



## NEO-PAGANISM AND WITCHCRAFT

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Neo-paganism/witchcraft is a spiritual orientation and a variety of ritual practices using reconstructed mythological structures and pre-Christian rites primarily from ancient European and Mediterranean sources. Using a wide variety of techniques, neo-pagans seek to rediscover, reinterpret, and reinvigorate ancient myths, symbols, and deity forms, especially emphasizing goddess figures. Neo-paganism is usually used as an umbrella term that comprehends a wide range of beliefs and practices, including Wicca (witchcraft), druidism, ceremonial magic, and other such things. Popular opinion notwithstanding, most neo-pagans do not repudiate Christianity; on the contrary they point to the elements of Christianity that have been borrowed from pre-Christian practices and borrow widely from many other world religions.

Neo-pagans claim that their beliefs and practices spring from ancient sources. Specifically, most see in goddess worship a re-discovery of folk practices that persisted in rural Europe throughout the Christian era and up to recent times. However, the current neo-pagan revival can only be firmly traced to events and trends in the mid-nineteenth century. One source was the occult revival, which saw the flowering of conspiracy theories involving mysterious fraternities such as Knights Templar, Rosicrucians, and Illuminati, and later the emergence of new mystical religious and ceremonial orders ranging from Theosophy

to Spiritualism to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Another was romanticism, which in the emerging industrial age nostalgically sought a return to a simple pre-modern life. A third was the rise of modern anthropology, which brought earlier and less "advanced" cultures into the public eye.

### *Gerald Gardner*

One individual was pre-eminently responsible for melding these disparate tendencies into what is now known as neo-paganism. It is possible that modern paganism could have emerged without Gerald Gardner, but without his influence it would have been quite a different phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

Gardner claimed to have been initiated into magical paganism at a young age by an elderly woman named Old Dorothy. With the assistance of Aleister Crowley and others, Gardner created a set of rituals and a simple interpretation of pre-Christian Celtic worship centered on an image of a great Goddess. The new/old religion he called "Wicca," a word allegedly taken from Old English and meaning "to bend or alter." Practitioners of the religion, called witches, were held to be reawakening ancient powers of pre-Christian deities ignored by the modern world.

Gardner began teaching this religion in Britain during the 1920s. One of his initiates, the brilliant and eccentric Alexander Sanders, developed his own version of Gardner's philosophy. In turn, Sanders's students Janet and Stewart Farrar created yet another style of practice. These three branches of Wicca—Gardnerian, Alexandrian, and Farrarian—are the basis of what is often called "Brit-Trad" (British-Tradition) Wicca. The Brit-Trad "schools" and other variants on the theme began to filter into the United States in the 1960s, just when a new American market for alternative religions was emerging.

### *Neo-Paganism in the United States*

The first generally recognized neo-pagan organization in the United States was founded in 1961 by a young man named Tim Zell. The group called itself the Church of All Worlds, and based its teachings in part on a Robert Heinlein science fiction novel.<sup>2</sup> The church gradually began to incorporate other beliefs and came to see itself as a modern manifestation of an ancient "sensibility" that it was believed many pre-modern peoples shared, that all life on earth is interrelated and interconnected and that the planet is a real living entity. It began to call itself "pagan" in 1967 as an expression of this sensibility. The Church of All Worlds has remained largely distinct from Wicca by maintaining its own rituals and a unique organizational structure and philosophy.

During the 1960s and 1970s neo-paganism in the United States began to take root and develop features that made it distinct from the British and European pagan movements. Philosophers such as Isaac Bonewits developed complex theories of ritual and magic which incorporated computer and technological ideas and language to explain how magic works. Z. Budapest and Starhawk, blending facets of Wicca with other pagan traditions and emerging feminism, created a woman-centered version of the religion

called "Feminist/Dianic Wicca." Individuals who interpreted Gardnerian and Alexandrian traditions in their own fashion created new sects of Wicca, some which have become significant in their own right, e.g., Frostian and Georgian Wicca. During the 1970s other groups began to emerge that were interested in reviving pagan traditions other than those represented by Wicca, such as Asatru (Norse), Hellenic (Greek), and Isis-Osirian (neo-Egyptian). By the 1980s the sheer variety of neo-pagan groups in the United States had become staggering, generating a new genre of books, a growing number of festivals, new computer bulletin boards for networking, and even whole communities for pagans who could afford to purchase land together. The interest in and growth of neo-paganism has continued unabated and today neo-paganism is among the fastest growing new religious movements.<sup>3</sup>

### *Beliefs and Practices*

Despite the central historical position of Gardnerian Wicca, there is no one authority or scripture for all neo-pagans. Neo-pagans borrow quite freely from many religious and philosophical traditions and from each other. This allows for a great deal of personal religious freedom in thought and practice. As a result, the neo-pagan community has been diverse, not centralized. Many neo-pagans "discover" their religion through publications and become "solitary practitioners" rather than members of covens. In the effort to find one another, neo-pagans turn to books, periodicals, computer bulletin board services, and festivals where they can share their beliefs and practices.

As a result of this networking and the influence of Gardnerian Wicca, the following general practices and beliefs have emerged as comprising a "generic" pagan theology and ritual structure. This structure remains loosely true to form even among neo-pagans who do not profess association with Wicca.

1. There is a general tendency to stress the importance of the feminine principle in divinity. Most pagans see this tendency as stemming from the overuse of a male deity in our culture and feel that they are seeking to re-balance this inequity.
2. There are general ethical principles which maintain that whatever one does comes back at some point—a kind of “instant karma,” often called the threefold law: whatever you do comes back to you three times over. Connected with this principle is the Wiccan Rede, a general ethical motto that is often cited as the core neo-pagan credo: “An it harm none, do what thou wilt.” Closely related to this ethical principle for most pagans is a doctrine of reincarnation that acts both as a means by which the cosmos exacts justice and as a device whereby individual souls spiritually grow and develop.
3. Finally, there is a stress on the need to develop a facility for the working of magic. Magic is to be used for generally constructive and defensive purposes and there is an emphasis, at least in the literature, that one should strive for balance and control of self before working magic.<sup>4</sup>

Most neo-pagans cultivate a healthy sense of humor about their gods and goddesses, stressing the importance of “reverence and mirth” in religious practices. Many neo-pagans engage in “discordian” behavior or magic, a practice difficult to describe that frequently emerges during rituals that may be getting too solemn for the sensibilities of some present. It is not uncommon for jokes and silliness to attend the most serious invocations; neo-pagans claim that such antics act as humbling devices designed to remind participants of the divine chaos present in the universe.

Most neo-pagans observe eight high festivals which correspond to the turning points of the agricultural year and the seasons: Yule (Winter Solstice), Imbolg (Candlemas, February 2), Vernal Equinox (March 21), Beltane (May Day, May 1),

Midsummer (Summer Solstice), Lammas (August 1), Autumnal Equinox (September 21), and Samhain (Halloween). These are thought to be times of maximum power, when the forces of the land, the ancestors and the goddesses/gods are at their height. Many neo-pagans also observe the phases of the moon with special rituals. A festival is typically observed with a main ritual, in which a sacred place is established by the casting of a circle and the invoking of goddesses/gods and other additional powers that might be considered helpful and which are associated with the season. A rite of the sharing of food and drink usually forms the main portion of the ritual. Although most books describing the festivals recommend the use of cakes (bread) and wine, this author has participated in rites where Kool-Aid, cola, potato chips, and pizza were used as legitimate substitutes. According to neo-pagans, it's the thought and spirit that count, not the literal substance used.

After the ritual there is usually more food and drink shared along with storytelling, songs, and sometimes even short dramas depicting myths both ancient and modern which have been composed for the occasion. There remains a common public perception that neo-pagans also engage in sexual orgies during these rituals. While it is true that neo-pagans are, for the most part, freer in their sexual attitudes and expressions than mainstream Americans, tolerating homosexuality, bisexuality, alternative partnerships, and multiple partners relatively easily, most of these relationships are conducted in private. After attending literally hundreds of rituals, this author has yet to encounter a single orgy. With the current spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, neo-pagans have become their own police, freely handing out condoms at festivals and strongly advising safe sex. Responsibility has become a byword.

The most frequent items used in ritual services are the wand, the cup, the pentacle, and the dagger, representing, respectively, the four elements of fire (or air), water, earth and air (or fire). These four elements (tools) also correspond to the will,

emotions, body, and intellect of the human being. One uses these elements to "cast a circle," to create a sacred space wherein magic or ritual is to be worked. The powers of the four elements are invoked with the corresponding tools in the four directions: east/air, south/fire, west/water, north/earth. The caster of the circle represents the fifth direction/element, that of spirit.™ Often the elemental directions are invoked by calling on gods/goddesses, spirits, or angels that are said to rule these elements. Once the circle is cast, and proper purifications have been made, commonly through the use of saltwater and incense, the magical work or ritual may commence.<sup>5</sup>

There is often a confusion in the public's mind about the real function and purpose of magic. While neo-pagans will differ on the precise definition of what they call magic, for most of them, magic or spellwork is a means by which a prayer or petition is acted out in a ritual. It uses props and words to calm and focus the mind in order that the universe/goddess may be made aware of the needs and wants of the practitioner. Most pagans strongly emphasize that while the items used in spells/magic, such as candles, colored cloth, herbs and incense, are facilitators of magic, the real magic lies in one's own focus and intentions. Props are used to help create an atmosphere, and in some instances represent a kind of sacrifice to deities being called upon, as a payment for their attention and concern. Many neo-pagans also keep a record of their rituals and magical workings called a "Book of Secrets/Shadows" in which they keep track of the efficacy of their rites. Neo-pagans regard themselves as practical people who will abandon techniques and rituals which are considered ineffective or negative. Often some form of divination, astrology, tarot, or runework will accompany the ritual as sign or communication from the powers invoked as to the probable outcome of the rite.

The great majority of neo-pagans stress the importance of engaging in magic for only positive or constructive purposes. This general principle does not prevent, how-

ever, the odd pagan from occasionally engaging in such practices as "black/destructive magic." If such a person is discovered, he/she is commonly shunned by the community and can be blackballed throughout the networking system. The issue of ethics in magical practice is a topic of continuing debate among neo-pagans who often spend a great deal of time determining whether or not a ritual is well intended prior to a working in order that there may be no confusion among themselves or the powers to be invoked.

According to most neo-pagans, an individual is not "made into a pagan"; rather, one discovers that she/he has been a pagan all along. Typically a person who has been searching for a spiritual practice happens upon neo-paganism through a friend or publication and realizes that there are others who share the same perceptions and feelings about divinity and nature. Neo-pagans do not proselytize openly, and many groups are in fact quite insular, seeking to engender security and intimacy in their magical practice. An individual who wants to become "officially" pagan is often initiated into a particular school of practice by a high priest/priestess or a coven. Self-initiations are also quite legitimate. Some groups maintain a simple degree system based on Gardner's adoption of the spiritual levels practiced by occult lodges. Others simply rotate ritual responsibilities among the membership. Initiation is a ritual of self-sacrifice and commitment that binds an individual to a practice and a set of goddesses/gods that become the protectors of his/her magical and religious practice.

### *Controversies*

Allusion has been made to common public misperception of neo-paganism. Much of the criticism levelled against neo-pagans has come from other marginalized religious groups, notably Christian fundamentalist sects that persistently link neo-pagan practices with "Satanism." These linkages are exacerbated by the tendency of official sa-

tan organizations to blur the distinctions between themselves and neo-pagans, often imitating the practices and language of neo-pagans. Neo-pagans are adamant about the distinctions between themselves and Satanists, pointing out that Satanism tends to focus on "selfish" magic and certain male images of divinity, does not affirm fundamental doctrines of reincarnation and cosmic justice, and bases itself on an affirmation of the Christian doctrine of the duality of good and evil which neo-pagans deny. The most common neo-pagan defense is that they do not believe in Satan and therefore they cannot be said to be worshipping him. For certain Christian fundamentalists, these are superficial protestations, since any faith or practice not corresponding to their own is considered suspect and probably satanic.

Neo-pagans have also come under attack for their generally libertine attitudes toward variant sexual orientations/practices and for their insistence on reclaiming words such as "witch" and "magic" from common negative connotations. Fears of "witchcraft" have led to neo-pagans' losing their jobs, their homes, and their children in some cases; in one instance of which the author is personally aware, a neo-pagan was lynched by a group of fundamentalists who deemed him a danger to the community.<sup>6</sup> In some instances neo-pagan ritual sites on private property have been vandalized and festivals threatened. In 1986 Senator Jesse Helms introduced a bill in Congress that would have prevented already legitimated neo-pagan religious organizations from receiving tax-exempt status, in effect making such bodies not "real" religions in the eyes of the federal government. The measure was killed in committee, but such actions have galvanized the neo-pagan community. There now exist a number of neo-pagan legal networks whose sole purpose is to monitor the activities of government on local, state, and federal levels in order to counter anti-neo-pagan activity with letter-writing campaigns and demonstrations. In addition, there has been a recent movement toward organizing a kind of official clergy that could both serve

the neo-pagan community at large and act as representatives of neo-pagan concerns at interfaith gatherings and political hearings. How this would be accomplished is not clear, since the sheer variety of neo-pagan traditions and practices renders any general understanding of the movement inadequate and even inaccurate. Many neo-pagans also feel that the creation of an official clergy would create an atmosphere of dogma, and an authority class within the neo-pagan community that would stifle individuality and creativity. Still, most neo-pagans see a need for solidarity among all the modern pagan traditions in order to meet opposition more effectively. Neo-paganism has found support in some factions of the feminist and environmental movements, with whom the neo-pagan movement has some shared concerns. American neo-paganism is much more politically aggressive than its European counterparts, and, as a result, many neo-pagans often are also members of feminist and environmental groups, using these movements as further legitimation of their rituals and beliefs.

### *Demographics and Other General Information*

The neo-pagan movement has, until recently, been largely a white, urban, middle-class development. During the last decade this trend has continued with some general broadening of the demographic base into rural, working-class and, less frequently, upper-class practitioners. Members of the upper class who are interested in alternative religions tend to become attracted to New Age or Ceremonial Magic spiritualities, since they can afford the complicated tools and the expensive seminars associated with such spiritual paths. Growing movements of Hispanics and African Americans who are rediscovering elements of their own pre-Christian traditions are generally quite distinct from neo-pagans and strongly maintain their independence.

Recent surveys have indicated that over half of all neo-pagans are female, although the gender gap has narrowed considerably in the last five years, and there are substantially more gay and bisexually identified individuals in the neo-pagan population than the national average (25 to 30 percent of the pagan community as compared to 10 to 13 percent overall).<sup>7</sup> The occupations of neo-pagans are a cross-section of middle-class America with everything from teachers, executives, lawyers, laborers, and artists to computer programmers represented. Most neo-pagans, however, reside within that 40 percent of Americans who have attended college, and refer to themselves as voracious readers. Most neo-pagans are up on current affairs and are articulate. Most are as conversant about the federal budget and other public affairs as they are about theories of reincarnation and the latest ritual needs for a healing spell—all within an hour's discourse. In addition, far from being nostalgic nature lovers, most neo-pagans are not anti-technological. Technology is seen as a tool for proper use and management of nature. Pollution and environmental destruction are "bad magic," symptoms of selfish spiritual doctrines. Neo-pagans seem to be particularly entranced with computer technology and recent developments in both physics and biology, which they claim support their views on the flexibility of mind and matter and of divine consciousness residing in all things. A recent development is the use of computers to engage in computer bulletin board long-distance rituals in which different practitioners will dial up and contact each other at an appointed time. They then engage in an ad hoc ritual with each participant adding something to the ritual and then responding via the

keyboard as the rite progresses—rather like religious Nintendo.

Pagans in the United States are more politically active than they are in Europe, reflecting the higher level of opposition to neo-paganism in America and the connections between the neo-pagan movement and the feminist and environmental movements.

### Summary

Neo-paganism appears to be growing in popularity. Estimates of numbers range from the tens to hundreds of thousands of active participants and individuals sympathetic to the movement. The large festivals, of which there are approximately a half-dozen in the United States every year, and whose numbers are increasing annually, routinely draw five hundred to seven hundred people each. Neo-paganism is counted as one of the most rapidly growing of the new religious movements. A large publishing industry geared specifically to serving the needs and interests of the larger neo-pagan community has already emerged.

Neo-pagans are currently engaged in consolidating and further defining themselves and their political and spiritual agendas. This process will perhaps never be completely implemented as there are many neo-pagans who object to any kind of overall organization of their movement. Still, neo-pagans remain unified and active in the protection of their legal religious rights, and have recently won several concessions from entrenched political opponents. Neo-paganism is alive and continuing to grow in the United States, Europe, and Australia. As neo-pagans themselves put it: "The Goddess is alive and magic is afoot."

### Notes

1. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Witchcraft* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 148–55.

2. The novel was Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961; Avon Books, 1962).

3. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 372–437.

4. Starhawk's view on the working of magic is probably closest to being normative in America. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance, A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).

5. Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 55–75.

6. Such cases are a regular feature of most neo-pagan periodicals. Example: Gerrie

Ordaz, "Lady Liberty Report," *Circle Network News*, no. 45 (Mt. Horeb, Wisc.: Summer 1992): 7.

7. Examples of surveys reflecting these demographics can be found in Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 443–65, and, more recently, Carpenter and Fox, "Pagan Spirit Gathering 1991 Tribal Survey Results," *Circle Network News*, no. 45 (Mt. Horeb, Wisc.: Summer 1992): 20.

### *Suggestions for Further Reading*

Adler, Margot. *Drawing Down the Moon*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986.

Campanelli, Pauline. *Wheel of the Year*. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 1989.

Luhrmann, T. M. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Russell, Jeffrey B. *A History of Witchcraft*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979.