

# Origins of wicca: the beginning of a new religion



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The Wiccan religion has become one of the fastest rising religions in the United States. It is also one of the most misjudged due to the debates surrounding its history and the mystery cloaking its beliefs and doctrines. Wicca is frequently misconstrued to be allied with Satan and rituals that use elements of black magic. There are a number of popular TV series that have shown Witchcraft and Wicca in a positive light, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Charmed, and because of this, its popularity has increased. The downside is this fame has not been partnered with a growth in understanding and respect. Margot Adler, a writer for Reader's Companion to U. S. Women's History, has said, " Wicca is the term commonly used to describe several different traditions of contemporary Paganism—an earth-centered religion that reveres nature; celebrates seasonal and lunar cycles; and worships a Goddess, or many Goddesses, or sometimes a Goddess and a God".[1]This religion centers on revering an earth God or Goddess, and tapping into their power and the earth's elements for the good of everything and everyone. Wicca offers a nature focused belief system with an assortment of customs and rituals,[2]yet, obliviousness and historical fallacies control public view.

Controversies that surround Wicca begin with its exact origin. There are few who believe that it has origins in Witchcraft as there are similarities between them. Pagan practices, such as Witchcraft, began with the Celts around 700 B. C.[3]The region during this time was chiefly a rural culture, and as such, Celtic traditions were based uniquely on nature. Months were named after trees, and festivals centered around the solstices and equinoxes.[4]Being a polytheistic religion, pagans worship female and male deities and are

connected with Goddess worship, a strong belief in the divinity of the female. [5]These paganistic principles and rites gradually merged with other European religious practices, such as magic, tonics, and liniments for healing, to form what we call now, Witchcraft. Those who did not have pagan views branded these beliefs as demonic worship,[6]which has led to the misconceptions of today. There are numerous Wiccans today that do not believe the beginnings of their faith is in Witchcraft, yet, others believe that these religious practices are a part of the foundation of Wicca. There has remained questionable historical evidence to support a direct connection between the two since paganism is not an organized religion and is passed on through oral traditions,[7]

The introduction of Wicca is connected with Gerald Gardner (1884-1964). [8]Gardner had been a British civil servant and an informal archaeologist, who spent part of his time in Southern Asia. He authored the book *Witchcraft Today* after his return to England, which detailed the rituals, beliefs, and doctrines of the religion he coined Wicca. Gardner claimed his book was inspired from Celtic traditions; however, it was a combination of Western faith, Asian magic, God and Goddess worship, and Masonic rituals.[9]The religion he outlines in his book is a nature-based faith with a low emphasis on magic. There is an inclination to view Wicca and Witchcraft as the same and while some Wiccans identify themselves as witches, it is a choice each Wiccan makes. Wiccans today do not see themselves as witches. Witchcraft is viewed as a magic-based practice but does not hold the spiritual footing that Wicca exemplifies. The Wiccan religion of today is different than the one previous Christians tried to annihilate during the Spanish Inquisition and the

Salem Witch Trials;[10]however, it is sometimes impossible to deny the similarities between them.

Wicca, formally founded in England in 1950, arrived in the United States in the sixties and seventies during the religious movement, Neo-Paganism. This Neo-Paganism referred to religions that joined the worship of pagan deities, particularly of the earth, with witchcraft.[11]It has slowly gained in popularity since its inception, especially in recent years, and has gained recognition as an organized religion by the United States Government.[12]It is difficult to know the exact number of people in the U. S. that follow Wicca; however, approximations run anywhere from 40, 000 members to 140, 000 members. [13]Wicca is not what most would recognize as a religion as there is no large, central church or a communal set of doctrines. A traditional congregation does not exist. Some traditional congregations contain small groups within them. These small groups in relation to Wicca are called covens. Each coven consists of no more than twelve members, and it may also have a high priest or priestess, for a total of thirteen.[14]There are covens that reach numbers into the twenties, but a majority of the covens keep to a few members. Factors that make it impossible to establish an accurate number of practicing Wiccans in North America include the fact each coven contains a small number of practitioners, the religion is spread geographically, and many practitioners observe Wicca in private because of common misconstructions, such as its improper connotations with Satanism.[15]

Wicca is a religion that consists of countless individuals. Several people come to Wicca through research into religions and find themselves drawn to the beliefs, rituals, and peacefulness of it. There are few people who are born

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into Wicca, and those that are had lineage of witches in their family history. Individuals that decide to follow this faith oftentimes practice on their own before they seek a coven to join or begin their own, a way of experimenting. [16]Covens that form are different from each other in small ways as it is first practiced by oneself and each individual practices their own way. Every coven and practitioner possesses a book called the Book of Shadows, which differ as much as the covens do.[17]The Book of Shadows include spells, potions, and wisdom that can be passed down. New members who join are often drawn to something in an individual coven rather than the religion as a whole. Each coven has its own set of beliefs, which makes Wicca difficult to label and categorize. There are varying covens in the religion, but it is often tough to distinguish one from the next. There is one coven, Gardnerian, created by Gerald Gardner, which only differentiates itself due to its devotees' worshipping in the nude. [18] There is no defined chain of power in Wicca; still, covens are frequently led by a High Priestess, a High Priestess and a High Priest, or in some rare cases, a High Priest only.[19]Such people are usually long-time members of the religion, the coven, and are seen as an of Elder of the group that neophyte members can go to for guidance. The meetings that covens hold are called esbats. These meetings, or gatherings, are held for the coven to conduct coven related business, hold coaching and training sessions, i. e., spell-casting and potion-making, and perform rituals such as initiations and other similar ceremonies.[20]Esbats are held at full or new moons, for a total of thirteen annually. There are other gatherings in addition to the esbats. Eight holiday events in which Wiccans recognize and gather for are called sabbats. <sup>19</sup> These sabbats are traditionally planned around major events in nature, such as the changing of the seasons, and life

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cycles. There are four major and four minor sabbats. The four major holidays were originally designed to commemorate the changing of seasons and to revel in the hunt and harvest.[21]The minor holidays are celebrated with regard to the solstices and equinoxes. Modern practitioners use these sabbats to celebrate life and perform rituals to honor their interpretation of these days.[22]Wiccan religion has more variances than other religions as it is a religion of constant involvement. There is no preacher who stands before a congregation and leads them in lessons from a bible. Those that lead from within the covens decide how they want the members to worship and the manner in which rituals and ceremonies are to be performed.

The principal belief system of Wiccan religion is based on natural law.

Natural law is grounded in morality and ethics. It is exposed to humans through the use of reason and choosing between good and evil, thus finding its supremacy in realizing universal standards in morality and ethics.

[23]Wiccans, therefore, believe nature functions separate of an all-controlling, ever present God and instead conducts themselves by their own laws, on their own clock. There is no Heaven or Hell in the Wiccan world, nor an incorporeal, prodigious God that is set apart from nature quietly controlling all aspects of it. God, instead, is an objective creating force, called " The One." [24]The One is a personification of all in nature, everything that has its own unique energy or lifeforce, networking and influencing each other to form a balanced accord. Everything, in essence, has a celestial spirit, and, when put together forms a broad depiction seen as The One. The principal deities for Wicca are the Mother Goddess, who represents the fruitfulness of the earth, and the Horned God, who perished and was revived,

signifying the earth's renewing powers. <sup>24</sup> The conviction is that all living things are part of the main God and Goddess, and that the Earth itself is an active organism. Each and every living being is seen as an integral part of that organism. A bond is formed by tuning into the communications from the Earth and nature. Wiccans are actively involved in protecting and promoting Earth and her natural resources. Practitioners hold numerous festivals and celebrations to honor these Gods and Goddesses. <sup>24</sup> This concept is not an exclusive one to Wiccans, however, it is one that has continued to be a vital part of the Wiccan religion. Although modern Wiccans draw on their Pagan roots and continue to worship a multitude of ancient pagan deities, it is very important to note that these deities are not considered actual individual Gods or Goddesses but part of The One divine spirit.[25] This is a problematic notion for some monotheistic, patriarchal religions, such as Judaism, to grasp. Wiccans believe that the intergalactic dynamisms of the universe [The One] are comprised of balanced masculine and feminine characteristics, embodied in the Goddess and God.[26] The Goddess and God encompass a variety of features that can be further denoted by the individual ancient pagan Gods. The deities act as a way for Wiccans to identify with the different facets of the singular divine spirit, The One. Praying, for instance, for guidance in a love relationship, it would be simpler to relate to Venus, the Goddess of Love, than an impersonal, all-encompassing divine force. [27] Wicca is not a very structured or rigid religion, so one will find variation in how Wiccans classify themselves: monotheistic, duo-theistic, polytheistic, etc.; but in general, many support the idea explained above.

Wiccans support the premise of natural law, of a non-interfering divinity, however, they expand on the belief that they can tap into or channel the energy of the divine to influence or manipulate things.[28]The explanation for such credence is since the celestial life-force exists in everything, each individual can attain a personal connection or communion with the force, such as tapping into its energy. This is quite different from the traditional God/worshiper roles existing in numerous monotheistic religions. This leads to a deeply personal relationship between a Wicca practitioner and the Goddess and God. The ability to tap into and manipulate the powers of the deity comes a moral obligation. There is a strong desire for peace and harmony among Wiccans. They desire this not only within their religion but also with all of nature's creatures. Followers are allowed freedom in what they do as long as it does not bring any intentional harm to any other living beings. Wiccans adhere to a peaceful belief system which are outlined in the Wiccan Credo,[29]a widespread and publicized poem written in the early 1900s with its origins concealed in mystery.[30]The peaceful mentality of Wicca can be perceived in the first three lines of the poem:

“ Bide within the law you must,

In perfect love and perfect trust.

Live you must and let to live,

Fairly take and fairly give.”[31]



The Wiccan Credo is notorious for containing the two most observed laws of Wiccan behavior: The Wiccan Rede and The Threefold Law. (Please refer to the end of the document to view a full version of the Wiccan Rede.)

The true nature of Wicca can be seen towards the end of the Wiccan Rede, where it states: " An ye harm none, do what ye will." Translated, this simply means, practice as you please as long as it harms no soul or thing. The Threefold Law holds another view of the true nature of Wicca as it introduces the Wiccan belief in karma and rebirth. The Threefold Law is found within the Wiccan Credo in the following lines: " Mind the Threefold Law you should, Three times bad and three times good." [32] It can be deduced that this suggests an individual's actions return to him or her three times over, whether good or bad. Some practitioners do not buy into the literalness of the factor of three, but they do advocate the idea that their deeds will have repercussions. This idea is expanded further in the common belief in reincarnation. This notion is best summarized as some believe a soul is continually renewed whereas others believe once a soul acquires all life instruction, it is permitted everlasting rest in their new home called the Summerlands. [33] Reincarnation is the ultimate method for curbing the misuse of magic and evil behavior as it distributes cosmic impartiality. A person is reborn in a place that suits their deeds from their former lifetime.

The origins of Wicca may have some similarities to Witchcraft; though, after examining the history and the birth of this religion, the differences become evident. The doctrines and beliefs of the Wiccan's hold the true nature of their practice; a respect for nature and human-kind. Wicca is not about promoting or provoking harm or ill intent toward anyone or anything.

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Wiccans do not use magick or spells to benefit from others' misfortune, contrary to popular belief. The mystery that shrouds this religion is easily dispelled after examining its true nature. Once an individual researches the practices of this religion, they will have an understanding of respect instead of fear. The Wicca religion prides itself on the Wiccan Credo which states that if they do not harm another person or thing, they can practice as they wish. But should they choose to do evil, their deeds will be reaped upon them threefold. Morality and ethics frame the basis for Wicca, as well as the idea of a divine spirit that is represented in the Goddess and God. Throughout history, Wicca has had a major impact on its followers and non-followers. People are either believers or non-believers, followers or non-followers, or for it or against it. The true nature of Wicca is peaceful and caring to both humankind and the natural elements of the world, and as such, deserves a level of respect and understanding.

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## Wiccan Credo

Bide within the Law you must, in perfect Love and perfect Trust.

Live you must and let to live, fairly take and fairly give.

For tread the Circle thrice about, to keep unwelcome spirits out.

To bind the spell well every time, let the spell be said in rhyme.

Light of eye and soft of touch, speak you little, listen much.

Honor the Old Ones in deed and name,

Let love and light be our guides again.

Deosil go by the waxing moon, chanting out the joyful tune.

Widdershins go when the moon doth wane,

and the werewolf howls by the dread wolfsbane.

When the Lady's moon is new, kiss the hand to Her times two.

When the moon rides at Her peak, then your heart's desire seek.

Heed the North winds mighty gale, lock the door and trim the sail.

When the Wind blows from the East, expect the new and set the feast.

When the wind comes from the South, love will kiss you on the mouth.

When the wind whispers from the West, all hearts will find peace and rest.

Nine woods in the Cauldron go, burn them fast and burn them slow.

Birch in the fire goes, to represent what the Lady knows.

Oak in the forest towers with might, in the fire it brings the God's insight.

Rowan is a tree of power, causing life and magick to flower.

Willows at the waterside, stand ready to help us to the Summerland.

Hawthorn is burned to purify, and to draw faerie to your eye.

Hazel-the tree of wisdom and learning adds its strength to the bright fire burning.

White are the flowers of Apple tree, that brings us fruits of fertility.

Grapes grow upon the vine, giving us both joy and wine.

Fir does mark the evergreen, to represent immortality seen.

Elder is the Lady's tree, burn it not or cursed you'll be.

Four times the Major Sabbats mark, in the light and in the dark.

As the old year starts to wane, the new begins, it's now Samhain.

When the time for Imbolc shows, watch for flowers through the snows.

When the wheel begins to turn, soon the Beltane fires will burn.

As the wheel turns to Lamas night, power is brought to magick rite.

Four times the Minor Sabbats fall, use the Sun to mark them all.

When the wheel has turned to Yule, light the log the Horned One rules.

In the spring, when night equals day, time for Ostara to come our way.

When the Sun has reached its height, time for Oak and Holly to fight.

Harvesting comes to one and all, when the Autumn Equinox does fall.

Heed the flower, bush, and tree, by the Lady blessed you'll be.

Where the rippling waters go, cast a stone, the truth you'll know.

When you have and hold a need, harken not to others greed.

With a fool no season spend or be counted as his friend.

Merry Meet and Merry Part, bright the cheeks and warm the heart.

Mind the Three-fold Laws you should, three times bad and three times good.

When misfortune is enow, wear the star upon your brow.

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Be true in love, this you must do, unless your love is false to you.

These Eight words the Rede fulfill:

“ An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will”

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