

‘Tis the Pagan Season

Gentle Pagans Celebrate a Happy Yule

While the tiresome debate rages over whether Target clerks should be wishing their customers, "Happy Holidays," or, "Merry Christmas," Pagans look at the season in a different light.

On Sunday, December 18, about 40 local Pagans celebrated Yule in an upbeat Wiccan-based ceremony at the Unitarian Universalist Church on Benevolent Street in Providence. The 45-minute ceremony, backed by drumming, bagpipes, and guitar, opened with the invocation, "I conjure and create thee, O Circle of power." Circle members ranged from infants to seniors; a few donned robes or other festive garb, but most were casually attired. There was food as well as chants and songs, including a rousing variation of "Deck the Halls" with vigorous drumming.

The Yule celebration marks the winter solstice, when night and day are of equal length. "This is a time when Pagans are celebrating the return of the light, or the metaphorical rebirth of their sun, and thus is a joyous time," says Lorna Buffum of Gaia's Hearth (www.gaiashearth.com), which sponsored the event and is Rhode Island's sole member in the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans.

Buffum, who works as director of Healing Paws, a Barrington-based organization dedicated to wildlife rehabilitation and education, is married to a Christian Unitarian, so she celebrates both Christmas and the solstice. She says the Pagan equivalent of the "Holiday Season" begins not at Thanksgiving, but at Samhain, or Halloween. This marks the end of the Wicca year, and is a time to honor ancestors and the dead, and to acknowledge mistakes and reflect on the past. "It is a solemn time of being inward and introspective," says Buffum. "Then Yule comes and we open our hearts and begin the New Year in joyous fashion."

Many Christian holiday traditions, including the very timing of Christmas, borrow from or build on Pagan beliefs and rituals. Paganism, however, has been left out of the seasonal diversity sweepstakes. The acceptable pantheon includes Christmas, Chanukah, and Kwanza, but not Pagan rituals. "Despite our country's ethnic diversity, there is very little general understanding or tolerance for the concept that none of these [celebrations] might be relevant to someone in our culture," Buffum says.

Should you wish "Merry Christmas" to a Pagan? You certainly could, although "Happy Yule" would be more appropriate. However, even under the umbrella of Paganism — which comprises a number of earth-based animistic spiritual traditions, including Druidism, Wicca, and Norse Heathenism — there are a number of different possible greetings, as well as varying traditions associated with the season.

Gaia's Hearth is probably the most visible Pagan organization in Rhode Island, the nation's most Catholic State, although it is certainly not the only one, and there are several practicing Pan-Hellenic, Norse Heathen, and Wiccan groups. As for those who may perceive Pagans and Wiccans as devil worshipers, Buffum cites a few irresponsible individuals and a generalized

hostility toward earth-based religions as the problem. "Wicca is one of the gentlest, most life-affirming religions there is," she says.

This article originally appeared in the Providence Phoenix December 23, 2005.