

## Witchcraft/Wicca

By Rick Branch

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**Founder:** While Gerald B. Gardner is generally credited with the modern revival of Wicca, he was neither the first to practice nor the founder of Witchcraft.

**Founding Date:** In 1949 Gardner published his first book, which was later followed by several other works.

**Official Publication:** Because of the varied nature of Wicca, there is no single official publication. However, *Llewellyn's New Worlds of Mind and Spirit* and *Llewellyn New Times* (Llewellyn Publishing) are two of the key periodicals.

**Organization Structure:** Each individual coven is autonomous and therefore will have their own organizational structure. Generally the high priestess is considered the leader of the Coven.

**Unique Terms:** *Witch* refers to both male and female members. *Sabbats* are the meetings held on festival dates while *esbats* are the general meetings held by local Covens.

**Other Names:** *The Craft* and *The Old Religion* are sometimes used to refer to the magical aspects of Wicca or to its revival of ancient non-Christian traditions. While *Neo-Paganism* is often associated with Wicca and the two certainly share many of the same characteristics, Neo-Paganism is, technically speaking, somewhat different in its ideology.

### HISTORY

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Though Witchcraft can be traced back several centuries before the coming of Christ, through the early Christian church period, the inquisition, early American colonies and finally through Spiritism of the past century, for the purpose of this *Profile*, the historical overview will begin with Wicca's modern revival in 1949.<sup>1</sup>

Gerald Gardner published his "*High Magic's Aid*," a novel about "The Craft" in 1949 under the pen-name, "Scire."<sup>2</sup> The pen-name was used because of the current laws of the land. However, "In 1951 the Witchcraft Act of 1736, and a section of the Vagrancy Act of 1824, were replaced by the Fraudulent Medium Act. For the first time in more than 300 years in Britain, witchcraft was no longer a crime."<sup>3</sup> Due to the changes in the legal system, Gardner was able to follow-up his novel with two other non-fiction works under his own name.

Guiley has observed, "It is difficult to say whether Gardner intended to create a new religion or whether it grew spontaneously from public interest in his writings."<sup>4</sup> However, Frank Smyth writes in *Man, Myth and Magic*, "In the absence of any evidence except hearsay, there is a strong case in favour of the suggestion that Gardner invented the cult of Wicca to satisfy his own sense of the esoteric..."<sup>5</sup> Other authors have indicated that Gardner's revival of Witchcraft also "centered mainly around

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discreet sexual frolics in the nude, aided by drugs.”<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his life, Gardner was fascinated with many different aspects of the Occult. He had been a follower in varying degrees of such people and philosophies as Aleister Crowley, Ordo Templi Orientis, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Rosicrucianism.<sup>7</sup> Historians have credited Doreen Valiente, a follower of Gardner who he initiated into the Craft in 1953, with “increasing the emphasis on the Goddess.”<sup>8</sup>

While followers of Witchcraft had been in America for hundreds of years, its “greatest growth took place in the 1960s and 1970s, during a general revival of interest in Occultism.”<sup>9</sup> Many historians of Wicca credit Raymond Buckland and his wife Rosemary with Wicca’s successful spread into American society. “The Bucklands came to the U.S. in 1962” having been followers of Gardner.<sup>10</sup>

In 1973, Llewellyn Press, one of the most prolific publishers of Occult material, “sponsored a meeting of Witches in Minneapolis.” The gathering, attended by Witches from seventy-three different Craft traditions, attempted to write a *statement of principles*. The attempt failed to satisfy all participants. The meeting was followed in 1974 by the Council of American Witches which did finally draw-up the *Principles of Wiccan Belief*. Later, in 1975, thirteen covens would “ratify the Covenant of the Goddess.”<sup>11</sup>

Rosemary Guiley explains why most modern followers prefer the term *Wicca* to *Witchcraft*. “As a religion Witchcraft often is called ‘Wicca,’ an Old English term for ‘witch,’ in order to counter the negative stereotype of Witches as ugly, evil, and Devil-worshippers.”<sup>12</sup> Because of their wish to avoid stereotypes and the autonomous nature of Wicca, several key groups have sprung into existence over the past few decades. Some of these groups are the Gardnerian (founded by Gerald Gardner), the Alexandrian (founded by Alexander Sanders), the Dianic (based on the worship of the Greek goddess Diana), the Celtic (based on worship of ancient Celtic myths) and several others.<sup>13</sup>

One other group which differs somewhat in its theological perspectives, yet is Wiccan in its overall philosophy is the School of Wicca founded by Gavin and Yvonne Frost. By some estimates, this group “...may have created a hundred covens through its activities.”<sup>14</sup>

## DOCTRINE

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As with most groups that fall under the wide umbrella term of *Occultism*, the theology of Wicca varies from group to group and even from coven to coven. However, the following are a few of the doctrines that most Wiccan covens will believe and practice.

**Autonomy:** “There is no central authority or liturgy; various traditions have their own rituals, philosophy and beliefs. Some have added elements from Eastern, Native American Indian, aboriginal and shamanic systems; others have injected politics into their traditions. New ritual, songs, chants and poetry are continually created.”<sup>15</sup>

Raymond Buckland explains, “All religions lead in the same direction, simply taking different paths to get there. Witches feel that all should therefore be free to choose their own path.”<sup>16</sup>

**Experience versus Doctrine:** Because of the Autonomy of each Coven and even to a large degree of each individual member of Wicca, the experience of the individual is

of greater importance than any set of dogmatic doctrines. “Generally speaking Witches are very open-minded people, especially where religion is concerned. They have no hard and fast ‘Commandments,’ no catechisms.”<sup>17</sup> Adler adds,

By creating our own divinities we create mental steps for ourselves, up which we can mount toward realizing ourselves as divine...The lack of dogma in the Craft, the fact that one can *worship* the Goddess without *believing* in Her, that one can accept the Goddess as ‘Muse’ and the Craft as a form of ancient knowledge to be tested by experience—these are precisely the things that have caused the Craft to survive, to revive, and to be re-created in this century.<sup>18</sup>

**Rituals:** These individual or Coven experiences are gained through self-designed rituals.

We are talking about the rituals that people create to get in touch with those powerful parts of themselves that cannot be experienced on a verbal level...Rituals are also created to acknowledge on this deeper level the movement of the seasons and the natural world, and to celebrate life and its processes.<sup>19</sup>

**Magic:** Many of these rituals involve divination or magic.

In his book of shadows, Gardner listed eight ways to raise magical power (singly or in combination): (1) meditation or concentration; (2) chants, spells, and invocations; (3) trance and astral projection; (4) incense, wine and drugs; (5) dancing; (6) blood control by binding parts of the body with cords; (7) scourging (not enough to draw blood); (8) ritual sex.<sup>20</sup>

**Goddess Worship:** This worship of the Goddess sometimes manifests itself as the worship of “...the Mother Goddess in her three aspects of Maiden, Mother, and Crone.” Sometimes it is the worship of “what we potentially are.”<sup>21</sup> In many covens the high priestess is seen as the personification of the “...mother goddess who is the principal deity of witchlore.”<sup>22</sup>

**Feminism:** While not all feminists are Wiccans, many find the philosophy of Wicca to be a compatible philosophy.

Women who have come to the Goddess outside the channels of Neo-Paganism and the Craft are beginning to find rituals and concepts that allow for the same idea. They are finding the Goddess within themselves and within all women. And, as might be expected, those feminists who have found joy in rituals, and who have discovered that the concept of ‘Goddess’ feels right inside, are often drawn into the Craft.<sup>23</sup>

**Seasonal Festivals:** The worship of nature or natural order is of paramount importance. “Wicca is basically a fertility cult and its great festivals are geared to the seasons.” Key dates in the Wiccan calendar would include February 2 (Candlemas), March 21 (spring equinox), April 30 (Beltane), June 22 (summer solstice), August 1 (August Eve), September 21 (autumn equinox), October 31 (Halloween), December 21 (winter solstice).<sup>24</sup>

**Evil:** Wiccan groups do not accept the existence of evil. They explain, “Wicca can be defined as a pagan mystery religion with a polarized deity and no personification of evil.” In the *Principles of Wiccan Beliefs* is stated, “We do not accept the concept of ‘absolute evil,’ nor do we worship any entity known as ‘Satan’ or ‘The Devil’ as defined by the Christian tradition.”<sup>25</sup>

**Horned God:** As mentioned, some Wiccan covens worship not only a Mother Goddess, but also a masculine deity. “Many Craft traditions also worship a god, related to the ancient horned lord of animals, the god of the hunt, the god of death and lord of the forests.”<sup>26</sup>

## BIBLICAL RESPONSE

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Because followers of Wicca do not believe the Bible to be the Word of God, it is difficult to demonstrate the error of Wicca to a Wiccan from a biblical standpoint. However, from the Christian perspective, Wicca’s theology has been condemned for centuries.

- 1) Witchcraft and magic (enchantments) are condemned (Lev. 19:26, 31; Deut. 18:10-11; 2 Chron. 33:6).
- 2) Worship of other gods (or of goddesses) is condemned (Exodus 20:3; 1 Kings 11:4-5).
- 3) Esteeming nature above God is condemned (Romans 1:21-25).
- 4) Satan and his influence of evil are real (Zech. 3:2; Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 6:45).

## RECOMMENDED READING

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*The Occult, Josh McDowell and Don Stewart.* This books provides a Christian critique and overview on such topics as Satanism Divination, New Age Occultism, Spiritism, Magic and Superstition. Soft back, 249 pages.

*Powers: Testing the Psychic and Supernatural, Dan Korem.* While not dealing specifically with Wicca, this work does provide an excellent biblical examination of magic. Since the use of magic is of central importance to believers of Wicca, this book would be most valuable to those wishing more information. Soft back, 232 pages.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (New York: Facts on File, 1989) 368-374.
- <sup>2</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 61.
- <sup>3</sup> Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, 374.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Richard Cavendish, *Man, Myth and Magic: Vol. 14* (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1970) 1869.
- <sup>6</sup> Leslie Shepard, *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology Vol. 1* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1978) 366.
- <sup>7</sup> Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, 375.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Shepard, 133.
- <sup>11</sup> Adler, 99-103.
- <sup>12</sup> Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1991) 647.
- <sup>13</sup> Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, 377-379.
- <sup>14</sup> Adler, 125.
- <sup>15</sup> Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, 376.
- <sup>16</sup> Raymond Buckland, *Buckland’s Complete Book of Witchcraft* (St. Paul, Minn: Llewellyn Publications, 1986) 99.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Adler, 173.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, 197-198.
- <sup>20</sup> Guiley, *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Paranormal Experience*, 649.
- <sup>21</sup> Adler, 10-11, 202.
- <sup>22</sup> Cavendish, 1866.
- <sup>23</sup> Adler, 205.
- <sup>24</sup> Cavendish, 1866.
- <sup>25</sup> Adler, 100, 103.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 11.



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