Women in New Religions

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Wicca

Valuing the Divine Feminine

Origin of Wicca

Although some Wiccans claim that their religion has ancient roots, scholars and academically inclined practitioners trace its origin to Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964), an Englishman who published claims that he had discovered a coven of witches at Christchurch, Hampshire, in England, into which he had been initiated. Gardner asserted that the coven had ties to ancient pagan fertility religions dating prior to the rise of Christianity, and he published descriptions of a midwinter Wiccan celebration, including casting a circle, purification ("scourging") of participants, and "Drawing Down the Moon"—invoking the Goddess into the priestess.[1]

Gardner claimed that the New Forest coven, theretofore secret, gave him permission to publish these and other rites, which he did in *Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959) following the English Parliament's repeal of the country's last laws banning witchcraft in 1951. Gardner provided many of the basic elements of rituals that came to inform contemporary Wicca. He described seasonal celebrations based around solstices (summer and winter) and equinoxes (spring and autumn) in which celebrants venerated a Goddess and God with secret names by dancing naked. He encouraged a ritual in which Wiccans draw a circle with a sword or knife to contain the magical power the ceremony would release, acknowledge the four cardinal points, participate in scourging participants, and dance frenetically. Gardner described covens with thirteen members led by a high priestess in concert with a high priest, cross-sex initiation into the coven to celebrate and promote polarity of the sexes, and a religion that viewed sex as sacred, and honored and celebrated fertility.

The high priestess Gardner claimed invited him into Wicca, and who later initiated him into her coven, was someone he called "Old Dorothy," whom he described as a local, wealthy, elderly woman who always wore a strand of pearls. The historian Ronald Hutton cast doubt on this claim, identifying "Old Dorothy" as Dorothy Clutterbuck (1880–1951), who did live in Christchurch, but whose diaries, dating to the time when Gardner claims to have known her (discovered on her lawyer's shelves in 1986), reveal what Hutton describes as a "simple, kindly, conventional, and pious woman." Dorothy Clutterbuck was an active Tory and dedicated Anglican, with no demonstrated historical relationship to Gerald Gardner, and no apparent interest in "paganism or the occult."[2]

While academics do not accept Gardner's claims of Wicca's historical connection to ancient religion, it is important to recall that new religions commonly claim ancient origins. Christianity tied its own texts to those of Judaism (pairing its own Bible with the Hebrew Bible and calling the Jewish scriptures "old" and its own scriptures "new"), Islam claimed connections to Jewish and Christian prophets, and Mormonism claims ties to Judaism. The veracity of these claims is of less interest, perhaps, than what they tell us about the religions that make them: what a religion projects as its past reflects something critical about its contemporary self-perception—its sense of its core beliefs, traditions, practices, history, and identity.

Nonetheless, a prophet initiates an original constellation of beliefs, and although Gardner made no claims to be a prophet, his influence on Wicca is undeniable. Gardner drew from a variety of sources in constructing his vision of Wicca. From the British anthropologist and Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1863–1963), who wrote the introduction to *Witchcraft Today*, Gardner adopted the idea of an ancient fertility religion that had been suppressed by patriarchal witch hunts. Murray popularized the idea of an ancient religion celebrating the Goddess of fertility and the God of the hunt, and Gardner adopted these ideas, as well as beliefs about celebration of seasonal cycles and magic.[3] Hutton traces other influences on Gardner as well, including secret Masonic societies, Theosophy's emphasis on mysticism and the occult,

growing interest in Britain in folklore, the English practice of using folk magic to find lost objects or cast spells, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.[4]

Through his publications Gardner began to attract initiates into Wicca in the mid-twentieth century. Press accounts describing Wiccan celebrations were sometimes condemnatory and sometimes more sympathetic, and both increased the notoriety of the movement and attracted more participants. Raymond Buckland (b. 1934) and Rosemary Buckland (b. 1936) were drawn to the movement after Raymond read some of Gardner's books in the United States in the early 1960s. The two are credited with bringing Wicca to the United States from the United Kingdom. Growth of Wicca in the United States commenced originally via word of mouth, and the movement became inextricably linked with the ideas of those who first embraced it. Most especially, the feminist spirituality and environmental movements profoundly influenced Wicca in the United States, as did the counterculture movement, beliefs in anti-authoritarianism, and American individualism.[5]

In 1968 WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy From Hell), a New York–based group, published a manifesto asserting that witchcraft had dominated ancient Europe, but had been brutally repressed by witch hunters who opposed the sexual independence and boldness of female witches. The group repeated the claim first made by the German scholar Gottfried Christian Voigt (1740–1791), and later echoed by the nineteenth-century suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–1889), that nine million people, mostly women, were killed as witches during the witch hunts in Europe from the fifteenth century through the mid-eighteenth century. WITCH called on women to become witches—sexually free, independent, and assertive—again. Even though WITCH disbanded the following year, the group's ideas about witches proved longer-lasting. The radical feminist Mary Daly (1928–2010) repeated assertions made in the manifesto in her writing, as did the feminist theorist and activist Andrea Dworkin (1946–2005), though Daly and Dworkin focused on the use of Wicca to oppose patriarchy rather than as a religion.[6]

These claims of early persecution of independent and sexually free women as witches were influential, especially among radical feminists, in supporting a vision of history in which powerful women had been suppressed as witches, and pointing to a way for strong women to reemerge. The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (1921–1994) bolstered a view of history in which pre-Christian Europe venerated a female Goddess in her publications *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1974), *The Language of the Goddess* (1989), and *The Civilization of the Goddess* (1991), as well as in earlier articles. Gimbutas claimed that archaeological evidence pointed to prehistoric European matriarchal culture and worship of a great Goddess, both of which she claimed were destroyed by patriarchal Indo-European invaders. Gimbutas also repeated the assertion that the witch hunts primarily targeted wise women and healers, resulting in "eight million" of their deaths.[7] By the 1980s references to the "Burning Times" (shorthand for the persecution of women as witches in the European witch hunts) were common in radical feminist literature.[8]

At the same time that some radical feminists adopted the idea that ancient Europe was populated by matriarchal societies that worshipped a Goddess, but that the religion had been virtually destroyed by the witch hunts, Wicca was promoted as a form of authentic spirituality and a way to reclaim access to the feminine divine. For most feminists (like Andrea Dworkin), Wicca was merely symbolic of female resistance. Some feminist Wiccans incorporated a more literal interpretation.

Zsuzsanna (Z.) Budapest (b. 1940), a Hungarian immigrant, moved to the United States in 1956, and in 1971 founded the Susan B. Anthony Coven Number 1 in Hollywood, California. Budapest reinvigorated the emerging radical feminist interpretation of Wicca (as connected to ancient matriarchal cultures, a Goddess, and suppression during the Burning Times) with explicitly religious rites and symbols—magic, chanting, dancing, seasonal celebrations, and sacred objects. Budapest combined Wicca with radical feminism, focusing on female empowerment and embracing female separatism. Unlike other branches of Wicca—which emphasize polarity of the sexes through such components as belief in Goddess and God, celebration of heterosexual polarity, mixed-sex covens, and leadership by a high priestess and high priest—Dianic Witches, as these Wiccans are called, best typify the convergence of radical feminism and Wicca in feminist spirituality.

Budapest's influence has been significant, both through her publication in 1989 of *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries*[9] and through the effect that she had on another important figure in contemporary

Wicca, Miriam Simos (b. 1951). Simos was drawn to nature and a Pagan view of the world in 1968 when camping along the California coast. She explored Wicca with a friend by teaching a course on the topic in the early 1970s, and Simos met Budapest after returning from a failed move to New York to become a novelist.[10] Simos also studied with the Pre-Gardnerians and in the Feri Tradition,[11] was initiated as a Feri, changed her name to Starhawk, and in 1979 published one of the most influential books in Wicca, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*.[12] Indeed, taken together, Z. Budapest and Starhawk are the most widely read Wiccans in the world.

Starhawk's thinking evolves somewhat through her work. She published *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (1982); *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (1987); *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* (2002); *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature* (2004); and *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups* (2011), as well as a number of coauthored works and works of fiction.[13] She combines Wicca with progressive politics, particularly environmentalism, feminism, and anti-militarism. Her inclusion of men in Wicca calls for a redefinition of gender premised on egalitarian relationships, and she emphasizes a form of self-empowerment that asks people to exercise "power-from-within" (self-empowerment) or "power-with" (working with), rather than "power-over" (domination of) others or nature. Starhawk advocates rethinking power and relationships to prioritize connectedness—to self, to the earth, to others—assuming a responsibility to each of these, and thereby transforming each and the connections between each to make all healthier. Although she does not clearly specify whether she understands the Goddess literally or metaphorically, and celebrates differences in specific beliefs (though within certain confines), the wide readership of Starhawk's works has contributed significantly to the spread of Wicca and has helped to shape contemporary Wicca.[14]

Despite charges of Satanism leveled against practitioners of Witchcraft made by conservative Christians—such as those made in the late 1990s and early 2000s by evangelical Christians against military personnel at Fort Hood who celebrate Wiccan rituals—Witches are in no way connected to Satanism.[15] Fear of Satanism and some charges of Satanic ritual abuse were made in the 1980s and 1990s, but careful investigation by sociologists,[16] journalists, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation failed to reveal any evidence supporting the claims, and by the early twenty-first century, academics and law enforcement concurred that such accusations were the result of a moral panic rather than indication of any actual abuse. Satanism, specifically the Church of Satan, is a very small religion founded by Anton LaVey (1930–1997) in San Francisco in the late 1960s, which encourages qualities including indulgence and self-interestedness, but does not promote belief in any supernatural entities, not even Satan.

Wicca is the largest Neopagan religious group,[17] though many who self-identify as Wiccans or Witches may have no formal training, may practice alone, and may continue ties with other religions, such as Judaism or Christianity.[18] Until at least the 1970s, Witches were most often portrayed as ugly older women in black dresses and pointy caps carrying brooms, or as young, attractive women who "covertly used their magical powers to 'catch' or keep a man or to maintain the peace (as well as traditional gender roles) within their homes."[19] A plethora of information about Witchcraft available via new technologies has dramatically changed those older stereotypes. Television shows such as *Charmed* (1998–2006), *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996–2003), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), the *Harry Potter* novels and movies (1997–2011), and diverse other media representations of Witches have attracted unprecedented attention to "the Craft." It was originally spread via word of mouth in the 1970s and 1980s, but social networks, online publications, books, journals, newsletters, and other media now allow people to learn about Wicca without personal contact, and to develop their own covens or to practice alone as solitary practitioners. Older stereotypes have been replaced, at least in media representations, with Witches who are "often characterized as attractive, youthful, strong, and independent females who openly use their magical powers to fight against evil for the greater good."[20] It is important to note that Wicca lacks any centralized record-keeping, and so no one knows how many self-identify as Witches or Wiccans, but "there is a sense among researchers that all forms of magical religion are becoming more popular," largely as a result of increased media representations and access to information and resources via modern technologies.[21]

Becoming a Witch used to entail being trained in a coven, but now is often as simple as reading about

Wicca online and declaring oneself a Witch, a phenomenon that some older Wiccans fear may diminish the rigor of training and practice within Wicca.[22] Most who become Wiccan report feeling like they have found something in Wicca that they were drawn to even before they knew that it existed, that finding Wicca is like "coming home."[23] The sociologist Helen A. Berger and her colleagues at West Chester University published a census of Neopagans in 2003, and estimate that there are more than 150,000 Neopagans in the United States, the majority of whom identify as Witches.[24] There is some risk to initiates in identifying with a religion that is so poorly understood, which complicates counting adherents, and the boundaries of Wicca are particularly porous, as there is no universal standard for joining or leaving. Moreover, Neopaganism incorporates a wide variety of movements, such as contemporary shamanism, Odinism, and Druidry, not to mention various forms of Wicca, such as Dianic Wicca, the Faery and Feri movements, and others. As Berger points out, contemporary Wicca is eclectic, and incorporates beliefs and practices from a variety of traditions, including shamanistic traditions and Native American and Asian religions. The focus here is the beliefs and practices of those who self-identify as Wiccans.

As Wiccans are averse to any form of authoritarianism, in Wicca each individual is the authority on her or his beliefs; each finds and follows a spiritual path, resulting in a highly individualized and privatized religion. Even those who are trained in covens practice mostly in homes, backyards, or parks. Although some individual groups own land, Wicca has no prophet, single sacred text, dogma, national structure, buildings that are available in communities across the country for worship, or paid ministry. Still, Gardnerian form and access to shared sources of information about belief and practice shape the infinite possibilities for belief and worship. Witches share information through a few online, degree-granting seminaries, such as Cherry Hill Seminary in South Carolina, and Woolston-Steen Theological Seminary in the state of Washington; via books, journals, and newsletters; at festivals; and in covens; and so practices that Gardner advocated—though the specific elements, such as the words of a chant, may vary—generally remain consistent, at least in basic form. The specifics of ritual and belief are open to personal creativity, and Wicca's emphasis on innovation, anti-authoritarianism, and personal responsibility for one's own spiritual development encourage diversity.[25]

Gardner embraced a gender binary, and wrote that Witches should be trained and initiated in covens—secret enclaves comprising thirteen members, including a high priestess and six women and six men. Initiates take an oath of secrecy (though many coven secrets are widely available today on the Internet and in books) and learn the rituals, beliefs, and practices of Wicca. In mixed-sex groups, which Gardner advocated, the high priestess is the leader of the coven, and works closely with the high priest in order to create balance between masculine and feminine energies. All of the other members of the coven are initiated into one of three levels of attainment, and all are also priestesses or priests.[26] Women-only feminist spirituality groups, in contrast, eschew hierarchy, and do not recognize priestesses or levels of attainment, though some initiates may serve as de facto leaders based on personal characteristics that suit them to the task. Although covens form and break apart, and initiates leave and join, they often provide close, emotional connections for their members, especially in a modern world of high geographic mobility, where relationships tend to be fragile. Berger notes that the metaphor Witches use to describe the relationships they form in their covens is family: like a family, a coven is "filled with caring and concern and also with internal tensions and power struggles."[27] This sense of closeness is strengthened by Witches' experience as co-participants in a marginalized group, by shared beliefs and practices, and often by shared participation in political action.

The number of Witches who practice not in covens but alone is growing. The Pagan Census finds that just over half of Witches (51 percent) are solitary practitioners.[28] Books, especially Scott Cunningham's *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (1988),[29] and modern technologies contribute to this trend, easing access to both media representations, which may spark interest, and materials that allow learning and self-initiation. Witches also may vary their participation, working with a coven at some times and alone at others. Data from the Pagan Census indicate that solitary practitioners tend to be younger than other Witches, are more likely to live in rural or isolated places, are less concerned about gender and sexuality equity issues, and are less politically active on average.[30]

Berger asserts that Wicca exemplifies late modern emphasis on the individual, self-inquiry, individual reflexivity, and individual transformation. These emphases, particularly among the young, allow Wicca to

help form for practitioners a "personal myth,"[31] a cognitive framework that guides their social and environmental activism. At the same time, young Wiccans, though they generally support gender equality, are less likely than older practitioners to identify as feminists, or with particular political perspectives. For the young, Wicca is less connected to a specific political identity or physical community, and is more a privatized religious experience, with emphasis on the individual.[32]

Still, Wicca emphasizes connectedness—of selves to community and to nature, of life to death, of the seasons, of all life. Each individual is part of the web of life and has the power to both influence and be transformed by it. Veneration of nature is central to Wicca; the individual is *part* of nature, and all of nature is worthy of respect. Living and nonliving things have spirits, and each has energy, which can be focused, raised, and used to sway how things unfold. Magic is key. Everyone, Witches believe, has some capacity to use magic, though some may have better innate ability than others, and anyone can improve her proficiency through proper training. Rituals manifest veneration of nature, and allow coalescence of energy and magic. But all of life, even the mundane, is sacred. Nothing happens that is entirely random. Synchrony—the notion that nothing happens by chance, that events are connected—informs the interpretation of life.[33] Actions and thoughts have influence; Wicca helps one to understand and direct that influence, often in order to transform one's self and life.

Still, Wicca is incredibly diverse. With no central dogma and no overarching leadership, as well as the emphasis in Wicca on innovation, Sabbats, esbats, rites of passage, festivals, and personal rituals often incorporate new elements, and reflect the individual(s) involved. This is so often the case that exceptions exist for almost any generalization about Wiccan ritual or belief. Nonetheless, the tendency to follow the outline provided in Gardner's writings, as well as the more recent propensity to draw ideas from publications and Internet sources, both contribute to common patterns. Those are discussed here with the caveat that Wiccan belief and practice vary greatly.

Gender and Sexuality in Wicca

As a nature-based religion that celebrates the web of life, seasonal change, and fertility, Wicca sees mortality as part of the cycle of life. Different sects of Wicca understand Goddess(es) and God(s) differently, but all privilege the feminine, symbolized as Goddess(es). Wiccan groups that include men venerate the horned God along with the Goddess, though they too privilege the Goddess. Wiccans have tended to accept a gender binary, and both Goddess, associated with the moon and the divine feminine, and God, associated with the sun and the divine masculine, are necessary for sexual polarity, according to many Wiccan groups that include men.[34] Diversity of interpretation is common, however, and some Wiccans accept the Goddess and God as literal deities, while others view them as representations of the divine, or as metaphors for nature. Women-only groups celebrate only the Goddess, but here too there is variation in belief about whether she is a literal deity or a sacred symbol.

Despite great variation in understanding the divine feminine, it is most often represented as the triple Goddess whose aspects include maid, associated with the new moon; mother, associated with the full moon; and crone, as the moon wanes. The triple Goddess gives birth to the horned God (celebrated at Yule, 21 December), who later is her consort (Beltane, 1 May), and dies to ensure fertility of crops (Samhain, 31 October). Seasonal changes correspond with emblematic changes in the Goddess and horned God, and rituals celebrate these on eight Sabbats, spaced approximately every six weeks throughout the year as seasons begin and peak. Each aspect of the Goddess is associated with a life stage for women, recasting female bodies and their processes as divine, part of the eternal cycle, and to be celebrated. The feminine sacred is venerated above the masculine sacred, even in Wiccan groups that include men. Many male Wiccans identify with the Goddess, in whom they see a "representation of their female 'selves' or female energy."[35]

Wicca is a deeply experiential religion in which ritual celebrations—Sabbats, esbats, rites of passage, and personal rituals—play a critical part. Most Wiccan rituals follow the outline provided by Gardner, and unique, individual components—words, songs, symbols, dance—are easily inserted into this. Sabbat celebrations follow the wheel of the year and focus on the changing seasons. Before a Sabbat ritual begins, participants normally prepare themselves via meditation or breathing exercises in order to "center"

themselves. The ritual begins with the creation of a sacred circle as the high priestess and high priest call the cardinal directions, using a ritual knife, or *athame*. Each direction is associated with certain elements and colors (East—air, yellow; North—earth, black; West—water, blue/aqua; and South—fire, red). As almost all Wiccan rituals take place in mundane spaces—a backyard, a living room—sacralizing the space by casting the sacred circle is important.[36]

Figure 4.1. Handfasting ceremony in Avery, England, on Beltane, in the spring of 2005. Photograph by ShahMai Network, http://www.shahmai.org.

After the circle is cast, participants enact the main part of the ritual. Each Sabbat is associated with an aspect of the Goddess and celebrates her relationship (in mixed-sex groups) with the horned God. The seasons are likened to the process of birth, fertility, aging, and death; each is seen as connected to the others and necessary for the whole. Participants may read something written for the ritual or participate in an enactment in honor of the season—dance around the Maypole, or call back the distant sun in winter. Goddess(es) and/or God(s) are often called into the circle. Wiccans dance skyclad (nude), in street clothes, or in robes, and dancing and chanting can allow participants to achieve an ecstatic state and to raise energy. Sabbats sometimes involve more participants than do esbats, though both are often celebrated by the coven, and Sabbats connect participants to seasonal change, assist them in transforming their lives, and nurture a sense of Wiccan community. When the symbolic enactment of the ritual is done, the Watchtowers or guardians of the cardinal directions are dismissed, the circle is opened, and participants share food in order to ground themselves.

While Sabbats are celebrated throughout the year and mark the movement of the sun and seasons, esbats are usually lunar rituals marking new and/or full moons. The phases of the moon are symbolic of the aspects of the Goddess—the new moon of youth, the maiden, menarche; the full moon of fertility and middle life; and the waning moon of age and wisdom—and each is essential, part of the cycle of life. At esbat, the high priestess and her coven draw down the power of the moon; the coven chants, sings, drums,

and raises energy, and that energy may be directed toward magic. Energy raised at esbat is often focused on personal transformation—finding a lover, empowering oneself, physical healing, alleviating depression, or recovering from a traumatic experience.

Magic is central in Wiccan belief and practice, though the notion of connectedness applies here as well, as beliefs about magic are informed by ideas about the workings of the natural world and the Wiccan emphasis on the connections among things within it, such as thinking and energy. Common descriptions of magic emphasize that because things are interconnected, and because we are surrounded by energy, thoughts and actions have consequences, even if the person who initiates them is unaware.[37] Wiccans believe that the mind, especially the focused mind, can influence the physical world: they believe that "human consciousness is magick, that human consciousness has the ability to manifest change outside itself."[38] Magic relies upon focusing the mind, meditation, out-of-body experiences, and visualization. These—achieved with the aid of chanting, dance, drumming, and singing—may be used in rituals to "raise 'energy.'"[39] Energy can be directed—to an end, such as closing a polluting coal-burning power plant; to an object, which will then convey energy to its wearer; or to a person who is ill, to help heal her.

Even in nonritual settings, thoughts, actions, words, and energy can all be directed, more or less skillfully, to achieve a desired goal. Many Wiccans believe in the paranormal, and use Tarot readings and/or horoscopes to understand and help influence the path of life. Wiccans generally see magic not as something outside themselves, but as something via which they transform themselves, thus allowing them to realize their desired ends.[40] Most Wiccans also believe that one should have permission of any person on whose behalf one might direct magic, and many adhere to the notion that whatever energy one sends out will come back threefold, and so avoid using magic to harm unnecessarily (see discussion of the Wiccan Rede below).

One of the most common uses of magic is to heal. Wiccans, who have been profoundly influenced by the writings of Starhawk and others who portray Witches in medieval Europe as traditional healers, commonly employ folk health remedies, such as tinctures or herbal therapies, and other alternative medical approaches.[41] To heal, Wiccans may also raise and direct energy toward the malady, and/or use laying on of hands or massage. Wiccans also use magic to heal nonphysical maladies: the sociologist Janet Jacobs notes Wiccans' use of a feminist spirituality ritual to heal rape survivors, and concludes that the ritual allowed healing, solidarity among survivors, and political response.[42]

Wiccans have also developed various rites of passage to mark transitions from one stage of life to another, including initiation into Wicca, introduction of an infant by her parents into the community (Wiccaning), entry into puberty and later adulthood, marriage (handfasting), magical naming ceremonies, croning, and death. Though practitioners may draw from available sources in determining the specific elements of a rite, such as a personal Book of Shadows containing instructions for magical rituals (the earliest of which was used by Gerald Gardner, and which modern practitioners may keep, modify, and use), practitioners innovate and personalize rites of passage.

After initiation, Wiccans are encouraged to choose and adopt a magical, secret name—which may change as the individual undergoes transformation—to capture the person's essential self. This is the name by which the individual is called in Wiccan ceremonies. Handfasting ceremonies link people in adult relationships, but unlike marriage, connect people for life or so long as there is love, or as desired by participants. In keeping with the Wiccan view that sexuality is sacred and to be celebrated so long as it is not coercive, handfasting is available to lesbians, gay men, trans people, and bisexuals. Wiccans also allow for polyamory, and handfasting sometimes connects more than two partners, although the Pagan Census found more theoretical support than practice of group marriage in Wicca.[43]

Wiccan parents sometimes participate in a Wiccaning, a naming ceremony welcoming their child into the community after birth. Later, Wiccans may participate in a rite of passage for a child as she enters puberty—around the time of menarche for girls—and sometimes a rite of passage as the young person graduates from high school and prepares to leave his parent's home. Both puberty rites are normally unisex. Wiccans encourage the child to find her own spiritual path.[44] Witches borrow ideas about rituals from a variety of sources, especially available information about prehistoric practices, and see rites of passage filling a gap in modern culture, which lacks rites of passage, especially into adulthood.

In middle age, a woman may participate in a croning rite, which generally celebrates aging and the wisdom that comes with it. This can be commemorated in a coven, a larger group, or alone, and may occur more than once. In a society that overwhelmingly encourages women to retain their youth—or at least the appearance of youth—cronings celebrate old women. Wicca also sees death as part of the web of life, and Wiccans are more likely than those in the general population to believe in reincarnation.[45] The specific contours of belief in reincarnation vary, though Wiccans commonly reference a place of rest and reconciliation first mentioned in the Spiritualist movement—Summerland—where the essential self prepares for its next time of life. Wiccans tend to focus more on living in the present than on death, and Starhawk's *Pagan Book of Living and Dying* (1997) presents death as part of the cycle of life; contains chants, meditations, prayers, rituals, and songs for dealing with death; and provides practical ideas for preparing for death, including information about grieving and such things as a durable power of attorney and living will.

Larger celebrations are likely to occur at annual festivals, most of which attract dozens to a few hundred participants.[46] For a weekend or as much as a week, Wiccans (and often other Pagans) gather to camp, share meals, attend workshops, and dance, chant, and drum around a ritual fire that is kept burning in the center of the camp. Festivals are a time to build community and "come out of the broom closet" for Witches, many of whom hide their connection to Wicca from friends, coworkers, and family members. Festivals have the atmosphere of a summer camp as participants wear ritual robes, go skyclad, or wear street clothes to participate in two or three rituals each day, attend workshops, purchase materials from vendors, and help with the work of the camp. For a religion with amorphous boundaries, festivals provide an opportunity to connect with others, create a sense of community, share resources, and live openly as a Witch.

Solitary practitioners now probably constitute more than half of all Wiccans, and their growth is thought to have increased use of personal ritual. Just as a circle is cast at coven rituals, the individual practitioner is encouraged in instructive writings to create a sacred space (temple), usually with an altar. Personal rituals are innovative; Wiccan training materials encourage creativity and customization of the ritual to allow it to better accomplish healing or whatever ends the practitioner seeks.[47] An altar usually is cloth-draped, and displays a pentacle, a wine-filled chalice, candles of symbolic colors, and incense. It aids the practitioner in focusing her attention and centering the ritual. Altars are also often used in coven rituals, where they serve a similar purpose.

Wicca is not, for most practitioners, a religion of withdrawal from the world, but a religion that encourages participation and responsibility. Moreover, informed by second-wave feminism, Wicca is a religion that values the feminine in the divine and mundane. Women's bodies and bodily processes are not sexualized or impure, but celebrated; sex itself is not sinful, but joyful and integral to life. The individual is encouraged in much Wiccan literature to see her self as whole and connected to the divine, and to see her self and actions both transformed by the web of life and creating transformation in the world.

Many Wiccans adhere to the Wiccan Rede, an ethical guideline that, although quoted differently in different sources, is some version of "An ye harm none, do what ye will." Here too, Wicca varies and there is no universal understanding of the Rede, but most interpret it as a guideline, not a commandment, and a common understanding is not unlike the golden rule, that what a Witch does will come back to him three times as strongly. Called the Law of Return, the Rule of Three, or the Three-Fold Law, as its name suggests, the Rede advises that whatever energy one puts out into the universe, positive or negative, will be returned three times.

Given this, it is not hard to understand why Wiccans tend to be politically engaged. The Pagan Census found that Wiccans are better educated, more politically liberal, and more politically active than the general public. Women make up just less than 60 percent (58.9 percent) of those who identify as Witches.[48] Since Wicca emerged in concert with the modern feminist movement, from which it adopted the notion that *the personal is political*—that personal problems and issues are connected to larger social forces such as policies, laws, and institutional practices—politics are integral to Wicca.

All Wiccan rituals potentially include the possibility of both personal and community/social transformation, and these are seen as connected. Energy is raised in order to direct it to magical ends, and those ends, though they are sometimes as personal as finding a new lover, are often about helping to

reconcile relationships, protect the earth, or heal the self and community. Still, not every Wiccan is politically active. Berger suggests that solitary practitioners are drawn to Wicca more out of interest in self than community or social transformation, have less personal connection to the feminist movement, and are unlikely to be trained by older Witches, all of which make their political participation less likely. Berger asserts also that the growth of solitary practitioners may change the direction of Wicca in the future, making it a religion more focused on self-transformation, though she notes that most who join new religions leave, and that some who join will be trained by older Witches.[49] It is important to note that even though they are less politically active, solitary practitioners are politically and demographically more like other Wiccans; both are more politically liberal, are more likely to be white, and have a higher average educational attainment, for example, than the general public in the United States.[50]

Women in Wicca do not have to translate their experiences as embodied selves to their religious beliefs: the language, symbols, rituals, and leadership of Wicca incorporate the feminine in an immediate, valued way. In Wicca, as in all of the other new religions examined in this volume and religions examined in this series, "the self that is developed . . . is a gendered self."[51] The sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire asserts that the increased fluidity of gender that emerged in response to the modern feminist movement has forced religions to respond to social constructs of gender, by either reinforcing traditional gender norms or challenging them.[52] In response both to changing social definitions of appropriate gender and to expanded social acceptance of formerly sanctioned expressions of sexuality, religions position themselves vis-à-vis the secular world.

Wicca, which draws heavily from the second-wave feminist movement, primarily challenges traditional gender constructs, but often does so in a way that reinforces a gender binary, the idea that there are basic differences between female and male, femininity and masculinity. Wicca posits a cosmology that affirms women and challenges male dominance, encouraging connection to the feminine and feminist spirituality for both women and men. Female power, expressed in the symbol of the Goddess, promotes individual and group empowerment and healing for participants, and by participants, in the world. Second-wave feminism celebrated the feminine, which the movement saw as systematically culturally devalued, and in doing so some second-wave feminist theorists reified the notion of the feminine. Writings such as Starhawk's suggest that there are fundamental differences between men and women. In contrast, some other feminists are more likely to see gender as socially constructed, as something that people do (Candace West and Don Zimmerman),[53] or perform (Judith Butler),[54] and as created at the macro level through social systems (laws, policies), at the mezzo level through institutions and organizations (regulations, rules), and at the micro level through interactions (Lynn Weber).[55]

Most paths of Wicca view the divine as both feminine and masculine, and suggest that the two are different. Elements of essentialism (the notion that men and women have inherent, unchanging "essential" behavioral and other qualities) appear in some Wiccan writings. But many contemporary Wiccans also have modified ritual in order to allow women and men to choose which role they play in mixed-sex rituals, and so even though masculine and feminine are distinguished, neither is always and necessarily linked to one sex. Instead, it is more common for Wiccans to describe themselves as having both masculine and feminine facets.

In Wicca, people are encouraged to perform gender in nonnormative ways, to rewrite gender scripts. At festivals, men wear skirts and participate in providing childcare; trans people are almost always welcomed; everyone is expected to help prepare and serve community meals. Many male-identified Wiccans are critical of patriarchy and seek to develop a new type of masculinity, one that values feminine qualities and their own femininity. Most Wiccans believe that, as all people may have masculine and feminine energy, men may celebrate the Goddess to get in touch with their feminine energy, and women in mixed groups may celebrate the God to access and develop their masculinity. The sociologist Wendy Griffin argues that women and men are encouraged in Wicca to reimagine aspects of the feminine in ways that value aspects of bodies and experience devalued in the wider society.[56] In Wicca, menstruation is not dirty or shameful, but powerful and linked to fertility; the pregnant body is beautiful, even divine; age is equated with wisdom rather than the decline of sexuality and beauty. All of these elements of Wicca suggest some recognition that gender may be at least partially constructed through social processes, as the rituals themselves seek to construct gender differently.

This thealogy (preferred over "theology"—thea, Goddess; theo, God) in its celebration of the feminine also reifies the feminine in order to suggest that it is different from the masculine and worthy of celebration. Dianic Wicca explicitly advocates gender essentialism. Women-only groups are most likely to suggest that prehistoric matriarchal societies worshiped a Goddess, and that these were overthrown by patriarchal monotheistic religions. Dianic Wicca idealizes these groups as peaceful, egalitarian communities, in balance with nature, and sees in them a model to emulate, at least in one's own life. Dianic Wiccans are more likely than Wiccans in mixed-sex groups to worship the Goddess (rather than Goddess[es]) as a literal deity, though in every group there is diversity of belief. Feminists in mainline religions incorporate aspects of criticism and practice from women-only groups without adopting beliefs whole-scale in most instances, but women-only groups have rethought religion in a manner that has far-reaching implications even for mainstream religions.[57]

The feminine is privileged over the masculine *because* it is thought to incorporate qualities valued in this earth-based religion such as nurturing, connectedness, and caring. As Berger notes, "Elements of essentialism . . . coexist with attempts to create a community of equity between men and women within Wicca." Masculinity is valued in mixed-sex Wiccan groups as a necessary pole to create sexual polarity, and Wiccan men often embrace the role of protector in their communities. But as Berger points out, essentialism exists in tension with attempts to "create a community of equity between men and women within Wicca."[58]

Wicca celebrates the earth and all of the natural world, bodies, fertility, and the divine feminine; for Wiccans the mundane is imbued with the spiritual. This is true of sexuality as well. For Wiccans, sexuality is sacred, including same-sex sexuality and polyamorous sexuality. Wiccans, influenced by second-wave feminism, see adult, consensual sexuality as positive. Wiccans incorporate celebration of sexuality into many rituals, including Sabbats associated with fertility and renewal, such as Beltane. Sexual symbolism and skyclad or seminude dancing at esbats or Sabbats are not uncommon. Nonheterosexual, nonmonogamous families are accepted and supported at Wiccan events.

As in other aspects of human relationships, in sex "power-over" is discouraged. Sexuality is unrestricted as per sexual orientation or number of sexual partners, but Wiccan authors almost universally encourage sexual partners to communicate openly and honestly, and to establish clear consent (which precludes sex with anyone who is too young to consent or who is intoxicated, and therefore cannot legally consent).[59] In keeping with the emphasis on power-with and power-from-within sexual expression, condoms are available at Wiccan festivals, where it is not uncommon for partners to hook up, and their use is encouraged in order to reduce transmission of STIs.

This is not to say that there is no sexual abuse in Wicca. Lacking a mechanism to enforce rules or expel those who behave in a way at variance with practices generally accepted by self-identified Wiccans, or even ability to establish dogma against which practices could be measured, some Wiccans have encouraged sexual practices that violate the elements of consent more generally advocated in Wiccan materials. In their 1972 book *The Witch's Bible* (retitled *The Good Witch's Bible* in its 1976 and subsequent publications), Gavin Frost (b. 1930) and Yvonne Frost (b. 1931) advocate sexual initiation of children into Wicca—that the "physical attributes of male and female virginity are destroyed at the youngest possible age, either by the mother or by a doctor."[60] In later editions of the book the Frosts expunge practices other Wiccans criticized as most offensive, but they continue to advocate surgically breaking the hymen for female initiates, and cutting the membrane of the male initiate's penis, as well as sexual instruction prior to initiation:

> In the female case, the hymen is painlessly broken surgically. In the male case, the mother makes absolutely sure that the foreskin can be drawn fully back by cutting the underside attachment membrane. At the last sabbat or eshbat before the initiation, the female novice is given the sacred phallus and the instruction sheet in Table 5 so that she can learn to insert and remove the phallus quickly and comfortably. She is also taught how she should lie and what she should do during the initiation ceremony.[61]

Others who self-identify as Wiccans have been charged with sexual crimes, including an Illinois man in

2010 and an Ohio couple in the spring of 2012.[62] Each was accused of sexually assaulting a minor, and in each case the defendant is reported to have cited Wiccan practice in police interrogation.

Although these charges may be consistent with misconceptions of Wicca that link it to Satanism or ritual abuse, they are antithetical to the bulk of Wiccan belief and practice as outlined in books, websites, and other materials. In fact, Wiccans have historically taken a strong stand against sexism and sexual exploitation. When Gerald Gardner asserted that an aging priestess should step down because a younger, more attractive woman would better symbolize the Goddess, Doreen Valiente (1922–1999), an influential member of Gardner's original coven, protested. Contemporary Wicca, heavily influenced by modern feminism, explicitly challenges as sexist any double standard of sexuality or beauty. The notion of emulating youth and beauty in high priestesses has today been replaced by accenting age and wisdom, as in celebrations of croning. According to Berger, North American Witches have worked to eliminate what they perceived as sexism in Gardnerian Wicca.[63] For example, several researchers have observed that when men respond with sexual aggression or harassment to nude or seminude dancing at rituals, it is not tolerated.[64] Though not without inequalities, Wicca celebrates the divine feminine, affords women equal access to leadership (at least as that exists in a nonhierarchical religion, as priestesses are discouraged from practicing power-over) or at least autonomy in worship, and supports social changes in the direction of gender and LGBT equality.

Conclusion

New religions provide an indispensable site for examining gender in religions. They generally claim in their early years that they have unique access to the truth, and so emerge in tension with their sociocultural context. New religions provide us the opportunity to examine Max Weber's assertion that new religions tend to allot equality to women. The religions we have examined here are diverse, but examination of them supports this assertion. One must avoid overgeneralizing from four examples, and use caution in drawing any definitive conclusions about new religions, which are both innumerable and incredibly varied. Nonetheless, we can see interesting patterns of gender construction in at least some new religions. To the extent that the religions examined here emerged in social contexts that limited opportunities for women, each provided some greater access to leadership than was common in dominant institutions at the time. In those religions that became institutionalized (unlike Wicca), restriction of opportunities for women followed institutionalization. For each, the sociocultural context changed over the life of the movement, complicating the movement's relationship to that context in a way that continues to affect definitions of gender and opportunities for women within it.

Catherine A. Brekus suggests that the practical concerns a new religion faces often give rise to a willingness to allow women's greater participation in activities normally reserved for men. Just as Ellen White insisted that "not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed" in order "to help forward this grand work,"[1] Brekus asserts that the real-world requirements of a new religion make women's contributions less dispensable. This—in combination with the break from tradition that charismatic leadership provides, emphasis on lay leadership and direct connection to the divine, and heightened emotionalism, all of which frequently characterize new religions—contributes to a context in which all believers are more likely to be encouraged to participate.[2] Still, new religions frequently define themselves through distinction from the world—the larger secular context—and so that context is important in defining women's role in new religions.

Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding gender and religious change. They suggest a first phase, the "'charismatic' stage," in which there is "dissatisfaction with the patterns of the old system," and "a new movement which sees itself in direct contact with the divine" "transcend[s] established role definitions" to provide women greater opportunities.[3] The emphasis on charismatic leadership and a break from tradition, as well as the excitement, immediacy, and sometimes—as with an Endtime prophecy—urgency of new truth encourage a religion in which women's contributions are important. The argument here is that the new religion provides opportunities to those not privileged in the wider society—especially women—and to do so amplifies the distinctiveness of the movement. The movement may consent to women speaking in tongues, training to become pastors, healing by the laying on of hands, serving as prophets, contacting the divine, speaking to congregations, or publishing religious journals because *to the degree that the social context restricts women*, each of these sets the movement apart. As a religion matures—as it recognizes that the world will not end as quickly as anticipated; as members of the second and subsequent generations take positions of leadership, especially if children of founders participate in secular educational institutions; as it develops a system to recruit and train new followers; as it attempts to build and pursue secular accreditation for its own institutions, such as hospitals and colleges; as members become more participant in the secular world and more concerned with the way that outsiders view their movement—it is likely to seek some alignment with the larger sociocultural context. To the extent that this occurs, *if the social context restricts women's access to authority*, the religion is likely to do so as well. Women's earlier religious participation may come to be seen as embarrassing, and it may be downplayed for a time. The third stage is "maturity," when a religion's "boundaries blur into the general social structure."[4] The religion, now far more integrated into its social context, becomes more comfortable and tolerant of diverse views, sometimes even going so far as to tolerate "mildly prophetic" expressions of conscience. Modern examples of this may be found in the ordination of women by numerous denominations—including the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Mennonite Church USA, and others—in the 1970s, or the election of Gene Robinson, an openly gay man in a committed relationship, as an Episcopalian bishop in 2003.[5]