

Wicca

History & Development

Vampires and Goths and Wiccans oh my! America has witnessed over the past few decades a tremendous revival of an ancient religion or perhaps instead it has witnessed the birth of an entirely different religion, patched together from numerous sources. The problem is that the participants themselves aren't sure and for the most part don't even care. Driven by pragmatism and their united hatred for organization and institutional religion, the movement spreads through many diverse tributaries, such as Whole Earth Expos, Environmental gatherings and of course the internet. Collectively the movement goes by different names; Neo-Pagans, Wiccan/Witches/practioners of the Craft, Goddess Worshippers and there are very few things which bring them all together.

Inspired by the writings of anthropologist Margaret Murray, who taught that the Christian movement had driven underground the surviving elements of an ancient pagan religion, British civil servant Gerald Gardner started a campaign in the late 1940's to overthrow Britain's 500 year old prohibition against Witchcraft. The success of this movement inspired Gardner to come "out of the broom closet" as it were and declare his allegiance to this "ancient path". Many others followed. Soon Raymond Buckland and various others brought the Craft to America where it started to flourish. Many groups such as the Covenant of the Goddess and the Isis movement incorporated and sought status as legitimate religions. Feeling both emboldened and paranoid the fledgling movement kept its rites and rituals secret and yet numerous books from heretofore-unknown publishers were disseminating

a plethora of titles. *The Spiral Dance* by Starhawk, *Drawing Down the Moon* by Margot Adler and other books started to get national attention. Academics like Marija Gimbutas from UCLA and Joseph Campbell 's numerous PBS specials gave intellectual credence to the idea that the ancient world had worshipped a Goddess and not the Father of Christian or Jewish Faith. This ancient world was marked by peace, love and a passionate care for the Mother of all life – The Earth. Only when the male god showed up out of the Middle East, driving the peace loving religions from their rightful place, did the world go into the destructive cycle of violence and rape of the planet. Propelled by Gerald Gardner's musings on the persecution and an a-historical claim that perhaps 9 million witches were killed by the evil Christian church during the "Dark Ages", movies like the Burning Times were played over and over again on national TV. Spurred on by this newly achieved victim status the wiccan movement spread gathering numerous former Christians who were disillusioned by the loveless atmosphere of their Christian experience and intrigued by the idea of aligning themselves with those "martyrs" who loved Mother Earth, respected the environment and were open to a more tolerant view of homosexuality and a more inclusive attitude towards other religious paths.

On the other hand, scholars like Hutton and Eller have pointed out the discrepancies in Gardner's story, his infatuation with Alistair Crowley the famous occultist (who was also admired by L. Ron Hubbard of Scientology) and his fascination with sex and masonry. Many of Gimbutas's and Campbell's peers in their academic fields cast major flaws about their work, thus undermining the academic support and in the past couple of years even the magic ultimate victim number of 9 million wiccan

“martyrs” has been largely abandoned. But the larger attitude of the participants is what is important here – none of this discussion really matters. The Craft is driven by practice, not by truth or doctrine. If a spell “works” then the practitioners are justified in their beliefs. If it doesn’t work then there is always a different spell or formula to bring about the desired results. Ancient religion or postmodern pastiche, the average believer has an opinion and no seeming desire to find an answer.

Scripture

As eclectic as the Neo-Pagan movement is, there is no Holy writ of any kind. Some are interested in ancient Hindu or Buddhist texts, while others have no interest in anything outside of their own intuition. In fact it is the driving force behind the whole movement that each practitioners is guided by their own understanding and intuition. One can learn from those who have practiced longer or from other sources but ultimately what teaches you is your own connection to the divine within the self, the community, nature and the universe itself.

The most prevalent attitude about the Bible is that it a homophobic, racist, exclusivist text, while at the same time it has been changed innumerably and suffers from various contradictions. Most of course have never read it and show no real desire to do so. It is enough to know that the Bible is full of “hatred” for homosexuals and other marginalized peoples.

The only somewhat similar authority that might be parallel is to certain well know authors/traditions, such as fans of Margot Adler or Starhawk, Gardnerians (Gerald Gardner), Alexandrians (Alex Sanders) and others. But if one presses a

controversial position taken by their favorite author, it is all too easy to just dissent and move on. The most important writing that is involved is that of the Book of Shadows. Each practitioners journals their new- found teachings, ideas and spells, which give practical formulas for obtaining what each participant desires. The Craft celebrates “Desire” which is defined as that which each person wants, without guilt or shame, and only that which harms is prohibited. This is seen in the Wiccan Rede – which states “An it harm none, do what thou wilt”. While some claim this is an ancient rule found through out the various religions, its more likely origin is something that Gardner borrowed from Crowley. But again regardless of its dubious ancient pedigree, Wiccans feel that this is the ultimate moral guideline and thus are free from sexual restrictions of any kind. So quite literally each person seeks out their own path, their own authority, their own divinity and power and ultimately their own desires. And no other can criticize anyone else.

At a meeting of the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago 1993, I attended a meeting taught by Phyllis Currott, head of the Covenant of the Goddess. She illustrated all this by saying, “I am a Wiccan, and this is what Wicca means to me, but I cannot tell anyone else what it means to them.” Then the person next to her said the same thing and the person next to them and so on. This went all around the room. The point was clear – each person decides for himself or herself and no one can decide for another. The Autonomy of the self is prized above any religious text.

Jesus

Interestingly enough, the phenomenon of Jesus being morphed into virtually all the world religions is also present with some Wiccans. Jesus is not the Second Person of the Trinity who incarnated in human form and died for the sins of the world on the Cross, then later resurrecting from the dead, giving instruction to His church and then ascending to Heaven. In that they talk about him, Jesus is an enlightened one or Master Wiccan. He did not do miracles, because pagans do not believe in miracles per se, rather that a wise one can be in touch with the natural (not supernatural in any way) forces of the universe and nature and thus bring about any action that is desired. So Jesus can thus be recast as a Master healer, lover of nature, lover of the marginalized in society. Jesus loved the environment, was fine with homosexuality and is open to all religious traditions and paths. Since the Bible serves no role in the understanding of the person of Jesus, each teacher of the Craft can then paint an entirely new picture of Jesus, suiting their own styles and intuition.

Supreme Being – God

The pagan communities have many varied beliefs concerning who or what God is. One thing they do hold in common is the Goddess. Called by many names such as Isis, Dianna, Brigid, Kali, and so on, the Goddess represents all that is. We all come from the Goddess and will all return to her. Some see this in a classically pantheistic way, seeing the Goddess in every bit of nature, while others see the goddess and a male god (usually the Hunter or Pan) representing the duality of life in nature. The

Goddess again is not a supernatural being, but rather the embodied Spirit within all of nature. Thus all acts of Magick are seen as natural expressions of natural forces. Since the divine is in all, much like the Ramanuja school of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, then each creature is in charge of its surroundings and environment. The divine self within is in charge of its own thoughts and decisions and this again justifies the autonomous nature of the movement. Even pagan groups that feature a priesthood of sorts are such that the priestess/priest is seen as a guide, not an external authority. So the question of a supreme being is muddled and context specific – Some wiccans appear pantheistic, others polytheistic and others seem monotheistic. Like the maze that is Hinduism, it all depends on which witch you are talking to. One other thing of great importance in their passionate fear and concern over being connected to Satanists in any way. Satan to them is a Christian invention, a slur of their beloved good god Pan, and not a part of their beliefs or rituals.

Human Predicament

Much like the Romantic Movement from which some of its sources sprang, the Goddess movement believes that the human condition is essentially good, reflecting its divine nature. The problem then is external and like Rousseau, many pagans believe the church and state are the problem. Left to themselves the “state of nature” of human beings would be peacefully dwelling in earth sensitive communities in tune with the Goddess and each other. But institutional religion and hierarchal political society have created the world’s problems. Many if not most Wiccans are extremely left wing in their political sensibilities or outright anarchists.

“The People” can then be trusted to follow the Rede and the world will be turned to the Goddess and balance will be restored. This belief in the natural status of humans being seen as good allows for sexual openness and freedom. Many rituals are done in the nude (sky clad) depending on the group. Like pagans of old, sacred sex can be seen as cooperating with the natural processes of nature herself. Clearly this notion of humanity has no place for the reality of sin, or transgression or rebellion against a holy God. As we will see later this is a major point for fruitful witnessing.

Salvation

This is perhaps the most offensive idea to most wiccans. By definition if one is a divine spirit embodied in flesh then there is no sense of needing salvation at all. If one is not a sinner in any way, then there is nothing to be saved from. If the question then is what about the afterlife, many pagans talk about going to the “Summerlands” which is a paradise where, depending upon the teacher, one learns and waits for another reincarnation or one might travel to other planets, dimensions, etc. Most pagans believe in some form of reincarnation but it is not systematized in any recognizable way. There are some whose version of reincarnation is somewhat similar to the eternal return of the Atman of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, where the eternal Atman merely sets down one set of clothes and picks up another, but the essential Atman remains the same. Others draw from the Buddhist well and talk about a non-essential self with the scattered parts (will, consciousness, form, etc) being strewn through out the universe in different

manifestations. Like many other pagan ideas there is absolutely no consensus on the afterlife. Are the Summerlands analogous to Nirvana? The Christian Heaven? A reborn planet? Who knows for sure and the pagan doesn't seem to be too concerned about it.

Another point to consider here is the idea of karma. In classic Asian thought, Karma means action and the gurus teach that it cannot be thought of in terms of good or bad, positive or negative and so on. This is because all of reality is Maya or the dream/illusion. One should not be caught up in whatever happens (karma) in the dream. But for the Wiccans, Karma is more often thought of as the good and bad things one does in this life. This westernized view of the ancient Asian thought, sees the world not as an illusion (especially for writers like Starhawk!) but the earth is real and our actions are critical. So critical that Goddess worshippers refer to the "three-fold law of karma". This indicates their notion that whatever one does will be returned to the individual in this life or the next three times over. So Wiccans pronounce how they would never commit violent acts, or other examples of bad behavior, as the fear of having that come back serves as a brake on potential behavior. The Wiccan thus promotes that the threefold law and the Rede are sufficient to keep Wiccan behavior in a positive mode always. Yet ironically there are many examples on the net and in Wiccan literature of sexual abuse in the covens and other overt "evil" or negative acts. So like all human beings the Pagans don't have a foolproof method of checking bad behavior. This also is critical when it comes to witnessing to them.

Last Things

As mentioned in regards to salvation, Pagans are not really focused on end times types of issues. The focus is very much on the here and now. How can I solve my problems now? How can we establish peace and harmony here in this incarnation is much more on their minds. Especially those in the Starhawk camp see political activism towards homosexual issues, environmental concerns, social justice for oppressed peoples as much more important than any afterlife or eschatological beliefs. Another point to make on this is that Pagans revolve their rituals and worship of the Goddess around 8 nature-oriented events. These are: (All dates for 2009)

Imbolc/Moonrise - February 1.

Spring Equinox – March 20

Beltane/Moonrise – May 1

Summer Solstice – June 20

Lughnasah/Moonrise – August 1

Fall Equinox – Sept 22

Samhain/Moonrise – Oct 31

Winter Solstice – Dec 21

As seen here these events correspond to natural events for the Sun, Moon, harvest and so on. Pagans believe in the cycles of the earth and nature and this cycle is past, present and future. The universe is Divine and eternal. There generally is no end in sight. The concern then is not at all similar to a Christian notion of the universe having a beginning in the Creation and a close at the apocalypse. Rather it is about

finding power to get ones desires fulfilled in the earth today. Balance between your own desires and bringing about harmony in nature and the environment are the overarching issues.

Summary of basic pagan beliefs

Pagans/Wiccans/Goddess worshippers are an eclectic group by definition with very few common beliefs other than their belief in the Goddess embodied in nature and the universe. Each practitioner of the old ways or Craft is an authority in themselves and through their wisdom and knowledge of the various rituals and spells, can obtain power to obtain the desires of their hearts. The divine can be seen in the Goddess alone, or in the dualism of Goddess and male consort, or those can be just seen as metaphors for the divine forces in the entire universe. The worship and religious rituals are centered on natural events like the Solstices and harvest. The Wiccan Rede and the threefold law of Karma serve as checks on potential bad behavior. The movement is autonomous to the extreme, with the largest meaningful group being a Coven of up to 13 and all larger affiliations being voluntary and for fellowship not ritual. Sexual and personal freedom is paramount for the followers of the Craft. There is no priest or priestess or authority over each other than the divine within. The afterlife is a brief time of waiting for reincarnation or instruction. Wiccans do not believe in the Devil or Satan and generally look down on what is called Black Magick, which may bring harm and thus violate the Rede.

Witnessing Tips

It is important to remember that in the early days of this new religious movement that virtually all of them have some sort of Christian background, at least in a nominal sense. While that is changing and Pagan “Sunday “ schools and home schooling is a growing phenomenon, there are still some Judeo/Christian sensibilities in the Goddess movement. This is critical in reaching them with the Gospel.

Wiccans denounce the belief in sin and in objective defined evil with their teachings, but virtually every one I have ever talked to or read is passionate about injustice, wars, mistreatment of the environment and so on. The alleged Burning Times, concerning the murder of nine million witches is a great example of this. Even though they are backing away from the number – it is still part of their sensibility that is wrong to murder. On the other hand their autonomous beliefs betrays them here. If each person decides for themselves what is right or wrong and no one is an authority over the divine within me – then how can one judge the inquisitors or Salem magistrates for the alleged murdering of witches – whatever the actual numbers? If murder is objectively wrong then there is a law higher than the autonomous self, and the pagan denies this. But what about the Rede and the threefold law? Well human beings of all religions, philosophies and cultures have proven themselves to be wonderfully pliable when it comes to such things. “Harm” like beauty, seems to be in the eye of the beholder. If autonomy is what the Craft makes of it, then one is free to rationalize any and all behavior. This obviously is not unique to the Wiccan, but is ubiquitous through out human history. But there is

another more basic problem; The Wiccan movement has made its stand on its close association with the Goddess through nature and its cycles. If there is one thing that nature DOES NOT teach – it is non-violence towards other living things. As the Transcendentalist author (nature worshipping himself) quipped, “Nature is red in tooth and claw”. Nature does not teach one to love one’s neighbor. Rather it teaches that one should eat one’s neighbor, especially the weak and infirm. Nature does not teach that one should respect others. Rather it teaches that the life cycles themselves involve a constant picture of life and death struggles with untold numbers of living participants dying while others live off them. In both cases the Goddess worshipper is betrayed by their own key ideas of connectedness with nature and autonomy. The real ancient pagan cultures truly connected with the patterns they see in nature as manifested in rituals of sacred sex, sacred dance and most critically - sacred death/sacrifice. The modern/postmodern pagans adore and venerate sacred sex and dance but eschew sacred death. But death is an obvious part of the natural cycle and it is usually random, senseless and violent. So as Paul teaches that even the Pagans have a God-given conscience (the Law written on their hearts in Romans 2), then it is important for the Christian witness to take seriously the moral concerns as best as one can about things like murder, then push the pagan to take seriously how that is a moral issue. Is murder truly up to the autonomous person’s choice? If so there is no moral concern. Is murder always wrong at all times in all places, including the murder of witches in medieval Europe? If so then there must be an explanation for the universality of the moral code. Nature cannot be a solution as nature is filled with “murder”/natural acts every day on a huge

scale. If humans are just part of nature in the meaningful sense the pagans assert, and violence is normative throughout nature, then the pagan cannot assert that murder is wrong when the contrary evidence is ever in front of us. Since murder is objectively wrong, and the witches own concerns reveal that, then the only explanation for an external, objective, universal law is an external, objective, universal lawgiver. As Kant and Lewis and others have well argued, the fact of moral universals is proof of a larger source for that morality. It cannot be left to subjectivity or perspective or cultural construction, for that opens the door to murder being acceptable and even moral in different contexts. Most pagans are passionate pacifists and do not want murder to be optional. But if the only real candidate for a larger source for the universals is nature, which is itself full of random violence, then the pagan is grasping for a foundation.

Here the Christian Gospel can be asserted powerfully. Because the Bible does take sin/evil seriously, we can find common ground with the Goddess worshippers concern over injustice, murder and mistreatment of women, etc. This also reveals to the Wiccan that the Father God of the Bible, who is so often caricatured in Goddess literature (e.g. the male God of the Bible allows men to abuse women) is the very one who tells the husband to love his wife and even give his life for her. It is the Father who condemns the abuse of women in the Mosaic Law. It is the Father who condemns murder of the innocent and demands protection for the widow and the orphan and the alien immigrants. as well as the Creation accounts showing the Father's concern for the environment,

We, just like the pagans, can show our outrage for the destruction brought to the world and to people, but unlike the pagan, we know why this is so. We are not inherently good, but tragically flawed. The very same people who can affirm their love for their children can moments later kill the children of others. The very same people who desire justice for themselves can at the same time be so unjust to others. Hypocrite! The pagan cries out. True enough I respond. That is why I need a savior. And that is why you need a savior. It is not enough to have a law, whether from Moses or the Rede. All of us fail and that is why the world looks as it does. As Chesterton pointed out, the doctrine of original sin is empirically verified. The Wiccan denies the title but mourns the actuality. Since this is not a problem of wisdom or knowledge or enlightenment (we both know what is right and what is wrong), then there must be another solution. Pagans only offer more of the same cycle that has allegedly always been. Where is the hope in that? People will get better in their next incarnation? Where is the proof of that? If nature is eternal then we have already been reincarnated millions of times at least. Where then is the improvement? We seem to be even more proficient at murder than we have ever previously been. The cycles of nature stand mute about human change. But the incarnation of the divine into the natural world, as in Jesus Christ who is God incarnate in the natural form of mankind, is an interruption to the pagan cycles. Jesus whose heart for the hurting, his concern for the poor and weak, his concern for women and others is all on record in the New Testament. But Jesus came for much more than that. He came to pay the price for our sins, for our destructive choices that we all do and for the overwhelming destruction that we ourselves have brought

upon this world. So famously the Bible says – For God so loves the world that He gave his only son, who whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. It is the Father's desire to save us from ourselves and our own destruction. This is why the Cross, (so hated in pagan circles except as a Magick Talisman or symbol) is so important. In the Cross the pagan can see both God's own sacrificial love, the love of Jesus who gave his life for others and the justice of God as well. Not in personal karma payback of some sort but that the Lord himself took on all our failures and rebellion, and made a way for others to benefit from his mercy. So instead of paying for my actions (read Karma) I can receive real forgiveness and grace. The Father offers this gift to the world and we can choose to accept His grace. In the actual physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead we see the power of God over the cycle of birth and death. This is the same power that can change anyone, including this hypocrite, into a person who can love and show mercy to others. The Rede says harm none, but nature is full of harm. Jesus says the two greatest things are to love God (who is outside of you) and your neighbor (who is likewise outside of you) If you as people are the divine then it is the divine that is responsible that is responsible for environmental destruction, abuse of women and children and mass murder in the world. If you are the divine then the divine is part of the problem. (The divine killing the divine at Auschwitz, Rwanda, Kampuchea, etc???) But if the divine is separate from us then God can be the solution since He is not part of the problem.

So in the Gospel message the Wiccan can find real hope for change for individuals, a promise of a true paradise where the wolf will lie with the lamb and the boy can

play with the snake. A time where is no tears, because we will be different and the true Lord will live with us.

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