrees or certificates from other Trads or correspondence courses.

It is impossible to describe or define every Tradition of Wicca, for a few reasons. One is that new Trads are forming all the time, developing and evolving from their founders' experience or inspiration. Another is that there is no central registry of Traditions; nobody knows about all of them. A third reason is that sometimes the differences between one Trad and another are very subtle.

Not every Trad is active everywhere, and not every Tradition has an outreach program. If you do not have the opportunity to work in person with a teacher of a Tradition that interests you, your best option is probably to learn as best you can, and practice as an Eclectic Wiccan.

When you are able to explore the local Neo-Pagan community, you may find other groups, Eclectic or following established Traditions, that offer classes or are open to new members. If you find a local network that sponsors open rituals, take the opportunity to see what groups practice in your area, and make your choice from that reality.

Finding a Wiccan Coven

Not all covens are open to new members. No coven is obliged to accept a new member just because s/he wants to join. Covens are not therapy groups, they're worship groups. Some devote themselves to teaching Wicca, while others prefer to restrict their membership to people who already have a basic understanding.

Discouraged? Don't be! No one has to join a coven to be Wiccan. Whether you are a covener or a solitary, Eclectic or following a Tradition, your local community will care about your behavior, not your memberships.

There are advantages to working in a coven; there are advantages to practicing solitary. If you're looking for the coven experience, be patient. You may not find the right-for-you coven immediately; and it's never a good idea to join a coven just because you can. It's important to know its members well, and know that you share their attitude toward Wicca.

Do not expect a coven to adapt to you; expect to adapt to your coven. That is, if you're interested in an established group, respect it and expect to learn its ways, and to learn from its ways. Learn how the coven operates and make sure you can follow its rules before you join.

If a coven "rejects" you, don't take offense. Not every coven is right for every Wiccan who wants to join one. The coven that takes your application seriously enough to realize you wouldn't be comfortable as part of that group is doing you a favor as well as protecting itself. Ask why they don't think you'd be a good fit, and take the answer as direction on your path to a coven that is right for you.

If you find a coven or an independent teacher, you can expect to do some homework. You may even be asked to contribute to the cost of candles or other altar gear, or lesson handouts. However, it should not be the case that you must be a coven leader's personal servant in any way.

It's one thing to push yourself toward growth, but -- if anything you are asked to do makes you uncomfortable, ask why it's required – and if the answer doesn't make sense, then say good-bye to that group or teacher.

Networks – and Your Own Coven

Ideally, you can learn about covens you might like to join through a formal or informal network of Pagans in your area, where you can meet other Wiccans and ask about active groups.

Participating in a network or similar group may be just what you're looking for. (For example, the Tucson Area Wiccan-Pagan Network holds public monthly meetings, sponsors Sabbat rituals hosted by Neo-Pagans of various faiths, offers monthly classes on a variety of subjects, and hosts Fall and Spring festivals. Participation offers access to the wide diversity of Neo-Pagan experience in the Tucson area; similar groups exist in other locales, too.)

If there are introductory classes available, the people teaching them may be able to guide you toward a coven you'll find compatible. Some classes are hosted by covens, and by taking them you can get a feel for their approach to Wicca.

It may also be the case that in time, you will meet other Wiccans who are practicing on their own, and get to know them well enough that you want to form a coven with them. The best advice is still to take it slow. Read up about the process. (Amber K's *Coven Craft* is an excellent book on the subject.) There's more to it than coming up with a cool name and having good intentions.

One of you needs to have some advanced training or experience, or else you need to ask a more experienced priest/ess to mentor your group. Reading books, even good ones, is a good start, but it isn't enough.

Wicca is a religion of experience. You need to get some before you can decide what Tradition to follow or what coven to join!



In this photo, followers of several faiths gather in a public park for a TAWN-sponsored celebration of the Winter's Solstice, which Neo-Pagans know as Yule.

Mother Earth Ministries-ATC

Founded in 2000 and supported by volunteers, Mother Earth Ministries' mission is to provide accurate information about Wicca to interested inmates, chaplains, and prison staff; and to facilitate Pagan prisoners' study and practice of Neo-Pagan religions. MEM is an affiliate of the internationally known and respected Aquarian Tabernacle Church.

MEM focuses on Wicca, but work also with Ásatrú and Druidry. We offer a number of introductory brochures and flyers to inmates all over the country, and our writing priestess is available to answer questions and discuss various aspects of Wicca in some detail. Our visiting priestess leads ritual for inmates at most Tucson units of Arizona state prisons, and at some federal facilities upon request.

We **don't** offer or recommend correspondence courses, assist inmates with legal action or research, or run a pen-pal program.

For more information, please contact us at Post Office Box 35906, Tucson, AZ, 85740-5906, visit us on line at **MotherEarthMinistries.org**, or send e-mail to **Scribe@MotherEarthMinistries.org**.

Enchantment Encumbered: the Study and Practice of Wicca in Restricted Environments, is available on line from CreateSpace.com, and through Amazon. Other Pagan prison ministries who want to distribute copies to inmate, and chaplains purchasing copies for unit libraries are eligible for a discount, and should contact us for details. MEM does not sell *Enchantment* directly, but it is available by "snail mail" from The Blue Eyed Witch, at P.O. Box 475, Tombstone, Arizona, 85638 for \$19.00 (including shipping for one book).

Your donations to MEM are tax-deductible, and we thank you for them.

Blesséd be.

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WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW TO FIND ONE

