Introduction to Contemporary Witchcraft

Historical Influences, Worldview, Ethics, Theology, Ritual, Organization, Practice
Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1888)

- Dr. William Westcott
- Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers
- Isis-Urania Temple of the hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn
- Rosicrucianism
- Freemasonry
Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

• Orders of the Great White Brotherhood
  – First Order (5 ranks)
  – Second Order (4 ranks)
  – Third Order (3 ranks, spirits only)

• Three key assumptions:
  – Belief in Correspondences
  – Trained Will (Willpower)
  – Astral Planes, Astral Entities
Aleister Crowley

- Initiated in 1898
- Left in 1900
- Book of the Law (1904)
- Aiwass (spirit guide)
- Law of Thelema
- Three Ages of Mankind:
  - Pagan, Christian, Neopagan (Age of Horus)
- Bad reputation
- Died 1947
The Witchcult in Western Europe

- Margaret Murray
- Operative and Ritual Witchcraft
- Dianus/Janus
- Devil and Queen of Fairy
- Sabbats & Esbats
- Covens
- Fertility Rituals
Witchcult Ritual Sacrifices

- Blood Sacrifice
- Animal Sacrifice
- Child Sacrifice
- God Sacrifice
- Joan of Arc
Criticisms of Murray’s Thesis

• Unbelievable Stories
• Influence of Inquisitor’s Manuals
  – Malleus Mallificarum (Hammer of Witches) 1487, by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger
• Confessions under Torture
Gerald Gardner

- Born 1884
- New Forest Coven (1939)
- Dorothy Clutterbuck
- Hereditary Witches?
  - Crowley thesis - emph. On hierarchical, ritual sex, human Will
  - Murray thesis - Gardner’s first novel = male deity, match for Murray, not later Goddess-oriented worship
  - Hereditary witch thesis - Dorothy Clutterbuck did really exist, for example
Gerald Gardner

- Why go public?
  - Repeal of the Witchcraft Act (1951)
  - Afraid elderly members would die out, leave Witchcraft to die away.

- Witchcraft Today (1954)

- The Meaning of Witchcraft (1959)
Gardnerian Emphasis

- Goddess Oriented - fertility goddess, horned god
- Skyclad worship
- 8 Seasonal Festivals
  - Samhaim (Oct. 31), Yule (Dec. 21), Imbolc (Feb. 2), Vernal Equinox (Mar. 21), Beltane (May 1), Midsummer (June 21), Lammas (Aug. 2), Autumn equinox (Sept. 21)
- The High Rite
- 3 Levels of Initiation:
  - Witch
  - High Priest or Priestess
  - Queen or Magus
The Origin Myth of Wicca

- Pan-European Goddess Religion
- Fertility, nature based spirituality
- Feminine aspect respected
- Horned God equated to Devil in Christianity
The Origin Myth of Wicca

- Old Religion kept alive in secret
- Multi-generational witches
- 8 Seasonal festivals
- Wiccan Rede
The Origin Myth of Wicca

- The Burning Times
- Margaret Murray’s thesis
- Repeal of Witchcraft laws allowed some multi-generational witches to go public
- A symbolic story of origins?
The Impact of Historical Influences on broader witchcraft/pagan movement

• Very diverse movement, but also many common elements:
• Some commonalities stem from widespread influence of Golden Dawn & Crowley (hierarchical, correspondences, astral planes, human Will = magic, Law of Thelema)
• Others come from Murray - (sabbats, esbats, covens)
• Most can be traced to Gardner - not all Witches acknowledge debt to Gardner, but most do
  – Current debate among wiccan scholars - should ALL modern witchcraft be called “Gardnerian” to acknowledge importance of this historic source?
• Widespread influence of historic elements leads to common worldview, many common practices among contemporary Witches.
Wiccan Worldview

- Monistic
- Every Act is meaningful
- Magic is possible through ties that unite all things
- Nature/universe is spiritual
Wiccan Worldview

- Multi-Level Reality
- Spiritual or astral planes
- Power of human imagination
- God/dess exists on this level
Wiccan Worldview

- Intentional and Progressive
- All things happen for a reason
- Life has purpose – spiritual goal is to pursue purpose
- Universe sends signs to indicate path to take
Wiccan Worldview

- Nature Based
- Earth conceptualized as Goddess- Gaia
- Reverence for body – especially female – women as goddess
- Feminism
- Environmentalism
Wiccan Worldview

• Cyclical
• Seasonal emphasis
• Spiritual life cycle – birth, death, rebirth
• Reincarnation
• Communication with “dead” possible
• Karma
How does one “become” a Witch?

• Born a witch – majority of wiccans will say that they always had a Wiccan perspective, they just didn’t have a name for it until finding Wicca.

• Interpretive Drift – Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann suggests that Wiccans gradually shift their way of thinking into a Pagan mindset, unaware that their understandings of the world are changing as they come into contact with other pagans.

• Conversion – less common, but a few Wiccans have a more traditional “conversion experience” – a sudden unexpected experience of the Goddess, for example, that transforms their religious perspective.
Theology

• Bi-theistic
  – The triple Goddess - Maiden, Mother, Crone
  – The God – Hunter, Lover
The Goddess

- Maiden
- Diana
- Youth, purity
- Romantic Love
- Spring
The Goddess

• Mother
• Gaia
• Fertility, Home, Family
• Success, Protection
• Summer
The Goddess

- The Crone
- Hecate
- Age, Wisdom
- Anger, Aggression
- Death, Rebirth
- Autumn
The God

- Hunter/Warrior/Holly King
- Action, Aggression
- Protection, Strength
- Power, Death
- Winter/waning year (Midsummer to Yule)
The God

- Lover
- Potency, Desire
- Energy, Creativity
- Renewal, Lust
- Summer
Wiccan Ethics

- Wiccan Rede
- “An it harm none, do as ye will”
- Law of Threefold Return
Organization

- Solitary Practitioners (Solitaries)
- Witch (first degree of initiation)
- High Priestess or High Priest (2nd degree of initiation)
- Lady/Queen or Lord of Witchcraft (3rd degree, rarely found outside of Gardnerian Covens)
Varieties of Witchcraft

- Gardnerian
  - Strong emphasis on lineage
  - Formal rituals
  - Hierarchical organization
  - 3 levels of initiation
  - Symbolic scourge
  - Skyclad worship
  - Nine-foot circle
  - The Great Rite
  - Goddess-centred, God as consort
  - Drawing down the Moon as central ritual (Charge of the Goddess)
  - Matrilineal (generally)
Varieties of Witchcraft

- Wiccan (eclectic)
  - Less hierarchical
  - Often only two levels of initiation
  - Flexible ritual style - drawing on Gardnerian traditions as inspiration, but also on many other sources
  - Rarely skyclad (but skyclad okay if weather permits!)
  - Rarely scourge
  - Usually goddess/god balanced
  - Adaptable (ie seasonal festivals can change, depending on what region of the world you live in)
Varieties of Witchcraft

- Dianic
  - Women’s spirituality
  - Feminist political agenda
  - no hierarchy (single level initiation only)
  - Goddess as Crone emphasized
  - God role minimized (sometimes seen as human lover/son of divine Goddess)
  - males often/always excluded
  - Kore, Inanna – mythic goddesses who unite life, death
Dianic/Reclaiming ritual: The Spiral Dance
Rituals: Casting the Circle

• The Sacred Space is the Circle
• Casting the Circle is the first ritual step
• Calling the four quarters
• Raising energy
• Opening the circle
Witch’s Tools

Wand - symbol of air, thought, imagination, east
Athame - symbol of fire, willpower, conviction, south
Cup - symbol of water, life, birth, emotion, west
Pentacle - symbol of earth, stability, the body, north
Quarter days & Cross Quarter days
Samhain (Oct. 31) - New Year’s Eve, Endings and Beginnings, veil between worlds thinnest
Yule (Dec. 21) - mid-winter, longest night, return of light
Imbolc (Feb. 2) - fertility, return of spring
Eostar (Mar. 21) - fertility, new beginnings, cleaning
Beltane (May 1) - fertility, beginning of summer, bonfires, maypoles, handfasting
Midsummer (June 21) - longest day, emotion, passion, marriage
Lammas (Aug. 2) - harvest, thanksgiving
Harvest Home (Sept. 21) - harvest, reincarnation, contemplation