

Gardnerian Wicca

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"Wicca." Many things flood the mind upon hearing that word. To many people, it is synonymous with devil worship, fortune telling, and even human sacrifices. Images of black pointed hats gracing green wrinkled faces burst on the imagination. Is this the truth about Wicca? Is it all about little old ladies running around a cauldron in the company of unruly black cats? Is Wicca in fact devil worship?

A study of the subject will show that there are many different sects collected under the umbrella of "Wicca." Specifically, there are 28 main branches that are present throughout the world. Keep in mind, though, that these are only the most prominent branches. Because of the relativistic nature of the religion many other unknown sects exist, and many more could develop in years to come. There are significant differences in some of the sects; however they are all very accepting of one another. One Wiccan scholar writes:

As you can see by the number and variety of branches of Wicca, there is really no end of "traditions" that can arise in the religion of Witchcraft, and there is also no end to the disagreements over the definition of any named branch. Wicca is what any witch makes it, as long as the branch is based upon Pagan ideas and deities.¹

¹D. J. Conway, WICCA: The Complete Craft (Toronto: The Crossing Press, 2001), 19.

The purest and perhaps most widely practiced form of Wicca, though, is the branch known as *Gardnerian Wicca*. This is also perhaps the sect that holds to the most traditional Wiccan teachings and practices. All other Wiccan sects share at least some things in common with Gardnerian Wicca, and many sects that exist today are off-shoots from this very branch.

With that said, this paper will be an examination of the Gardnerian tradition of Wicca in order to gain a better understanding of the sect itself. We will deal with are the areas of its history, its founding, its ethics and belief systems, its dietary tendencies (if any) and its worship rituals.

It is hard to say when exactly Wicca began as a religion. Its adherents call it the "Old Way", referring to the Paganism that has been common throughout the world during recorded history.² There does not seem to be an ancient religion or version of shamanism that has not been claimed by someone or other as the root of Wicca. Conway writes,

The fundamental roots of Wicca lie in the very beginning of spiritual seeking on this planet. Although there are no written records to confirm this, statues and wall paintings portray scenes of ceremonies that are very similar to the ceremonies used by later Pagan cultures and by Witches today.³

2 Gerina Dunwich, *Wicca Craft* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1991), 18.

3 D. J. Conway, *WICCA: The Complete Craft* (Toronto: The Crossing Press, 2001), 8.

We also know of a number of ancient sculptures that depict a female goddess along with a male god. Since this idea is also incorporated into Wicca, Wiccans leap to the conclusion that there existed elements of Wicca very early in human civilization. This notion is generally held very high by Wiccans because they feel that it gives them more credence and respectability.

Regardless of these historical speculations, Gardnerian Wicca as a recognized branch has only been around since the early 1950's. This form of Wicca was founded by Gerald Gardner and is seen as giving rise to the modern witchcraft revival movement.

[Gardnerian Wicca] is generally considered to be the starting Tradition of the modern witchcraft movement. Gardnerian Wicca is another of British Traditionals and is highly structured, with firm requirements in both time and skills that have to be met for advancement through the various degrees. Self-initiation is not possible in Gardnerian Wicca; thus it is not a viable path for Solitaires.⁴

Gerald Gardner was born in 1884, to a rich family in Blundellsands, near Liverpool. He had 3 siblings; one younger brother and two older brothers. Because of health problems and at the suggestion of the family nurse, he was taken to spend what he thought would be the winter in France. However, this

⁴Gary Cantrell, *Wiccan Beliefs and Practices* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2001), 35.

trip turned into life-long journey that would lead him around the world.

While he was a young man he spent a lot of time alone in the jungles of Borneo and Malaysia, which eventually lead him to develop friendships with the local natives. Gardner took to this very much, and became very much a part of their lives. During this time he studied their religious beliefs and also did extensive reading in the area of Spiritualism. His further travels lead him to many more diverse places and professions, and the more he traveled the more he studied. He did significant work in the area of archaeology and was given an honorary Doctorate by the University of Singapore.

All through his life Gardner maintained an interest in the occult and adopted a mixed view based on what he had experienced with the jungle tribes he lived with years before. Just before the start of World War Two, Gardner took part in a Covens initiation ceremony. (A coven is a group of Wiccans who meet together and practice.) After the war was over, he visited New Orleans to study Voodoo. Not long after that, he published a fictional book that illustrated the "true face of witchcraft".

In 1953 Gardner initiated Doreen Valiente into the Craft. She became very influential in shaping what was to become known as Gardnerian Witchcraft. Gardner found the Book of Shadows of his original coven sadly lacking, so he decided

to correct it using his knowledge of religio-magic and by borrowing heavily from a wide variety of sources.⁵

His student, Valiente, worked with him in order to help him keep a more balanced view of the feelings and philosophies of the Old Way. What resulted from this compilation was the Gardnerian Book of Shadows, which is now in use in countries all around the world.

This, then, is the basic history of how Gardnerian Wicca was founded. Gardnerian Wiccans are those Wiccans who use his Book of Shadows, and who adopt his view of Wicca blended with further teachings of Spiritualism and Voodoo. Gardner is seen today as the founder of the modern Wicca movement and is very well known by those who are familiar with the Occult.

Buckland says concerning him that: "Gardner's books established him as the spokesperson for the Old Religion (Wicca)."⁶ It is for this reason that almost all Wicca that is taking place today is in some aspect Gardnerian in nature. But what exactly are the basic ethics and beliefs of Gardnerian Wicca? What distinguishes it from the other 27 branches that exist in the world today?

The first basic belief of Gardnerian Wicca is that it is polytheistic, as are all Wiccans for that matter. The deities

⁵ Raymond Buckland, The Wiccan Book (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2002), 202.

⁶ Ibid., 202.

that are emphasized are male and female, however it is the female who is more powerful.

It is the goddess who controls the cycles of nature and has the power of magic, called *seidh*... She uses natural substances in the practice of magic, including sexual activity, as done in the Eastern Tantric practice.⁷

This feature clears up the question why throughout history the majority of those persons involved in Wicca are women. The female deity is seen as the one who is the head, and the male deity is seen as her helper or servant. The domain of the goddess is seen as the night sky. According to one Wiccan authority: "She is invoked each esbat as the Silver Lady of the Night, the full moon, ruling the tides of the oceans and the cycles of women."⁸

This belief explains why Gardnerian Wicca and all forms of Wicca celebrate the phases of the moon. She is actually seen as the triple goddess, as she is pictured in 3 different forms: young woman, mature woman, and old crone. These phases are represented by the phases of the moon. She is basically considered to be the mother figure for all creation. She is said to rule the world and to bring fertility to all creatures. Gardnerian Wicca specifically stresses the worship of the goddess and the horned god.

⁷ Ann Moura, Origens of Modern Witchcraft (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), 156.

⁸ Gary Cantrell, Wiccan Beliefs and Practices (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2001), 26.

Of all the god forms acknowledged by our ancestors, the horned god was probably the most widely worshiped. Originally he was venerated through the physical manifestation of the stag, the bull, and the ram. Just like his animal counterpart, he was respected for his strength, vigor, beauty, swift movement, and protective capabilities. He represented the untamed forces of nature and the ability to regenerate life.⁹

It is necessary to note here that, though virtually all Wiccans acknowledge both a male and female deity, the identity of those deities can be different. For example there is more than one male deity; Wiccans also acknowledge a sun god and a god of the harvest, both of which are male as well. However, most scholars would explain that these gods are not separate male deities; rather they are many faces or aspects of the one male deity. So, just as the goddess has many faces, so does the male god.

It is also worth noting that while Gardnerian Wicca affirms the complementarities of the two sexes, there is one specific group of Wiccans who do not. These are known as Dianic Wiccans, which are much more feminist in nature. Some covens of Dianic Wicca only affirm a belief in the female deity and consequently only allow women to participate in the coven. This practice, however, is not the norm and is not present in the Gardnerian tradition. Most of the other forms of witchcraft focus their

⁹ Lady Sabrina, Exploring Wicca (Franklin Lakes: New Page Books, 2006), 43.

attention on the same male and female deities that Gardnerian witchcraft does.

However, one thing that seems somewhat unclear in Wicca is the names of their deities. What name do they call on when they worship? Gardnerian Wicca (which is representative of most other form of Wicca) recognizes a number of names for the female deity. One resource says:

The goddess is invoked by a variety of names, including: Aphrodite, Artemis, Astaroth, Astarte, Athene, Brigit, Ceres, Cerridwen, Cybele, Diana, Demeter, Friga, Gaia, Hecate, Isis, Kali, Kore, Lilith, Luna, Nuit, Peresphone and Venus. The goddess Diana is probably the most popular among witches.¹⁰

As indicated before, the female deity is held with a higher regard in all forms of Wicca, including Gardnerian Wicca. She is seen as the sustainer of life and the mother of all living things. The male deity's role in life isn't as significant. He is connected with the underworld, and reincarnation.

In the original myths concerning the god, one finds him as the co-creator, vital companion, and mystical priest of the goddess. His prime purpose is to join with her to create order out of chaos, substance out of spiritual matter, life from universe energies swirling in the dark abyss. His next purpose is to carry out her will and see that her laws are obeyed.¹¹

¹⁰ Craig S. Hawkins, Witch Craft: Exploring the World of Wicca (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 42.

¹¹ D. J. Conway, WICCA: The Complete Craft (Toronto: The Crossing Press, 2001), 54.

These gods are seen to exist in everything and be represented in every living thing. That is why Wiccans don't like to harm the environment. As a matter of fact, one of Gardnerian Wicca's chief points of ethics is balance.

There is a very strong impulse within Wicca that looks toward the concept and attainment of balance; not surprising, given the emphasis on our interrelationship with all other beings. With such a wonderful worldview, balance is extremely important. It involves treading lightly on the earth so as not to disturb the environmental web that is currently suffering from the imbalance caused by irresponsible use of its resources.¹²

Herein lies one of Gardnerian Wicca's chief ethical pillars. Because of their panentheism, that is to say that god is in everything, they basically worship nature. That's why all the aspects of its deities deal so much with nature, and so little with devotion. Wiccans do not practice direct devotion to either the god or goddess in their own right. They assert that they are in contact with the deities through magic and ceremonies, but they believe nothing that can be compared with the biblical idea of God, to whom Christians pray, and whom they worship.

Another ethical pillar of Wicca, and especially of the Gardnerian tradition, is the Wiccan Rede. This is something that comes close to being a statement of beliefs for Wiccans. Some might see it as law which the deities gave to humanity; however most Wiccan scholars see it entirely differently. "The Rede is

¹² Anne Marie Gallagher, The Wicca Bible (New York: Sterling Publishing,2005), 20.

not a law. It is a counsel, advice, guidelines, something on which to base your decisions before you take any actions-magical or physical-carefully, consider the consequences, and be willing to accept those consequences."¹³

Basically the Rede is a rule to live by, which is to say something to remember that could apply to any situation in life, similar to a proverb. But what does it say? What principles does it uphold? Well, the most pervasive principle is the last stanza which reads, "Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill: Any ye harm none, do as thou will." This is the basic rule of thumb in Wiccan philosophy, which sounds very much like a lot of the advice given throughout our society today. It's not uncommon to hear something like "As long as it's not harming the planet or anybody else, and it's between consenting adults, do whatever you want." Such a statement by itself brings up an interesting question; does this principle imply the idea that not fulfilling it would be considered evil? Well, the answer to that is "yes." Gardnerian Wiccans as well as other Wiccans do believe in evil in contrast to world views that consider evil only to be apparent.

Nevertheless, even though Wiccans do recognize the presence of good and evil spirits, they maintain a relativistic point of

¹³ Ellen Canon Reed, The Heart of Wicca (York Beach: Samuel Weiser Inc. , 2000), 112.

view. They don't have strict guidelines as to what constitutes "true Wicca" and claim to be very accepting of other traditions, even if they differ a great deal.

But then, if Wiccans are relativistic and yet do believe in evil, what constitutes evil? To them the one thing that is wrong is to do harm to another being. Therefore, evil spirits are those spirits who do harm to people or to the environment.

The acknowledgement of evil spirits raises the question of Satanism. Are Wiccans Satanists? They are very quick to speak up and loudly avow that they are not.

One of the vilest accusations against Wiccans or Witches is that we worship the devil and are Satanists performing blood sacrifices and having wild sexual orgies spiced with drugs. First, we do not believe in the Christian devil and would never consider worshipping such a foul, negative entity. . . We do not kill animals or humans in our rites, as we believe the life force and life itself to be very sacred . . . We do not consider that humans have more value than animals."¹⁴

This assertion is true. Even though many people see them as Satanists, they are not because a Satanist by definition believes in Satan. They do not acknowledge him in worship, even though many people down through the years have interpreted them in that way. One example of this misconception comes up in the Salem Witch trials that took place in early American history.

¹⁴ D. J. Conway, WICCA: The Complete Craft (Toronto: The Crossing Press, 2001), 4.

The Witchcraft crisis began in mid January 1691, when two little girls living in the household of Rev, Samuel Paris began to suffer from fits they and their elders soon attributed to witchcraft. In the months that followed, growing numbers of accusers claimed to be tortured by the apparitions of witches and ghosts . . . This led to legal actions against 144 people. Most were jailed for long periods. 14 women were hanged and 5 men, one man was pressed to death, while 3 women 1 man and several infants died while in custody."¹⁵

This accusation came from people who interpreted witchcraft as Satanism, which, by definition, it is not. They don't believe in the devil or Satan. Now it could be stated that just because they don't believe in the Satan of the Bible doesn't mean that he doesn't exist. And it certainly doesn't mean that they couldn't be worshipping him unknowingly. However, in all fairness, we must maintain the distinction that Gardnerian Wiccans--and all Wiccans for that matter--cannot be categorized as Satanists; devil worship is categorically another religion by itself.

Now, it is true that Satanism does share some things in common with Wicca. They use the same symbol: a pentagram, and each point of the pentagram stands for Fire, Earth, Water, Air, and spirit. That much is common to both; however they are not identical in many other respects.

Gardnerian Wicca does rely heavily on magic as its central concern. There are numerous spell books by different Wiccan

¹⁵ Mary Beth Norton In the Devil's Snare (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 4.

authors, each of whom promote different spells, thereby providing us with further example of its relativism.

However incongruous the spells may be with each other, the general practice of magic is virtually the same throughout the whole of Wicca. The Gardnerian tradition recognizes the use of both white magic and black magic. The articles that are used in Coven ceremonies are very particular, and they are all symbolic.

Some of the articles Witches use during ritual are powerful in themselves, such as salt, water, a bonfire, or herbs. These items obviously have the power to replenish, burn, or heal, without having a witch tweak them. Other objects, like wands and ritual robes, are symbols more than anything else. By using the same materials over and over again, and by using them only for rituals, those items become charged with your personal energy.¹⁶

It is clear that this portion of Wicca is very specific. Some of the other articles include a cauldron, a pentagram, other herbs, a dagger, two goblets, a white pillar candle, an incense burner, a bottle for consecrated water, a candle snuffer, and the Priest's Book of Shadows. During the ritual, both a priest and a priestess are present, which represents the male and female deities. There are a number of different spells and chants that go along with the rituals, but the rituals usually follow the cycle of the moon. One further distinction is that Gardnerian Wiccans usually practice their ceremonies naked.

¹⁶ Lauren Manoy, *Where to Park Your Broomstick: A Teen's Guide to Witchcraft* (New York: Fireside, 2002), 59.

Another noteworthy fact about Gardnerian Wicca is their view on diet. They do not have set dietary laws; however, certain things are encouraged and others are discouraged when it comes to food and drink. The Rede of "no harm done" applies here.

In keeping with the thought that all life is sacred and divine, I would like to touch on the benefits of a natural diet that exemplifies the principles of the Wiccan Rede and its deep philosophical teaching. . . One can easily purchase bottled water and organically grown fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and cereal at many health food chains.¹⁷

It is clear that, because of the high status that Wiccans give to nature and attaining balance, they encourage natural and organically grown foods.

But if nature is that important, where did it come from? What do Gardnerian Wiccans believe about the origins of the universe? Well, they believe basically in evolution.

We might call it Gaian evolution, after the Gaia theory developed by Lovelock and Margulis. Gaian evolution is not so much counter to Darwin as a shift from the individual to the ecosystem, the whole world. The earth functions like a living being, and the biosphere, the world community of life forms, changes its environment as it is changed by it. . . Evolution is the story of how the planet herself comes alive."¹⁸

¹⁷ Mark Ventimiglia, The Wiccan Rede (New York: Kensington Press, 2003), 29.

¹⁸ Starhawk, The Earth Path (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 43.

Other authors claim a similar belief in the "big bang" theory, but resort an idiosyncratic origin of the universe. They believe that the big bang happened because of a huge cosmic orgasm by the male and female deities. This image brings up the last question this paper will address.

Since humans have a spark of the divine in them, as does all of life, what happens after death? Gardnerian Wiccans believe heavily in reincarnation and Karma, as do all Wiccans. Reincarnation takes place in a continuous cycle. The laws of Karma determine in what position the next life begins, an idea that they have clearly imported from Indic religions. Wicca is very vague, though, when it comes to what happens to a person once someone has completed the cycle of reincarnation. One author says:

Wiccans say that after rising upon the spiral of life and death and rebirth, those souls who have attained perfection will break away from the cycle forever and dwell with the Goddess and God. Nothing is ever lost. The energies resident in our souls return to the divine source from which they emanated.¹⁹

This description has some points in common with South Asian religions and other traditions that promote reincarnation. To this extent and in this respect, apologetics toward Wicca could probably be similar to what one might say to a Hindu. I would

¹⁹ Scott Cunningham, Wicca: a guide for the solitary practitioner (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publishing, 2005),76.

begin with the idea that their deities do not seem to be personally concerned for the world. The God of Christianity offers love, concern, and care for His creation; Wicca leaves us with over-stimulated deities who expect individual persons to manipulate unreliable forces in the face of an uncertain future.

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