



## Contemporary Paganism

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### Introduction

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At the onset of the twenty-first century, humanity is confronted with global challenges that have redirected interest in apocalyptic narratives. These challenges, encompassing climate change, environmental degradation, and the ramifications of a global pandemic, have led to a resurgence in exploring eschatological themes. Historically, apocalyptic narratives in various religious traditions are often depicted as linear and catastrophic events, typically linked to divine retribution or human transgression. However, this interpretation does not fully encompass the breadth of apocalyptic thought, especially within the diverse spectrum of contemporary Paganism.

Contemporary Paganism presents a contrasting viewpoint to the traditional Jewish and Christian narrative of apocalypse. In contrast to monotheistic traditions, where the apocalypse often signifies a terminal event, Pagan perspectives are notably different. Paganism tends to conceptualise the apocalypse as a cyclical process of transformation and renewal. This perspective is deeply rooted in observing natural phenomena, emphasising the interconnectedness of all existence. Here, endings are not seen as absolute terminations but as integral phases of ongoing cycles of life, death, and rebirth (Adler 1986; Harvey 2005). In this framework, the apocalypse is not a disastrous end as seen in popular imaginations but a transformative process integral to the natural and cosmic order.

The relevance of this Pagan perspective is particularly significant in the context of contemporary environmental crises. In facing climate change and ecological challenges, Pagan interpretations of the apocalypse offer a unique lens, emphasising balance, respect for nature, and humanity's role within a larger ecological system. This approach transcends traditional eschatological speculation, offering a framework for understanding and responding to real-world environmental issues (York 1995, 2003; Harvey 2005).

Furthermore, contemporary Paganism's apocalyptic narratives frequently incorporate elements of prophecy, divine inspiration, and revelation. While differing significantly from their Abrahamic counterparts, these elements contribute to a rich landscape of beliefs and practices that underscore a harmonious and cyclical view of existence (Magliocco 2004; Pike 2004).

This article aims to explore these unique Pagan perspectives on the apocalypse, critically examining how they contrast with, and at times converge with more conventional views. The study seeks to illuminate how these narratives contribute to broader discourses surrounding environmental crises and the envisioning of possible futures, enriching our understanding of Pagan beliefs and offering alternative paradigms for considering the role of humanity in an ever-changing world.

## Historical Context and Development of Pagan Apocalyptic and Millenarian Views

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The historical development of cyclical understandings of [apocalyptic](#) and [millenarian](#) views within Paganism reveals a plethora of cultural, spiritual, and philosophical traditions.

In ancient times, many pagan cultures perceived time and existence as cyclical, significantly influencing their apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs. This view is apparent in the recurring themes of death and rebirth prevalent in various mythologies and rituals. For instance, Norse mythology's concept of Ragnarök depicts an apocalyptic series of events leading to the world's destruction, followed by its renewal and the dawn of a new existence cycle (Davidson 1964, 1988; Lindow 2001). Similarly, ancient Greek thought, with its notion of recurring ages culminating in cataclysmic events and subsequent renewal, reflects this cyclical apocalyptic vision (Dodds 1951; Burkert 1987).

With the modern Pagan revival, these ancient narratives have been reinterpreted and adapted to contemporary contexts. Modern Paganism, including traditions such as Wicca, Druidry, and Heathenry, draws upon these ancient myths and symbols to construct unique apocalyptic and millenarian narratives. These narratives often emphasise the interconnectedness of all life and the earth's natural cycles, viewing apocalyptic events as opportunities for spiritual and societal transformation (Hutton 1999; Starhawk 1999).

Millenarianism within Paganism is less concerned with a literal thousand-year reign and more with envisioning a future era of balance and harmony, often following a period of upheaval or transformation. This vision is particularly evident in eco-spiritual movements within Paganism, where the future is seen as a return to ecological balance and a deeper connection with the natural world (Taylor 1995; Abram 1996). Here, the millennial period is not a fixed temporal span but a metaphorical expression of a future state of elevated consciousness and harmonious living.

Broader sociocultural changes, including environmental activism, feminist thought, and a growing global awareness of ecological interdependence, have influenced the development of these beliefs. As a result, contemporary Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian narratives often serve as a critique of unsustainable practices and a call to action for environmental stewardship and social change (Pike 2004; Blain 2005).

Thus, the historical context and development of apocalyptic and millenarian views in Paganism reflect a dynamic interplay between ancient mythologies and contemporary spiritual and ecological concerns. These views, rooted in a cyclical understanding of time and existence, offer a distinct contrast to the linear narratives found in monotheistic traditions. They provide a framework for understanding and responding to the challenges of the modern world, highlighting the possibility of renewal and transformation in the face of apocalyptic change.

## Geographical, Political, and Social Landscapes

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Geographical, political, and social landscapes significantly influence the development and expression of Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian views. These views, stemming from a variety of cultural and societal contexts, reflect the rich diversity inherent in Pagan traditions.

Geographically, contemporary Pagan traditions are inspired by ancient civilisations across the globe, each cultivating unique end-of-times interpretations shaped by their distinct environmental and cosmological understanding. Norse Paganism, for instance, with its origins in the harsh climates of Scandinavia, developed the concept of Ragnarök, a cataclysmic series of events culminating in the world's rebirth, a narrative deeply embedded in the region's environmental challenges (Davidson 1964). In contrast, Mediterranean pagan traditions, such as those in ancient Greece, perceived cyclical destruction and renewal, a viewpoint reflective of the rhythms of their natural world and the dynamics of human society (Burkert 1987).

In contemporary settings, particularly in Western societies like the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, Paganism has undergone a significant revival and global spread. Modern Pagans in these regions often intertwine their apocalyptic and millenarian views with current political and social issues. For instance, in the United States, environmental degradation and political and social unrest have distinctly influenced modern Pagan groups to adapt their apocalyptic narratives to these contemporary challenges (Carpenter 1996; Berger 1999).

Politically, Pagan apocalyptic beliefs frequently challenge established power structures, advocating for alternative societal organisation forms. This is evident in the emphasis many Pagan traditions place on egalitarianism, environmental stewardship, and social justice (Adler 1986). These beliefs critique the unsustainable practices of modern industrial societies, envisioning a post-apocalyptic world characterised by balance and harmony (York 1995).

Socially, the growth of Paganism and its accompanying apocalyptic narratives align with a broader quest for meaning and spirituality outside conventional religious frameworks. This search often involves critiquing modernity's alienating effects and a yearning to reconnect with nature and community. As a result, Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian narratives frequently underscore themes of community-building, reconnection with the natural world, and personal spiritual transformation (Harvey 1997).

The impact of globalisation and digital technology on the dissemination and evolution of Pagan beliefs is profound. The internet has enabled the formation of diverse, interconnected Pagan communities, facilitating the sharing and development of apocalyptic and millenarian narratives. These narratives, while deeply rooted in ancient traditions, are continually evolving in response to global environmental crises, political shifts, and social changes (Cowan 2005).

Therefore, understanding the geographical, political, and social contexts of Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian views is crucial. These contexts provide a rich backdrop for shaping these beliefs, offering insights into the perceptions and responses of Pagans to the challenges of the modern world through their unique apocalyptic visions.

Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs, deeply embedded in diverse cultural, religious, and historical contexts, have significantly evolved over time. While these beliefs are anchored in ancient traditions, they have dynamically adapted to contemporary contexts, reflecting the evolving needs and understandings of their adherents (Davidson 1964; Carpenter 1996).

In ancient times, pagan societies typically perceived apocalyptic and millenarian events through a lens of natural cycles and renewal. Celtic traditions, for instance, intertwined the concept of apocalypse with the natural world, viewing the end of one cycle as the commencement of another (Green 1993). Similarly, ancient Germanic and Norse cultures, as depicted in sources like the Poetic Edda, envisioned apocalyptic events such as Ragnarök as integral parts of a larger cosmic cycle, leading to renewal and rebirth (Davidson 1964).

The encounter of Paganism with other religious and philosophical systems, especially during the spread of Christianity, marked a significant evolution in these apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs. In some instances, pagan beliefs were syncretized with Christian eschatology, resulting in unique interpretations of the end times (MacCulloch 1911). In other scenarios, pagan beliefs were either suppressed or driven underground, only to resurface and be reinterpreted in later periods.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries heralded a crucial juncture in the evolution of Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs with the modern Pagan revival. Influenced by romanticism, environmentalism, and a renewed interest in indigenous and folk traditions, this revival led to a reinterpretation of ancient beliefs within the context of contemporary issues. Modern Pagans, drawing from a plethora of sources including ancient mythologies, folklore, and ecological science, began to develop new apocalyptic narratives emphasising themes such as environmental sustainability, social justice, and spiritual transformation (Harvey 1997; Starhawk 1999).

A key feature of contemporary Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs is the emphasis on personal and collective responsibility. Contrasting with some traditional religious views that portray the apocalypse as predestined or divinely controlled, many Pagans view potential apocalyptic events as consequences of human actions, particularly in relation to environmental impacts (Pearson 2002). This perspective often fosters a call for transformative changes in human interactions with the natural world, focusing on sustainability and ecological harmony (Blain 2005).

Moreover, modern Pagan millenarian views often envision a future where society undergoes transformation into a more equitable, just, and sustainable form. This vision frequently incorporates a reconnection with or a return to ancient wisdom and practices, seen as vital for healing the rifts caused by modern industrial and consumerist societies (York 1995).

The evolution of Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs reflects a dynamic interplay between ancient wisdom and contemporary concerns. These beliefs, continuously adapting, offer a unique perspective on the end times, deeply rooted in the natural world and human agency. As humanity confronts increasing environmental and social challenges, these Pagan narratives provide a framework for understanding and responding to the potential for apocalypse and the promise of millenarian transformation (Carpenter 1996).

## Prophecy and Divine Inspiration

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In Pagan traditions, [prophecy](#), divine inspiration, and revelation occupy a distinctive role, particularly within the frameworks of apocalyptic and millenarian narratives. These elements are integrally linked with nature and the human experience of the divine, contrasting with monotheistic traditions where prophecy often signifies a divine mandate or warning (Davidson 1964).

Ancient pagan cultures did not view prophecy as simply foretelling the future; rather, it was a means to discern the Gods' will and the natural order. The Druids in Celtic societies, who were believed to possess prophetic abilities, are believed to have intertwined their predictions with an acute understanding of the natural world and life-death cycles (Green 1993). Similarly, in Norse tradition, the Völva (seeresses) were revered for their foresight and ability to communicate divine guidance, particularly during times of uncertainty (Davidson 1964).

The modern Pagan revival has seen an evolution in the understanding of prophecy, divine inspiration, and revelation. In contemporary Paganism, these elements are often perceived as personal experiences rather than communal doctrines. Many Pagans engage in practices such as meditation, ritual, or other spiritual activities as means of connecting with the divine or spiritual realm, leading to personal insights or revelations that inform their beliefs and actions, including those related to apocalyptic and millenarian perspectives (Rabinovitch and Lewis 2002).

Divine inspiration in contemporary Paganism is closely associated with artistic expression. Many Pagans view their artistic endeavours, be it writing, music, or visual arts, as manifestations of divine inspiration. These creative pursuits offer channels for expressing spiritual truths and exploring complex concepts like apocalypse and renewal, serving as personal spiritual practices and allowing the creator to share insights within the Pagan community (Cowan 2005).

Pagan revelations are often viewed as ongoing processes of personal and communal discovery. Pagans may experience revelations through dreams, nature, ritualistic practices, or introspection. Deeply personal revelations can also bear communal significance, especially when they pertain to broader themes such as the earth's fate or the future of humanity (Greenwood 2000).

In the context of apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs, Pagan revelations frequently highlight the interconnectedness of all life and the cyclical nature of existence. These insights might be seen to provide guidance on potential paths for humanity, warning against environmental neglect or social injustice, or envision a more harmonious and balanced future. Such revelations often prompt a re-evaluation of personal and societal values, advocating for a closer alignment with natural rhythms and a more sustainable lifestyle.

Thus, prophecy, divine inspiration, and revelation within Paganism are vital to its apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs. They offer a means of understanding the world and one's role in it, guiding individuals and communities towards a future in harmony with the natural and spiritual realms. As humanity contends with escalating environmental and social challenges, these Pagan perspectives offer potential paths forward, emphasising the significance of personal spirituality, creativity, and a deep connection with the natural world.

## Sources, Scholarly Interpretation, and Debates

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The investigation of Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian views is an intricate process, drawing from a vast array of sources that range from ancient texts and artefacts to contemporary writings and practices. This diversity in sources presents a complex arena for scholarly interpretation and debate, reflecting the eclectic nature of Pagan beliefs (Davidson 1964; Hutton 1999).

Ancient sources, including myths, legends, and rituals from various Pagan cultures, provide insights into early Pagan perspectives on the apocalypse and millennium. Norse mythology, as exemplified in texts like the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda, introduces pivotal apocalyptic concepts such as Ragnarök. Additionally, Celtic beliefs, partially understood through archaeological finds like the Gundestrup Cauldron, contribute significantly to our comprehension of these ancient viewpoints (Davidson 1964; Green 1993). Scholars employ various analytical approaches—including historical, anthropological, and theological methods—to these ancient sources, leading to debates concerning the consistency and regional variations of these ancient beliefs and practices.

In the modern era, especially following the twentieth-century Pagan revival, a substantial body of literature has emerged, reinterpreting ancient sources and introducing new, evolved beliefs and practices. Influential figures within this movement, such as Gerald Gardner, Doreen Valiente, and Starhawk, have been instrumental in shaping contemporary Wiccan and witchcraft practices, thereby influencing modern Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian views (Adler 1986; Hutton 1999). Scholarly interpretation of these contemporary writings often focuses on the amalgamation of ancient and modern elements, scrutinising the impact of ecological and feminist movements on these beliefs and assessing their relevance in today's societal context.

A pivotal area of scholarly debate in Pagan studies revolves around the authenticity and continuity of Pagan beliefs and practices. This debate encompasses the varying interpretations and emphasis placed on apocalyptic and millenarian themes by different Pagan traditions. While some scholars underscore the ecological and activist slants in modern Pagan apocalyptic views, others advocate for a broader spectrum of beliefs, highlighting more individualistic interpretations (York 1995; Pearson 2002).

Furthermore, the role of globalisation and digital technology in shaping Pagan beliefs has become a significant subject of study. The internet has played a crucial role in facilitating the global dissemination and exchange of Pagan ideas and practices, resulting in both the homogenisation and diversification of beliefs within the community. Scholars explore the impact of digital communication on the development and spread of apocalyptic narratives within Paganism, examining how these technological advancements influence the community's understanding and articulation of these themes (Cowan 2005).

Therefore, the study of apocalyptic and millenarian views in Paganism is characterised by a wealth of sources and a dynamic field of scholarly interpretation and debate. These discussions contribute to a deeper understanding of Paganism's role in addressing contemporary global challenges, offering diverse perspectives on societal transformation and the potential for renewal.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

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Apocalyptic and millenarian views in contemporary Paganism offer a distinctive perspective on the nature of societal and cosmic cycles. Pagan narratives, with their emphasis on cyclical time and interconnectedness, provide an alternative to the linear and terminal visions of the apocalypse prevalent in monotheistic traditions. They challenge audiences to reconsider their relationship with the natural world and their approach to existential threats and societal upheavals.

The Pagan understanding of apocalypse and millennium is deeply rooted in the rhythms of the natural world, reflecting a worldview that sees endings as opportunities for renewal and transformation. This perspective is particularly relevant in our current era, marked by environmental crises and social changes. As humanity grapples with these challenges, the Pagan viewpoint encourages reevaluating our values and practices, advocating for a closer alignment with natural processes and a more sustainable way of living.

Looking to the future, there is a significant potential for further scholarly exploration of these themes within Paganism. The growing interest in ecological spirituality and the global impact of Pagan beliefs on environmental activism and social justice movements present fertile ground for academic inquiry. Future research could focus on how contemporary Pagan communities are actively interpreting and embodying these apocalyptic and millenarian views, particularly in response to global climate change and ecological degradation. Moreover, as Paganism continues to evolve and adapt to modern contexts, it will be essential to explore how these changes influence Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian narratives. The role of digital media and technology in shaping and spreading these beliefs offers another promising avenue for research, considering the increasing interconnectedness of global Pagan communities.

To conclude, the study of Pagan apocalyptic and millenarian views not only enriches our understanding of this diverse religious movement but also contributes to broader discussions about humanity's future and our collective response to the challenges we face. As we move forward, these Pagan perspectives will undoubtedly continue to provide distinctive insights and alternative visions for navigating an increasingly complex world.

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