



Wicca

by Yvonne Aburrow

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Wicca is primarily a nature religion, honoring the deities and spirits of nature, and seeking to commune with the divine through the contemplation and celebration of nature and its mysteries.

Although the religion was formerly erroneously claimed to be a modern survival of an old witchcraft religion that originated in pre-Christian Europe and is sometimes referred to as the Old Religion, contemporary Wicca was officially founded in 1951 by Gerald Gardner, a retired British civil servant. He claimed to be an initiate of an ancient witchcraft tradition stretching back to the Middle Ages. In fact, the earliest date that the group could have been formed was some time in the 1920s.

As organized by Gardner, Wicca was a secretive society in which membership could be gained only through initiation by another Wiccan. Most Wiccan groups still practice initiation, but many popular books on the subject suggest that this is not required, and many people who have not been initiated identify as Wiccan.

One of Gardner's initiates was Doreen Valiente, who wrote much of the core Wiccan liturgy (known as the *Book of Shadows*, implying that written texts are mere shadows of actual performed rituals), including *The Charge of the Goddess* (1954), which contains much that Wiccans interpret as theological statements. The most important of these from a glbtq perspective is the belief that "All acts of love and pleasure are My rituals." Most Wiccans take this statement to mean that the Goddess approves of sexuality in all its glorious diversity.

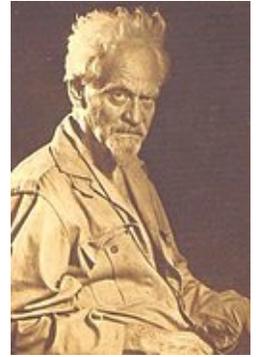
In the 1970s and 1980s, Wicca and other forms of witchcraft attracted many second-wave feminists, interested in reclaiming the negative stereotype of the witch (an embodiment of female and "deviant" sexuality) and celebrating women's power, and the nurturing qualities of darkness and nature. Among witches, the most celebrated of these feminists is Starhawk, who has written many inspirational books on feminist witchcraft.

Also in the 1970s Dianic witchcraft (which is mostly women-only and honors a single Goddess) was founded. It attracts women of all sexual orientations.

In 1975, a group for gay men, called the Minoan Brotherhood, was formed in New York. It was started in response to the heterocentric culture of Wicca at the time, and includes "a strong current of queer spirituality."

Wicca became much more eclectic and open to innovation in the 1990s, when people began to experiment with different and more inclusive forms, including same-sex initiations and more polytheistic rituals. This trend has continued into the twenty-first century.

Problems with Wicca



Gerald Gardner, the founder of contemporary Wicca.
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Many Wiccan rituals emphasize the importance of polarity, the idea that for magic to work, there has to be erotic attraction, usually between a man and a woman. Traditionally, a woman had to initiate a man, and a man had to initiate a woman. Gardner himself was homophobic, though the reason usually given nowadays for a woman initiating a man (and vice versa) is that it is to ensure a balance of power in the group (if one gender or one person did all the initiations, they would have an unfair advantage).

Some Wiccans are duotheist, that is, believing that "All the Gods are one God and all the Goddesses are one Goddess." As the divine couple are then understood to be lovers, this again tends to exclude glbtq practitioners or at least underpin heterocentrism.

Polytheist Wiccans see the Horned God and the Moon Goddess (the two deities of the divine couple) as patron deities of Wicca, with a special relationship with the religion, rather than a conflation of a multiplicity of different deities. Still, there is a great deal of emphasis on duality and polarity in the rituals; and there are many people who insist that Wicca is a "fertility religion."

However, Wiccan liturgy does not imply that all magical acts are about fertility. Indeed, it could be argued that "fertility" should in any case be interpreted in its widest possible meaning, such as fertility of ideas and spirit, rather than simply physical reproduction.

Wicca as it is practiced today is sometimes heterocentric, but very rarely homophobic.

Queer Wicca

Wicca and other contemporary pagan traditions celebrate our existence in this world and attempt to gain spiritual insight from nature and the world around us. Wicca also honors the qualities of darkness and the powers of the moon. These are themes that have proven particularly prominent in queer spirituality and attractive to glbtq adherents of Wicca.

There is also in Wicca a tradition of the Divine Androgyne (inherited from the Western mystery tradition), a being who includes both genders and perhaps even transcends gender.

Occultists at the end of the nineteenth century regarded psychological androgyny as the ultimate aim of the Adept, partly because of a belief that humans were androgynous before the Fall, and partly because of a belief in the androgyny of the divine. As Wicca draws in part on the Western mystery tradition, it has inherited these ideas, which are expressed in the *Dryghtyn Prayer*, which is addressed to an entity that is "male and female, the original source of all things."

The Wiccan celebration of nature may also have a special appeal for glbtq adherents. Early gay rights pioneer Edward Carpenter was an enthusiastic advocate of nature as a place of freedom. Following him, his friend E. M. Forster made the hero of his novel *Maurice* (written in 1913) feel "at one with the forests and the night" as soon as he had made the decision to adopt an actively gay lifestyle. Harry Hay, founder of the Radical Faeries, who was a Carpenter enthusiast, also stressed the importance of communing with nature.

Many Wiccans believe that the celebration of darkness, which mainstream culture regards as the realm of evil, allows us to transcend boundaries and to recover lost and repressed aspects of the psyche, and to honor the ideas associated with them. It may also allow us to escape the hierarchical view of the cosmos, which is associated with the honoring of the light.

Wicca also emphasizes the interaction of light and darkness, as played out in the Wheel of the Year (the cycle of Wiccan festivals). Instead of seeing them as opposed, Wiccans see light and darkness interact in a dance or sexual union. This is the basis of the idea of polarity.

One way to make the idea of polarity more inclusive is to regard the primary polarities as self and other, lover and beloved, rather than male and female. Thus, rather than regarding the Great Rite of Wiccans as the union of masculine and feminine polarities, Lynna Landstreet sees the first touch of lightning on the primordial waters as the "true Great Rite, of which all other enactments, sexual or not, are merely symbolic."

It could be argued that Wicca is inherently queer. The word *wicca* (Anglo-Saxon for a male witch) apparently derives from an Indo-European root meaning "to bend" or "to shape," actions of adaptation and creativity that are frequently associated with same-sex love. The emphasis on the need to become psychologically androgynous (frequently couched in terms of developing men's feminine side and women's masculine side) and the use of the *Dryghtyn Prayer* add to the feeling of queerness at the heart of the tradition.

In addition, the figure of the witch, derived in part from the *spae-wives* (fortune tellers) and *seiðr*-workers (practitioners of a type of shamanism that included men-loving men) of Northern Europe, is often associated with sexual and gender transgression. These ideas may not be very current in Wicca generally, but they are part of the historical discourse about witchcraft.

Just as glbtq people have reclaimed the word "queer" as a badge of resistance to heteronormativity and as a tool for liberation, Wiccans and other contemporary pagans have similarly reclaimed the word "witch" to mean a shaper, a changer of consciousness, and a radical. There is a strong strand of ecological, political, and sexual radicalism in Wicca and its variant traditions.

Moreover, since Wiccans have incorrectly been associated with Satanism and black magic, they have suffered some of the same discrimination as have glbtq people. Not surprisingly, they have often kept their religious beliefs secret. Tellingly, the practice of acknowledging oneself as Wiccan to others is sometimes known as "coming out of the broom-closet."

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