

Chapter 20

Wicca, Witchcraft and the Goddess Revival: An examination of the growth of Wicca in post-war America

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Preface

When dealing with a topic as unfamiliar as Wicca is to many, it seems important before progressing further to establish just what is meant by the terms ‘pagan’, ‘neopagan’, ‘witch’ and ‘Wiccan’, both to scholars and those to whom the terms apply. There is a great deal of debate concerning this matter, which does not look to be reconciled any time soon, and many, scholars included, are wont to use these terms interchangeably. It does not help that in many cases there is no single specific definition accepted by both groups, as in the case of Wicca; or that the official dictionary definition is outdated and reflects a quite clearly Christian bias. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a ‘pagan’ as “heathen; unenlightened or irreligious”. One can see immediately how offensive, not to mention inaccurate, such a description would seem to pagans, who are neither unenlightened nor irreligious. In general, one must look at the context in which the word is used to determine its meaning.

The term ‘pagan’ derives from the Latin *paganus*, meaning ‘country dweller’, and reflects the important link between humanity and nature that has always existed within pagan cultures. Whilst originally it was used to distinguish between the country-dwelling folk who still followed the ancient traditions and the largely urban-dwelling Christians, over time it evolved to include all non-Christians, and, as the dictionary definition shows, acquired something of a derogatory tone. Many seem to believe that the term ‘pagan’ is synonymous with ‘Satanist’, ‘witch’, ‘evil-doer’ and ‘atheist’; in actual fact, it is none of these. In the context of this chapter, ‘pagan’ means neither a heathen nor an irreligious barbarian, but a follower of the beliefs and practises of pre-Christian Europe, most of which were Earth-

centred, polytheistic and pantheistic. The gods and goddesses whose names are found through the neopagan revival generally stem from this pagan period, drawn from a variety of mythologies, including Celtic, Saxon, Finnish and Norse. Because of the close links between the two, paganism is generally considered an ‘umbrella’ term under which neopaganism is considered an offshoot.

Mark Satin writes that the “old Religion [paganism] couldn’t be re-established in ... society, but we could adapt its nature- and woman-centeredness [sic] to our own new priorities and concerns”.¹ This, in essence, is where neopaganism enters the picture. In its most basic form, ‘neopaganism’ refers to the modern revival of the pagan deities, symbols, festivals, practises and beliefs, although it is so “exceptionally fluid, diverse, and eclectic that it is difficult to specify what it ... entails exactly”.² The term ‘revival’ is important to bear in mind when discussing neopaganism—neopagan religions are *not* direct continuances of pagan traditions, merely resurrections of those now largely extinct practises, with a modern twist. For example, the modern Druids are not part of a Druidic line stretching back to the time of Stonehenge and before; they are a resurrection of an extinct faith. In just such a manner, Wicca does not date back to pre-Christian Europe—it is an entirely modern construct—but its traditions and practises do.

One of the most confusing and frustrating terms associated with neopaganism and Wicca is ‘witch’. As will be subsequently discussed, part of the problem with this term is that it has acquired a cultural aura, which significantly influences how it is perceived, and a severe negative connotation. Throughout history the term ‘witch’ and those to whom it is ascribed have become associated with Satanism, devil-worship and evil. The stereotypical witch is the Disney™ hag, with her flying broomstick and black cat, casting wicked spells and cackling; and it is hard to think of a witch without the spectre of the witch trials—

¹ Mark Satin, *New Age Politics* (New York: Dell, 1978), 113-114.

referred to by many neopagans as ‘the burning times’—springing to mind. Indeed it is partly this cultural aura which impedes efforts to accurately estimate the number of Wiccans in the United States; as a result of the association of Wiccans with witches—not entirely inaccurate—many Wiccans are reluctant to ‘come out of the broom closet’.

The figure of the witch is an archetypal one, present in almost every culture on earth, and as such means different things to different people. Within neopaganism witchcraft is often referred to as ‘the Craft of the Wise’ or ‘wisecraft’, and witches of ages past are seen as “the wise people of the village, often women, who were skilled in healing and practical arts”.³ In line with this thought, many neopagans—and indeed, feminists too—have “reclaimed the word ‘witch’ to describe themselves as a political statement in recognition of the history, since the Middle Ages, of the oppression of women and folk healing by male-dominated society and medicine”.⁴ However, the term is not limited to women; men too can be witches. It is a common misapprehension that ‘witch’ is the feminine term and ‘warlock’ the masculine: the word ‘warlock’ is in fact an ancient Scottish term meaning ‘traitor’ or ‘oath-breaker’.

Wicca has been described as “the religion of witchcraft, which is at the forefront of the pagan revival”.⁵ This sentence, whilst largely truthful, is somewhat inaccurate. For a start, it is the *neopagan* revival that Wicca is a part of—there is no such thing as the ‘pagan revival’; and secondly, whilst Wicca does indeed fall under the ‘umbrella’ of witchcraft, the two are not synonymous. Most Wiccans will also describe themselves as witches, but not all witches are Wiccan. In a sense, it is similar to the relationship between Christianity and Catholicism, for example: all Catholics are Christian, but not all Christians are Catholic. A

² Danny Jorgensen, “American Neopaganism: The Participants’ Social Identities,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 3 (1999): 327.

³ Dennis D. Carpenter, “Practitioners of Paganism and Wiccan Spirituality in Contemporary Society,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, edited by James R. Lewis (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 1996), 377.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 377

Wiccan, in essence, is a specific kind of witch, and not necessarily one who practises magic, or anything remotely resembling it. An easy, although not necessarily more illuminating definition, is that Wicca is the religion of witchcraft, whilst witchcraft itself is a practise.

The matter of witchcraft and magic aside, Wicca is without a doubt the largest single religion within neopaganism. Although the matter of what Wicca is will be dealt with in greater depth later on within this chapter, it is important to lay down a few basic principles. For example, it is an earth-based religion with its spiritual roots in the earliest expressions of reverence for nature. Wiccans believe that all aspects of nature are linked, and that all have individual vital spirits. They believe in the polarity of nature, which includes humanity, and as a result are strong proponents of gender equality, one of the most attractive aspects for many feminists.

Wicca is simultaneously polytheistic, pantheistic, monotheistic, and in some cases, even agnostic. Wiccans generally believe in an incomprehensible, over-arching creative force that is without name, and that this force is manifested through the Horned God, who straddles both the animal and human worlds, and the Great, or Triple Goddess, who is Maiden, Mother and Crone. The various pagan gods worshipped within Wicca are not seen as synonymous with the God and Goddess, but merely representations of various aspects. There are also some Wiccans who do not believe in any kind of supreme beings, and see the God and Goddess as powerful archetypes, based on myth. In fact, many Wiccans “simultaneously believe in the Goddess as reality and the Goddess as metaphor”.⁶

It is important to stress that there are no evil entities within Wicca, no demons or Christian devil, and the primary Wiccan symbol, the pentagram, is only associated with evil when reversed, with the point downwards, just as it is with the reversed cross. There is also no hell within Wicca, and to a certain extent, no heaven either: the matter of the afterlife is

⁵ Vivianne Crowley, *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Millennium* (San Francisco: Thorsons, 1996), 1.

one for each to decide individually: some believe that there is no afterlife, others believe in reincarnation, yet others believe in ‘the Summerland’, a heaven of sorts.

It is a religion with no dogma, hierarchy or sacred texts—indeed, the only aspects most Wiccans agree on are the Wiccan Rede and the Rule of Three. The Rede is generally expressed thus: ‘An’ harm ye none, do what thou will’. The Rule of Three displays karmic principles, expressing that whatever is done to another will be returned three-fold, whether for good or evil. Again it is important to stress that Wicca does not seek to regulate its followers’ behaviour, trusting to their own inherent morality and good judgement. It is not an ‘easy’ religion where one need only follow certain guidelines to achieve everlasting bliss; but as its increasing numbers show it seems to be a fulfilling one.

Introduction

In 1990 a study was conducted by the City University of New York, known as the American Religious Identification Survey,⁷ aimed at accurately mapping the religious affiliations of the American population. It found that some 86.2% of Americans would describe themselves as affiliated with Christianity, in some form, and 3.3% with non-Christian, ‘alternative’ religions such as Buddhism and Wicca. Eleven years later a follow-up study was conducted. This 2001 study found that the Christian 86.2% had declined some 9.7 percentage points, to 76.5%, whilst the ‘alternative’ 3.3% had increased to 3.7%. A modest increase maybe, but a very significant one.

Wicca itself had multiplied some 1675% in the decade between the two studies—the highest increase of any faith group monitored; and this despite the fact that the ARIS study counted Wicca and paganism as two separate religions, whereas in fact they are too closely

⁶ Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 184.

⁷ Egon Meyer, Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey” (http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_index.htm, 25 March 2003).

intertwined to do so. This in essence ‘splits the vote’ between the two—many Wiccans, when asked in specific surveys such as the ARIS study, will describe themselves as pagans or neopagans, largely because the religion is not so high profile that those conducting studies would be able to recognise the many different branches. So it is likely that the true number of Wiccans in the U.S. is much larger than the ARIS study concludes, and is increasing every year.

However, whilst studies such as that of ARIS can give detailed information on how much the religion may be growing, they cannot explain why. For example, a study conducted by Helen Berger, commonly referred to as ‘The Pagan Census’,⁸ found that, generally speaking, the majority of Wiccans are white, female, living in urban or suburban areas, and well over half of those surveyed hold at least a college degree. They are spread throughout the United States, but a large percentage live on either the East or West Coasts. Both studies provide some valuable information concerning those who belong to this religion, but almost nothing of their motivations. It is not known *why* Wicca is proving to have such appeal for so many people; what it offers that society and the monotheistic religions in particular are lacking; what prompted its astonishing growth; how it relates to social movements that share some of its major themes; and in which direction its future may lie.

This study is aimed at filling in the gaps left between the studies of ARIS and ‘The Pagan Census’. Both of these, whilst valuable, do not deliver the whole picture. This chapter attempts to demonstrate that Wicca’s exceptional growth is owed largely to the circumstances in which it found itself upon its inception in the United States: in other words, the ‘counterculture’. This period in history proved to be fertile ground for the emerging religion, and it is likely that Wicca would not have grown in the way it did had it been introduced at any other time. As a result of its inherent philosophy Wicca struck a chord with several of the

⁸ Helen Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 8-9.

most important threads in American societal thought, particularly the environmental and feminist movements. These movements have since become absorbed into mainstream American thought, and Wicca, because of its close links with both, has thus flourished.

Of course, it is not solely the environmental and feminist movements that share common themes with Wicca—many aspects of the countercultures can be found echoed within Wiccan philosophy: holistic healing, sexual freedom, eastern mysticism, anti-authoritarianism. Due to the constraints of space it is not possible to discuss these within this chapter, although there can be little doubt that just as there is much overlap between Wicca and environmentalism and feminism, there is a great deal of resonance between Wicca and these other aspects of the counterculture.

In addition to investigating why Wicca is proving attractive to so many individuals, this chapter also intends to look at how the major monotheistic religions, Christianity in particular, are failing to adjust to society's political concerns, and why this is prompting many to turn away from the Christian church towards a more esoteric outlook.

Wicca

Despite having already written in the preface on what the term 'Wicca' means, it is still necessary to explain in some detail the background and origins of Wicca and something of its philosophy for the uninitiated reader. Whilst this chapter is exclusively concerned with American Wicca's own peculiar form of witchcraft and its evolution in the crucible that was the American counterculture, these origins cannot be ignored.

An immense amount of material has been written about Wicca, specifically over the past two decades, much of it approaching the subject from very different angles. There are those—Margaret Murray, with her *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, for example—who have attempted to prove that Wicca is one of the oldest religions in the modern world, a direct continuance of the supposed ancient witchcraft religion of pre-Christian Europe. Then there

are those who believe that Wicca as a religion is little more than forty years old, and whilst it may be based on ancient pagan traditions and beliefs it is in itself not ancient, merely a modern reconstruction.

It must be noted that the latter is the opinion of the vast majority of Wiccans now—and is the opinion on which this chapter is based—although as recently as twenty years ago it was generally believed within the religion, and by some scholars, that Wicca was in fact part of a direct line of witches and goddess-worshippers who had gone underground due to persecution since the rise of Christianity. This flexibility and ability to adapt is surely one of the most remarkable facets of Wicca, and one that will no doubt hold the key to its future survival. There seem to be few modern religions which could withstand such a major turn-around in belief and origin without disintegrating, and Wicca's entire lack of dogma has played a major part in this flexibility. Its origins, in essence, are not what is relevant.

Assuming then that the current scholarship on the subject is accurate, and Wicca is less than half a century old, these origins lie in 1950s England, with a retired civil servant named Gerald Gardner. In 1951 the British Witchcraft Laws were repealed, and four years after that, the first account of modern-day Wicca, *Witchcraft Today*, was published by Gardner, followed by *The Meaning of Witchcraft* in 1959. Gardner claimed to have been initiated into an hereditary New Forest coven in 1939, by a witch named Dorothy Clutterbuck, and that the witchcraft religion of which he was a part dated back thousands of years, to a time long before Christianity began to make its mark on Europe. This is what Isaac Bonewits has called “the myth of the Unitarian, Universalist, White Witchcult of Western Theosophical Britainy [sic]”⁹. There has never been any substantial proof of the existence of either Clutterbuck or the coven, and many people dismiss Gardner's story as fiction.

However, as previously stated, the accuracy or inaccuracy of reports of its early history

⁹ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in*

are irrelevant to Wiccans. The belief and content is what is important, not where it came from or why. One can see this in the words of one Wiccan High Priestess, Mary Nesnick, who says of the religion:

Fifty percent of modern Wicca is an invention bought and paid for by Gerald B. Gardner from Aleister Crowley. Ten percent was ‘borrowed’ from books and manuscripts like Leland’s text *Aradia*. The forty remaining percent was borrowed from Far Eastern religions and philosophies, if not in word, then in ideas and basic principles.¹⁰

From this, one can see that despite Wicca being apparently a specifically crafted religion, it is still one that holds a great deal of power and appeal, largely because, as Margot Adler has stated, “it fulfils a need.”¹¹ It does not need to depend on history, tradition or dogma, because it is a religion based upon individual experience, and Wicca is simply a framework to allow these experiences to happen.

And indeed, there *was* a great deal of interest in Gardner’s “blending of liturgical elements from ceremonial magic with the speculative scholarship of Margaret Murray”,¹² as James Lewis has described it, which later became known as original or Gardnerian Wicca. Covens rapidly began to spring up, based on the information contained within Gardner’s books. There was also considerable cross-fertilisation from classical pagan mysteries, Eastern traditions, Greek and Roman paganism, and from outsiders, strangers to the Gardnerian initiatory line. Different traditions began to emerge as it grew, relying on different rituals, beliefs, and even deities. The main offshoots were at first Alexandrian, formed by Alex and Maxine Sanders, both initiates of Gardner; and Dianic, developed by Morgan McFarland and Zsuzsanna Budapest, and inspired by the Women’s Movement. Dianic Wicca, more than any

American Today (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997), 45.

¹⁰ Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon*, 64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72

¹² James R. Lewis, “Introduction”, in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany: State University of

other tradition, overlaps that of the feminist Craft, and there are a great number of purely female Dianic covens. However, these covens cannot be said to speak for the religion as a whole, and have been accused of reverse sexism in their exclusion of men. Most Wiccans feel that Wicca is inherently a feminist religion, although a latent feminism rather than a radical form, and does not need to exclude men in order to prove this.

To many strangers to Wicca the sheer number of sects, and the great disparity between them all, seems strange and impractical, and disinclines many to view Wicca as a single, legitimate religion. However, Wicca's loose, unorganised structure, and flexible ethos seems to have allowed the religion room to grow in such an incredible manner, and may indeed be what appeals to many of its adherents. In essence, there is no right or wrong way to practise in Wicca, only what *feels* right for the individual involved. It comes as little surprise, in light of this, that Wicca has been described as “religion without the middleman”¹³.

Wicca in the United States can be traced back to Rosemary and Raymond Buckland, both initiates of Gardner, who in 1964 established the first Gardnerian coven in Long Island, New York. This is not to say that there were no indigenous pagan religions in America, or indeed no witches, before the Bucklands' emigration—merely that Wicca, as its own singular form of witchcraft, did not exist in the United States before the date in question. American Wicca is somewhat different from English or European Wicca, largely due to its more formalistic nature. There is more of an emphasis on the Book of Shadows—a magical diary, a ‘recipe book’ of rituals, spells, charms and incantations—than in Europe, although Vivianne Crowley argues that:

This formalism has had the effect of creating a strong and powerful...Wiccan tradition in the United States, something that is not easy to do when transplanting from Europe

New York Press, 1996), 2.

¹³ Gavin Frost, cited in Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon*, 23.

a tradition rooted in the land.¹⁴

Wicca is also more eclectic in the United States, and it has taken on what Helen Berger calls “a much more American flavour”. Hallmarks of the ‘counterculture’ in which it found itself run throughout Wicca: “mysticism, ecological concerns, women’s rights, and anti-authoritarianism”.¹⁵

Wicca in the United States has come a long way from Gardner’s original ideas, which focussed very much on ritualistic ceremonies and High Magic. Today there many different traditions in the U.S.—more so than in England—ranging from Dianic, Seax and Teutonic Wicca, to Fam-Trad (family tradition, or hereditary witchcraft), Faery and the Church of Wicca. This can be ascribed to the more conservative nature of coven Wicca in England, and the fact that there is a far greater tradition of hedge (or solitary) witchcraft than in the United States. The social makeup of the U.S. plays a part too; the American ‘melting pot’ means there are a great number of varying nationalities and cultures, traditions and beliefs, all intermingling and combining. This provides for an incredibly rich social background of which Wiccans do not hesitate to take advantage. Because one of the most intrinsic aspects of Wicca is its great variety and lack of dogma, one can argue that there are as many forms of Wicca as there are practitioners.

Indeed, one can see this most visibly in two books that together have done more to spread the Wiccan ‘gospel’, to borrow a phrase, than any others. Adler’s *Drawing Down the Moon* and Starhawk’s *The Spiral Dance*, both published within a day of each other, have probably brought more individuals into contact with Wicca than any other Wiccan literature, including that of Gerald Gardner. The differences between these two books could not better express the variety that one finds within Wicca. Adler’s book, published in Boston, expresses the “more rational and intellectual kind [of radicalism] of the East [Coast]” and Starhawk’s,

¹⁴ Crowley, *Wicca*, 36.

¹⁵ Berger, *Community of Witches*, 12.

published in San Francisco, “the more poetic and visionary radicalism of the West Coast”.¹⁶

Yet both writers are Wiccan, and neither book claims to contain the ‘truth’ of Wicca.

As a religion Wicca embraces many of the concepts and beliefs that its followers feel have been suppressed and denied, or just simply ignored, over the years by the major patriarchal monotheistic faiths, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. It is simultaneously monotheistic and polytheistic, a fact that lends its followers a certain amount of tolerance for other religions; in the Wiccan pantheon there is room for any and all. With its Mother Goddess and her consort the Horned God, it emphasises “empowerment of women, reverence for the reproductive process and honouring the body”,¹⁷ and seeks to re-connect with the earth, “the Goddess’s principal embodiment”,¹⁸ and encourage individuality of thought and action, a quality many Wiccans feel the monotheistic religions lack, with their sacred texts that proscribe action, thought and belief. It is no surprise then that the feminist and environmental movements, together with the more recent ecofeminist movement, have found neopaganism a refuge, and there are a great many links between the movements. Many Wiccans found their way to the Craft through one or both of these movements, and many have described the sensation as that of ‘returning home’.

The Counterculture

Morris Dickstein describes the 1950s as “the ground against which the upheavals of the sixties sought to define themselves”.¹⁹ It would take another study entirely to detail exactly why this apparently settled and complacent society erupted into—or perhaps more appropriately, gave birth to—one of the most turbulent periods in American society; and such a discourse is not relevant to this study. Suffice it to say it is this very complacency and

¹⁶ Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 370

¹⁷ Crowley, *Wicca*, 38

¹⁸ Lewis, “Introduction”, 1.

¹⁹ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 27.

conformity which played a large role in nurturing the resulting backlash that became known as the ‘counterculture’. Middle-class life in the 1950s was increasingly homogenised, and the rapid growth of the ‘suburb’ only encouraged this, as “people felt a need for companionship and a sense of belonging as they moved into new communities of strangers”.²⁰ Indeed, some foresaw that this would pose a problem in the future, one newspaper editor commenting in 1954 that “conformity may well become the central social problem of this age”.²¹ Norman Mailer described this period as “the years of conformity and depression”, and anticipated a “slow death by conformity, with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled”.²²

At the same time, post-war prosperity and abundance allowed the baby-boomer generation a degree of freedom undreamed of by previous generations, with wealth and new innovations fostering an atmosphere where they could increasingly pursue alternative notions of what the ‘good life’ and the American Dream entailed—a ‘happiness explosion’, as Tom Wolfe has called it, arguing that this period offered opportunities for people to discover “novel ways of...enjoying, extending their egos way out on the best terms available, namely their own”²³. Yet this ‘golden age’ of affluence and prosperity contrasted sharply with the omnipresent threat of the Cold War and possible nuclear Armageddon. This social climate of fear and suspicion actively discouraged the kind of youthful experimentation to which the youth of America was naturally drawn. The 1960s idealistic rebellions were a direct result of this clash between convention and innovation, and a reaction against the repressed conformist attitude of the previous generation.

It was not solely the youth of America that was finding cracks in the glitter of the American Dream. The dissatisfaction surfaced throughout society, most visibly in the popular

²⁰ George B. Tindall and David E. Shi, *America*, 5th edition (London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, 2000), 1107.

²¹ Unknown, cited in *America*, 1107.

²² Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 53.

²³ David Farber, “Introduction”, in *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 2.

culture and arts of the time. A prime example of this was the ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ of Elvis Presley, who was criticised for promoting an apparent “pagan concept of life”²⁴ and denounced by Catholic and patriotic groups for encouraging “dishonesty, violence, lust and degeneration”.²⁵ Films of the period were also blamed, such as *The Blackboard Jungle*, which was criticised for its rock ‘n’ roll soundtrack and for glamorising that which it portrayed, the wave of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s. The paintings of Jackson Pollock expressed the chaotic meaningless of American life, those of Edward Hopper the isolation and anonymity. Literature too expressed this dissatisfaction: creative products such as J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* expressed the sense of alienation and suffocation, the loneliness and hollowness that many felt. This was also the era of the Beats, a small but controversial group of writers, musicians, painters and poets, who rebelled against the conventional wisdom of the time. They strenuously embraced life, but “life on their own terms, and their terms were shocking to most observers”.²⁶ This, if any, could be a fitting description of the men and women who made up the counterculture.

“The American equation of success with the big time reveals an awful disrespect for human life and human achievement”,²⁷ wrote James Baldwin in 1960. In this post-war era these emerging dissenters were espousing a different society to the one in which they had grown up: a society that embraced pacifism, racial, class and gender equality, antiauthoritarianism and sexual expressiveness. They felt that post-war America was becoming “too complacent, too conformist, too materialistic”.²⁸ Morris Dickstein argues that the young people engaged in this rebellious outpouring of expression were “recalling

²⁴ Tindall and Shi, *America*, 1115.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 1119

²⁷ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.

²⁸ Tindall and Shi, *America*, 1098.

America to its expressed but often neglected democratic and egalitarian values”²⁹ which they, having never experienced the disillusionment and bitterness that comes with having lived through a world war, still believed in. In essence, they still believed in what Herbert Croly referred to as “the promise of American life”³⁰, and felt that the society in which they lived was not living up to that promise.

The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) sums this up succinctly:

We are the people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. ... Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living ... we ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present ... that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well.³¹

The counterculture was both an expression of defiance against the stifling social attitudes of the previous generation, and an attempt to recapture the idealism and potential of America’s much-vaunted early history. Indeed, one supported the other: the Declaration of Independence upheld their enshrined *right* to rebel, should they feel their government and society was not serving them adequately. The youth of the period did not see their actions as rebellious; or if they did, for all that their elders disapproved, it was a rebellion protected by the most cherished document of their nation. In fact, for all the modernity of the counterculture it was also firmly rooted in the past, in the revolutionary tradition of the United States and its belief in the values propounded in the Constitution. One could, in fact, describe it as an attempt to reach back into this past and bring its integrity and honesty

²⁹ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, xi.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Students for a Democratic Society, *Port Huron Statement* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, August 1962), 3-4.

forward to the modern world, an attempt paralleled by that of Wiccans to recapture the connection with the earth and the rhythms of nature that humans once enjoyed.

Wicca and Countercultural Politics

Wicca's introduction to the United States came at a fortuitous time—it is highly likely that had it been introduced any earlier, or later, it may not have taken hold in the way that it did, if indeed at all. The counterculture of the 1960s and 70s proved to be fertile ground in which Wicca could take root, and whilst the counterculture itself has floundered and dissipated in the years since, Wicca is going from strength to strength. The debt it owes to the counterculture cannot be measured—indeed a large part of what constitutes American Wicca is a direct result of this counterculture; although it would be almost impossible for any new religion to have been introduced into the most volatile and turbulent period in modern history and not be affected; and affected Wicca was. In fact, Frederic Lamond, in his book *Religion Without Beliefs*, argues that “religions take particular forms to suit particular times”,³² and that Wicca, as much as the counterculture from which it took root, is a product of its time.

Upon its introduction in 1964 Wicca fitted right into the ‘Age of Aquarius’ New Age movement that was such an integral part of this counterculture, with its renewed interest in mysticism, occultism, arcane traditions and unorthodox spirituality. This movement, in its most basic form, was and still is an extensive combination of various spiritual, social, and political groups, all with the common aim of transforming individuals and mainstream society through spiritual awareness. It was largely due to this movement that feminism, environmentalism, and spiritual and human concerns found their way into the mainstream. Wicca was certainly not the only new faith to be found within this movement, but it did seem to be one of the most accessible. More than the eastern imports, such as Taoism, Buddhism or Hare Krishna, Wicca tapped into the concerns that were at the forefront of the countercultural

revolution, concerns such as feminism, environmentalism and pacifism, and amalgamated these political concerns with a fulfilling spirituality. Indeed, Adler, after interviewing many Wiccans, concluded that there were at least six primary reasons for joining the Craft, and all of these could find answering echoes within the counterculture: beauty, vision and imagination; intellectual satisfaction; growth; freedom; feminism; and environmental response.³³

American Wicca has, more than any other of these New Age faiths which arose from this 'Age of Aquarius' period, always been closely connected with the political, not least because many of its followers found their way into Wicca through specifically political movements such as the feminist or environmental movements. Helen Berger attributes this to one of the most integral aspects of the Wiccan belief, that all things on earth are connected, a part of, not separate from one another. As she explains it:

The individual is viewed as a part of nature, not separate from it. Individual growth is simultaneously regarded as connected to cosmic changes and as helping to usher in those changes. The development and transformation of the self are therefore regarded as part of the process of social change. As there is an erosion between the personal and the political, the development of the self is viewed as part of the process of effecting necessary changes in the larger world, as well as in individuals' lives".³⁴

In essence, the counterculture served to break down the "liberal distinction between the public/political and the private/personal".³⁵

This notion that the personal and political are inextricably intertwined, and that one should not be considered without the other is an idea propounded by the sociologist C. Wright Mills in his 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination*. This book, which was

³² Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 382.

³³ Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon*, 22-23.

³⁴ Berger, *Community of Witches*, 5.

influential in the rise of the New Left and the counterculture, deals with the decline of the entrepreneurial class and the rise of the white-collar worker, whom he describes as ‘cheerful robots’. Mills argues that this middle-class change, moving from independence and personal achievement to becoming part of the salaried, standardised masses, with no opportunity for individuality and freedom of expression, along with the concentration of power amongst a few select members of society—members of the military, corporate and executive elite—had led to a general decline in freedom. It is this decline of freedom and rise of authoritarianism and military control—the “unwarranted influence” of the “military-industrial complex” which Eisenhower warned against in his 1961 farewell address to the nation—that the counterculture was rebelling against.

The politics that are such a part of Wiccan ideology is what Anthony Giddens refers to as ‘life politics’:

Political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflective project of the self, and conversely where the process of self-realisation influences global strategies.³⁶

For Wiccans worshipping the goddess is “to worship nature and the female aspect—to live a life that is consistent with the needs of the environment and to be aware of women’s issues”.³⁷ In essence, Wicca provides a spirituality that is consistent with individuals’ political concerns.

It is no doubt Wicca’s connection with these vital political concerns that has ensured its survival and expansion in the years since the decline of the counterculture. The same ‘baby-boomers’ who have turned away from the rebelliousness of their youth to become lawyers, doctors and politicians still follow the neopagan path. Why? Because those aspects of the

³⁵ Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women since 1945* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 97.

³⁶ Berger, *Community of Witches*, 79.

counterculture that are echoed within the Wiccan ideology are those same aspects that have been assimilated by modern American society in general: the more visible being environmentalism and feminism, but also secularism, pluralism, egalitarianism, a distrust of authority, and a scepticism about the use of force in international conflicts.

During the counterculture these concerns were seen as radical by a society that was still largely rooted in the conservatism of the war generation. Today, these concerns are an integral part of society: today those who speak out against them are seen as radical. Indeed, Morris Dickstein³⁸ argues that the election of Bill Clinton to the presidential office in 1992, with his lack of military service and antiwar protest record, saw the final integration of those counterculture ideals with the mainstream conservatism of the United States. Herein lies the genius of American society, in its ability to assimilate and ‘disarm’ those ideologies that could conceivably pose a threat to it, and to sustain both a rich conservative and radical/liberal tradition simultaneously; and perhaps the genius of Wicca in its inclusion of such topical concerns.

Wicca and Feminism

To many feminism is one of the first things that springs to mind when confronted with the term ‘Wicca’, and this comes as no surprise to most American Wiccans. The feminist witches are the most vocal and outspoken members of the neopagan revival, and Wicca is perhaps the most ‘female-friendly’ of all the modern neopagan religions, with its supreme goddess who represents all aspects of female life: Maiden, Mother and Crone. Wicca, more than any other religion, celebrates and exalts the divine feminism in all women, and its introduction to America in the late 1960s when the Women’s Movement was just beginning to take off was highly fortuitous. In fact, many Wiccans, believing in some form of divine providence or quirk of fate, argue that the two arrived at roughly the same time specifically in

³⁷ Ibid., 79.

³⁸ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, xi.

order to feed off and encourage one another. Some even believe that had not Wicca been around the Women's Movement would not have survived, and indeed, flourished, and vice versa. However, it is more likely that both were to a certain extent products of the prevailing cultural atmosphere of the period, an atmosphere that had already given rise to the New Left and the Civil Rights Movement.

Since the focus of this chapter is Wicca, and not feminism and the Women's Movement, it would not serve to dwell too long on the rise and role of women in America in this period. Nevertheless, it must be noted that whilst the Women's Movement was a part of the counterculture, and a very important part, it was not as integrated as popular culture would have one believe. Its role in the counterculture can be related to that of Dianic Wicca in the greater neopagan revival: a vociferous and forthright group, but not one whose values can be described to define the movement as a whole; a part of the whole, and not the sum.

Part of the contradiction women faced within the counterculture is addressed by Dorothy Dinnerstein in her book *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. She argues that although the values of the counterculture were similar to “the things that woman have always informally and deeply known”³⁹—a belief paralleled in Wicca, that women possess some form of genetic knowledge which men lack—the counterculture was led by men, not women. It was in itself *not* a feminist revolution, and indeed did not attempt to be. Dinnerstein describes the counterculture as “the beginning of a redefinition, by young men themselves, of the traditional male role”⁴⁰. Rochelle Gatlin expands upon this, writing:

Men were willing to become more ‘feminised’ but they did not encourage women to assume traditional masculine characteristics and roles. Instead, men asked women to

³⁹ Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 267-268.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 267-268.

become mere assistants in what had formerly been their special domain”⁴¹.

Small wonder then that women felt it necessary to form their own movement, part of and yet still separate from the wider countercultural revolution.

This is the great irony of both Wicca and the Women’s Movement, that neither would have been possible without the groundwork already laid previously by men. Wicca’s origins lie with Gerald Gardner, however much some of the more radical feminist and Dianic witches try to deny it; and the Women’s Movement could not have been possible without the atmosphere fostered by the male-centric counterculture. However, this dichotomy is not as contradictory as it might first appear: one must remember that Wicca celebrates the divine feminine in both women *and* men, and the vast majority worship both the Goddess and the God equally. It is only the more radical purely feminist witches who seek to exorcise the masculine from their lives, just as it is only the radical feminists who seek to live lives separate from men—most simply desire equality, not separatism.

It is impossible to underestimate the impact the feminist movement has had on Wicca, although regrettably the reverse cannot be said to be true. It is harder to evaluate Wicca within feminism largely because there is no longer a unified movement to evaluate, as there was back in the 1970s. Wicca has survived. Feminist groups such as NOW and the Women’s Pentagon Actions have disbanded, and the Women’s Movement “appears to be declining in numbers and political influence”⁴². Wicca’s role within this movement is an area of scholarship woefully neglected, by both feminist and neopagan scholars—although with the increasing visibility of both Wicca and neopaganism this situation might change. All too often it is discussed as an unnamed part of the New Age movement, rather than a fully-fledged spirituality in its own right; and it is as a spirituality that it came to the attention of many within the feminist movement.

⁴¹ Rochelle Gatlin, *American Women*, 97.

In their book *Womanspirit Rising* Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow outline four major obstacles that feminists see as impeding their search for a fulfilling spirituality within the Judaeo-Christian belief system—the image and language of a deity that is exclusively male; the division between body and soul, where the soul alone is divine and the body gross and sinful; the denial of “women’s spiritual experience and history”;⁴³ and the inability to create a new theology and new rituals that would make such obstacles obsolete.⁴⁴ Wicca’s attraction to feminists is its ability to overcome each of these obstacles, and provide women with a religion that can adapt to meet their political and personal concerns.

Mary Mellor writes that feminists were “arguing for a distinctive women’s spirituality... that [would] provide a basis for women’s empowerment outside patriarchal control”,⁴⁵ and that in order to find this feminists needed to reclaim the older forms of feminine wisdom that the patriarchal Judaeo-Christian religions had attempted to obliterate. With this in mind, what could be older and more empowering than the witch, an archetypal figure that Ronald Hutton, one of the foremost neopagan scholars, describes as “one of the very few images of independent female power which historic European cultures have bequeathed”. In his treatise on modern neopaganism, *Triumph of the Moon*, he writes:

As the United States became the main source of modern feminist thought in general and radical feminist thought in particular, the appropriation of this image [the witch] became virtually inevitable.⁴⁶

However, the simple appropriation of such a universal cultural figure as that of the witch does not explain why Wicca itself has served to have such emotional resonance for so many within the feminist movement, and why this resonance has led many feminists to wholeheartedly embrace Wicca. The witch exists as a symbol outside of Wicca—indeed, there are Wiccans

⁴² Gatlin, *American Women*, 238.

⁴³ Mellor, *Feminism & Ecology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 52-53.

⁴⁴ Carol Christ & Judith Plaskow, cited in *Feminism & Ecology*, 52-53.

⁴⁵ Mellor, *Feminism & Ecology*, 52.

who reject the term, believing that it has a ‘bad press’ and “refers to a decayed version of an older faith”.⁴⁷ In the words of Adler, the term ‘witch’ “is not merely a word, but an archetype, a cluster of powerful images ... that resonate in the mind”.⁴⁸ There is something associated with ‘witch’ that is “atemporal, primordial, prehistoric, something perhaps ‘older than the human race itself’”.⁴⁹ Heady stuff, indeed, for women seeking spiritual and cultural empowerment; but whilst the terms ‘Wicca’ and ‘witch’ are often used interchangeably they are *not* synonymous. One need not be Wiccan to be a witch, and vice versa. On the contrary, whilst it may be that this appropriation is what drew the attention of feminists to Wicca in the first place, it is something else entirely, something unique to the religion, that draws them in.

Barbara Epstein has argued:

Neopagan and feminist spirituality [appeals] to women largely because they give women powerful figures with whom to identify and because they challenge alienation among human beings and between humanity and nature.⁵⁰

This is surely accurate, but seems far too simplistic an explanation. For example, the feminist movement was not as unified as may otherwise be believed; there were very distinct individual threads running throughout it, and these would surely have had similar, but not identical goals. The three most visible were “anarcha-feminism, ecofeminism and feminist spirituality”, all of which “[shared] a conception of revolution that [revolved] around creating new kinds of community and transforming culture and consciousness”⁵¹, a conception echoed within Wicca. The genius of Wicca is its ability to appeal to all three directly, and provide an integrated and fulfilling framework for each.

For the anarcha-feminists there is the appeal of the polytheism of Wicca, which was seen

⁴⁶ Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 341.

⁴⁷ Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁰ Epstein, *Political Protest*, 171.

within the movement as an alternative to cultural imperialism: “It accepts and incorporates new cultures, new goddesses and gods, rather than attempts to fit them in a pre-existing mold”⁵². Such a philosophy would make religious wars a thing of the past—conversion would be irrelevant, as all gods and goddesses could be incorporated into a pantheon that had plenty of room for all. This flexibility is largely due to the fact that Wicca is not rooted upon “assertions of creed”⁵³, as Epstein puts it. There is also the strong anti-authoritarianism thread within Wicca, a thread which “sometimes borders on anarchism” itself.

For the ecofeminists—and the pure environmental/ecologists, although this will be explored in the subsequent chapter—there is a religious ideology that is in harmony with the earth, an ideology that celebrates the earth as the divine embodiment of the Great Goddess, the Earth Mother; and the myriad goddesses as “manifestations of the One Great Goddess whose identity is as the universal feminine spirit of Nature”.⁵⁴ This view of the earth as a living entity, as a corporeal whole, has especially taken root since the famous moonwalk of 1969, when for the first time Americans saw their planet from space.

Just as ecofeminism is the bridge between environmentalism and feminism, Wicca is the “logical spiritual application of such studies”. One can understand why ecofeminists more than any others would be drawn to Wicca. “The Goddess is the concept of feminine divinity incarnate. The denial of feminine divinity results in the oppression of all women, including Mother Nature”.⁵⁵ For Wiccans, and no doubt many ecofeminists, the Goddess is “the very soul of the earth, and she lives or dies as all life on this planet lives or dies”. To draw a comparison, raping and polluting the earth to a Wiccan is no different to spitting on the cross would be to a Christian, an unforgivable profanity.

And for the spiritual feminists there is a religion that celebrates and exalts the feminine,

⁵¹ Ibid., 159.

⁵² Ibid., 171.

⁵³ Ibid., 172.

⁵⁴ Morning Glory and Otter G’Zell, “Who On Earth is the Goddess?”, in *Magical Religion*, 26.

instead of oppressing and subjugating women as so many of the monotheistic faiths do. For any number of reasons, all of which are too lengthy to focus on here, women seem to feel a far greater need for spirituality in their daily lives than men do. In recent national surveys,⁵⁶ it has been discovered that in almost every aspect of religious life women feature far more prominently than men: in religious attendance; in commitment to their faith and in the significance their religion plays in their lives. Women are more likely to see religion as a source of self-worth; more likely to seek comfort from religion when faced with personal problems, and more likely to spend time developing their faith. This trend—not at all unique to the United States—was originally interpreted as being part of the traditional set of roles that women played:

Mother, housekeeper, guardian of traditional values, participant in voluntary associations, marginal to the labor [sic] force, marginal to sources of social status such as education and professional occupations”⁵⁷.

However, whilst the position women occupy in society has changed radically in recent times, this trend persists. The fact still remains that, for whatever reasons, women seem to feel a distinct need for spirituality in their lives.

It is surely no coincidence that the decline evident in the Christian faith has run almost hand-in-hand with the rise of feminine equality. As more and more women were rejecting the traditional Christian role ascribed to them of mother and homemaker, they were at the same time, perhaps almost unconsciously, turning away from the faith that was no longer fulfilling to them, the faith that kept them bound to the home. The counterculture, with its influx of ‘alternative’ and New Age faiths, and the Women’s Movement that was increasingly gaining momentum, offered women a world of spiritual and cultural alternatives that had previously

⁵⁵ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁶ Gallup poll, cited in Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 225.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 226.

not been available to them. Wicca, with its emphasis on the divine feminine and its celebration of the equality of both men and women, was the perfect religious vehicle to appeal to the women of the counterculture.

Combine this with the fact that that the Women's Movement was made up of segments of the American population in which religious affiliation already tended to be weak—the young, the educated, those with professional careers and with more secular outlooks on life – and the apparent inherent need within women for a fulfilling spirituality, and one can see why Wicca found the following it did within the feminist movement. To quote: “feminism functioned much like the liberal, egalitarian values of the ‘new class’ ... counter to the more traditionalistic values that had been prominent in the churches”, and it is these liberal values that can be found throughout Wicca. Wicca would have seemed a haven for these liberals, almost diametrically opposed to the conservative Christian church in its sympathy for liberalism, homosexuality, abortion, sexual experimentation, and feminism. Since the feminists could not find support within Christianity, the only alternative was either abandon the feminist cause or find another faith; and for many, this faith was Wicca.

Wicca and Environmentalism

Starhawk writes that “witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology”,⁵⁸ and if witchcraft is, then there can be no doubt that Wicca too shares this concern for the environment, as perhaps the most politicised of all the neopagan religions. Indeed, for an earth-based religion such as Wicca, with its strong emphasis on respect for the earth as the divine embodiment of the goddess, and its belief in the connection between all life on earth, it would be a surprise if it did *not* have a strong association with the environmental movement. Just as Wicca’s stance on gender equality and its celebration of the divine feminine in both men and women has appealed to feminists, so its strong appeal for humanity to see itself as a part of nature, and not above and superior to it, has appealed to environmentalists.

The environmental or ecology movement in the United States stems from the same post-war atmosphere as the counterculture, and was “very much in line with the other cultural changes spawned by the confluence of factors that dominated the 1960s”.⁵⁹ In this sense, it was not even a reaction unique to the time: Hal Rothman argues that throughout America’s history, whenever society was faced with periods of “sociocultural unrest”, there was a general yearning for a kind of utopianism, a desire to ‘get back to the land’.

Environmentalism was a symptom of its time, a cultural protest, reacting against the self-serving policies of the large corporations that were polluting the land; against chemical hazards that threatened both humanity and nature, such as the subsequent disaster at Three Mile Island; and also against the nuclear Cold War mentality of 1960s America that was such a danger to the long-term safety and health of the globe. Indeed, there was a great deal of overlap between the environmental movement and the anti-nuclear movement, as there was between the latter and neopaganism. Direct action movements such as the Women’s Pentagon Action group used “symbolism, ritual and political theater ... to affirm and create

⁵⁸ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1999), 35.

bonds among movement participants, to project the movement's vision of community, and to dramatize political issues",⁶⁰ and in many cases the rituals used were pagan:

[These] rituals [emphasised] the power of human collectivity, and the human bond with the natural environment, and acceptance of the unconscious and irrational in human personality and experience.⁶¹

As Margot Adler has written, this use of pagan rituals within environmental protests is especially apt because, in her words: "Pagan religions work according to ecological principles: spiritual diversity is like ecological diversity"⁶². For many environmentalists these rituals may have been the first exposure to the echoing beliefs of neopaganism in general and Wicca in particular.

One of the most similar aspects of environmentalism and Wicca is what is known as the 'Gaia hypothesis', formulated in the mid-1960s. The Gaia hypothesis was the brainchild of James Lovelock, a NASA scientist living and working in Pasadena, California, and was named for the primordial Greek earth goddess, Gaia. In its most basic form, the idea was that "life defines and maintains the material conditions needed for its survival" and the entire planetary ecosystem "seemed to exhibit the behaviour of a single organism—even a living creature".⁶³ What Lovelock was proposing, in essence, was that the planet *itself* was alive, not merely in the sense that it contained life, but as an independent living creature.

Whilst at first the theory was dismissed by many as 'pseudo-science' and viewed as mystical teleological speculation, Lovelock's theory gradually came to occupy a respected place within environmental and geo-biological theory. The 'Gaia hypothesis' also took hold in the public imagination, and today is more ever present than ever: there are now numerous

⁵⁹ Hal K. Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation: Environmentalism in the United States since 1945* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 83.

⁶⁰ Epstein, *Political Protest*, 159.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170

⁶² Adler, cited in *Political Protest*, 171.

poems, statues, books, bookstores, catalogues and scientific conferences all dedicated to this idea of Gaia.

As a scientist Lovelock obviously did not interpret this in the same way as many neopagans did. Wiccans, for example, have always believed that the earth is alive, that the earth is indeed the body of the goddess; and Lovelock's theory seemed to support this belief. The Gaia hypothesis was seen by many Wiccans as scientific vindication for what they had always believed; that the planet was alive, that everything was connected and that in harming the earth humans were only harming themselves. This argument had great resonance amongst the environmental community, who too have been stressing much the same thing.

Environmentalists felt that the Gaia hypothesis placed a greater emphasis on the need to care for and respect the planet as a living entity in its own right, an "elaboration of general ecological notions of close relationships between living things and their environment"⁶⁴.

The Gaia hypothesis proved to many Wiccans that the environmental and scientific community was evolving along a path that Wicca had already forged. For many environmentalists "the scientist's Gaia resonated with [neopagan] intimations about the nature of deity and seemed to suggest appropriate means of building relationships"⁶⁵.

However:

Gaia would not respond primarily to calls for salvation or expressions of praise, but responded better to life-styles expressive of ecological commitment: recycling, down-shifting, simple living and 'Green' co-operation with the environment.⁶⁶

In essence, "doing, not believing, seems a more adequate response to Gaia",⁶⁷ a belief that fits firmly with Wicca. Whilst it has always held a particular reverence for nature, American

⁶³ James Lovelock, cited in *Triumph of the Moon*, 352.

⁶⁴ Adler, *Drawing Down The Moon*, 303.

⁶⁵ Graham Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism: Listening People, Speaking Earth* (New York, New York University Press, 1997), 146

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁷ Harvey, *Contemporary Paganism*, 4.

Wicca has taken this to another level—original Gardnerian Wicca was initially more of a fertility religion than a nature religion, which is not the same thing. Vivianne Crowley has argued that the strong emphasis on ecological principles within Wicca has only existed since the time of the counterculture, and was not present to the same extent within British Wicca.⁶⁸ This emphasis, she writes, evolved in much the same way as the environmental movement: in response to the state of society and the various ecological disasters of the time—the Santa Barbara oil spill, the fire on the polluted Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, both in 1969, and the LA smog of the late 60s. As a proactive environmental awareness was being cultivated within the general population, so it was within the already sympathetic followers of Wicca, and in much the same way.

Whilst at first hand it may seem that religion has very little to do with earthcare and an environmental sensibility, earth goddesses aside, many scholars have argued that, on the contrary, humanity's choice of religion may have had more impact on the environment than anything else. Arnold Toynbee, in his essay “The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis”, has argued:

Some of the major maladies of the present-day world ... the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures, and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured ... can be traced back in the last analysis to a religious cause, and that this cause is the rise of monotheism.⁶⁹

Scholars have argued that the spread of the Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Baha'ism—have encouraged mankind to think of nature as an ‘other’, as something outside of themselves, to be conquered and overcome. Indeed, the Bible states explicitly that humanity is to “subdue it [the earth]: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the

⁶⁸ Crowley, cited in Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 415.

⁶⁹ Arnold Toynbee, “The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis”, in *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 3 (1972): 63.

fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth”.⁷⁰ It is this attitude that many Wiccans believe is the problem:

[The traditional Judaeo-Christian] image of God as outside of nature has given us a rationale for our own destruction of the natural order, and justified our plunder of the earth’s resources. We have attempted to ‘conquer’ nature as we have tried to conquer sin. Only as the results of pollution and ecological destruction become severe enough to threaten even urban humanity’s adaptability have we come to recognise the importance of ecological balance and the interdependence of life. The model of the Goddess, who is immanent in nature, fosters respect for the sacredness of all living things. Witchcraft can be seen as a religion of ecology. Its goal is harmony with nature, so that life may not just survive, but thrive.⁷¹

One can understand, bearing this in mind, why many environmentalists have found difficulty in reconciling their political ideology and environmental conscience with their religious beliefs. Indeed, some scholars have argued that it is this political/religious dichotomy that underlies the current interest in neopaganism:

Paganism has re-emerged within Western twentieth-century society for a good reason, for though it draws upon the past, it is designed for living in the present. Its reappearance at this time is a spiritual corrective to what many see as the head-long hurtle towards planetary destruction.⁷²

The word ‘designed’ is important in the context of Wicca. Whilst Margot Adler argues that all individuals to a certain extent create their own individual religions, that “all of us, Christians, Jews, Pagans or whatever, are using our source materials selectively and

⁷⁰ Genesis 1:28 (KJV).

⁷¹ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, 34-35.

⁷² P. Jones and C. Matthews, “Introduction: The Pagan World”, in *Voices from the Circle: The Heritage of Western Paganism* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1990), 13.

interpreting them in accord with our own experiences and values”,⁷³ one must remember that Wicca, perhaps more than any other modern religion, is a construct, aimed at fulfilling a particular need. Whether that need is a religion that does not exclude women or that preaches harmony with the earth is irrelevant to many Wiccans: it does not matter what brought an individual to the Craft or why it appeals to him/her; it does not matter which deity one chooses to worship or whether one refuses to recognise any deity at all. Wicca is about individual choices and living the life that is best suited to one’s self, whatever that may entail. For Wiccans, life can be summed up this: ‘An’ harm ye none, do what thou will’.

Conclusions

The 1990 and 2001 ARIS studies revealed a noticeable move amongst the American population away from established religions, and also a trend towards alternative spiritual movements such as Wicca. However, neither the ARIS nor the Berger studies, which were essentially descriptive, were in a position to investigate the reasons why these shifts had occurred. This chapter has provided a possible explanation for *both* of the shifts demonstrated in the ARIS studies, by identifying the key elements in the American counterculture in the 1950s, 60s and beyond, and examining these alongside the values inherent in both the mainstream and Wiccan religions.

This period in American history served as a crucible in which Wicca could evolve and grow into a fulfilling esoteric spirituality with the ability to adapt to fit whatever circumstances required of it, unlike the more rigid ‘religions of the book’—such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity—all of which rely on dogmatic texts (divinely inspired or otherwise) written many hundreds of years ago in reaction to societal conditions of their own. Ronald Metzner writes, “existing cultural paradigms cannot adequately deal with the issues

⁷³ Judy Harrow, “The Contemporary Neo-Pagan Revival”, in *Magical Religion*, 11.

humans are facing, particularly with regard to the ecological crisis.” He describes an “emerging ecological worldview with very different perceptions of the role and place of the human in the scheme of things”.⁷⁴ He was not describing Wicca, but he many well have been. Only a religion firmly rooted in the present can adequately deal with the issues of today; a religion rooted thousands of years in the past cannot ever provide a satisfactory answer for today. Wicca is open enough and flexible enough to fit almost any framework. Its ideological spectrum is broad enough to encompass whatever the major trends of society may be, whether they be environmentalism and feminism or some other unforeseen future concerns.

During the 1960s and 70s there were many varied elements swirling around the central tenet of the counterculture, which was a rebellion against the stagnation and conformity of American society. Many of these elements found an answering echo within Wicca, whether it was feminism or eastern mysticism, environmentalism or a strident antiauthoritarianism. It is this connection with the myriad elements of the counterculture and its ability to appeal to many apparently contradictory segments of society which has ensured Wicca’s survival.

Barbara Epstein writes that “feminism and an environmental sensibility are the only ‘ideologies’ that have never been disavowed or challenged by any significant group within the [direct action] movement”⁷⁵ that was such a part of the countercultural revolution. Indeed,

⁷⁴ Ronald Metzner, cited in Carpenter, “Practitioners of Paganism”, in *Magical Religion*, 403.

⁷⁵ Epstein, *Political Protest*, 157.

both of these movements have now become absorbed into mainstream American thought, although obviously in both cases there are still radical groups who shun the mainstream path. They have done so largely because they both espouse fundamental values, basic values away from which the majority of society has drifted away. Wicca's genius is its ability to appeal to both groups, mainstream *and* radical. Of course it is not merely mainstream values which have found an echo within Wicca; many elements of the counterculture which did *not* find their way into mainstream society, elements such as anarchism, eastern mysticism, magic, sexual freedom, can all also be found within Wicca.

This in essence is what has ensured Wicca's growth in the years since the counterculture, its ability to tap into the major anxieties of society—many of which stemmed from the counterculture—and provide an answer suitable for many disparate groups. Wicca has the ability to build bridges, between Eastern and Western traditions; between male and female; between mainstream and radical groups; between itself and other religions.

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