Many pagan religions show reverence toward nature, according to Fresno State anthropology instructor Penny Verin-Shapiro, who is finishing up her second year researching pagans in the Central Valley.

Professor finds real witches aren’t out just on Halloween

By Doug Hoagland / The Fresno Bee
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Fresno State instructor Penny Verin-Shapiro has spent hundreds of hours listening to the personal stories and observing the unfamiliar rituals of pagans in the Central Valley. Today is a major holiday for them -- "the pagan New Year's," Verin-Shapiro said.

So tonight, as Halloween trick-or-treaters lurk about in the shadows ringing doorbells, she will continue the serious research she began almost two years ago into pagans, heathens and their practices.

Verin-Shapiro and her 5-year-old son plan to attend a party hosted by a coven of Wiccans, who practice the best-known of the pagan religions. A coven member, Michael Farrell of Fresno, said a quiet ritual might take place in which some members try to communicate with friends or relatives who have died.

While the Central Valley is better known as the Bible Belt of California, the region also is home to Wiccans, witches and other practitioners of nontraditional religions. They represent a slice of America's diversity that is feared, misunderstood and seldom studied in the Valley, Verin-Shapiro said.

Research has been done on pagans elsewhere but not in the Valley, probably because people have underestimated how many live in this region, Verin-Shapiro said. Exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint.

An estimated 500,000 to 700,000 pagans practice their religions in the United States and Canada, and they belong to one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the world, said Sabina Magliocco, professor at California State University, Northridge.

Verin-Shapiro wants to write a book based on her research findings.

At least one pagan speaks hopefully of what the research might accomplish.
When Verin-Shapiro's book comes out, it could help people view pagans more favorably, said Farrell, who considers himself a Wiccan because he worships a god, goddess and nature, and a witch because he practices magic.

"Hopefully people will begin to realize that we aren't evil as the churches have always said we are. We're just different," Farrell said.

Pagans don't worship the devil, don't sacrifice humans, and only some practitioners of voodoo and Santeria -- an Afro-Caribbean religious tradition -- practice animal sacrifice, Verin-Shapiro said.

The 39-year-old wife and mother, who is not a pagan, was raised in a secular Jewish home in Los Angeles. She now attends a Fresno Jewish temple and believes in God. Verin-Shapiro said her research has made her more open-minded spiritually and less afraid of the unknown.

She received a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology from the University of California at Davis and a master's degree in medical and psychological anthropology from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Verin-Shapiro began teaching at Fresno State in 2000. A long-standing interest in witches, combined with teaching an anthropology of religion course at Fresno State, prompted her research. So far, she has done in-depth interviews with 63 men and women, some sessions lasting five to six hours.

"I want to characterize how cohesive a community it is, how do groups regard each other and look at the variety of groups out there and compare and contrast them," Verin-Shapiro said.

One of the first pagan rituals she attended involved 10 men and women gathering in a Fresno park one Sunday afternoon to celebrate the coming of spring. The group also asked the king and queen of the fairies for fertility of plants, animals and people.

They danced around a maypole made with green and pink ribbons, and then took turns jumping over a small fire -- part of the fertility ritual.

That crowd was white and Hispanic. Most of the people Verin-Shapiro has interviewed are white. A majority are female, and some came from religious backgrounds including Baptist, Catholic, Mormon and Jehovah's Witnesses, although a few grew up with pagan traditions.

Pagan religions are attracting people who are dissatisfied with mainstream religions, said Magliocco, professor of anthropology at Cal State Northridge. People are attracted for numerous reasons, she said.

There's creativity in devising rituals. There's an acceptance of feminism. There's environmental consciousness and individual freedom.

In the United States, where Christianity is the dominant religion, Christians have different views of pagans, said Rosemary Radford Ruether, professor of theology at the Claremont School of Theology and Claremont Graduate University in Southern California.

Conservative Catholics and Protestants believe that pagans wrongly worship demons and idols, while their liberal brethren are more accepting, believing people of different religions can have valid ethics and theology, Ruether said.

Verin-Shapiro's students have had the same mixed reactions to pagan guest speakers.

While a few have complained to her that the speakers are too critical of Christianity, one
Christian student this semester said it's been "eye-opening" to learn about paganism.

And Verin-Shapiro's research makes her a better teacher, said Phyllis Johnson, a 48-year-old social work major from Fresno. "It kind of makes it more interesting when you know the teacher has some experience with what they're talking about."

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