

Wicca

Wicca is the term most commonly employed to describe the largest and best-known contemporary Pagan religion. The foundational premise from which Wicca emerged is the (since discredited) witch-cult hypothesis, the idea that the witch trials of early modern Christendom were an attempt not to combat a cabal of devil-worshippers but to eliminate a pre-Christian fertility religion popular among Europe's peasantry. This theory had developed among nineteenth-century scholars, but only reached widespread attention when it was propagated by the Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1863–1963) in the 1920s and 1930s. When Wicca publicly appeared in the 1950s, its adherents claimed that it was the survival of this witch-cult and that its lineage stretched back into deep prehistory. Although most historians specialising in the early modern witch trials had already expressed reservations about the theory, it would only be firmly demolished by more intensive research during the 1960s and 1970s. By that time, however, the theory had entrenched itself in the popular imagination, particularly within sectors of the occult milieu (Hutton 1999, 132–150).

The man often credited with establishing Wicca was Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), an upper middle-class, politically conservative Englishman who had spent much of his life in Southern and Eastern Asia. On retirement in 1936 he returned with his wife to Southern England, settling near the New Forest and joining an esoteric group called the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship. In later years Gardner alleged that members of the Order were also active in a secret Wiccan coven into which he was initiated in 1939. The truthfulness of Gardner's claim has been much debated. On the one hand, a circumstantial case for the coven's existence has been made; it is not intrinsically implausible that a group of individuals created the basic structure of Wicca at some point in the 1930s (Heselton 2000). On the other is the fact that Gardner was often liberal with the truth and it may be that he invented claims of a 1930s coven to disguise the fact that he created his version of Wicca largely whole cloth in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

By the early 1950s Gardner had relocated to London and was operating his own coven from a cottage in the midst of a naturist club located just north of the city. In 1953 he initiated a woman named Doreen Valiente (1922–1999) and she soon became his coven's high priestess. The ceremonies conducted by the group were based on liturgies assembled by Gardner and included within what he called a Book of Shadows (Heselton 2012). Examination of the different copies of the Book that he used over the years have demonstrated that he drew heavily upon a range of earlier esoteric sources, among them the writings of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) and other ceremonial magicians (Kelly 2007). Gardner further promoted Wicca through a number of published books, his Museum of Magic and Witchcraft on the Isle of Man, and through a wide range of press and television appearances. By the time of his death in 1964 he had established covens in various parts of Britain, Sydney, Australia, and the state of New York (Heselton 2012).

Although he founded "Gardnerian" Wicca and is often regarded as the "Father of Wicca" more widely, Gardner was not a lone creator. Various other occultists – located in Britain, Australia, and the United States – established their own covens, utilising both Gardner's writings and many of the sources that had influenced him. One of the best known was Sybil Leek (1917–1982), who attracted much press attention in Britain during the early 1960s before relocating to the US. More private was Robert Cochrane (1931–1966), who operated his own Thames Valley coven and promulgated a form of Wicca that placed greater emphasis on the pursuit of gnosis than Gardner's. One Gardnerian initiate, Alex Sanders (1926–1988), used Gardner's model to establish his own "Alexandrian" Wicca, which he propagated with great success in Manchester and London during the 1960s. In the United States, a number of different traditions appeared during that decade. In California, Victor (1917–2001) and Cora Anderson (1915–2008) drew upon Gardner's writings, Huna, and American folk magic to establish the Feri tradition in the late 1950s or early 1960s. Meanwhile in New York, an Italian-American named Leo Martello (1931–2000) blended the standard Wiccan structure with Italian folklore, producing a variant commonly known as Stregheria. In Australia, a Sydney coven was established by Rosaleen Norton (1917–1979), an artist who caused national scandal with her erotic artworks (Doyle White 2016, 34–42).

Many of these individuals – among them “big names” like Martello, Sanders, and Cochrane – falsely claimed to have inherited their Wiccan traditions from their relatives. In doing so they contributed to the perception that these different groups were scattered survivals of the Murrayite witch-cult as opposed to new developments appearing as part of a wider zeitgeist. Attempts were made to unite these groups, for instance through the short-lived Witchcraft Research Association in the UK and the Covenant of the Goddess in the US. It was also within this environment that the term “Wicca” emerged as a more socially acceptable name for the religion. Derived from the Old English word *wicca* (“sorcerer”), the noun “Wicca” soon became an area of contention within the movement. Although the earliest examples used the term in an inclusive manner to apply to all alleged survivals of Murray’s witch-cult, by the 1980s some Gardnerians were insisting that only they and certain allied traditions had a right to the term. While the inclusive definition appears to have again gained dominance, arguments over the contested meanings of “Wicca” and “Witchcraft” continue (Doyle White 2010).

The latter 1960s and 1970s brought significant socio-cultural changes to the Western world, a number of which exerted an impact on Wicca. Counter-cultural leftist ideas about egalitarianism were particularly influential in California, resulting in the establishment of Wiccan traditions like the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn (its name a humorous nod to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn) as well as the later Reclaiming tradition established by Starhawk (b.1951). Second-wave feminist thought generated the Dianic Wiccan tradition of Zsuzsanna Budapest (b.1940), which in most forms was female-only and centred solely on the figure of the Goddess. Gay liberationist ideas also found expression in Wicca through Eddie Buczynski’s (1947–1989) creation of the Minoan Brotherhood – a tradition for gay and bisexual men – in New York City (Doyle White 2016, 43–51). This period also witnessed the increasing proliferation of books explaining how individuals could set themselves up as Wiccans without initiation into a coven, including *Mastering Witchcraft* (1970) by Paul Huson (b.1942), *The Tree* (1973) by Raymond Buckland (b.1934), and *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (1988) by Scott Cunningham (1956–1993). This

resulted in a fundamental demographic shift within the Wiccan community, as self-initiated solitary practitioners went from being a minority to the majority.

These factors contributed to the growing visibility of Wicca both in the US and internationally. In turn, Wiccan ideas exerted an influence on the portrayal of witches in various fictional forms, particularly in American film and television. The image of the young, attractive, good witch had already established itself in American popular culture through the film *Bell, Book, and Candle* (1958) and the television series *Bewitched* (1964–1972). In the 1990s, however, this image took on a distinctly Wiccan twist through the film *The Craft* (1996) and the television shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Charmed* (1998–2006), all of which incorporated Wiccan terminology and iconography into their depiction of modern American witches. These fictional portrayals generated considerable interest in Wicca and related forms of magical practice among “tweenagers” and teenagers, who were soon catered to by an array of books and websites by authors like Silver RavenWolf (b.1956) (Berger and Ezzy 2007). In part as a reaction to what many practitioners have disparaged as “fluffy bunny” aspects of Wicca (Coco and Woodward 2007), since the late 1990s there has also been a growth in the number of practitioners deliberately adopting a darker aesthetic. One manifestation of this has been the appearance of Goth Wicca, a tradition promoted in the writings of American author Raven Digitalis (b.1983). Another has been the decision by some Wiccans to embrace the self-description of “Traditional Witchcraft”, a term that is (confusingly) also employed by members of other occult currents, like Luciferianism.

As with many religions that have branched off into a wide variety of denominations or “traditions” there is much variety in Wiccan belief and practice. Theological beliefs vary, although most traditions embrace both male and female deities. In keeping with the beliefs common in early Wicca, many contemporary practitioners embrace a theology centred on a Horned God and a Mother Goddess, the latter often personified as part of a Triple Goddess who manifests as a Maiden, Mother, and Crone. Other Wiccans have adopted more explicitly polytheistic frameworks while some promulgate an explicitly monotheistic approach, usually centred upon a Goddess or a genderless entity. Some Wiccans believe in the literal existence of such entities, although others are atheist or agnostic and treat the gods as symbols or Jungian archetypes. In most cases the names

and appearances of such deities are heavily influenced by the pre-Christian mythologies of Europe (Doyle White 2016: 86–96).

The perceived link between Wicca and pre-Christian "paganism" is strong. Most early practitioners believed that Wicca represented the survival of an ancient, pre-Christian religion. While many contemporary practitioners are well aware of the ahistoricity of such a claim, a sense of spiritual connection to the pre-Christian societies of Europe remains prevalent, as it does in most contemporary Pagan religions. Alongside this sense of connection to the ancient pagans, Wiccans typically also perceive a strong connection between themselves and the historical "witch" (Purkiss 1996). Most practitioners describe themselves as "Witches" and their religion as "Witchcraft", with some altogether eschewing the term "Wicca" in favour of this more evocative if controversial alternative.

Wiccans practice magico-religious rituals, both solitarily and in groups commonly known as covens. The structure of the coven varies according to the tradition in question. Gardnerian covens for instance tend to be hierarchical and under the firm leadership of a guiding high priest and high priestess (Scarboro et al 1994); conversely, Reclaiming covens operate on a more egalitarian, consensus-based model (Salomonsen 2002). These rituals often take place within a circle and make use of various ceremonial tools, among them a knife, wand, pentacle, and chalice, which are placed upon an altar. This structure has been largely adopted from ceremonial magic, through the Golden Dawn tradition. In embracing spell-casting and magic alongside the veneration of deities, Wicca – like Thelema and certain other occult currents – blurs the lines between magic and religion (Hutton 1999, 394). Ethical and moral teachings vary among Wiccan traditions, although the most widely embraced tenet is the "Wiccan Rede", commonly presented as "An' it harm none, do as you will" (Doyle White 2015). Wiccans observe seasonal festivals known as Sabbats, which often mark the equinoxes, solstices, and the four "cross quarter days" situated between them (Hutton 2008). This link with the seasons ties in with the common Wiccan perception of being an "earth-based" or "nature spirituality". The Wiccan community not only contains members of the lineaged forms of "British Traditional Wicca", like Gardnerianism and Alexandrianism, but also practitioners of Cochranean, Dianic, Stregherian, and many other forms of coven-based

Wicca. These are accompanied by the considerable number of solitary practitioners, often self-initiated, who may or may not align themselves with some of the aforementioned traditions. While Wicca remains a largely Anglo-American phenomenon, it has made inroads in many other parts of the world, including continental Europe and Latin America. It remains difficult if not impossible to accurately calculate the size of the world's Wiccan population, although a conservative estimate would place it within the low hundreds of thousands. Demographically, the religion is overwhelmingly white, predominantly female and liberal-leaning, and contains a high percentage of bisexual and homosexual practitioners (Doyle White 2016: 164–171).

Wicca has also made considerable inroads into Western popular consciousness since the mid-1990s, to the extent that it has been used as the basis for episode plotlines in *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons*. However, prejudice against Wiccans – often organised by fundamentalist Christian groups – persists, with practitioners reporting harassment and even violence (Barner-Barry 2005). Wicca has also witnessed increasing academic attention since the late 1980s from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including history, anthropology, and sociology.

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