

What is Wicca?

An Introduction to "The Old Religion" of Europe and its Modern Revival

By Amber K, High Priestess

Our Lady of the Woods
P.O. Box 1107
Los Alamos, New Mexico 87544

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WICCA (sometimes called Wicce, the Craft, or The Old Religion by its practitioners) is an ancient religion of love for life and nature.

In prehistoric times, people respected the great forces of Nature and celebrated the cycles of the seasons and the moon. They saw divinity in the sun and moon, in the Earth Herself, and in all life. The creative energies of the universe were personified: feminine and masculine principles became Goddesses and Gods. These were not semi-abstract, superhuman figures set apart from Nature: they were embodied in earth and sky, women and men, and even plants and animals.

This viewpoint is still central to present-day Wicca. To most Wiccans, everything in Nature -- and all Goddesses and Gods -- are true aspects of Deity. The aspects most often celebrated in the Craft, however, are the Triple Goddess of the Moon (Who is Maiden, Mother and Crone) and the Horned God of the wilds. These have many names in various cultures.

Wicca had its beginnings in Paleolithic times, co-existed with other Pagan ("country") religions in Europe, and had a profound influence on early Christianity. But in the medieval period, tremendous persecution was directed against the Nature religions by the Roman Church. During a span of over 300 years, millions of women, many children, and some men were hanged, drowned or burned as accused "Witches." The Church indicted them for malevolent magic and Satan worship, though in fact these were never part of the Old Religion.

The Wiccan faith went underground, to be practiced in small, secret groups called covens. For the most part, it has stayed hidden until very recent times. Now scholars such as Margaret Murray and Gerald Gardner have shed some light on the history of the Craft, and new attitudes of religious freedom have allowed covens in many areas to become more open.

Some covens and larger networks have organized to the point of incorporating as churches or tax-exempt religious organizations under state and federal law. Wicca is also recognized by the U.S. Armed Forces and included in their Chaplains' Manual. Wiccan organizations were co-sponsors of the Parliament of World Religions in 1993, and in many forums are receiving recognition as a revitalized and growing religion.

How do Wiccan folk practice their faith today? There is no central authority or doctrine, and individual covens vary a great deal. But most meet to celebrate on nights of the Full Moon, and at eight holy days or sabbats throughout the year. They also gather with other Nature religions at great outdoor summer festivals.

Though some practice alone or only with their families, many Wiccans are organized into covens of three to thirteen members. Some are led by a High Priestess or Priest, many by a Priestess/Priest team; others rotate or share leadership. Some covens are highly structured and hierarchichal, while others are informal and egalitarian. Often extensive training is required before initiation, and coven membership is considered an important commitment.

There are many branches or "traditions" of Wicca in the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. These include Gardnarian, Alexandrian, Welsh Traditional, Dianic, Faery, Georgian, Seax-Wicca and others. All adhere to a code of ethics. None engage in the disreputable practices of some modern "cults," such as isolating and brainwashing lonely, impressionable young people. Genuine Wiccans welcome brothers and sisters, but not disciples or unthinking followers.

Coven meetings include ritual, celebration and magick (often spelled with a "k" to distinguish it from stage illusions). Wiccan magick is not at all like the instant special effects of cartoon shows or fantasy novels, nor is it medieval

demonology. It operates in harmony with natural laws and is usually less spectacular -- but effective. Various techniques are used to heal people and animals, seek understanding, or improve members' lives in specific ways. Positive goals are sought; cursing and "evil spells" are repugnant to practitioners of Wicca.

Wiccans tend to be strong supporters of environmental protection, equal rights, global peace and religious freedom, and sometimes magick is used toward such goals. Local covens may provide community service by helping needy families over the holidays, cleaning up litter, assisting AIDS patients, or in many other ways.

Wiccan beliefs do not include such Judeo-Christian concepts as original sin, vicarious atonement, divine judgement or bodily resurrection. Wiccans believe in a beneficent universe, the laws of karma and reincarnation, and divinity inherent in every human being and all of Nature. Laughter and pleasure are part of their spiritual tradition, and they enjoy singing, dancing, feasting and love.

Wiccans tend to be individualists, and have no central holy book, prophet or church authority. They draw inspiration and insight from Nature, tradition, the arts, literature, science and personal experience. Each practitioner keeps a personal book or journal in which s/he records magickal spells, dreams, songs and chants, poetry and so on.

To most in the Craft, every religion has its own valuable perspective on the nature of Deity and humanity's relationship to It: there is no One True Faith. Rather, religious diversity is necessary in a world of diverse societies and individuals. Because of this belief, Wiccans do not actively recruit or proselytize. There is an assumption that people who can benefit from the Wiccan way will "find their way home" when the time is right.

Despite this lack of evangelistic zeal, many covens are quite willing to talk with interested people, and even make efforts to inform their communities about the beliefs and practices of Wicca. One source of contacts is The Covenant of the Goddess, P.O. Box 1226, Berkeley, CA 94701. You may also be interested in The Circle Guide to Pagan Groups, at Box 219, Mt. Horeb, WI. 53572. Also the following books may be of interest -- ask your librarian or local bookstore.

The Phoenix and the Flame -- Vivianne Crowley

The Spiral Dance -- Starhawk

True Magick -- Amber K

What Witches Do -- Stewart Farrar

Wicca -- Vivianne Crowley

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