

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 4 Theme: **Can We Coexist?**

Title: **Coexisting with Wicca and Neo-Paganism** Author: **Fr. Brenden Pelphey**

A trip to any local bookstore will quickly reveal that Wicca or Witchcraft, sometimes simply called “the Craft,” is very popular in America today, along with various forms of Paganism and Neo-Paganism. Numerous books devoted to Wicca and Paganism are for sale in any bookstore, and over five million sites are listed on-line for the interested reader. A number of popular films and television shows have also appeared in recent decades which depict Wicca in positive ways, most of these films being directed towards teens or children, and several having been produced by the Disney corporation.

In spite of their popularity, however, it is sometimes easier to say what Wicca and Paganism are not, than what they are.

First, Wicca is not identical to Paganism or Neo-paganism. Paganism deliberately harks back to ancient Greek, Roman or other pre-Christian religions: for example, in the modern worship of Athena, Diana or Norse goddesses. Wiccans on the other hand honor the Earth and are attempting to practice rituals that manipulate or honor unseen powers or spirits. These rituals may be identified with supposed Celtic practices and gods, but many Wiccans do not worship any particular god except, perhaps, the Earth.

Thus, Wiccans may mingle with Pagans in common meetings and picnics; but often the representatives of the various groups disagree with one another, much in the way that Protestants and Catholics disagree—each claiming more authentic roots than the others. Nevertheless, most members of local neo-pagan societies (for example on the college campus near you) may well count themselves as Wiccans too.

Second, Wicca is not Satanism. This confusion is constantly made by zealous Christians, but it is offensive to Wiccans who consider Satan to be a Judeo-Christian invention. In general, Wiccans prefer to see only good in the world (including the world of spirits), but in any case few would be willing to worship evil spirits. Owing to this perspective, Wiccan websites often refer to Satanism as a Christian heresy or an inversion of Catholicism, which in their view has nothing to do with the Craft.

Also, Wicca is not really New Age. “New Age” (which today is becoming known as post-modernism) looks forward to the creation of new spiritualities, chiefly by combining elements of many other traditions. Wicca, on the other hand, along with various forms of Paganism, looks backward to certain religious practices—or at least supposed practices and mythologies—from the past. That being said, Wicca and Neo-Paganism mingle with New Age especially when we think of such things as crystal therapy, developing “positive energies” or worshipping Celtic divinities.

Finally, Wicca is not necessarily the practice of magic, at least in the popular sense of the word. Much which passes for Witchcraft today is, in the view of serious witches, simply child’s play or entertainment, having little to do with the actual religion. Certainly witchcraft is not slight-of-

hand, although the practice of serious “magick” (the invocation of spirits and unseen powers) is part of witchcraft as many people know it.

We should add, perhaps too obviously, that Wiccans do not wear black pointy hats or black dresses and do not fly on brooms (although these, incidentally, are phallic symbols in certain rituals). Strange black hats and billowy black robes are worn by Orthodox Christian clergy, not by witches. The popular Halloween costume stems from the Welsh national costume of medieval times, and is quite unfairly associated with witchcraft. Your modern witch, either a man or woman (men are not “warlocks”—another popular misconception) could be the lovely young lady serving you at your bank, your doctor, lawyer or soldier.

Having said this, it is generally agreed among Wiccans that there are three primary types of witchcraft today. These are Gardnerian (named for the Englishman Gerald Gardner, 1884-1964); Alexandrian (named for Alex Sanders, also English, who founded this branch in the 1960's); and Celtic (supposed to be derived from ancient Celtic practices). Witches are organized into covens, which in Gardnerian practice are limited to 13 members.

Gardnerian witchcraft is what is known as a “British lineaged tradition and includes secretive initiations, “skyclad” (naked) meetings and occult practices. Alexandrian is public and popular and is practiced in America often without any attempt at lineage. Celtic practice is... well, largely made up, since it is difficult even for archeologists to know what Celts really did. In any case, American wicca was imported from Great Britain in the early 1950's and is arguably a modern phenomenon, not an ancient religion. It gained ground especially with the growth of feminism and women's political issues. The Salem “witch” trials of the early American colonies actually involved African Yoruba voodoo, not English witchcraft, although today the town is inundated with modern covens and touristy wanna-be's.

As a mnemonic device, modern Wicca can be categorized by colors. So-called “White” Wicca concerns itself with personal purity and maximizing the Self. Ritual and magick is positive in its character, seeking to improve situations or personal habits. “Green” Wicca is concerned with the Earth, personified as The Goddess or Gaia (Greek for “Earth”). Rituals and prayers are directed towards preservation of the Earth and honoring her. Yellow is associated with the more serious practice of spell-casting, for example, to retain a lover or turn away a suitor. Red correlates to more directly evil practices such as cursing. Black, finally, characterizes the descent of spell-casting into serious evil, defined as deification of the Self which then seeks to harm others (in this sense, Satan-worship is actually self-worship). Most Wiccans would, at least publicly, decry the latter two practices and shun them altogether, but it is a fact that these levels of Magick exist, even if as occult or secret practices.

Wiccan ethics are summed up in the so-called “Rede” (Middle English for “Rule”), i.e. a Rule of Life, which is: “Do what ye will, an ye harm none” or, “Do whatever you want, as long as you do not harm anyone.” In this view there is no sin other than causing harm; no Last Judgment other than the judgment of history.

Wiccan worship revolves around annual, monthly (lunar) and weekly festivals. Rituals are memorized and involve fun and energetic chanting, such as “Merry meet, and merry heart, and

merry meet again!” as a final benediction. Altars at home create “sacred space” for meditation and prayer.

Orthodox Christians can enter into fruitful dialogue with Wiccans on a number of important levels. We accept that there are indeed “elemental spirits” (mentioned by St. Paul); the only question is whether they are to be worshipped and manipulated, or acknowledged as created and intended to serve the Creator. We agree that there should be no harm to others or even to ourselves. St. Ephrem the Syrian referred to the Earth as “our mother,” and advocated our care for her. Wiccan home altars are reminiscent of Orthodox icons and prayer-corners. Orthodox Christians do not condemn or judge others, which is important to Wiccans. Some former Wiccans in our congregation were drawn to Orthodoxy because of our deep sense of “sacred space” in the sanctuary, and the profound nature of Orthodox worship.

For these and many other reasons, an Orthodox Bible study that we conducted at a local university drew numerous Wiccans for a period of several years. Participants expressed genuine appreciation for the Orthodox perspective of God, of judgment and for our kindness towards them, when numerous so-called Christians on campus derided them and condemned them. We should keep in mind that many—perhaps most—Wiccans in America today were reared in Protestant or Catholic homes, and were hurt by their religious up-bringing.

As a last word perhaps it is good for Orthodox Christians who might be drawn to Wicca to remember St. Paul’s words to the Colossians, to “see to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition and according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). But on the other hand St. John was speaking to pagans when he said, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not be lost, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be healed through Him.”

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Discussion Questions:

Do you know anyone who’s a practicing Wiccan? Is there a Wicca group on your campus? Do you have any type of relationship with them?

What were your perceptions of Wicca before reading this article? Have they changed?

Are there any points of contact between Wicca and your faith? Are there points of disagreement?