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## Wicca as Nature Religion

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Wicca or Pagan Witchcraft is the most popular branch of contemporary Western Paganism. Its self-image is that of an 'old religion'; a reawakening of the spiritual values, ideas, ideals and practices of Pagan ancestors. Amongst these ideas is a romantic veneration of 'Nature'. Nature is considered to be ensouled, alive, 'divine': Wiccan beliefs encompass elements of pantheism and animism. The divine is described both as an impersonal 'force' or 'energy' manifest in the world of nature and as deities – Goddess and God – who are venerated in ritual in different forms at different seasons of the year. These forms draw on images of wild and untamed nature – the Huntress God, the Green Man of the forest, the Sun God, and agricultural deities, such as Corn Goddess and Corn God. Themes and symbols drawn from nature are central to Wiccan belief and practice, but harken back to a world far removed from the experience of most Wiccans. How does Wicca view its relationship to the world of nature and does Wiccan belief and practice provide a basis for an environmental ethic?

### What is Wicca?

The great Sun, moving in the heavenly houses, has left the House of the Fishes for the House of the Water-Bearer. In the coming age shall humanity be holy, and in the perfection of the human shall we find the humane. Take up the manhood into Godhead, and bring down the Godhead into manhood, and this shall be the day of God with us; for God is made manifest in Nature, and Nature is the self-expression of God (Fortune 1976 ed., p.173).

These words were written not by a Wiccan, but appear in the novel *The Sea Priestess* (1938) by the esoteric novelist, psychotherapist and proto-Pagan Dion Fortune (Violet Firth) whose works are frequently read and quoted by Wiccans. A Wiccan might choose to

say 'the divine' or 'Goddess' rather than 'God', but would echo the sentiment that the divine is immanent in human beings and in nature.

So what is Wicca? Wicca is the name given by its practitioners to the religion of Witchcraft. The word 'Wicca' derives from the Anglo-Saxon word for witch and has been used in its present sense since the 1950s. Within the Wiccan community, the term 'Witchcraft' is used in a special sense to mean a Pagan mystery religion and nature religion which worships Goddess and God and is open to both men and women. The words 'Witchcraft' and 'Witch' are often capitalised by practitioners to distinguish their form of 'Witchcraft' from anthropological and other uses of the word.

The 'founding father' of modern Wicca was Gerald Gardner, a colonial administrator with a long-standing interest in folklore and naturism. On his return to England on retirement in the 1930s, Gerald Gardner claimed to have made contact with a group of people practicing Witchcraft. The Witches met in the New Forest in Hampshire in a small group, a coven, with a system of initiation not dissimilar to the three degrees of Freemasonry. The group practiced activities traditionally associated with witchcraft such as casting spells, but these were for beneficial and altruistic purposes. The Witches also worshipped their Gods through seasonal rites. A strong distinction was made between Witchcraft and Satanism. The Witches did not consider themselves to be Satanists or to be members of an anti-Christian cult; rather they claimed to be Pagans, worshippers of pre-Christian deities, the keepers of the 'Old Religion', whose ancestors had practiced Paganism underground and secretly for centuries since its suppression by the Christian Church.

The veracity of Gerald Gardner's claim that his group was practicing an ancient form of faith handed down in secrecy over generations is a subject of much debate within the Wiccan community. Regardless, however, of whether he was reviving an ancient tradition or launching a new religion, Gerald Gardner's books and in particular *Witchcraft Today* (1954) succeeded in spawning a Wiccan movement which has spread firstly into other English speaking countries -- the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; secondly into countries such as the Netherlands and Scandinavia, where his books have been readily accessible because English is widely used as a second language; and more recently, from the early 1980s onwards, into countries such as Germany, where Gardner's works and those of his successors have been translated. Interestingly, Wicca has had little appeal in Catholic countries and few books have been translated into French, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese. There is little interest in Wicca in Ireland, for instance, despite the absence of language barriers and the residence there of two of Wicca's most prolific authors -- Janet and Stewart Farrar. The reasons for this are unclear. One could speculate that Wicca's emphasis on the feminine in the form of the Goddess and its use of ritual might be more novel and therefore attractive features to those of a Protestant background. Alternatively, those in Catholic countries who are seeking alternative forms of spirituality may be less likely to experiment with a religion which contains deities such as the Horned God and practices (in some groups at least) of ritual nudity which would be difficult to reconcile with their earlier religious teachings.

How large is this movement? Wicca is the most active branch of the Pagan movement. Extrapolating from the membership figures of the UK based Pagan Federation, which is the largest European organization in the field and possibly the largest world-wide,

it is likely that over half of all Pagans would describe themselves as practicing some kind of Wicca. However, given that most Wiccans do not join membership organizations of any kind but belong to small autonomous groups or are solo practitioners, numbers are difficult to assess. Harvey and Hardman (1996 p.ix) estimate that there are between 50,000 and 100,000 Pagans (Wiccans, Druids, followers of the Northern Tradition and others) in the UK. Walter Schwartz, religious correspondent of *The Guardian* gives an estimate of 100,000 Pagans. The *Daily Telegraph* plumps for more -- 200,000. The newspaper figures seem inflated, but the Pagan movement as a whole is growing, and within that Wicca.

## **Wicca's Self Image**

### **Margaret Murray**

If Gardner's account of the historical continuity of Wicca with ancient Paganism is suspect, where did his information about and images of Wicca originate? Gardner's image draws heavily on that of the controversial folklorist, anthropologist and Egyptologist Dr Margaret Murray of University College London. Two of her books were extremely influential in the formation of modern Witchcraft, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*, first published in 1921, and *The God of the Witches*, which followed ten years later in 1931.

Margaret Murray's books are not good history but represent a selective presentation and interpretation of the facts. Her thesis, which Gerald Gardner was later to adopt, was that the witches persecuted in the sixteenth and seventeenth century witch trials in Europe and the United States were not devil-worshippers, or the victims of society's hysteria and paranoia, but were Pagans who worshipped the Horned God and practiced magic. In Murray's view, theirs was a cult which derived directly from an ancient Paganism which had co-existed secretly with Christianity with little active persecution until the witch trials. Moreover, it was protected by those in high places. Many of the English kings were said by Murray to have been sympathetic to the Pagan cause, if not active leaders of it. William II (William Rufus), hitherto more famous for his homosexuality than his spirituality, was recast by Murray as a sacrificial king in the James Frazer mould and the secret leader of the witch-cult.

For Margaret Murray, Witchcraft (she does not use the word 'Wicca') involved rain-making and fertility rituals. It was much like any tribal culture she would have studied as an anthropologist. She writes of familiars, the Horned God, coven leadership and discipline (here seen mainly as male-led), and Witches' death and rebirth myths. Witchcraft is a fertility cult which worships a dying and resurrecting God. The focus on a Goddess which Gardner later introduced is not apparent here. Murray's image draws on the Cambridge school of anthropology and in particular on Sir James Frazer's famous study of myth, *The Golden Bough*. For Murray, the Witches' God is not only the Horned God of hunt and forest, he is the sacrificial victim, the corn God of the harvest, the dying and resurrecting God. These ideas permeated from James Frazer into anthropology and literature and can be found not only in Margaret Murray, but in Jessie Weston's understanding of the Grail myth in *From Ritual to Romance* (1921), Naomi Mitchinson's novel *The Corn King and the Spring Queen* (1931) and history teacher Henry Treece's novel *The Golden Strangers* (1956). Murray writes:

The chants used by the witches, the dances, the burning of the god and the broadcast scattering of his ashes, all point to the fact that this was a fertility cult; and this is the view taken by those contemporary writers who give a more or less comprehensive account of the religion and ritual. (Murray 1921, p.169)

### **Gerald Gardner**

Gerald Gardner's books cover similar subject matter to those of Margaret Murray. In fact, his *Witchcraft Today* was introduced by Murray. Murray as an academic had created an historical basis for a Pagan Witch-cult and Gardner claimed to have found it still in existence in his day.

In Gerald Gardner's books, Wicca is described as the remnants of Northern and Western European Paganism with influences from the Classical Mysteries. Its origins were said to lie in the Stone Age, but it has been suppressed by the Christian Church, which identified its Horned God, named in different parts of Europe as Pan, Cernunnos or Herne, with the Christian Devil. Wicca was not therefore a 'New Religious Movement' but a 'Revived Religious Tradition'.

Gardner describes Witchcraft as a fertility cult, but little mention is made of nature religion *per se*. He is also interested in magical powers and the traditional image of the Witch as caster of spells. However, despite Margaret Murray's portrayal of the Witch as rain-maker, Gardner comments specifically (Gardner 1954, pp.126-7) that modern witches do not make rain. There is much discussion about the use of dance within a nine-foot radius circle as a way of raising magical power. Witches are described as worshipping the Gods at four major 'Gaelic' festivals: Hallowe'en, Samhain, or Samhuin (1 November); Brigid (1 February); Bealtaine or Beltane (1 May), Lughnasadh (1 August) (Gardner 1954, p.130). The festivals that fall in autumn and winter are described as festivals for the God and the spring and summer festivals are dedicated to the Goddess. The deities are seen in what would now be described as sexually stereotyped ways. The God is described as a protector, the Lord of Death and giver of rebirth; the Goddess is described as 'sweetness and beauty'.

More interestingly, the Goddess is also described as 'the soul of nature'. Below is an excerpt from a text known as the 'Great Mother Charge', which has become a standard part of Wiccan ritual liturgy.

Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess; she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven; whose body encircles the universe.

I, who am the beauty of the green earth and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the desire of the heart of man, call unto thy soul. Arise, and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature, who gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed, and unto me all things must return; and before my face, beloved of Gods and of men, let thine inmost divine self be enfolded in the rapture of the infinite. (Quoted in Farrar and Farrar 1984, p.298)

Here, direct links are made between the Wiccan Goddess and the world of nature. Wicca enjoins the exaltation of women, the Goddess and nature.

Wicca as presented by Gardner is not a world-transforming revolutionary movement. It is 'world-affirming' in the sense that the created world is to be enjoyed, but Gardner's Wicca looks to stability, the preservation of ancient tradition, and the revival of an 'Old Religion' which is in danger of dying out, rather than being a radical new movement seeking social reform. Gerald Gardner's vision of society can be found in *Witchcraft Today*.

The witch wants quiet, regular, ordinary good government with everyone content and happy, plenty of fun and games when you are alive, all fear of death being taken away; as you grow older, you rather welcome the idea of death, as an abode of peace and rest, where you grow young again, ready to return for another round on earth. (Gardner 1954, p.127)

Although the emphasis is on this world and on reincarnation to return the believer to it, Wicca is also concerned with the inner world and the 'Otherworld'; presumably because experience of these other dimensions can enhance human enjoyment of life on the material plane. Gardner writes:

Witchcraft was, and is, not a cult for everybody. Unless you have an attraction to the occult, a sense of wonder, a feeling that you can slip for a few minutes out of the world into the world of faery, it is of no use to you. (Gardner 1954, p.29)

### **Doreen Valiente**

Gardner's books, magazine articles and radio broadcasts created an interest in Wicca and the beginning of the Wiccan movement. However, there was a major flaw in the image of Wicca as presented by Murray and Gardner -- Wicca as a fertility religion. Why would a fertility cult appeal to modern worshippers who, with some exceptions, were more likely to be preoccupied with birth control than fertility? The answer was supplied by an initiate of Gerald Gardner's Witch coven who later went on to develop her own form of Witchcraft -- Doreen Valiente. A prolific writer of formative books, but not an initiator and hence direct creator of other Witches, Doreen Valiente recasts the concept of fertility in her own image. She writes in *An ABC of Witchcraft Past and Present* (1973):

But, the sceptic may say, what place have the rites of an ancient fertility cult in the modern world at all? Do we still need to perform these old rituals in order to make the crops grow? And as for increasing the population, isn't the world grossly over-populated already?

The answer is that all things, including living religions, evolve; and the Craft of the Wise is a living religion. Over the years, we have begun to see a new concept of the idea of fertility; one that is not only material, but also of the mind and the soul.

The creative forces are not only creative in the physical sense; they can also beget and give birth to art, music, poetry and literature. We speak of people's minds being 'fertile' or 'barren'. We talk of 'cultivating' ideas as well as fields; of new 'conceptions' of a better way of living. There is a spiritual as well as a material fertility;

and human life is a desert without it. These are the aims towards which sincere and intelligent present-day Pagans, witches, and Nature-worshippers are tending.

The spirit of the old rites, therefore, continues; but in a higher form. The concern is not so much with literal fertility as with vitality, and with finding one's harmony with Nature. In this way, people seek for a philosophy of life which bestows peace of mind, as well as physical satisfaction. (Valiente 1973, p.135)

Doreen Valiente had also described her rationale for the practice of Witchcraft some years before in her after dinner speech at the 1964 annual dinner of *Pentagram*, a Witchcraft magazine.

What witches seek for in celebrating these seasonal festivals is a sense of oneness with Nature, and the exhilaration which comes from contact with the One Universal Life. People today need this because they are aware of the tendency of modern life to cut them off from their kinship with the world of living Nature; until their own individuality is processed away, and they begin to feel as if they are just another cog in a huge, senseless machine.

It is the reaction against this feeling which is attracting people's interest in Witchcraft today. They want to get back to Nature, and be human beings again, as She intended them to be.

Doreen Valiente's Wicca has similar purposes to those of Gardner, '...a philosophy of life which bestows peace of mind, as well as physical satisfaction'. However, it is no longer a fertility religion, but a nature religion.

### **Eco-Wicca**

A nature religion implies a nature to worship. The idea that nature was being exploited, desouled, desacralised and that our environment was in danger was not new to the 1970s. This was a common theme of artists, writers, poets, philosophers, religious thinkers and others from the eighteenth century onwards. However, with the increased pace of industrialisation throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, it was a matter of increasing concern. Here, for instance, is Lord Dunsany's 'The Prayer of the Flowers' which appeared in *Fifty One Tales* (1915) and appealed sufficiently to modern Witches and Pagans to be reproduced by Pagans Against Nukes in the Lughnasadh 1984 edition of their magazine *The Pipes of Pan*.

It was the voice of the flowers on the West wind, the loveable, the old, the lazy West wind, blowing ceaselessly, blowing sleepily, going Greecewards.

'The woods have gone away, they have fallen and left us, men love us no longer, we are lonely by moonlight. Great engines rush over the beautiful fields, their ways lie hard and terrible up and down the land.

'The cancerous cities spread over the grass, they clatter in their lairs continually, they glitter about us blemishing the night.

'The woods are gone, O Pan, the woods, the woods. And thou art far, O Pan, and far away.'

I was standing by night between two railway embankments on the edge of a Midland city. On one of them I saw the trains go by, once in every two minutes, and on the other the trains went by twice in every five.

Quite close were the glaring factories, and the sky above them wore the fearful look that it wears in dreams of fever.

The flowers were right in the stride of that advancing city, and thence I heard them sending up their cry. And then I heard, beating musically upwind, the voice of Pan reproving them from Arcady -- 'Be patient a little, these things are not for long.'

Concern about environmental issues gathered pace during the twentieth century. Initially, concern focused on access to the environment. Urbanisation, coupled with cheap public transport and later the car brought a desire for and the possibility of leisure access to the countryside. In the 1920s, the Ramblers' Association led mass trespasses to secure access to the countryside for the urban masses. Later concerns focused on the preservation of the planet and of the environment. In the 1950s young and old marched against nuclear weapons; in the 1970s environmental pollution became the rallying cause. Nature was on the agenda.

During the 1970s, a whole new generation was being drawn into Wicca. These were not middle-class ex-colonials who were part of the 'establishment', as many of Gerald Gardner's generation had been, but younger people influenced by the Hippie era of peace, love and student demonstrations. Some were commune dwellers. Here, for instance, is a quote from an application letter written by a would-be member of a now defunct organisation, the British and Irish Pagan Movement, which was published in the Midsummer 1971 edition of its magazine *Waxing Moon*.

I'd like to join the Pagan Movement. I'm very glad that something like this exists; I heard about it as you know through the Commune Movement, and the two have a lot linking them together, I think, in many ways. I've been interested in the wica [sic] for several years now, not so much from the ritual magic angle but from the fact that witches seem to be more in harmony with the earth, with nature and with PLACES. ... My interests generally accord with the Commune Movement and an ecological, harmonious, non-violent approach to life in general.

The word 'ecological' is important here. Stimulated by those who had participated in the 'Alternative Society' of the 1960s and 1970s, the ethos of Wicca and Paganism was beginning to evolve from nature veneration to nature preservation. In 1981, the organisation Pagans Against Nukes (PAN) was formed. Its aims and objectives were displayed prominently in its magazine *Pipes of Pan* which appeared throughout most of the 1980s.

Pagans Against Nukes (PAN) is an activist organisation dedicated to the banishment of nuclear technology from our Earth, and the re-establishment of a culture that lives in harmony with Her. We seek to co-ordinate all Pagans, of whatever land and tradition, in political and magical work to achieve this end, that the Earth be Greened Anew.

On the other side of the Atlantic, similar ideas were permeating the US Wiccan community. From the late 1960s onwards, Wicca began a strong period of growth in the United States. Gerald Gardner's books became known and within the United States books began to be written about Wicca by Witches such as Sybil Leek and Lady Sheba who were media-friendly and keen self-publicists. The image presented of Wicca by these early US books was drawn from the British template. In fact, Sybil Leek was English and had started her Witch career in the New Forest. However, a more radical interpretation of Wicca was to emerge from the American Witch Starhawk, one of the generation who had experienced student life in the 1970s. Her book *The Spiral Dance* (1979) was to have an enormous impact. Starhawk's description of the history of Witchcraft draws on the picture presented by Murray and Gardner.

Witchcraft is a religion, perhaps the oldest religion, extant in the West. Its origins go back before Christianity, Judaism, Islam -- before Buddhism and Hinduism, as well, and it is very different from all the so-called great religions. The Old Religion, as we call it, is closer in spirit to Native American traditions or to the shamanism of the Arctic. It is not based on dogma or a set of beliefs, not on scriptures or a sacred book revealed by a great man. Witchcraft takes its teachings from nature, and reads inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon and stars, the flight of birds, the slow growth of trees, and the cycles of the seasons (Starhawk 1979 ed., pp.2-3).

In Starhawk's work, there is however much greater emphasis on the 'aliveness' of nature.

To Witches, as to other peoples who live close to nature, all things -- plants, animals, stones, and stars -- are alive, are on some level conscious beings. All things are divine, are manifestations of the Goddess. (Starhawk 1979 ed., p.20)

For her, Wicca includes the by now standard ritual forms, Goddess and Horned God worship, and magic, but there is also a new element: Wicca as the basis for radical action. Starhawk sees Wicca as encompassing active environmentalism.

Meditation on the balance of nature might be considered a spiritual act in Witchcraft, but not as much as cleaning up garbage left at a campsite or marching to protest an unsafe nuclear plant. (Starhawk 1979 ed., p.12)

The transition is significant. Wicca had moved out of the darkness, the occult world of witchery, to occupy the moral high ground -- environmentalism. To be at one with nature in one's inner self is no longer enough; radical action to preserve nature is now important.

Just as the commune and Hippie movement brought an influx of people into Wicca in the 1970s, so environmental activism brought in a new generation in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of today's Wiccans belong to environmental groups, some Wiccan and Pagan groups are created specifically to focus on environmental concerns, and many cite environmental concerns as one of their reasons for becoming Wiccan. Here, for instance, is a brief biography of one of the founders of the Dragon organisation.

[His] environmental campaigning began in the early 1980s while studying philosophy and literature at Essex University. His interest in philosophy and the environment led to Paganism and thence to the formation of the Dragon Environmental Group, a Pagan organisation combining environmental work with eco-magic. He was initiated into Wicca in 1991. (Harvey, and Hardman 1996, p.vii)

Dragon was created to practice 'eco-magic', that is rituals and spells to oppose road building programmes and other projects with negative environmental impact, and to stimulate environmental awareness. Its rituals are public and take place at threatened sites.

It can be argued that from nature worship to environmentalism and back again is a logical progression. This idea is explored in *Pantheism: A non-theistic concept of deity* (1994) by Michael P. Levine of the Philosophy Department of the University of Western Australia in relation to one approach to the divine which is apparent in Wicca.

Pantheism gives rational confirmation to the sense of unity with Nature which so many people ... have experienced. From the most primitive vegetation rites to the most sophisticated poetry there is a vast and varied testimony to the fact that the human mind has a spontaneous tendency to feel oneness with natural phenomena, and to see in them a manifestation of the Spirit in which they too participate. This feeling and this vision constitute a perennial strand in 'natural piety'. (H.P. Owen quoted in Levine 1994, p.355)

This 'natural piety' impacts on the pantheist's relationship to the earth. Here, Levine quotes Harold W. Wood Jr., a founder of the Universal Pantheist Society.

Instead of a 'conquer the Earth' mentality, pantheism teaches that respect and reverence for the Earth demands continuing attempts to understand ecosystems. Therefore, among religious viewpoints, pantheism is uniquely qualified to support a foundation for environmental ethics ... by learning to celebrate and revere such natural events ... people would be less likely to permit unfettered pollution to take place ... acid rain would not be seen as merely an inconvenience, but as a travesty against a holy manifestation ... Pantheist ethics has as its goal a closeness with nature ... a relationship with nature equivalent to traditional religion's relationship with God. It is closeness based not upon imitation, but upon reverential communion. (Levine, 1994, p.227)

In taking to environmental activism, Wicca has not abandoned its magical roots. Today, Wiccans not only campaign against environmental abuse and misuse and engage in physical work to reclaim environmentally damaged sites, they also petition their Gods and do acts of magic designed to influence the minds of polluters to change their policies and actions. This is logical in a belief system where the material and the spiritual are often seen as a series of 'levels' (Farrar and Farrar 1984, pp.106-13). 'As above so below, but after another fashion' often appears in Wiccan writings and is a reworking of the saying attributed to Hermes Trismegistus from the body of Neoplatonist texts, the *Corpus Hermeticum*. For the Wiccan, if it is to be effective, action on one level (the magical/spiritual) must be backed up by action on the physical plane.

In reinforcing physical action by spiritual activity, and *vice versa*, contemporary Wiccans are acting in a way not dissimilar to, say, a Christian Socialist or a medical missionary. However, the Christian focus has tended to be primarily on human concerns; although environmentalism is now rapidly entering the Christian agenda. Wiccan altruism is less human-focused. It reflects a world view which sees humankind as one of many species; better endowed intellectually but possibly having no spiritual superiority to other species. The Pagan Federation's first mass activity was to declare an annual Earth Healing Day. Members alone or in groups are encouraged to conduct a public, outdoor ritual which has the aim of healing the Earth. This takes place at a certain time on a certain day. (Overseas members synchronize with GMT.) However, the rite is preceded by action on the physical plane. Members are encouraged to conduct rituals at sites that are under environmental threat, such as polluted beaches, and to clean up the site before their rite. Members are also encouraged to take a more long-term environmental stance by joining environmental organisations and through lobbying Members of Parliament about local environmental issues.

### **Conclusion**

Wicca is undergoing a transition from an esoteric occult tradition to a more open exoteric movement with environmentalism high on the agenda. This has implications for the way in which Wiccans lead their everyday lives. 'Founding father' Gerald Gardner's focus was on continuity with the past and on how Wiccans might be in contact with the spiritual/magical realm and hence enhance their everyday lives. Modern Wicca is concerned, like the Western Pagan movement as a whole, with the condition of nature and with its future. Open 'Earth Healing' and eco-magic rituals encourage an environmentalist agenda which must have political overtones. Nature exists 'out there' in the world, rather than in the inner, closed and secretive world of the occultist. The transition from fertility cult to nature religion and from secretive rituals to pantheist activism can be expected to change Wicca from an occult tradition to a more mainstream movement broadly in sympathy with the aspirations and concerns of many in the post-modern world.

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