

What is Wicca?

Wicca is a term commonly used to describe modern Pagan Witchcraft - also known as the Craft of the Wise. Among the many traditions within Witchcraft, the better known include: (1) the Gardnerian, which derives from the teachings of Gerald Gardner (1884-1960); (2) the Alexandrian, which follows the ideas of Alexander Sanders (1929-88) redeveloped from those of Gardner in the late 1960s; (3) the Traditional, which professes to trace its lineage back to 'ancient wise women' and 'cunning men'; (4) the Hereditary, in which the lineage is claimed within a family, (5) the Dianic, which is based upon feminist principles and (6) Hedge Witches, who are solitary practitioners. Most people refer only to the first two traditions as Wicca, using 'Witchcraft' for the others.

History of Wicca

Wicca began to emerge publicly in the early 1950s (after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951). It is widely accepted that Gardner, a retired civil servant, was responsible for the creation of the religion as it exists today, and as such, can be seen as the founder of the movement. Gardner, who claimed to have been initiated into a coven in 1939, was familiar with various occult and alternative religious ideas such as those found in Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Spiritualism and Psychic Research, as well as in Folklore, Archaeology and Anthropology. He was also greatly influenced by the work of Margaret Murray, who in *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), suggested that Pagan Witchcraft had survived from the pre-Christian period until, at least, the Witch trials of the 15th-17th centuries. In his books, *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), Gardner argued that Wicca is a direct continuation of pre-Christian religious practice – a claim that has given rise to considerable questioning and debate.

How is Wicca Organised?

Wicca has no formal organisation. There is no overarching body which has control over Wiccans. Instead, the majority of Wiccans belong to covens, small groups of 6-13 people who meet regularly for the practice of rituals. It is experience that is valued within Wicca, and in theory, as a mystery tradition, all practitioners must be initiated into a Wiccan coven. Wicca does not seek converts and thus initiation must be actively sought. Traditionally, the initial training period is said to take a year and a day from the point when the neophyte asks for initiation to the point where s/he is initiated into the first degree. Most Wiccans will not initiate anyone who is below 18 years of age. There are 3 degrees of initiation; the first accepts the neophyte into a coven; the second marks the completion of the training necessary to be a recognised priest or priestess; the third, which possibly involves the Great Rite (either symbolic or actual sexual intercourse), usually only involves an established couple. Any

Wiccan initiated to the second degree can start their own coven. For this reason, there tend to be informal links of friendship between different covens, as members 'hive off' to form their own covens. A high priestess and/or a high priest leads the rituals of the coven, but is not meant to have authority over other members. As increasing numbers of people have become interested in Wicca, however, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain entry into a coven, resulting in the emergence of solitary practitioners, who have resorted to self-initiation.

Who Joins Wicca and Where is it to be Found?

Wiccans are to be found in most European countries, North America and Australia. Due to the lack of organisation, it is difficult to know the number of practitioners. It is estimated that there are at least 80,000 in the USA, and Hutton suggests that in 1996 there were 10,000 Pagan Witches in the UK. The 2001 Census of England and Wales states that approximately 40,000 individuals identified themselves as Pagans on the Census, with over 7,000 of these identifying themselves as Wiccans specifically. The majority of Wiccans in the UK are white and middle class and are approximately two thirds female to one third male.

What do Wiccans Believe?

The majority of Wiccans hold a pantheistic worldview in which the Divine/Life Force is seen as present in Nature. Nature is therefore venerated as an expression of divinity and much of Wiccan practice is concerned with celebrating the human connection with Nature. A range of beliefs concerning divinity can be found within Wicca. Some may see it as an impersonal, non-gendered life force, others may hold a monotheistic view of it as a single God(ess); others hold a polytheistic view of the Divine as numerous separate deities. But most Wiccans see The Divine as encompassing both female and male aspects, personified as the Goddess and the God (duotheism). For many, the Goddess has pre-eminence. She is often seen as representing the Earth and the Moon. She has three aspects: Maiden, Mother and Crone. While the Goddess is eternal and immortal, the masculine aspect – the God – is time-bound and mortal. As the Horned God, He is both the lover and the son of the Goddess, depending on the time of year.

There are a number of ethical statements to which the majority of Wiccans would adhere. '*An it harm none, do what you will*', is known as the Wiccan Rede. This is interpreted not as a licence to live in anyway one sees fit, but as a way of living by the principle of 'least harm'. Coupled with the belief in the divinity of Nature, this is often expressed in such practices as vegetarianism, recycling and campaigning for environmental issues.

Wiccan practice, particularly magic, is also governed by the law of three-fold return – the belief that any action a person takes will return to them three-fold.

What do Wiccans Practice?

Festivals: Wiccans practice 8 seasonal festivals (sabbats). These festivals are known as the Year Wheel as they celebrate the changing of the seasons. The Year Wheel is expressed as the relationship between the Goddess and the God, as well as between light and dark. It is a cycle of birth, life and death. The festivals are; 31st October (Samhain); 21st December (Winter Solstice); 1st February (Imbolc); 21st March (Spring Equinox); 1st May (Beltane); 21st June (Summer Solstice); 1st August (Lughnasadh); and 21st September (Autumn Equinox). Wiccans also hold rituals on each full moon (esbats), of which there are 13 a year.

Ritual: As well as the observances of sacred time marked by festivals, Wiccans hold rituals for a number of other purposes. Initiation rituals are performed either to bring new members into the coven or for existing members to gain a higher status and a deeper understanding of the divine. Rituals are also held to mark rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death; and they may be performed for specific intentions, such as healing or eco-magic, and most share some common characteristics. Wiccan rituals can take place anywhere. Some rituals take place outside and some covens have purchased woodland specifically for this purpose. Some Wiccans have a room in their house set aside for ritual. Rituals for larger groups may take place in rented halls. The majority of covens perform rituals within a circle, which represents the equality of all present. Before the ritual begins, the sacred space is created. The boundary of the circle is marked with a ritual knife, and the gods and goddesses are invoked. After the ritual, food and drink is shared. Some Wiccan groups perform their rituals naked in the belief that clothes inhibit the energy flow in and out of the body.

Magic: The majority of Wiccans practice magic. This is based on the principle of interconnectedness, and the idea that changes at the individual/micro level can effect changes on the greater/macro level. Wiccan magic generally uses properties (such as candles, poppets, cords, crystals, mirrors) and/or actions (such as dancing, chanting and drumming) to focus the mind and alter the state of consciousness. Most Wiccans state that there is no such thing as black or white magic as magic is neutral – it is the intentions and actions of the practitioner that colour it. Many would, therefore, state that they have the ability to practice magic for either good or ill, but will only practice good as they are bound to the ethics of least harm and three-fold return.

Causes for Concern

Throughout history, one popular image of the witch has been that of an individual associated with evil, darkness, illness, misfortune and death; some critics have claimed that witches have been in league with the Devil, and as a threat to both individuals and the society as a whole. This is not an accurate image of modern Wiccans, who emphasise the life-affirming nature of their practice and their adherence to moral and ethical codes. It is, however, true that modern witchcraft has, to some extent, developed as an alternative to Christianity, which some within Wicca may view somewhat stereotypically. Wicca celebrates certain aspects of life which it perceives as having been suppressed by Christianity. Wiccans tend to have an accepting attitude towards sensuality and sexuality and some covens express this through their rituals; with the mutual consent of all present. Wiccans argue, however, that it is not the act of sex itself which is celebrated, but rather the act of creation; the spiritual union of male and female is believed to keep the cycle of the year turning.

Witches believe that the practice of magic is a technique for contacting powers and energies of the earth, which, whilst having different characteristics, are basically amoral. It is believed that the witch can channel these forces for good or for evil and although the overwhelming majority of witches say that they only work for good purposes, inevitably the way a coven works depends on the morality of its members.

Wiccans themselves have voiced concern about unscrupulous individuals who may claim to offer initiation into Wicca on the condition that the neophyte follow a certain set of instructions, which may include sexual intercourse with the self-professed 'leader'. This could be exacerbated by the lack of a central regulatory body within Wicca.

Further Information

- Adler, Margot (1979) *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*, Boston: Beacon Press
- Crowley, Vivianne (1996) *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Millennium*, London: Thorsons
- Farrar, Janet & S. (1981) *The Witches' Bible: The Complete Witches' Handbook*, Custer, WA: Phoenix Publishing.
- Starhawk (1979) *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, San Francisco: Harper

For an academic approach:

- Hutton, Ronald (2000) *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*, Oxford University Press
- Luhrmann, Tanya (1989) *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic and Witchcraft in Present-Day England*, Oxford: Blackwell

Pike, Sarah (2001) *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, London: University of California Press.

UK Addresses:

The Pagan Federation, BM Box 7097, London, WC1N 3XX.

Tel no. 0906 302 0184

Website: <http://www.paganfed.org>

WiccaUK, BM WiccaUK, London, WC1N 3XX

Tel. No. 0845 456 187

Website: <http://www.wiccauk.com>

Children of Artemis, BM Artemis, London, WC1N 3XX
(networking group, puts people in contact with covens).

Website: <http://www.witchcraft.org>

Websites:

The Religious Movements Homepage

<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/wicca.html>

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New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information.

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