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Occultism

THROUGH THE EYES OF RELIGION

MORE ABOUT PRESENT- DAY WITCHES

AS OUR READERS will no doubt realize, it is necessary for a writer of articles dealing with the contemporary occult scene to return to the same subject

from time to time. It has been the good fortune of the present writer to have been responsible for a feature article in the February 1962 issue of this magazine, which bore the title *Beware, Witches at Work*. This article has led to much interesting corres-

pondence, some addressed to the editor, and some having reached the writer directly. In the latter group there was a communication dated July 1962 and written by a prominent British witch, who identified herself as a "High-Priestess and Witch-Queen." This fascinating correspondent expressed her thanks to the writer for the above-named article and gave voice to her gratitude for this material authored by a Christian clergyman, since, as she wrote, "We are not used to being dealt with fairly, particularly by someone of your creed." In view of this correspondence and the increasing volume of fine literature appearing on the ancient religion of witchcraft, it might appear of considerable profit to our readers if we once again direct our attention to this mysterious and intriguing subject.

As the reader might gather from the foregoing, witchcraft is not dead. This seems to be particularly true of Britain, but other parts of the world are not excepted either. Neither are the forces extinct which have been responsible throughout history for the monstrous persecutions which have cost the lives of some nine million real and alleged witches at the hands of religious fanatics, both Catholic and Protestant. As late as September 8, 1956, in Alfayucan, Mexico, two women, Christina Trajo and Be-

nita Sabina were hacked to pieces and their remains burned, on account of their alleged witchcraft. A year earlier on July 3rd another poor Mexican woman, one Josephina Arista, was accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake in Ojinaga, Mexico, only eighty-five miles from the city of Alpine, Texas. The ancient fears and hatreds against witches are alive, and so is the witch cult itself.

Whether there actually is a revival of witchcraft throughout the world in our present era — or whether there is merely a great deal of publicity directed to its existence — is a question which must remain unanswered for lack of evidence. Ever since the noted anthropologist, Dr. Margaret Alice Murray, in 1921 published her epochal work, *"The Witch Cult in Western Europe,"* it being followed by her other fine book, *"The God of the Witches,"* the world of interested students began to realize that the old picture of the witch as a repulsive hag, working evil magic against all and sundry with the aid of the Devil, to whom she offered unbaptized infants in sacrifice, was but a product of the imagination of medieval religious fanatics. It has also become evident that the attitude of those psychologists and neurologists who, beginning with Charcot and continuing with Freud and others, attempted to look

upon the witches as hysterics suffering from delusions, was not correct. The witch-cult is an ancient religion, having its roots in the prehistoric past of Europe and particularly England; a religion moreover, which in spite of the fury of its persecutors and all manner of other adversity survived almost unchanged to the present day.

A MODERN PROPHET OF WITCHCRAFT

DR. MARGARET MURRAY may have provided the academic foundations of the revival of interest in the witches, but it was another — Dr. Gerald Brosseau Gardner — who managed to attract the widest popular attention to the ancient faith. Gardner is a witch, and his works are written "from the inside," rather than from the point of view of a mere scholar of theories. His first work dealing with the witches was published in 1949, a historical novel, entitled "*High Magic's Aid*". It was, so far as it is known, the first book written by an initiated witch, describing under the guise of fiction, something of what a witch believes. Five years later, Gardner published his *magnum opus*, "*Witchcraft Today*", the first book ever written describing what witches are and what they do, by someone who had actually taken part in their ceremonies, worshipped their

gods with them, and made magic with them. This work was followed by Gardner's latest, "*The Meaning of Witchcraft*," (publ. 1959) written largely in response to the great interest aroused by his earlier books.

What manner of man is Gerald B. Gardner, the witch? Here is a description, as given by a reporter of the French newspaper, *Le Matin*:

"Dr. Gardner is a grand old man, over 75 years old. He has a triangular face, a beard fierce as if in battle; eyes blue, astonishingly young, and sparkling. His entire body is covered with magical tattoos. At his side is a sorcerer's dagger, covered with cabballistical designs with which he traces the magical circle, whilst he holds in the other the hammer of Thor. I suddenly had the impression of seeing before me an Egyptian Pharaoh, charged with magical power."

IT MAY BE said that the whole of Gerald B. Gardner's life has been a journey toward his beliefs. He lived for decades in the Orient, in Ceylon, and Malaya, where he worked on plantations, conducted archaeological excavations and studied native magic. He was acquainted with practically every major figure on the occult scene during his life time. The late Aleister Crowley, controversial mage of the 1920's and 30's, was so impressed with Gardner's knowledge of magic that he gave him authority to work under the auspices of the dreaded O.T.O., of which Crowley was the head.

But Gardner was not satisfied with ceremonial magic of the Kabbalistic variety: he was seeking something else. On the eve of the Second World War, with his initiation into the ancient "WICA" or witchcraft, he reached the goal of what had been his lifelong spiritual journey: Gerald Gardner had come home at last, he was a witch.

Gardner's books on witchcraft as the survival of an ancient pagan religion common to many peoples of the world have thrown more light upon this strange subject than almost any others published for centuries. He is the very first practicing witch to appear in print, saying what he wants to say. His utterances are subject, of course, to the restrictions which are usual among members of secret societies, who have to observe silence on many matters related to the rituals of their craft. Gardner has written, and he has been written about: he has been praised and revered, quoted, filmed, and televised. Yet, in spite of all this, he remains a somewhat mysterious and supremely aloof figure, holding steadily to his beliefs, and looking out for the good of the religion of the witches, to which he is thoroughly dedicated.

This modern wizard and apostle of witchcraft lives on the ancient and mysterious Isle of Man, off the coast of England.

Ten minutes away from his modest home stands an old mill, known since medieval times as the "Witches' Mill." In this building Dr. Gardner established what is perhaps one of the most unique institutions on the face of this Earth: the Museum of Magic and Witchcraft. Three floors of this museum are filled with relics of three thousand years of the craft; he also possesses thousands of rare volumes on witchcraft and related subjects, which are available to serious students. All those who have met him, describe Gardner as a man with a purpose. They say that purpose is all around him, that he believes passionately in the old religion of the witches, that his museum and books exist only to aid him in his task of washing away the ancient taint of evil which surrounds it. Such a man is Dr. Gerald Gardner, the witch.

WHAT DO THE WITCHES BELIEVE?

TO ASK WHAT the witches believe may appear to some as a nonsensical question, inasmuch as witches are known for *doing* things, (such as magic, etc.) rather than for their beliefs. But since the witch cult is a religion, it seems proper that we should inquire into its beliefs, or into the limited religious lore concerning it that has been made available to us so far. The witch-

es worship the divine spirit of Creation, without which there would be no world and no life. They do this by rites of power, which enable the gods of nature to aid man in his purpose of raising crops, making his herds multiply, and in living a happy and joyful life on Earth. The witches believe in reincarnation, and unlike many Westerners who have gotten hold of this belief only recently from the Orient, they always have held to the truth of repeated lives on Earth. They say that when they die, they go to the god's domain, where they rest for awhile and are prepared to be born again on Earth, witches are born again together with those they love, and they consider it the highest gift of their gods if in a new life they are permitted to enter the craft once more.

IT IS QUITE certain that some sexual practices are included in the rites of the witches, but it is equally certain that these are performed in a reverent and holy way, and that they are of a largely symbolic nature. The witches believe in what they call "the power" as a force which resides in their bodies, and which can be liberated for mystical and magical purposes through the proper rites. Dances are also a part of the rituals, although these are less elaborate and frequent than in the old days. The rituals are performed for the

most part by the witches in the nude; this is an ancient custom, dating back to probably prehistoric times, when people wore no clothes. That this need be no more immoral than the perfectly normal activities of nudist clubs, which now function in all civilized countries, goes without saying.

Witchcraft is not by any means identical with sorcery or black magic. Sorcerers, Ritual, Kabbalistic Magicians are concerned with the evocations of genii, demons or elemental spirits and forcing or bribing them to cause events to occur. Such magicians thus deal with non-human spirit-entities whom they wish to command. In order to please these entities, magicians often use blood, skulls and other loathsome objects. The witches dislike these methods and consider them unnecessary, because they are capable of calling forth just as much power from their own nature, and this without doing injury to other living creatures. The confusion of ceremonial magic and genuine witchcraft may have arisen in the middle ages when sorcerers often employed witches, more or less in the same way as modern psychic researchers employ mediums, and thus in the minds of the badly informed the magic of sorcerers and the worship of witches appeared as one and the same thing.

WITCHCRAFT AND CHRISTIANITY

THOSE WHO HAVE any inkling of the facts of history need not be told that the Christian Church was often guilty of the most un-Christian mode of behavior toward the witches. What is less well-known is that the witches were persecuted initially because of an ecclesiastical document of very doubtful authenticity, and which is today regarded as a rank forgery by most authorities. About A. D. 906, the Church-historian Reginus published a work on the disciplines of the Church in which he mentioned the alleged decree of the Council of Ancyra (A.D. 314) advising the bishops to put down with utmost severity the practices of some "wicked women, who believe and profess themselves, in the hours of night, to ride upon certain beasts with Diana, the goddess of the pagans." Whether genuine or not, this ancient and ambiguous decree was taken as the basis of the first persecutions of witches throughout Europe by the Church. In 1486, Pope Innocent VIII instituted far more severe measures and approved the infamous work "*Malleus Maleficarum*" authored by two fanatical monks as the most authoritative on the subject of witchcraft. This dreadful compendium of vile superstition, the English title of

which is "*Hammer Against Witches*," had a tremendous and fateful effect upon the persecution of witches. It was soon followed by many similar works, all devoted to the promotion of witch-burning. The practical results of these infamous books were the widespread witch-hunts and the unspeakable cruel tortures and executions connected with the same.

If one compares the earlier attitude of the Church to the problem of witchcraft with that exemplified in the *Malleus*, one notices a striking difference. In the earlier times, the Church was trying to put down the phenomena of "night-riding witches" as illusions induced by demons. The purpose of these earlier decrees was to frighten people out of attending Sabbaths by introducing the element of doubt into their minds, concerning the reality of the happenings. This was, of course, in accordance with the belief promoted by many Christians, that the pagan deities were devils in disguise. As time went on, so many people adhered to the cult of the witches, that it appeared as a threatening rival religion to the leaders of the Church, and more radical measures were introduced. In order to discard the earlier official "line" of the Church concerning witchcraft, dark allegations of "devil-worship" and "foul orgies" were made, in order to terrify

and enrage the populace. The fruits of this unscrupulous propaganda are unfortunately still with us, inasmuch as most people still tend to associate witchcraft with evil.

IT WOULD SEEM reasonable that as the various Christian denominations are increasingly forced into a position where they must accord respect to religions other than their own, they should also adopt a more intelligent attitude toward the old faith of the witches. It may be discomfoting for some to think that after so many centuries of Christian rule, the pre-Christian faith is still present in such countries as England. On the other hand, the situation is not so tragic as it might seem. Perhaps the existence and increased prominence of the witch cult might even be conducive to the internal regeneration of Christendom.

The more we study the nature of religious experience in various faiths and cultures, the more we realize, that they are divided more by mental concepts than by inner realities. As surely as the mind divides, so surely the heart unites. Spiritual co-operation is possible only in the mystical experience which is equally present in all religions,

whether they be called Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, Judaism — or the Dianic cult of the witches. The sincere aspiration of the human heart toward the Divine is the common denominator of all convictions concerning the essence of religion. As a hymn of singular beauty and insight has it:

"Each sees one colour of Thy
rainbow light,
Each looks upon one tint and
calls it heaven.
Thou art the fullness of our
partial sight;
We are not perfect till we find
the seven.
Some seek a Father in the
heavens above;
Some ask a human image to
adore;
Some crave a spirit vast as life
and love;
Within Thy mansions we have
all and more."

If men are to meet in fellowship and dedicate their common efforts in good works, they must be free of ancient fears and mistaken hatreds; rather they must realize that we all practice one quality of faith regardless of the names by which it is described. This recognition is indeed the hope of the world, for it is none other than the assurance of Divine wisdom, both of which surpass understanding. The rediscovery of the ancient religion of the witches may bring us closer to that recognition.