

# Six Sources: Part 6

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Well, we've reached the end of the road. Today is the final installment of our sermon series examining the 6 Sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith. This morning we will be focusing on: "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

As we begin our exploration of this source, it is important to note that although it does not explicitly use the term "Pagan," our 6th source is proudly embraced by self-identifying UU Pagans as the explicit link affirming our faith's growing and evolving connection to the panoply of diverse traditions that fall under the broad umbrella of paganism.

I also want to note that there are many who draw a distinction between "paganism" and "earth-centered spiritual traditions." The relationship between the two is nuanced, and there is so much overlap that it is difficult to discuss one without mentioning the other in the same breath.

Moreover, I also want to recognize that there is substantial disagreement within earth-centered, pagan, and neo-pagan circles as to which traditions specifically fall into which categories. As such, at some point this morning, I'm probably going to misidentify or mis-categorize a tradition, belief, or practice that falls under the umbrella of our 6th Source. And if that happens, I invite you to email me this week and inform me of my mistake so that I can learn from it. So let's start by attempting to define paganism.

Tricky.

Paganism means different things to different people. Some think of it narrowly, in terms of the ancient religions practiced by Greece, Rome, and European cultures. Some think of it more broadly as any tradition not counted among the Abrahamic faiths. It has been associated with witchcraft, Wicca, and the New Age movement. Some apply the term to the religious practices and beliefs of indigenous peoples in America and elsewhere. Theologically speaking, specific views on God that could fall under the pagan umbrella include: polytheism, monotheism, trinitarianism, pantheism, panentheism, animism, and religious naturalism. As we can see, the word "pagan" is immensely broad, and there is no single definition that can do it justice. In cases like this, I often find it valuable to look at the origin of the word in question. Our modern term "pagan" derives from the Latin term "paganus," which simply meant "a person from the country," or a "rustic individual." So originally, pagans were merely folks from the country. But the term took on a decidedly negative, more derogatory, pejorative connotation after the first few centuries of Christianity. As Christianity was spreading across the Roman Empire, it was taking root

most strongly in the cities—which is somewhat ironic considering the seeds of Christianity were originally sewn among a bunch of country folk in Galilee. And, interestingly, nearly 2000 years later, here in the West, Christianity's influence has moved away from urban areas and back to the country. But I digress.

So early on, Christianity was associated with sophisticated city-living, and rural areas became known for refusing to accept Christianity. And it didn't matter the exact religion these country folks actually practiced—it was different everywhere—all that mattered to the urban Christians was that these country pagans were NOT-Christian. Over time they came to be labeled “anti-Christian.” Thus, as Christianity's power and influence spread, the term “pagan” became a great insult. It was a way to marginalize and “other-ize” anyone who refused to adopt Christianity, regardless of what religion they practiced.

And it is, of course, worthy of note, that although Christianity (via the Roman Empire) ultimately conquered the pagan world, it is also fair to argue that paganism conquered Christianity. It did so by interweaving and interjecting local and tribal beliefs, traditions, practices, and holiday observances that were completely foreign to the first generations of Christians. In fact, it is not unreasonable to claim that modern Christianity has been more deeply influenced by paganism than by Christ. It is only relatively recently, perhaps within the last couple of centuries, that the term “pagan” has been reclaimed and redeemed by proud non-Christians looking to establish their own distinct religious or cultural identity—an identity often grounded-in (or at least inspired-by)—beliefs and practices that pre-date Christianity.

And increasingly, this pagan movement has included Unitarian Universalists. The origin of paganism and earth-centered spirituality within our faith is an interesting story. So in 1961, the Unitarian and the Universalists join forces and the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA, is founded. And quite frankly, at that time, the Association is comprised mostly of humanists and liberal Christians. In 1977, the UU General Assembly voted to pass a Resolution titled: “Women and Religion.” This was a very pro-feminist resolution that called-out the use of anti-woman language and symbology throughout our faith, including our liturgy and theology. And the Resolution mandated deep reflection-upon and examination-of our patriarchal norms. This was a powerful resolution that has shaped our current faith in numerous ways.

One thing that happened as a result of the passage of this “Women and Religion” Resolution was that a Committee was formed. It was called “The Continental Women and Religions Committee.” Three years after the 1977 Resolution, this committee sponsored the first-known organized Unitarian Universalist Pagan worship service at the 1980 UU Continental Feminist Theology Convocation. The Convocation included substantial conversation about Goddess theology, a witchcraft workshop, a Zen Buddhist film, and the first-ever Water Communion, which is now a regularly-celebrated event in UU Congregations across the Association, including here at UUCJ every September during our Ingathering.

Not long thereafter, a group of UU Pagans formed CUUPs: C-U-U-P-S, or The Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. CUUPs is an independent affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) honoring goddess-based, earth-centered, tribal and pagan spiritual paths. CUUPs' official affiliate-status was ratified at the 1988 UUA General Assembly, and it has been growing ever since. CUUPs chapters can now be found in UU congregations all across our Association.

Then in 1993, the UUA published "Singing the Living Tradition," otherwise known as "The Gray Hymnal." And if you leaf through it, you will see that a substantial selection of pagan songs and readings were included in it. Two years later, in 1995, paganism was elevated to the same status as other religious traditions officially recognized as comprising a part of our faith. The 1995 General Assembly added to our existing 5 Sources, a 6th: "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature."

It should not be surprising that Unitarian Universalists felt the need to add this 6th Source to our faith. Those who practice earth-centered or pagan traditions have long represented the fastest-growing demographic within Unitarian Universalism. And the growing popularity of paganism within UUism reflects a nationwide trend. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, between 1990 and 2000, the number of Wiccans—which is but one subset within paganism—the number of Wiccans in the U.S. increased from 8,000 to 134,000. That is a 1600% increase. And between 2001 and 2008, the number of all self-identifying pagans doubled.

So what is it about paganism and earth-centered spirituality that is drawing so many new adherents over the past few decades? Now, keeping in mind that paganism is a super-broad category, I have attempted to identify 3 big themes that seem to show up in most pagan or earth-centered traditions that I believe explain at least part of the attraction.

First. Paganism is deeply rooted in feminism and women's liberation. We saw this in our own UU history. The paganism within our faith was ushered in by UU feminists. Paganism and earth-centered religions, broadly speaking, in some fashion or form, celebrate the Goddess—the Divine Feminine. This is in sharp contrast to the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, whose sacred texts clearly identify God as a man. A particularly trenchant critique against these Abrahamic faiths is that their sacred scriptures have for centuries and millennia helped to center men and masculinity while propagating a culture of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. In short, the Abrahamic faiths have countless times suppressed the voice and power of women. In the past, when a woman belonging to one of these traditions became too powerful, she was conveniently labeled a witch. And then executed. So is it any surprise that now—when women have finally begun taking back their power and voice—that many women have proudly reclaimed the title and role of "witch"?

It's kind of a giant middle-finger to the patriarchy.

And it's awesome.

But beyond this, there is clearly something attractive to people—all people, regardless of sex or gender—there is something attractive about a religious system that centers life-affirming, feminine qualities. Especially after such qualities have been so brutally repressed for so long. In the West, particularly, the human soul has been thirsting for the wisdom and the power of the Divine Feminine.

A second reason for the growing popularity of paganism: Paganism shows reverence for the earth. The rise of modern paganism has coincided—not coincidentally—with the rise of environmentalism. Over the past several decades, we have become increasingly aware that we human beings, through our short-sidedness, greed, and selfishness, are destroying the earth. The theology of the Abrahamic faiths, but modern conservative Christianity in particular, has been a willing accomplice in the degradation and destruction of our planet. When the ruling religious system embraced by the Empire preaches a gospel in which the physical world is devalued and the spiritual world is elevated.. where heaven is the eternal abode of the gods and departed souls, while earth is a cesspool of depravity and sin and death. where this physical world is going to ultimately be destroyed by God anyways. is it any wonder that people who want to preserve this earth would flock to an alternative religious system?

Many anthropologists agree that the oldest spiritual traditions of humans were Nature-centered. The beliefs and traditions of the oldest religious systems lifted up and celebrated Nature and all of Nature's mundane miracles: The Sun comes up; it goes away; and it comes back.. Every time. That's amazing. It gets cold for a while, then warm. It gets dark for a while...then light. Like clockwork. It's rhythmic and predictable. What a miracle that is! Water falls from the sky and you can drink it! You put tiny seeds in the ground; they transform into something exponentially larger that you can eat. That's just ridiculous! It's little wonder that our ancestors worshipped Nature directly, or worshipped gods and goddesses that represented natural phenomena. Today, we are in need of a revitalized reverence for Nature and for our earth. And paganism offers precisely that.

The third reason for Paganism's increased popularity. Paganism offers us a path back to our emotions and our bodies. We as Westerners—and UUs—are a heady, hyper-rational bunch. The Enlightenment did many great things for the world. but it also left us cold. As a result, many of us have been enculturated to never truly get in touch with our own emotions or to give them full expression. Many of us were raised to keep our feelings bottled up and under control at all times. Additionally, many of us were taught that our bodies were sinful. So a lot of us are deeply repressed people, scared of our own emotions, ashamed of our own bodies. Look. Sometimes, you gotta dance naked and howl at the moon. Pagan and earth-centered traditions lift up and reclaim the ecstatic, emotional, and mystical expressions of worship that fell out of favor with the birth of modernism. It celebrates the divine within and allows us to re-connect to our more primal roots. Pagan traditions focus on the heart and the body, rather than the mind. One of my favorite quotes is actually the title of a book of poetry authored by the venerable Alice Walker: "Hard Times Require Furious Dancing."

The older I get, the more I think she may be right.

As we prepare to close out this sermon series on our 6 Sources, I hope that I have been able to provide support for a couple of the propositions I shared 6 weeks ago when we first began. You may recall that 6 weeks ago, I suggested that in order to have a complete picture of our UU faith, we must understand our 6 Sources collectively, as a complete set, rather than individually. The 6 sources are not severable from one another. You cannot solely base your UU faith on a single source. Nor can you completely throw away a source you simply don't like. Over the course of this series, we have heard some interesting metaphors that help to explain the mutual relationship shared by the six sources. (And it's worth remembering that many of these metaphors came from our youth). The Six Sources are like the co-equal branches of our government which check and balance each other. They are like a single spider-web hanging from six points. They are like a firmly grounded tree with grafted branches. They are like tools in a tool-belt, each with a specific use and purpose. In short, our sources complement and contrast each other, and together they offer balance, tension, and harmony.

The other blasphemous suggestion I made 6 weeks ago was that our 6 Sources are a deeper, broader, more accurate, and simply better representation of Unitarian Universalism than the 7 Principles. The 7 Principles, while lovely, do little to distinguish us from any other organization—religious or secular. Our 6 Sources, on the other hand, represent every major stream of philosophy and theology within our movement.

From Direct Experience we learn to trust ourselves, to value the individual, and explore the mystical and intuitive. The Prophets teach us to ever-strive for Justice and to not-rest until we have torn down every vestige of oppression: racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, to name just a few. The wisdom of world religions expresses our openness to new ideas and new theologies and celebrates the value we place on diversity. Our Judeo-Christian heritage grounds our history, polity, liturgy, and ecclesiology, and it gives shape to our identity. Religious Humanism elevates the role of Reason within our faith, unshackles the mind, and affirms our belief that religion and science can not only coexist, but can actually complement each other. And finally, earth-centered and pagan traditions open us up to theologies that center women, celebrate this physical earth, and engage the heart and the body.

If you ask me, that is an exciting Faith! And that's why I'm a Unitarian Universalist. And I'm guessing that's why you are too. So my charge to us all this morning is to take this precious faith and live it out in the world. Live these values that undergird our 6 Sources, so that everyone can see them. To quote the father of American Universalism, John Murray: "Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them. hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."

We are the faith of the future. And together, we will change the world.

So mote it be.