

# The birth of religions: Wicca

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*Wicca is a growing Pagan path in Britain, the US<sup>1</sup>, Canada, Australia, Scandinavia and Germany that is followed by both solo practitioners, known as hedge-witches, and by groups, known as covens. It is a secretive, initiatory tradition with all members considered part of a wider Priesthood. This paper explores the development of Wicca to illustrate the following central themes: (1) how spiritual needs are incorporated into a religious practice; and (2) how the development of a religion is affected by the wider culture of the societies in which it is born and grows.*

RELIGION can be conceptualised as different from spirituality. Perhaps, spirituality can be understood as a property of the Universe that can be felt and experienced by the individual, whereas religion is the institutionalised, formalised way of experiencing it that is based on faith, and what other people believe or have believed. Religions can be understood as the socially constructed containers and conduits for spirituality. They can be, as Marx (1843/1970) suggested, ‘the opium of the people’ with the congregation following faithfully the priesthood of whatever religion, as the men who are running the show. Priesthoods have been traditionally male-dominated institutions and often influenced by material power. However, it is unlikely that a materialist approach can provide a full explanatory account for the foundation of a religion. It is also unlikely that an explanation that sees a religion as the revelation of a deity’s message at a specific time through the exact methods of the deity’s choosing will provide a version that is satisfying to anyone but the devoted follower of that religion. What is perhaps required for an adequate account of a religion’s birth is both an appreciation of the socio-political and cultural factors of that time together with an appreciation of our need to connect to that *something more*, as William James (1902/1985) put it, which is spirituality.

Religions as the containers and conduits of spirituality are the products of the social and political circumstances of the time and place in which they are created. However, in order to survive and to maintain themselves across time, place, and changing social and political circumstances, they need to adapt. Nevertheless, the conceptual patterns formed at their inception can remain deeply encoded into them. As societies evolve around them, they may reformulate in order to adapt to the new context, but still preserve what was essential to their original form. For example, the evolution of Christianity has taken many forms, all involving the adaptation of the Christian message to the changing social and political context. The Emperor Constantine after 313 AD turned Christianity from the religion of the dispossessed and marginalised into the religion of the state and power. The response of a religion to the global context can perhaps be witnessed at the start of the 21st century in the development of radical Islam in reaction to Western politics and postmodernism. In a religion’s transformation, powerful processes of needing to belong to your pack, tribe or group may be involved, together with fearing what is outside, beyond the group’s boundary; out there in the woods, out there in the dark.

Spirituality is hard to suppress, as a spiritual component seems to be a feature of

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<sup>1</sup> The 2001 American Religious Identification Survey indicated that, in one decade, Wiccans in the US had multiplied nearly 17 times from 8000 in 1990 to 134,000 in 2001 (cited at PaganSpace Perspectives, 2003).

being human. For those who state that they have no religion, their spirituality may have taken another pseudo- or quasi-religious form, such as the values of science, a love of nature or a political movement. However, many people need the formal container and conduit of spirituality that is a religion, and if there is not already a codified, contained spirituality that is acceptable to a significant part of the population, then it is likely that a new religion will form. The building of religious containers and conduits may even be a social necessity as free-floating spirituality may be considered dangerous. If we apply Bion's (1962) concept of containment, spirituality may generate difficult emotional responses which, if projected into a religious code, may offer a means of holding, processing and thereby containing those emotions. Specific religions may prove to be transitory but spirituality appears to be an enduring feature of humanity, with each new religion in turn expressing this *philosophia perennis*. The transition point is certainly worth examining – i.e. how spirituality becomes contained and channelled within a religion through codification when people become prophets or deities, and written words become sacred.

From the mid 20th century onwards, there developed in Britain a religious movement called Wicca. This was a unification of High magic, as previously practiced by intellectual groupings of academics, theologians and aristocrats, through groups such as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (which represented an essentially ascending spiritual path) and the ritualised practices of rural people and folk magic (essentially a descending spiritual path)<sup>2</sup>. In so doing, Wicca incorporated the more primitive, grounded, earth spirituality of oral traditions with the reflexivity of religions based on the written word. As a consequence, something unique was created, which has led the histo-

rian Ronald Hutton (2001) to suggest that the 'modern pagan witchcraft' that emerged in the 1950s is the only *religion* that Britain has given to the world.

A study of Wicca with the purpose of examining the processes of a religion's birth and development has the advantages for researchers that they are close in time to its birth; the documents are fresh, the major characters are not long dead and it is possible to talk to people who knew them. In addition, the movement of Wicca between two similar but also different cultures, i.e. Britain and the US, permits a consideration of the impact of cultural shifts on a religion's development. This paper is focused on the development of Wicca and takes a historical, sociological and transpersonal psychological perspective. However, we suggest that the principles discussed in the examination of the birth of Wicca will be informative for scholars of other religions as comparisons may be made to the manner in which the world's major religions may have come into existence and developed.

### A British post-war religion

The major religions of the world tend to have a central 'founding father' figure; a Jesus, Buddha or Mohammad. In the case of Wicca this person would be Gerald Brousseau Gardner (1884–1964). The 'founding father' of Wicca discovered and was initiated into Witchcraft in 1939, shortly after the beginning of the Second World War. In 1940, just after France had fallen to Germany, Gardner, a staunch patriot and Air Raid Precaution Warden, joined several other Witches to perform a magical operation in the New Forest, called 'Operation Cone of Power' that aimed to prevent the invasion of German forces. Gardner recounted its events as follows:

*'We were taken at night to a place in the Forest, where the Great Circle was erected; and that*

<sup>2</sup> Daniels (2005) outlines the concepts of ascending and descending spiritual paths: ascending being focused on existence beyond the physical realm and associated with practices such as petitionary prayer and ritual magic; and descending being focused in the physical, often with strong links to Nature in addition to a focus on the unconscious.

*was done which may not be done except in great emergency. And the great Cone of Power was raised and slowly directed in the general direction of Hitler. The command was given: "You cannot cross the Sea. You cannot cross the Sea. YOU CANNOT COME: YOU CANNOT COME." Just as, we were told, was done to Napoleon, when he had his army ready to invade England and never came. And, as was done to the Spanish Armada, mighty forces were used, of which I may not speak. Now to do this means using one's life force; and many of us died a few days after we did this. My asthma, which I had never had since I first went out East, came back badly. We repeated the ritual four times; and the Elders said: "We feel we have stopped him. We must not kill too many of our people. Keep them until we need them." (Cited in Bracelin, 1960, pp.166–167)*

This event increased Gardner's passion for Witchcraft, and shortly after the end of the Second World War he published his first book related to Witchcraft, disguised as a work of fiction, *High Magics Aid* (1949), that contained magical passages and instructions. This publication coincided with a time when the British were adapting to the consequences of the Second World War. Many people had lost family and found their faith in the traditional order, including conventional Christianity, undermined. Rationing imposed severe restrictions and people felt their personal control and free choice were increasingly limited. Therefore, the idea of being able to do 'Magic' to influence your life, and to regain some of that control, was attractive. Also, from its inception, Wicca had a philosophical base that encouraged a re-connection to the Earth and to Nature; it emphasised celebrating the cycles of life whilst also understanding death as a natural part of that process.

One book that particularly influenced Gardner, and thereby the Gardnerian *Book of Shadows*, was Leyland's 1899 publication of *Aradia: Gospel of the Witches*. Aradia is the name given to the messianic daughter of the Goddess Diana, a champion for the

oppressed and underdogs of society. In the context of the social circumstances of that time, it is understandable that this book and the stories of Aradia influenced Gardner, and was in accordance with the zeitgeist of post-war Britain and the social, political and cultural forces that led to the development of the Welfare State.

Post-war Britain also experienced a continuation of the reappraisal of women's role in society that had occurred during the Second World War. Prior to the war, women had generally occupied traditional domestic roles. However, during the war, they had gained new worth, status and power through land-work and working in munitions factories. This social change maintained momentum during the 1950s and 1960s through the Women's Liberation and Feminism movements and was further enhanced by the increased control that women had over their bodies offered through the invention of the contraceptive pill. This pill further encouraged sexual liberation, which connected to Wicca's intrinsic ideas about sexual expression that comes from embracing the fundamental fertility in Nature's cycles. The Feminist Movement dovetailed into the Wiccan-linked Goddess movement that reclaimed the feminine in the Divine.

This contrasts with many other religions that are andocentric. The male God of Christianity and the central females of Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene can be difficult figures of religious identification for some people. For men, after the brutalities of war, The Goddess, with her innate nurturing and healing qualities, offered an alternative, as a deity that could be loved as a mother (though, as Fontana, 2003, p.91, points out, it is too simplistic to consider a God or a Goddess to be purely a parental substitute). The sociologist Glock (1964) suggests that new religions arise when people feel that they had been deprived of something that they expected from life. At the end of the Second World War there was a sense of deprivation, a desire for an expression of the

human spirit, and to retain some basic control, that encouraged new forms of religion to be born.

An important political and legal enabler in the development of Wicca was the repeal in 1951 of the 1736 Witchcraft Act. The repeal permitted people to practice Witchcraft without prosecution. This provided the opportunity for Gardner to publish directly about the practice, without the guise of fiction, and he wasted little time in producing *Witchcraft Today* (1954). Gardner strongly disliked modernity, particularly industrialisation and urbanisation; he desired a return to a *Golden Age* epitomised in folklore, myths and tribal magical practices. He had been a member of the Folklore Society for many years, giving talks and writing about the subject (Heselton, 2000, p.26). Gardner's reactions to modernity can be compared to those of William Morris in the 19th century when Morris began the Arts and Crafts Movement and also to those of Jung (Main, 2006).

Gardner's interest in a return to a past *Golden Age* can also be compared to the Druidry revival of the late 19th century, which also involved a perceived re-awakening of earlier Pagan paths. In fact, the end of the Second World War also saw an increased interest in Revivalist Druids. These had experienced popularity as the 19th became the 20th century and continued to gain advocates throughout that century. However, Druidry tended to attract a different type of person than Wicca. It was more male-orientated, probably due to the main Druid Revival at the beginning of the 20th century having close links to the men-only brotherhood of the Freemasons. Druidry ceremonies were more theatrical and rehearsed, in contrast to the spontaneity of Wicca. Druidry was known publicly through the Stonehenge Summer Solstice Rites, which had taken place from the turn of the 20th century, whereas Wicca was more secretive.

However, these differences did not prevent close connections between Druidry

and Wicca. Gardner became a member and, in 1946, began to attend Druid ceremonies, becoming well acquainted with the then head of the Ancient Druid Order (ADO), George Watson MacGregor-Reid. Gardner subsequently became close to ADO member, Ross Nichols, who may have helped him to write *Witchcraft Today* (1954). Nichols formed the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD) in 1963 and influenced Gardner's view of nature religions, imparting ideas and energy to what became known as *Gardnerian Witchcraft*. In this way, the new, alternative nature religion of Wicca gained sustenance from its earlier forbear of Revivalist Druidry (Heselton, 2003, p.80).

In addition to looking to the past for inspiration, Wicca was also inspired by the scientific advances of the 1950s and 1960s. Through advances in space travel, it was possible to see images of the Earth from space and to witness how beautiful, and yet how delicate, it appeared. These images helped to connect people with the reality of the Universe within which they lived. With those new understandings of the planet's ecological and meteorological systems came an increased understanding of how our actions were damaging it. This awareness influenced alternative intellectuals such as James Lovelock and Rupert Sheldrake. Lovelock started work on Gaia theory in the mid 1960s that culminated in *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979). This scientific theory influenced both academia and the general public, for whom science had become a source of almost sacred knowledge, linking people's daily lives to the world and cosmos (Joseph, 1991). Links to the influential epistemologies of Science made nature-based religions, such as Wicca, more understandable and acceptable. In addition, with its links to ecological movements, Wicca contained an appreciation of not only personal but also planetary vulnerability, with a focus on saving the world where we live rather than focusing on salvation in the next. These concerns and identification with nature and the planet are, according to

Daniels (2005, p.1) one important expression of the transpersonal, particularly given their integration with an appreciation of the spiritual in both nature and the planet.

Despite the 1950s and 1960s providing the conditions for the birth of Wicca, the contrast with mainstream society should not be under-estimated. During the second author's conversations with Charles Clark, who joined Gardner's Witchcraft group around 1954, he made her aware of how alternative 'the Wica', as he termed it, appeared in the 1960s. British society was still quite conservative, and the social and moral revolution of the 1960s had yet to make deep inroads into the accepted societal norms. For example, although the final Witchcraft Laws had been repealed in 1954, there were still strong laws controlling nudity (nudity being important for coven worship). In the early 1960s, Clark supported the photographer Jean Straker who had fallen foul of British censorship laws by publishing images that showed pubic hair. Straker was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act 1959 and imprisoned. His subsequent appeal was accepted, his conviction over-ruled, and this inspired change in the censorship laws in 1964.

However, support for liberal reforms did not mean that early Wiccans were generally liberal in all of their views. Early Wiccans also held many traditional values. Smyth (1973), a writer who interviewed several Wiccan groups in England in the 1960s, noted that members tended towards conservatism. It has also been noted by Hutton (2001) that Wicca started with Gardner as a form of radical conservatism but developed through Starhawk in the US into radical socialism. Starhawk's views are well illustrated at her website ([www.starhawk.org](http://www.starhawk.org)). Perhaps the founders of Wicca had the primary goal of personal spiritual development, and were rather inward looking, but through the amalgamation of their ideas with the political movement of Feminism, via the Goddess movement, Wicca became outward looking, embracing goals of social reform. This high-

lights the tensions that can exist in the world's major religions between two not incompatible functions: (1) the personal development of the individual to become closer to 'God'; and (2) the transformation of society for it to be made more 'Godly'. It also highlights that Wicca is not a static tradition. The needs that Wicca met for its early followers, when compared to those that it meets now, show both continuity and change.

### **The early Wiccans: Developing ritual and meeting needs**

Wicca offered its followers a chance to celebrate life and this was particularly pertinent post-1945, when many people wanted to celebrate the fact that they were happy to be alive following the Second World War. Wicca was also an opportunity for some to celebrate life through the Mother Goddess. It was a celebration that was not based around hopes of salvation in an after-life but focused on life and the planet in the present. It met people's desire for integration of the self and a re-connection with others, the planet, the Universe and the Divine.

The methods of worship met the needs of the early practitioners. Ritual drama could be creative and fun and had long associations with magical orders whose members understood the psychological effects of ritual, now also recognised by transpersonal psychologists:

*'Ritual is another core practice for transpersonal psychology. For many individuals and in many cultures and spiritual systems, ritual is the central means of discovering connections with each other; with communities, with the Earth, and with the cosmos.'* (Davis, 2003)

It was through The First Rosicrucian Theatre in England that Gardner first encountered members of the New Forest Coven, into which he was later initiated (Heselton, 2003, p.20). The rituals that early Wiccans developed included practices of worship that were somewhat shocking for their time.

Wicca incorporated a very special form of embodied spiritual practice for its followers

through its adoption of naked worship, being *skyclad*, though it was not practiced on all occasions and robes could be worn. The *skyclad* practice was influenced by the 'founding father' Gardner, who had been a naturist since the 1930s when, on advice from his doctor, he had become a member of the 'Lotus League' Sun Club (Heselton, 2000). He was comfortable with the naked body and this attitude contributed to the development of Wicca's *skyclad* rituals. In his books, Gardner stated that clothes hindered the 'power'; as he stated in *High Magics Aid*:

*Everything used must have been made with this object in view, so everything used brings to the brain of the magus the reason of the work. Therefore was Thur clad in the symbolically pure, clean white linen robe, signifying light, strength and purity, also (this is important) bearing no colour or pattern that could distract the mind of the wearer or his acolyte. For the same reason the girl was nude, this signified purity unsullied, and the natural magnetism in the human body could flow unhindered to the support of the magus. Here would be no temptation, no distraction for him in this beauty unadorned because a magus must be immune to such conditions ere he may become a magus, for if he cannot at all times prevent his mind from straying, failure in his enterprises would be inevitable; rather was such nudity an added strength to him, for by its presence it signifies the strength of his will and the power of his self-control. For a magus must ever work with a naked woman till nudity is naught to him, lest an evil or mischievous spirit should appear thus, and distract his mind at the critical moment and so ruin an operation.'* (1949, p.150)

This is a debatable position, and it must be noted that Gardner was also a man with a fondness for the naked female form that encouraged the concept of naked rites.

From its birth, Wicca has been ripe with sexual symbolism due to its emphasis on fertility. The symbolism can still be observed in the *Blessing of the cakes and wine*, a ceremony that is usually performed at the end of a ritual or *Sabbat*. This is when the 'male' *athame* (a form of dagger) is dipped into the 'female' cup containing 'the wine', for 'conjoined they bring blessedness'. Such sexual openness attracted people who wanted to explore their own sexuality further, and explains (in part) why the sexual liberation of the 1960s increased the growth of Wicca. The second author's conversations with Charles Clark indicated that Wicca attracted people on the 'sexual fringe', such as transsexual and gay people, perhaps as a result of Wicca's liberal views on nudity and, by extension, its alternative approach to sexuality. Gardner, with his colonial career and associations with wealthy people, leaned more towards the non-supportive, conservative views about homosexuality of his generation. This is a good example of the tension between the value system of the founder of Wicca and the path that it would take through later practitioners. In fact, even in the early days, Wicca contained people whose value system was not the mainstream, and this included some who were ahead of their time or, some may consider, forerunners of moral decline, such as Alex Sanders<sup>3</sup>. Either way, the current social world would be more accepting of their views than that of the 1950s and early 1960s, and would not find the spiritual ideas that interested its followers so unusual.

Wicca met the needs for those who wanted a spiritual path that was accepting of spiritual ideas that were new to many in the Britain of the 1950s and 1960s. As a new and developing religious path, it was open to the assimilation of religious and spiritual ideas

<sup>3</sup> Alex Sanders initiated his own form of Witchcraft, still followed by 'Alexandrians'. When he was alive they titled him the 'King of the Witches'. Sanders claimed to have been initiated by his grandmother but later joined a Gardnerian coven. For a while he followed a 'left hand path' but after personal tragedies determined to only practice magic for good. He was a far more flamboyant and controversial figure than Gardner. His ideas can be found in the Alex Sanders lectures (1984) and a biography of his more active years was produced by Johns (1969).

from around the world, which established religions like Christianity were not as able to do at that time. We do suggest, however, that Christianity during its formative years did just the same, adopting and adapting the ideas of other religions and spiritual practices and welding them into something new. From its early years Wicca was looking beyond what could be considered ancient British paganism for its inspiration. Gardner loved the Eastern mystic traditions he had encountered during his time in the Middle East, especially Sufism, and he had a close friendship with the Sufi scholar Idries Shah. Other influences included ancient Greek Bacchanalian ideas, probably via Gardner's friend, Dion Byngnam. There was also a strong influence from Freemasonry and the Hermetic traditions, together with the Druidry revival. In addition to new spiritual beliefs, early Wiccans were also accepting of those who had unusual experiences.

Experiences that were generally marginalised in mainstream religion, such as mediumship and the 'paranormal' were welcomed by Wicca. As Daniels (2005, p.41) states, in recent Western industrial culture the paranormal was 'stripped of its spiritual context'. Although not unique in doing so (for example, the Spiritualism movement had done so earlier) Wicca became another way to reconnect the paranormal to the spiritual and incorporate these experiences into a religious context. The practice of Wicca also encouraged altered states of consciousness through the use of trance-work and meditation. Several of the early members experimented with 'herbal highs' and in the 1960s there was a link to the Psychedelic Movement. These links to the 'Swinging-sixties' also brought Wicca to greater public attention.

A less spiritual need was also met by Wicca when it offered its early followers the chance of fame; a few of these followers would today have been considered minor celebrities. The majority of the High Priests and High Priestesses of Gardner's Witchcraft from the 1950s and early 1960s appeared in

newspapers, gave talks, authored books, appeared on television and were consulted on films about Witchcraft and magic. A possible negative potential of this attention may have been, on occasion, 'spiritual narcissism' where a spiritual practice is used to meet more self-centred needs.

### **Continuity and change: Ritual development and meeting needs today**

For its modern followers Wicca remains a religious practice that is grounded in an earthy appreciation of sexuality rather than the guilt and shame about sexual matters that is found in some religions. The importance of a healthy relationship with sexuality for spiritual development is recognised by Ferrer (nd):

*'Sexuality and the vital world are the first soils for the organization and creative development of immanent Spirit in human reality. That is why it is so important that sexuality be lived as a sacred soil free from fears, conflicts, or artificial impositions dictated by our minds, cultures, or spiritual ideologies.'*

Wicca is a spiritual practice, which perhaps unsurprisingly, fits with Wright's (1998) account of a feminine transpersonal psychology that has been summarised by Daniels as follows:

*'From the feminine perspective, the transpersonal is more about achieving wholeness and integration, about learning to become open or more permeable to one's body, to others and the environment, and about love, communion, relationship and inter-connectedness'. (2005, p.227)*

Modern Wiccans have been able to take the practice of naked worship and give it a meaning that differs from Gardner's position. Many Wiccans consider the absence of clothes as giving rise to psychological nakedness, openness and trust which are important for working with a rich symbolic framework where intent is the key to the magical work's effectiveness. Working *skyclad* encourages an acceptance of the body that contrasts to religions where guilt is a more significant component. This is healthy for

the fragile human ego and is a way of reclaiming the body and experiencing it as magical regardless of how it conforms, or not, to cultural stereotypes of the perfect body. As Greenwood states: 'The body is the initial focal point of all Western magical work' (2000, p.36). If would-be initiates are uncomfortable with the idea of nakedness, this may be symptomatic of a body-issue that the would-be candidate may have to address before entry can be gained. Alternatively s/he could find a coven that works only in robes. For it is important that covens utilise positive group dynamics and that its members feel that they belong.

The need to belong and be bonded with a group through spiritual practice is met through Wicca for its modern followers. The practice of Wicca in covens relies upon members' unity. It is believed that every group has an *Egregore*, a group mind. Vivianne Crowley adopts a Jungian perspective and suggests that '[t]he group mind of the coven exists on the borders of the personal and collective unconscious' (1996, p.71). All magical orders are based on a particular set of rituals and a symbolic framework. People are attracted to those that fit most closely to their other beliefs. Some are more anarchic than others, but by definition they will all have a basic psychological framework in place. The purpose of these frameworks is to provide the subconscious with a language to use in order to work magic. When casting a spell, participants of a particular group tend to work with the same symbolism; this may be a particular pantheon or a particular table of correspondences, such as those given by Aleister Crowley in his book entitled *777* (1977) which are based on Golden Dawn teachings. However, within a coven, although all members will be using a similar psychological toolbox and framework, the personal experience and perceptions are individual. For example, members of a coven may have varying interpretations of what the God and the Goddess are: one person may believe them to be actual 'beings', another may consider them as aspects of his/her own self,

and yet another may see them as personifications of natural forces in the world around us. These differing perceptions are not considered to be a hindrance to magical work and the attainment of a successful ritual.

For those who have a need for dramatic ritual to express their spirituality, Wicca continues to meet this and there are still many flamboyant 'performers' in Wicca. Self-confidence and the ability to act are good skills for the practitioner to have, especially in relation to ritual and invocation as these skills help to convince the practitioner and coven members of the ritual's intent. Wiccan ritual also contains dance and chant in order to *raise the power*, which echoes the traditions of the followers of the Greek God Dionysus who was associated with sexuality, joy and ecstasy. These are activities that, outside a religious practice, may increase feelings of psychological well-being. Vivianne Crowley (1996) suggests that a conscious state is achieved during a Wiccan ceremony similar to the *samadhi* state of Eastern spiritual practices. However, such suggested parallels are matters for further research.

If the rituals work well, attendees feel that they have had a shared experience which links to what could be considered one of the philosophies of Wicca; that everything is connected. This philosophy is, of course, not unique to Wicca. For example, Nagarjuna the Buddhist Monk stated: 'Things derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves' (cited in Capra, 1984, p.138). In fact, this Wiccan philosophy may have been adopted from Buddhism, according to Heselton (2003, p.82). Gardner himself took an interest in Buddhism whilst in the Far East. This process of assimilation from other spiritual practices continued; for example Vivianne Crowley (1996) advocates the adoption of the ancient Indian practice of *Chakra* work into the Wiccan practice of casting a circle.

When a coven is working well it can be considered to express what Ferrer (2002) has termed a participatory spirituality, defined as follows:



*'In a nutshell, the participatory turn conceives transpersonal and spiritual phenomena, not as individual inner experiences, but as participatory events that can occur at different loci, such as [an] individual, a relationship, a community, a larger collective identity or a place ... the engagement of a transpersonal event can potentially engage the creative participation of all dimensions of human nature, from somatic transfiguration to the awakening of the heart, from erotic communion to visionary cocreation, and from contemplative knowing to moral insight.'* (ibid. p.184)

Though the group mind, the *egregore*, is of paramount importance when working with others it is also possible for people to practice solo, as 'hedge-witches'. Solo and group practice are considered to offer different forms of rewards and understanding, with the loci of the transpersonal phenomenon in solo practice firmly on the relationship between the individual and the Divine.

Wicca, whether practiced solo or in a group, claims to meet the needs of people who want a more direct access to the Divine, where everyone is a Priest or Priestess, and access to Divinity is through oneself. In group work, the aim is for limited separation between the priesthood and the congregation. Covens do have a High Priestess and High Priest, roles usually held by people who are experienced practitioners of the Craft, but they are generally considered as 'first amongst equals'. However, in practice, covens still risk resembling the power structures of other world religions, with the High Priest or High Priestess as the central figures and other members as the congregation who may start to attend merely out of a sense of duty for their religious observation. In this way, religions can become disconnected from a proportion of their followers who may no longer feel that they are offered direct contact with the Divine, but rather a priest-mediated experience with the priest central to the sacred acts. In its aspirations, however, with everyone a Priest or Priestess, the practice of magic in Wicca is available to all.

By having magic as central to its practice, Wicca does not follow the modern Western pattern of separating magic and religion. Some religions began with magic and religion linked but lost those links as they developed. For example, some forms of early Christianity were mystery religions, containing mystical and arcane knowledge. However, a schism between the Gnostic mystics and the Orthodox thinkers occurred, which created a fluctuating power balance (Pagel, 1989) with the orthodox thinkers eventually becoming predominant. In this process, many alternative ideas and interpretations about the life of Jesus were undoubtedly suppressed or lost. The discovery of the *Nag Hammadi* library in 1945 has provided details of this process, indicating that this schism was the result of differences in personality, culture and the fundamentals of politics and power. However, some magical practices survived in Coptic Christianity that inherited a spell-craft tradition from Alexandria and from older, pharaonic magical traditions. Coptic Christianity no longer openly encourages the use of spells, although its priests do still carry out magical rites. One could argue that the prayers recited by priests at the request of their congregation in the Eastern Orthodox Church, particularly in the unreformed Bulgarian Church, have similarities with the concepts embodied by magic.

For the Wiccan or magician (of the non-conjuring variety) magic is about causing change through enacting the Divine purpose. According to Aleister Crowley, 'magick' (as he spelled it) is: 'The science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with the Will' (1973, p.131). By 'Will' he does not mean hedonistic self-centredness, although he is often misrepresented on this because of how he lived his life. Instead it implies connecting to the person's Higher Self and the Divine in order to be in the right place and time to enable these to manifest in the material world. The personal transformative quality in this is through the discovery of what that Will is,

and through the ability to follow it with intent. Intent is crucial, because it is believed that through mental focus the person gives the concept energy to manifest.

Of course, this implies that magical acts are continually occurring in the world. It is a magical act when an architect visualises a building, draws the design, and this is brought into material being by a team of construction workers. These are indeed magical acts of a lower form ('lower' in a non-pejorative sense). Where the Wiccan or magician differs is that their work is done through what Assagioli (1965) would term the Higher Self and Higher Consciousness, with the work done through specific ritual practices that include banishing, purification, consecration, invocation and evocation; and which may involve both astral travel and paranormal events.

However, these practices still bring dangers for the modern follower as they did for early Wiccans, including the risk of 'spiritual narcissism'. As Assagioli warns: 'the flowing spiritual energy may have the unfortunate effect of feeding and inflating the personal ego' (1965, p.44). He suggests that this effect is particularly acute for those with significant early wounding. It is possible that such wounding may be one reason for a person's attraction to Wicca, though the validity of this proposed link between wounding and the appeal of Wicca remains a topic for further research. However, there is some evidence for links between childhood sexual abuse, dissociative states and spiritual development in women (Stiles, 2007) which may predispose them to an interest in a feminine transpersonal spirituality such as Wicca.

### **The development of doctrine and spreading the word**

The development of a religion tends to involve the creation of a central text, a Bible, a Qur'an or a Pali Canon. This process of creating religious texts has occurred in Wicca, and an examination of this may be informative of how it may have occurred in other faith paths. Wicca involves the develop-

ment of an embodied shared practice, for example the preparation of a sacred space through the ritual of casting a circle. Attempts to capture the ritual, its process and procedures, by recording them in a written text represent a way to give guidance for the recreation of the right setting and conditions for the desired experiences, both for the individual and the group as a whole. The use of written language brings the possibility for reflection and to revisit what was written. However, writing also imposes limitations; written words can solidify a meaning, as breathy speculations become tablets of stone.

A special use of language that the general public would most associate with Witchcraft is that of the casting of a spell. Spells in Wicca are a way of being active in your own and others' psychological processes. To spell things out and to name things represents the active power of language, as David Abram elaborates in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1997). Wicca, like other faith paths, makes use of these properties of language in order to link to deeper symbolic representation, such as myths and legends that can be encoded into texts and embodied through ritual. Wicca is a coat rack on which to hang different symbolism.

Margot Adler defined a religion as: 'any set of symbolic forms and acts that relate human beings to ultimate conditions of existence, cosmic questions and universal concerns' (1986, p.11) and, when contained in text, such forms and acts become the doctrine of that religion. Every Wiccan coven now has a 'central doctrine' known as a *Book of Shadows* (BoS) that is an outline for how the Craft in that coven will be practised. Some covens stick rigidly to their original BoS text; others will elaborate and change it as the coven develops. Throughout the 1950s, Wiccan rituals were subject to revisions. Indeed, Gardner encouraged everyone to creatively add to their BoS. In its early years Wicca was relatively free of the dogmatism that is the common by-product of doctrine, with new ideas and approaches

readily inserted into its then simple theological framework. However, some Wiccan 'lines' with strong High Priestesses, who adored Gardner and for whom he was perhaps a surrogate father, have remained steadfast to his initial approach and BoS.

The investment of special significance in Wiccan material objects is small compared to what has occurred in some denominations of Christianity. Wiccan artefacts are not considered 'sacred' but they have a certain monetary value and some have become museum pieces. The First Coven, Bricket Wood, still uses the sword that Gardner gave to them. It is prized but not in the way of a Christian relic. Wicca also has material that is considered 'oathbound', but what constitutes 'oathbound' varies from one 'line' to the next, and indeed from person to person. The practice of making something oathbound is an attempt to protect what is perceived as an innate mystery and 'power'. In the US in particular, Wiccan texts have become 'coveted' and may indeed be considered sacred by some US Wiccans. It is necessary to sign a disclaimer to obtain a copy of selected extracts from Gardner's oldest extant penned work, *Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical*, and it remains difficult for initiates to obtain copies of Gardner's early BoS. The value of new material and the oathbound secretive nature of Wicca mean that it is difficult to encourage wider sharing. In contrast, Gardner himself printed many of the rituals, and shortly before his death discussed the publication of more material with his assistant and secretary, Charles Clark, as the best way to help people to understand the Craft. Again, potentially, this has been an issue faced by the early followers of other religions; to keep the message to a select few or to spread it widely in their own and other lands.

The world's major religions have undergone changes when they moved from their country of origin to other countries and as their rituals and beliefs were coloured by the cultures of the countries in which they are practiced. The movement of Wicca from

Britain to the US is informative of this process although, for Wicca, the story is somewhat different as it has been influenced by developments in modern technology. The development of the Internet in the 1980s led to increased contact between Wicca in the US and Britain: after 20 to 30 years with a degree of isolated development, the Internet's rapid exchange of information made it apparent that the US followers of the Gardnerian tradition had adapted and coloured their 'Craft' differently from the British. The second author's opinion, based upon her personal experience in Internet web-groups, is that US Wiccans are often more 'orthodox' than their counterparts in Britain, for example, taking many things in the BoS more literally. A comparison can be made here to Pagel's (1989) account of the differences between Orthodox and Gnostic Christianity.

Perhaps, the difference in orthodoxy between Wiccans in the US and Britain is due to the fact that Gardner and his cultural upbringing are closer to Britain, and thereby easier for British practitioners to relate to and evaluate. Practitioners in the US are more likely to believe that Gardner was passing on a tradition that had been kept underground for hundreds of years. In contrast, British practitioners are more likely to believe that Gardner revived and reconstructed something based on historical records and books such as *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* (1921) by Margaret Murray. Though Murray's work has been discredited in academic circles, this book had a great influence on Gardner. For British Wiccans, the flaws in Murray's work are less troubling as they acknowledge and even embrace the myth-making process, being more concerned with a deeper truth that is contained behind the myth.

The popularity of Wicca in the US may also relate to the relative newness of the culture of the Europeans who settled there, and that the indigenous religions of North America belong firmly to the Native American populations. So, it is perhaps

understandable that those people in the US who were seeking an alternative to Christianity should turn to a faith tradition that they consider being the indigenous one of their European motherlands. However, there are also indications of US Wiccans becoming dogmatic and critical of those in Britain. This may be a manifestation and consequence of the wider socio-political context in which the US operates in the world in the first part of the 21st century.

Religions throughout history have had to negotiate their relationship with the secular powers of the day. In the past this has typically been the King or Emperor. Today the secular power that has to be reckoned with is Business. At the start of the 21st century, some followers of Wicca have embraced business culture and consumerism. In so doing, Wicca may be open to the accusation of *spiritual materialism*: 'Spiritual materialism, as described by Chogyam Trungpa (1973), represents an attitude of pleasure-seeking, spiritual greed and passive consumerism' (Daniels, 2005, p.76). There are now Wiccan DIY courses, personalised robes and equipment, with the 'seeker' offered a diverse array of Witchcraft types and traditions, especially in the US.

It is a common theme of religions that their faith-path divides into subgroups, for example Sunni and Shia Muslims, or Catholic and Protestant Christians. This has occurred in Wicca and different traditions have developed. In an attempt to avoid confusion, many practitioners in the US have adopted the label 'British Traditional Witchcraft' (BTW) for traditions that stem from the New Forest Covens. These include Gardnerians, Alexandrians, lines descending from Sybil Leek's Horsa Coven<sup>4</sup>, as well as the Central Valley Wicca<sup>5</sup>, which displays some striking similarities to Gardner's Wicca (although their lineage, and exactly how and when it arrived in the US, is still a matter for

research). The term 'BTW' is generally not used in Britain.

The various 'lineages' and traditions of Wicca are still fairly separate. However, there is also often a force competing with that towards division within a faith path, i.e. the desire to come back together to form unity, and this has been demonstrated in Wicca. As the Pagan paths gain increased popularity, traditions are merging with the view that a stronger and more comprehensive framework will be formed. It is understandable that people want to integrate their favourite parts of different traditions into their own path and, since there is no central governing body, the Pagan paths readily lend themselves to adaptation and personalisation. This desire for unity also leads to communication between different religions. Wiccan practitioners have been involved with interfaith movements, including Don Frew in the US and John Macintyre of the Scottish Pagan Federation. Interfaith moots have also been started by pagans in Nottingham and elsewhere in an attempt to bring faith communities together for dialogue. Paganism is a broad-spectrum, pluralistic faith that embraces other paths, and has a stated aim of love for all and a recognition of the interconnectedness of all.

Except in societies totally cut-off from any outside contact, all religions (especially in the modern age) have to face the situation that they exist in a world of other faith-paths. Therefore, how they maintain their position in the religious 'market-place' and how they communicate to the followers of other religions as well as their own is vital. In representing itself through the mainstream media to the general public, to other religions and to other Wiccans, Wicca has increasingly been able to present itself in a non-sensationalised way. 'Guest witches' appear on television; for example, in 2005, Kevin Carylton, appeared on *Spirituality shopper* representing

<sup>4</sup> An introduction to the life of Sybil Leek can be found in the BBC 'Inside Out' (2002) article 'Sybil Leek – the South's white witch'.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the Central Valley Wicca see the website of 'The New Wiccan Church International' ([www.newwiccanchurch.net](http://www.newwiccanchurch.net)).

Paganism. In the late 1960s in the US, Tim Zell established the *Church of All the Worlds*; a collection of mystics influenced by the Sci-fi genre and by images of Utopia. From this collective arose *Green Egg*, a classic Pagan magazine, which was also a response to the planet in crisis. *Green Egg* was a pioneering US Pagan publication comparable to *The Pentagram*, *The Wiccan* and *The Cauldron* in Britain. Many publications, unlike the online forums, embrace more than one Pagan path. There are now many pagan paths, and, if separated, many would not have a sufficient readership, but together they can create a significant audience.

### Witchcraft today

Wicca at the start of the 21st century attracts people who, though the times have changed, possess qualities very similar to those it attracted in the 1950s and 1960s. Wicca attracts people who are from subcultures that include the following: goths, hippies, vegetarians, Dungeon and Dragon game players, 'computer nerds', would-be-mediums, and others who feel that they are at least slightly separate from mainstream society – people who, therefore, may identify with the traditional image of the witch in the Middle Ages as the wise one on the edge of the village. Wicca still meets similar needs to those it met in the 1950s and 1960s: a rejection of modernity, a desire for green living, a simple life, to be in the countryside away from the modern city, yet with an interest in scientific principles. It also provides a supportive network for the marginalised, offering social support, meaning making, solidarity and help to avoid alienation.

Additionally, Wicca provides a place for those who have had transliminal experiences or psychosis, and for survivors of abuse and trauma whose bad experiences may have led to both anomalous experiences and new spiritual understandings. Practitioners of Wicca are most likely not born into witch families, but may find a new family in a coven where they are able to talk about their experiences and developing spiritual awareness.

Whether, in time, their own children will continue to practice Wicca is an interesting question for the future.

Closely linked to Wicca, especially in the US, is Goddess Spirituality, with advocates such as Starhawk (e.g. 1979) and Zsuzsanna Budapest ([www.zbudapest.com](http://www.zbudapest.com)). This movement tends to attract more middle-class white women, often middle-aged and needing to 'reclaim' something for themselves, perhaps after devoting much of their life to children, partner, home and jobs. Life-stage issues and the appeal of Wicca may also be apparent in the attraction of Wicca to teenagers, with the additional influence of popular culture through figures such as Harry Potter and Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

If one considers the question: Would the founders still want to join? The answer is: Yes, probably, although they would notice differences. The sexuality component in the early 1950s and 1960s led more often to sexual activity than it does today. In that period Wicca was a justification to have more sexual partners, a justification that is perhaps no longer required. The early Wiccans would find the modern practitioners more socialist. They might also consider present-day Gardnerian and Alexandrian covens elitist and hard to find, and that the practices have become more fixed. However, because of the diversity within Wicca, they would be able to find a coven somewhere that suited them.

In a post-modern era it is appropriate that Wicca can become a container and conduit for a person's spirituality when expressed in combination with other religions. For example, Christian Wicca has emerged in the US as illustrated by the website for Christian Wicca ([www.ChristianWicca.org](http://www.ChristianWicca.org)). This faith path has a Trinity deity: God the father, God the mother and God the son. Links with Christianity are not as surprising as they might at first appear. Hutton (2001) draws parallels between covens and the 'House Church Movement' of British Christianity, where members meet in homes and have a diversity of practice within a common frame-

work, including faith healing and 'invocation', a form of 'possession' by the Holy Spirit. In addition, there are underlying historical links to Christianity from its adoption of pagan festivals. For example the pagan Yule, celebrating the rebirth of the sun, became Christmas, celebrating the birth of the 'son' of God. Another relatively new path involves the amalgamation of Druidry and Wicca to create Druidcraft (Carr-Gomm, 2002). In addition, people can use Wicca to follow specific pantheons, for example, Celtic Wicca, Seax Wicca. Wicca's flexibility encourages its appropriation by others; it has the ability to assimilate, to accommodate and to be assimilated and accommodated. In this, a comparison can be made to the practices of *Chaos magic* (Sherwin, 2005) where the individual borrows from other belief systems and changes them at will to bring about magical effects. Alternatively, or complementary to this, Wicca may be considered to be doing what religions tend to do at their birth; incorporate ideas from pre-existing faith paths and spiritual ideas in a form of 'religious syncretism' rather than 'paradigm piracy'.

### **Conclusion**

Wicca was born out of the age of post-war Britain. Like many religions, a central figure was involved in its birth. In Wicca's case this was Gerald Gardner, but he has not become a deity, sacred figure or prophet. Whilst, in the war years, German National Socialism had dipped into the cultural pool of European paganism and the esoteric to bring something dark into the world (Goodrick-Clarke, 1985), Gardner dipped into the same cultural pool to produce something positive. Then, what he had begun found fertile ground in the 1950s and 1960s, with

its recognition of the feminine in the Divine and sexual openness, linked to the Feminist movement and sexual liberation. In addition, as a nature-based religion it had common ground with the Ecological movement and its mission for planetary survival.

For its followers, Wicca enables a connection to the feminine transpersonal. It utilises ritual to produce a participatory spiritual practice with a positive attitude to sexuality, and it claims to offer its followers direct contact with the Divine through the practice of magic. It also became a religion for the marginalised and those with unusual experiences. Though a religion of limited doctrine, beyond each follower or coven's Book of Shadows, a greater fundamentalism has developed amongst US Wiccans that demonstrates how socio-political and cultural factors affect how a religion develops, which, in the modern era, have included factors such as the Internet and consumerism. Media representation has shifted from scandalising to tolerant mainstream acceptance as Wicca has become increasingly recognised as existing in a post-modern world where, for a growing number of people, it is now a conduit and container of all or part of their spirituality.

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