

Religious Studies 2811 lecture notes  
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Introduction to Contemporary Witchcraft

We are beginning our look at contemporary alternative spirituality with an examination of contemporary witchcraft. The religion of witchcraft is part of the broader Neo-Pagan movement. It is also the most widespread, popular form of Neo-Paganism practised in North America. Witches, like other Neo-Pagans, put a lot of emphasis on the religious and ritual beliefs and practices found in pre-Christian times. Contemporary witches draw heavily (but not exclusively) on what is known about the religious traditions of pre-Christian European peoples. As a result, witchcraft is a nature-based, goddess-oriented religious system. Contemporary witchcraft also draws on sources of inspiration that are much more "recent" in origin. Witchcraft, as practised today, is a creative amalgam of a multitude of religious, ritual, esoteric and mystical traditions. As Margot Adler, the Neo-Pagan witch author of a book titled Drawing Down the Moon notes, this willingness to draw upon 'any source that doesn't run away too fast' is one of the strengths of contemporary witchcraft.

In order to understand contemporary witchcraft, it is necessary to look at some of the historical antecedents of the movement. Contemporary witchcraft is, according to most practitioners and scholars alike, a "constructed" religious system. Contemporary witchcraft has been created, or constructed, out of numerous elements, including pre-Christian and Christian mystical traditions. Some of these sources are acknowledged in what Margot Adler calls the "myth of witchcraft," which tells the religiously meaningful story of the origins of the Craft. Others are traced by scholars of the movement, and are not necessarily known or recognized by practitioners of contemporary Witchcraft.

Historical Influences and Precursors

The recent origins of contemporary Witchcraft can be traced to a man named Gerald Gardner, who wrote several books on witchcraft published in the 1950's. Gardner in turn was influenced by numerous sources, including the work of Margaret Murray, an early twentieth century anthropologist, and the mystical and occult traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as reformulated by a group known as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and in particular by a man named Aleister Crowley. According to Carol Matthews, in her article "Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft," the origins of the contemporary witchcraft movement owes a great deal to each of these sources.

### The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

The first influence on the development of contemporary witchcraft that we are going to look at is the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in England in 1888. Its founder, a London coroner named Dr. William Westcott, based the society on some fragments of a document that were given to him by a friend who was a member of the Freemasons. Westcott believed these fragments to be very old, and claimed that they told of certain rituals conducted by members of an organization called the "Golden Dawn," a mystical and magical organization that admitted both men and women. Westcott took the document to another friend, named Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, and asked him to develop the fragments into full-fledged rituals. Once Mathers had accomplished this, the two men founded the Isis-Urania Temple of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in England, claiming to have received permission from members of the original Order of the Golden Dawn in Germany to do so. Although there is some question whether such an organization ever existed, and some question of whether the original fragmentary document was genuine, it nonetheless served to spark an occult and spiritual revival in late nineteenth century England.

The belief, rituals and organization of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn drew upon the occult traditions of western Europe, as well as the mythology of Egypt and Europe. Westcott himself was a Rosicrucian, a member of an occult fraternity that stressed alchemy, astrology, spiritual healing, and a secret mystical knowledge originally thought to have been taught by middle-eastern spiritual masters to the founder of the order, Christian Rosenkreuz, and passed down from him to his followers since the sixteenth century. Mathers was a Freemason. Freemasonry also stressed mystical knowledge, and an interest in alchemy and astrology. Both esoteric traditions were also extremely hierarchical. Within both Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, members are organized in ranks or degrees, and each higher rank is attained following a ritual ceremony of initiation.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn adopted this emphasis on hierarchical rankings and initiation ceremonies. The society was divided into three "Orders." The first Order had five ranks, or degrees, including a beginner or "Neophyte" rank for newcomers. The second Order had four ranks, and the third Order had three. These orders were referred to as the Orders of the Great White Brotherhood. Most members of the Golden Dawn were members of the First Order. Westcott and Mathers and a third man, Dr. W. R. Woodman, head of the Rosicrucian society of Anglia, were members of the second. And the members of the third order were non-human residents of the spiritual, or astral, plane. These were the spirits of the Great White Brotherhood, whose teachings were understood to be the basis for the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The beliefs of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn focused on three key assumptions. These assumptions were common among mystical and esoteric groups throughout the middle ages, and were adopted and elaborated by members of the Golden Dawn. The first is a belief in correspondences. According to this assumption, there is a basic correspondence which exists

between the Universe as a whole (the macrocosm) and the individual human being (the microcosm). The human soul, therefore, is understood to be "a magical mirror of the universe." Any aspect of the universe must also therefore exist in mankind, and every aspect of mankind exists also in the universe. Love, hate, creativity, destruction, life, death, etc. all existed in both human beings and the universe. The gods and goddesses were manifestations of these qualities. Properly trained members of the Order could therefore "call down" the cosmic force, for example, of Diana, goddess of love, and "become" her temporarily, or they could "call up" the force of love and sex from within themselves, and "project" it outside on to an external object, and thereby manifest Diana temporarily in the world. The realization of this link between the macrocosm and the microcosm was part of the training of members of the Golden Dawn.

The second assumption was the belief in the power of the human Will. According to the belief system of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the properly trained human Will is capable of absolutely anything. To accomplish "magic," all that is necessary is to train the Will to accomplish its ends. By focusing the Will, often with the aid of candles or incense or symbols, one could shape the external world.

The third assumption was that there were other "planes" of existence outside of the physical, earthly plane on which we as humans live out our everyday lives. Other types of beings live on those other planes. On the higher planes, beings of greater intelligence and spiritual awareness than us live, and they can communicate with the living. On the lower planes, lowly creatures - spirits of the elements, demons, etc. - live, and they too can communicate with the living, should the living seek to communicate with them.

Aleister Crowley

The most famous member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was a man named Aleister Crowley. Crowley was initiated into the Order in 1898. He rose very quickly through the first five ranks, and asked to be admitted to the second Order. After passing his initiation test, he was admitted. He was later expelled from the Order of the Golden Dawn, however, over conflicts with Mathers. When this break occurred, Mathers reportedly sent an army of elementals - fire, water, air, and earth spirits - to attack and presumably kill Crowley. Crowley reportedly responded by sending an army of demons to attack Mathers. Clearly, each man firmly believed in magical powers, and each believed he had been wronged by the other. Although unable to kill Mathers by his spiritual attack, Crowley did manage to irritate him by later publishing the secret rituals of the Golden Dawn. By publishing these secret rituals, Crowley enabled other would-be magicians to learn of the rites without actually joining the Order. This is Crowley's first major contribution to the development of modern witchcraft. A number of new esoteric Orders consequently arose.

After leaving the Order of the Golden Dawn to strike out on his own, Crowley continued his interest in occultism and magic. In 1904, he received a message from his guardian angel/spirit guide, a being named "Aiwass." This being, whom Crowley also believed to have been the solar/phallic god of Sumeria named Shaitan, or "devil-god," dictated to Crowley a magical text titled The Book of the Law. In it, the Law of Thelema is found, which reads, "Do what thou wilt is the whole of the Law." This law became the basis of Crowley's ethical system. Rather than being a law that says, "anything goes," Crowley and his followers understood it to mean that one must do solely what is required of one by one's own spiritual nature and goal. The contribution of this law is the second thing that marks Crowley as a major figure in the development of contemporary Witchcraft.

Crowley's spirit guide Aiwass also revealed to him the coming of a New Age - the Age of Horus, of which Crowley was to be a prophet. The three ages of man were revealed to him - the first being pagan, the second being Christian, and the third being Thelema, represented by the Egyptian god Horus. This age would see the abandonment of Christianity in favour of a neo-pagan occult revival. Crowley then continued his spiritual investigations, and got interested in sexual magic. Crowley has a very bad reputation in some circles because of his interest in sexual magic. In 1921, Crowley believed he had attained the third Order - that of the Great White Brotherhood - and as a result had attained knowledge of, and perhaps participation in, Godhood. As he stated "As a God goes, I go." He continued to be active in the Occult revival movement throughout the 1920's and '30's, but in the 1940's he developed ill health and financial trouble. He reportedly met Gerald Gardner in 1945, and he died in 1947.

#### Margaret Murray's "The Witchcult in Western Europe"

Whereas Aleister Crowley and the other members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn were actively interested in and engaged in magical and esoteric practices, the next influential figure in the development of contemporary witchcraft was not. Margaret Murray was an anthropologist, rather than an alchemist, astrologer or witch. She nonetheless wrote one of the most influential books within the twentieth century Witchcraft movement. Murray's book, The Witchcult in Western Europe, puts forward the thesis that many of those people killed by the Inquisition were, in fact, practitioners of an ancient, pre-Christian form of nature religion. According to Murray, there were two types of witchcraft being practised in Christian Europe of the later middle ages and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first she calls "Operative Witchcraft," which she defines as "all charms and spells, whether used by a professed witch or by a professed Christian.... common to every nation and country, and... practised by the priests

and people of every religion."<sup>i</sup> This kind of witchcraft, she suggests, is of little use in studying the possible existence of a pre-Christian pagan religion, because the practice of it has little connection to any particular religious system. The other kind of witchcraft, according to Murray, was "Ritual Witchcraft." Ritual Witchcraft, according to Murray,

"Embraces the religious beliefs and ritual of the people known in late medieval times as 'Witches'.... Underlying the Christian religion was a cult practised by many classes of the community [that] can be traced back to pre-Christian times, and appears to be the ancient religion of Western Europe.... it was a definite religion with beliefs, ritual, and organization as highly developed as that of any other cult in the world." <sup>ii</sup>

The beliefs of the religion of Witchcraft, according to Murray, centred around a male deity, whom she calls Janus or Dianus, after the two-faced God in Roman mythology. This deity was always incarnate or embodied in a living being - usually a man, according to Murray, but sometimes a woman and occasionally an animal. Practitioners of this pagan religion referred to the God as the "devil," using the language of Christianity. The devil led the witches in worship, kept the records and spell books, and trained new converts in the faith. This god was understood primarily as a fertility deity.

The festivals of this witchcult, according to Murray, centred around Sabbats and esbats. Sabbats were religious rituals, usually happening on holy days, and esbats were business meetings and social gatherings of members of the cult. According to Murray, the two most important festivals were May Eve (May 1) and All Hallows' Eve (Oct. 31), which, she suggests, means that this religion predated agriculture, for these are festivals which mark animal breeding

seasons, rather than planting seasons. Added to these were Candlemas (Feb. 1) and Lammas (Aug. 1), Beltane (June 21) and Yule (Dec. 21), and the spring and fall equinoxes.

The organization of the witchcult was congregational. Murray suggests that local covens were governed independently of one another. Each coven had its "devil," the incarnate god; many had a maiden/queen of the Sabbat, equivalent to a priestess; and most covens had a membership of 13 people. Rituals practised by covens included rites of worship of or homage to the god; ritual dancing to increase fertility; rainmaking dances to increase the fertility of the land; ritual sex, again to ensure fertility; communal feasting to celebrate fertility of land and animals; and the offering of sacrifices.

This last ritual, the ritual of sacrifice, had four forms, according to Murray - the blood sacrifice, usually the pricking of a finger to offer blood when some favour or prayer was granted; animal sacrifice, to honour the god; child sacrifice, again to honour the god, and the sacrifice of the god himself. When the god was sacrificed, either sacrificing the leader of the coven himself, a volunteer surrogate for the god, or an animal substitute for the god, this was done to ensure fertility of the land. The god-surrogate was burned, and his ashes mixed with the soil, to ensure fertility. Murray makes the interesting suggestion that the deaths by burning of witches throughout the later middle ages and seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may have been surrogate killings of the god - representing volunteer sacrifices at the hands of the public executioner.

As these practitioners of a pagan religion found it increasingly difficult to maintain their rituals, she suggests, they found other ways to practice them, including self-confessions for witchcraft with the full knowledge that death would be the result. She suggests that the figure of Joan of Arc can be seen in this light. According to Murray, the burial place and shrine of Joan of

Arc has for centuries been the site of pilgrimage by pregnant women and nursing mothers - revealing a connection to this pre-Christian emphasis on fertility and sacrifice of the deity in surrogate form.

Murray based her argument and description about this pre-Christian fertility witchcult primarily on transcripts from Inquisition trials. Needless to say, this material has been questioned by numerous scholars. Murray herself attempts to answer three of the most serious challenges to her work. Critics, she suggests, make much of the fact that the stories told by accused witches to the Inquisitors are filled with fantastic and unbelievable elements, including talking animals, flying witches, and invisibility ointments. However, Murray suggests, the fact that these things are highly unlikely to have occurred in reality does not mean that witches did not experience them in religious visions. Visionary experiences throughout the world's religious traditions include such fantastic elements, and so the presence of these elements in Inquisition transcripts does not automatically mean that these accused people were making every thing up under threat or application of torture.

The second common criticism against her argument, Murray suggests, is that the common structure and content of witchcraft confessions made to the Inquisition reveal the influence of Inquisitor's manuals (such as the *Malleus Malleficarum*) rather than genuine practices. If the Inquisitors were asking leading questions, its not surprising they got back uniform answers. However, Murray responds, this criticism ignores the question of where and how Inquisitors' manuals were first derived. Since the manuals were presumably derived from the testimony obtained from the questioning accused witches, it stands to reason, she suggests, that the manuals were based on actual practices. Furthermore, she suggests, the similarity of all accused witches'

confessions, coupled with slight regional differences, point to the practice of a uniform witchcult, rather than individual imagination.

The third criticism commonly made, according to Murray, is that nothing said by accused witches under torture can be taken as fact. Murray suggests, however, that not all confessions were made under torture, and that enough other evidence exists in addition to witchcraft confessions that the existence of a witchcult can be established. Murray points to stories that link witches with fairies, for example, (whom she suggests were mythologized memories of pre-Christian indigenous peoples in Europe), as further evidence for the existence of a witchcult. According to Murray, the fact that the leading woman in a coven often bore the title 'queen of fairies' indicates a recognition of a link between the witchcult and pagan times. She writes: "That there was a strong connexion between witches and fairies has been known to all students of fairy lore. I suggest that the cult of the fairy or primitive race survived until less than three hundred years ago, and that the people who practised it were known as witches."<sup>iii</sup>

### Gerald Gardner

The final major influential figure that we are going to look at is Gerald Gardner. Gardner was born in 1884 in England, but spent much of his life in Malaysia. He worked as a government official and amateur archaeologist for most of his life. Largely due to experiences in Malaysia and other far eastern countries, Gardner became convinced of the doctrine of reincarnation. In 1936, he returned to England with his wife Donna. They lived in the New Forest region, where Gardner became involved with the Rosicrucians. It was at a theatre group sponsored by the Rosicrucians that Gardner claims to have met a group of practising witches. According to Gardner, this group of people, led by a woman named Dorothy Clutterbuck, invited him to join their coven. Gardner claims that 'Old Dorothy' and her coven were a group of

hereditary witches, who had been practising the Craft since pre-Christian days, and who had kept the religion secret and intact all through the witchcraft persecutions of the later middle ages and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Gardner claims to have been initiated into the coven just a few days before the outbreak of World War II in 1939. One of the most famous stories told about witchcraft in this era is the ritual spells cast by the New Forest coven during the war to aid England in her battle against Germany. According to this story, Gardner and the coven performed a ritual designed to prevent Hitler from invading England. According to at least one account, three coven members died as a result of the ritual, probably from pneumonia brought on by exposure. It has been suggested that at least one of these deaths was in the nature of voluntary human sacrifice, for one coven member deliberately did not protect himself from the cold, so that his life could be given to strengthen the ritual.

The question of whether Gardner really did meet a coven of witches in the New Forest, and if he did, whether they were truly hereditary witches that could trace their lineage back to pre-Christian times, has been hotly debated. Some suggest that Gardner invented the whole story, possibly hiring Aleister Crowley to write the rituals for him. Support for this idea can be seen in the emphasis on hierarchical organization of ranks, and emphasis on ritual sex, and an emphasis on the human Will as the key to practical magic. Others suggest he really did meet with a coven of witches, but that the coven had just been in operation since the publication of Margaret Murray's book in 1921. Support for this idea is added by looking at a novel published by Gardner in the late 1940's, based purportedly on the beliefs of the New Forest coven, in which emphasis is put on a male horned god, but no goddess figure is mentioned. This reflects the theology described by Margaret Murray - and does NOT match what Gardner himself later says

was the bi-theistic theology of the coven. Others suggest that the New Forest Coven really was a hereditary coven of witches. According to Margot Adler, for example, there is some evidence that the woman Dorothy Clutterbuck really existed. Most practitioners and scholars alike agree that whether Gardner really met members of a practising coven or not, he subsequently added a lot of new material to his description of their religion and rituals.

Gardner published his description of witchcraft in two books, titled Witchcraft Today (1954) and The Meaning of Witchcraft (1959). These books were published, according to Gardner, because the Witchcraft Act forbidding the practice of witchcraft in England had been repealed, and because he was afraid that the practice of witchcraft would die out as the elderly members of the coven died. In these books, Gardner describes Witchcraft as a nature-based religion focused on the worship of a Goddess of fertility and a God of the forests. Members of covens met in a ritual circle and raised power by dancing and chanting and meditation.

The organization of a coven, according to Gardner, consisted of three levels of initiation. The first was that of the initiate witch and priest or priestess. A year and a day later, the initiate could be elevated to the second level, that of high priest or priestess, competent to teach first level initiates, cast a magic circle, and conduct other magical and religious rituals. The third level is that of Magus or Queen, usually granted to couples who run a coven. Worship was practised by the coven members skyclad, or naked, to celebrate nature. They celebrated eight festivals based on the seasons, and a "high rite," in which a priest and a priestess, embodying the forces of god and goddess, practised symbolic or actual sex to celebrate the unity of male and female and the power of procreation. Magic was the result of shaping reality by shaping one's will, and creating what one desired through sheer willpower. Gerald Gardner remained active in the Witchcraft revival until his death in 1964.

## The Myth of Wicca

All of these sources had a tremendous impact on the development of contemporary Witchcraft. What emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century from these different sources was a magical and spiritual tradition that stressed the pre-Christian origins of a nature-based, goddess- based spirituality, with an ethical system based on something called the Wiccan Rede and the Law of Three, and in which the practice of magic is understood as the imposition of one's Will on the world.

The mythic origins and history of this movement, as Margot Adler notes, begins with the assertion that in pre-Christian times, a pan-European nature religion focused around a male and a female deity and with rituals focused around the seasons and the land was widely practised. Although the names of the deities and the terms for the rituals might differ from place to place, the religion practised all across Europe was nonetheless the same religion. Because this religion was focused primarily on the sanctity of nature, life and the land, the primary divine force was female, for the Goddess was associated with fertility, life cycles, and crops. When Christianity was introduced into Europe, it incorporated elements of this pre-Christian tradition, turning aspects of the goddess into saints, turning pagan holy places (often wells or springs) into Church sites and Christian pilgrimage sites, and turning pagan festival days in Christian holy days.

According to the myth of Wicca, once Christianity became established in Europe, the old pagan ways began to go underground. Because the god of the pan-European nature religion was depicted as a horned being, he became associated with the Christian devil. The goddess became seen as the devil in disguise as a woman, or as Eve, or Lilith - Jewish and Christian female figures thought to tempt men with sexual thoughts. Practitioners of the old religion had to hide their beliefs and rituals, and soon the only records of the old religion left were those written

down by Christians attempting to destroy the faith. Much of the old religion was lost as a result, and other aspects of it were corrupted.

Despite these hostile record keepers and the deliberate attempts to suppress the pre-Christian goddess-worshipping religion, however, elements of the old religion survived in secret, and whole families who had kept the old religion alive maintained an unbroken lineage with those who were persecuted in the middle ages and the enlightenment periods. This religion was based on a calendar year that celebrated eight seasonal festivals and held the rede which states "An ye harm no one, do as ye will" as the basis of its ethical system.

Again according to the myth of Wicca, the suppression of the old religion by Christians culminated in the deaths by torture and fire of hundreds of thousands of people during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This period is referred to as The Burning Times by Witches. Many of the individuals killed in this period were individuals who, for one reason or another, were seen as threatening: most were women, and many were those who practised the old rites of healing and nature worship. Because of the Burning Times, it is necessary for witches to maintain secrecy, for one never knows when the Burning Times might come again. Even though the witchcraft Laws were repealed in England in 1951, there is concern that they may some day be reinstated, and witchcraft again made illegal.

Nonetheless, according to the myth of Wicca, following the repeal of the Witchcraft Laws certain members of families and covens who had kept the old religion alive through the centuries gradually began to go public with their faith, and the old religion re-emerged. Contemporary Witchcraft is therefore seen as the inheritor of a neo-pagan heritage that stretches back thousands of years, perhaps tens of thousands of years, to the palaeolithic period. This is why contemporary witchcraft is called the "Old Religion."

The myth of Wicca is a powerful religious story, and was accepted as literally true for at least twenty years by many practitioners of Witchcraft, from the 1950's up until the 1980's. Most practitioners of Witchcraft today, however, understand the story as myth - but myth not in the sense of a "false story," but instead in the sense of a "religiously meaningful story of origins." While some aspects of the story can be verified historically - pre-Christian cave paintings and other artwork suggest a goddess-based religion and Inquisition records certainly show the burning of those understood to be witches - other aspects of the story cannot. There is no real evidence for the existence of the universal, pan-European pagan religion described by Margaret Murray, for example, and very little evidence to suppose that Gerald Gardner actually met members of a coven that predated Murray's book.

Because of the controversy and lack of evidence for many of the elements of the myth of Wicca, very few contemporary witches accept this whole story as literally true today, just as few North American Christians accept the story of origins found in the book of Genesis as literally true. Instead, the story is understood as part history and part metaphor, more as a statement of affiliation with the meaning, purpose and values of the neo-pagan goddess-worshipping traditions of pre-Christian times than as a direct inheritance from them. Contemporary witches like Margot Adler or the feminist witch Starhawk find more value in the creative, constructed elements of contemporary Witchcraft than they do in the idea that this religious tradition represents an unadulterated survival tradition handed down from palaeolithic times. What we will be looking at next is what modern witches have created in terms of a belief and ritual system, drawing upon these historical sources and upon this origin myth, and going beyond them also to create a living, practised faith.

Contemporary Witchcraft

Contemporary Witchcraft, like most of the other religious movements we will be looking at in our course, is very diverse. There is a wide degree of variation in practice and belief within the contemporary witchcraft movement. One of the strengths of Witchcraft, according to Wiccan author Margot Adler, is its ability to draw upon multiple sources of inspiration and its acceptance of multiple truths. Because of this openness to multiple sources and perspectives, making generalizations about contemporary Witchcraft is somewhat problematic. We should keep in mind, therefore, that while there is some degree of commonality or uniformity to belief and practice within the movement, there are also individual, coven-wide, tradition-based, regional and even national differences within the movement.

The commonalities within the movement are partly due to shared historic sources for the movement. The widespread influence of Aleister Crowley and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Margaret Murray and her book The Witchcult in Western Europe, and Gerald Gardner and his books Witchcraft Today and The Meaning of Witchcraft contribute greatly to the overarching elements of contemporary Witchcraft. The popularity of more recent works on Witchcraft such as Margot Adler's Drawing Down the Moon and Starhawk's books The Spiral Dance and Dreaming the Dark also contribute to the shared elements within this tradition. These commonalities are further due in part to the growth and popularity of internet and world wide web sources such as "The Witches' Voice," <<http://www.witchvox.com>>, municipal, regional and national pagan umbrella organizations (such as Covenant of the Goddess or EarthSpirit Community), and pagan and wiccan periodicals and newsletters (such as The Green Egg or Hecate's Loom, through which favourite rituals, prayers, and stories are shared.

Worldview

In general, contemporary Witchcraft can be said to encompass a shared or common worldview, as well as shared theology, organizational structure, ritual structure, ethical system and calendrical festival structure among most, if not all, practitioners. The worldview of contemporary Witches is primarily monistic. Practitioners of witchcraft view the universe as a unified whole. Everything in the universe, and everyone in the universe, are united on a spiritual level. This monistic worldview leads to several additional assumptions about the nature of the world. First, it means that what one person does effects not only herself, but her fellow coven members, her entire community, and ultimately, her entire surroundings, up to and including the universe as a whole. Within a monistic framework, there is no such thing as a meaningless act, and no such thing as an isolated act. Every act has consequences, and every act is therefore meaningful. Second, this assumption of universal unity or monism provides much of the explanation for the effectiveness of magical practice, for once one recognizes the existence of the threads which bind everything together, magic becomes possible. Magic is the manipulation, via the human will, of the spiritual energies that unite the universe and everything in it into a unified whole. Third, since these energies are spiritual in nature, and the underlying unity of the universe itself is spiritual in nature, it follows that the universe, or nature, is spiritual in and of itself. The whole universe springs from a single spiritual source - Goddess or God - and partakes in, or participates in, or embodies - that divinity. Humans, by nature of their unity with the rest of the universe, also share in or embody that spiritual or divine essence.

The worldview of contemporary Witches is also one of multi-level reality. Most Witches believe that there are more levels or kinds of reality than the everyday level upon which we live out most of our lives. There are spiritual levels in addition to the physical level, and these levels are often called "planes" or "astral planes." Witches, however, do not necessarily conceive of

these "levels" as hierarchically ranked or "stacked." These levels do not exist one above another, as conceived in various other religious traditions, but instead co-exist with one another in the same time and space. According to anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, who has studied contemporary witchcraft extensively, this means that objects as they are conceived in the imagination are given equal "reality" to objects in your living-room - both exist, but they exist in different sorts of ways. This view of the world carries several additional assumptions. First, it is taken for granted that the human imagination has the power to effect the world. Every thought and every fantasy that you hold exists in reality on an astral plane. Positive or negative thoughts can therefore have very real consequences. Imagining "health" for a sick friend can cure the sick. Imagining illness for a rival can cause sickness. Similarly, imagining success can lead to success. Imagining failure can lead to failure. The human imagination becomes the key to effecting reality, for imagined ideas are real, and they really can effect the material as well as the psychic world. Second, the real existence of the Goddess or the God is assumed, here. Whether one believes in the physical reality of a Goddess or God or not, the spiritual reality, or astral reality, of divinity, is unquestioned. The very idea of Goddess or God makes Her or Him real, for ideas embody reality in the same way as physical objects do. The worship of the Goddess or God, therefore, becomes the worship of aspects of the spiritual reality of the universe.

Another aspect of the worldview of contemporary Witches is the twin assumption that the universe is intentional and progressive. Every living thing, and this includes the planet, and the universe itself, is understood to exist for a reason. There is a purpose, and a plan, behind everything that exists. There is consequently no such thing as an "accident." All things exist for a reason and all events happen for a reason. The purpose of all living things, both humans and the universe itself, is to progress, spiritually. The universe, and humans, are on a spiritual quest

to perfect ourselves, and recognition of this quest contributes to the goal. This assumption of universal and human meaning and purpose carries several further implications. First, if all life has a purpose, and all life is the result of a divine universal plan, it follows that spiritual progress is to be attained by realizing what one's own role in life is intended to be, and then following it. Realizing one's purpose in life is the path to spiritual peace. Second, since all things in the universe are connected, and the universe itself is alive, it should be possible to see signs, or omens, in the world, to indicate the correct path to follow. There is therefore no such thing as coincidence. If something remarkable happens, it is for a reason, and you should be aware of remarkable or seemingly coincidental events, for these are the sign posts along your spiritual road, given to you by the universe, or the Goddess, or God, to point you in the right direction or to turn you around if you've headed the wrong way.

A fourth basic component of the worldview of contemporary Witches is its assumption that true spirituality is nature-based. Witches understand the world to be of spiritual value. Religion, in this context, is the celebration of our connection to the world. Part of this connectedness to the world is the celebration of our connectedness to each other, and to our own natural bodies. The turning of the seasons, and life-cycles of birth and death, are therefore fundamentally spiritual for Witches. This emphasis on nature therefore leads to several further assumptions. First, the earth itself is understood to have spiritual significance, and is conceptualized as the Goddess, Mother Earth. Reverence for the divine is therefore the same as reverence for the earth. Second, this emphasis on nature leads to reverence for the body - particularly for the female body. A woman, like the earth, is the Goddess. Her bodily cycles mirror the cycles of the moon, and the moon, like the earth, is the Goddess. Third, oppression of women, or oppression of the earth through pollution or exploitive mining, logging, etc, is the

oppression of the divine. Witches, therefore, are universally feminists, and environmentalists, by virtue of their worldview. Although the degree of activism differs from person to person and coven to coven, concern with sexual equality and environmental responsibility are inherent aspects of contemporary Witchcraft.

A fifth fundamental element of the Witch's worldview is the belief in the rebirth of life, the soul, and the world. The worldview of Witches is cyclical. In connection to the world, this means that most Witches view time as a circle or a spiral rather than a straight (linear) line. Witchcraft is a nature religion, and nature is cyclical. The seasons follow one another, winter to spring, spring to summer, summer to autumn, and autumn to winter, in a perpetual cycle. Birth is followed by growth, which is followed by maturity, which is followed by age, which is followed by death. Death, however, is not understood to be the end of life. Like nature, human life itself is understood to be cyclical, and this means that the continuation of some aspect of a person following bodily death is taken for granted. Since reality includes many levels in addition to the physical, it follows that the death of the body does not necessarily imply the death of the soul. For most Witches, this means accepting a belief in reincarnation. This belief in reincarnation or the assumption of a continued spiritual existence that transcends death carries a couple of further assumptions. First, since "life" does not end with the death of the body, neither does one's ability to act in the world or to communicate with the living. The dead can send signs or omens to warn their loved ones of upcoming events, can send messages of love or comfort, or can take on the role of spiritual teacher or guide to the living. Second, since "life" does not end with the death of the body, neither does one's responsibility for acts committed during one's lifetime. Most witches believe in "karma" - the spiritual law of cause and effect, in which good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds punished. Coupled with a belief in reincarnation, this belief in

karma therefore implies that what one does in this life will effect the next. The lessons learned in this lifetime, therefore, help you in this life, but also in all future lives. Perfection will take many lifetimes to accomplish.

### Ethics

The monistic, intentional, progressive, multi-level, nature-based and cyclical worldview of contemporary witchcraft is reflected in the basic code of ethics to which contemporary witches adhere. Unlike the Judeo-Christian ethical code, which begins with a set of ten commandments forbidding or requiring certain acts, the Wiccan ethical code has, at root, only two commandments - harm none, and be true to yourself. This simple ethical code is summed up in the Wiccan Rede, often phrased in 17th century english, as "An ye harm no one, do as ye will." A more contemporary phrasing would be "If it harms no one, do what you will." This rule, formulated by Gerald Gardner, draws upon the influence of Aleister Crowley's "law of Thelema." It is not a license to do whatever you feel like, but is instead a reminder that you should follow your spiritual purpose in life, without fail. The other aspect of the ethical system of contemporary Witchcraft is referred to as The Law of Three or The Law of Threefold Return. Drawing again upon the influence of Gardner, this Law suggests simply that whatever you do, for good or ill, will return to you in three times over. Good will, and good deeds, are therefore warranted, for by helping others you help yourself. Bad will, and bad deeds, also return threefold - and so are ultimately self destructive, and to be avoided.

### Becoming a Witch

There are a number of different opinions on how individuals come to adopt this monistic, multi-levelled, intensitive, progressive, nature-oriented and cyclical view of the world. According to Margot Adler, witches are born, not made. Although training and education certainly helps

witches formulate their thoughts, and gives them a vocabulary in which to articulate their views, the assumptions, or beliefs, of witchcraft come naturally to those individuals who become practitioners of the Craft. Others, however, suggest that coming to see the world in this way is very much a process of development. The anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, for example, suggests that would-be witches slowly develop this kind of worldview through a process that she calls interpretive drift.<sup>iv</sup> According to this interpretation, individuals first become interested in Witchcraft for personal, social, philosophical, or various other reasons, and only after practising, and talking about, magic and witchcraft for a considerable time do they discover that their very view of the world has changed. In fact, Luhrmann suggests that many Witches never do make this discovery about themselves - the shift in their thinking is so gradual that one can't always recognize or pinpoint the change that has taken place. Still others suggest that people really do "convert," in a more or less typical definition of that term, to witchcraft: that is, that some witches become witches following a transformative experience upon encountering Witchcraft or the Goddess, and who subsequently adopt this new way of looking at the world as a result. It is entirely possible that each of these three theories are correct, explaining multiple paths to the adoption of a Wiccan worldview.

### Theology of Witchcraft

Witches, of course, are not simply defined as such by their worldview. To be a Witch is also to worship the Goddess and the God, to celebrate certain festivals, to follow certain ethical precepts, and to practice magic. As the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn defines it,

A Witch *above all* worships the Triple Goddess and her Consort, The Horned God, in one form or another. A Witch works Magick within a definite code of

ethics. A Witch acknowledges and uses the male-female polarity in his/her rites

[and] A Witch takes *total* responsibility for her actions, herself, and her future.<sup>v</sup>

According to this definition, it is not so much worldview, as it is bi-theistic worship, that first and foremost defines a witch. The worship of a female and a male divine principle is central to contemporary Witchcraft. Just as human beings are divided into two sexes, so too is divinity divided into male and female. The Goddess is usually understood to be the primary deity, with the God seen as her consort (although in some traditions the God is rarely mentioned, while in others he shares equal emphasis with the Goddess.)

### The Triple Goddess

Within the religion of contemporary Witchcraft, the female divine force is often referred to simply as The Great Goddess, the Triple Goddess, or simply the Goddess. According to the popular author and Witch Starhawk, the Goddess is that divine force who exists in the unity of the universe: the Goddess is the circle, the unbroken unity, that exists before sex, before male and female are even separated from one another. When She is referred to by name, she is called by the names of various goddesses who have been worshipped in various cultures and within various religious traditions throughout history. Popular names are Inanna, Diana, Rhiannon, Brigit, Gaia, Isis, Astarte, Demeter, Ceridwen, Ishtar and Hertha. Different names for the Goddess are appropriate depending upon which aspect of her are wish to invoke. If you appeal to her in her aspect as loving mother, you might call her Hertha, celtic goddess of hearth and home. If you appeal to her in her aspect as lover, you might call her Rhiannon, celtic goddess of love. The Goddess has many different aspects and facets, is worshipped in many forms and many ways. As anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann explains,

The constant theme of the Goddess is cyclicity and transformation: the spinning Fates, the weaving spider, Aphrodite who each year arises virgin from the sea, Isis who swells and floods and diminishes as the Nile. Every face of the Goddess is a different goddess, and yet also the same, in a different aspect, and there are different goddesses for different years and seasons of one's life.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite all these manifestations and interweaving symbols, the Goddess is most often conceptualized as The Triple Goddess, however, in recognition that She has three main aspects or forms.

The Goddess' three forms are that of Maiden, Mother, and Old Woman or Crone. As The Maiden, the Goddess represents youth, learning, purity, laughter, romantic love and the season of spring. She represents the youthful exuberance of childhood, the joy of being alive, the promise of the future, optimism, hope, and new beginnings. According to Starhawk,

The Maiden is Athena, patroness of art and culture... the ancient, primal virgin, complete unto herself, whose power is to create the works of art and culture that differentiate self from nature... The Maiden is also Artemis, Lady of the Wild Things. To invoke Her is to awaken the wildness of self, the feelings that will not be tamed, and the integrity of self that upholds our right to feel, to be different...<sup>vii</sup>

As The Mother, the Goddess represents fertility, growth, home, family, love, life, protection, and the season of summer. She represents the maturity of womanhood, the creative powers of humans and nature, the awareness of life, satisfaction, success, and accomplishments. Here, according to Starhawk, we can best approach the Goddess as Gaia, the Earth Mother: she is to be found in the garden, in the earth that nurtures, the leaves that grow, the fruits that ripen. She is described as:

Ishtar, the eternal lover who awaits with eager arms the mortal man brave enough to risk her immortal favour... She represents the strong woman, not dominant, but independent...

She is Nature, and she is the Earth. She is not an atavistic abstraction, not a mystical metaphor, not a construct of consciousness. Her body is of substance as material as our own, and we tread upon her breast and are formed of her flesh.<sup>viii</sup>

Understanding the Mother as Gaia, as Earth, in this way, Starhawk suggests, then gives us insight into the third manifestation of the Goddess: that of the Old Woman, or Crone. As the Crone, the Goddess represents age, wisdom, knowledge, will power, and the season of autumn. She represents knowledge hard earned, the struggle for life, the power of death, and the darker emotions of anger and aggression. The Crone aspect of the Goddess does not shrink from the darker side of female power: darkness, blood and death. According to Starhawk, worship of the Goddess as the Crone is a recognition that death and darkness are necessary to life and light. She says,

Annihilation is present in the midst of life; it is not separate from life, as the presence of terror was not separate from our first experience of love... The Crone, too, becomes a source of power - to end, to limit, to destroy... Hecate is called the Goddess of crossroads, i.e., choices... for every choice I take annihilates some other possibility... [but] to choose is also to begin.<sup>ix</sup>

The Goddess, clearly, is a complex, well-rounded character. She is all things, rather than one thing. Some practising Witches conceptualize the Goddess as a real, personal entity: someone who watches over her children, who gives birth to them who nurtures them, and who kills them and sends them on to be reborn. Others conceptualize her as metaphor: as the life force, the unity of the universe, the symbol of spirituality. For Starhawk and many other witches, these two ways of viewing the Goddess are not necessarily mutually exclusive. According to Starhawk, "People often ask me whether I *believe* in the Goddess. I reply, "Do you believe in rocks?"<sup>x</sup> The Goddess is real, in other words, no matter how one conceives of her: she is simply all that there is.

### The Horned God

The God worshipped within contemporary Witchcraft is equally is a multifaceted and complex deity. He is usually referred to simply as The God or The Horned One. Because he is depicted as horned and often bearded, Christians often mistake him for the figure of the Christian Devil. When the Horned One is referred to by name, he is called by the names of the various Gods worshipped throughout the world's religions in the past. Popular names are Cernunnos, Thor, Apollo, Pan, Janus, and Mars. As with the Goddess, the name by which you invoke the God depends upon the aspect of Him to which you wish to appeal. If you wish to appeal to him for guidance in business or battle, you might call Him Mars or Thor. If you wish to appeal to him for sexual power or appeal, you might call him Cernunnos or Pan. Where the Goddess is seen to have three main aspects, the God is usually seen to have two: the Hunter/Warrior, and the Lover.

As the Hunter or the Warrior, the God represents action, aggression, anger, righteousness, protection, strength, power, and also death. He is the god of the hunt and of warfare, the avenger of wrongs, protector of the innocent, and also the aggressive conquering force. He both protects life, and ends it. He represents the season of winter. He is invoked whenever matters of aggression, energy, success, protection, or justice arise. According to Starhawk,

The God is the Hunter... being a hunter is a state of consciousness, a relaxed alertness, a readiness to move in an instant, to take without hesitating. It moves in an instant because... something in the hunter's mind must reproduce the prey, must know it so well that the hunter becomes the prey. And while hunting is not a male quality (Artemis is a Hunter, too), perhaps the Hunter is telling us that this consciousness is a doorway men can use to attain what women do more easily. They can develop the ability to merge, to let another being in as part of oneself, to

flow around that being, to become ground as well as self. The Hunter becomes the agent of mortality; he wields the terrible power of annihilation, and yet the part of him that becomes the prey gives way to that death. So something else is given life. And the powers of life and death are united in Him as well as in Her...<sup>xi</sup>

As the Lover, the God represents potent male sex appeal - fertility, carnality, freedom. The horns on the head of the God are deliberate phallic symbols (symbols of the male sexual organ). As the Lover, therefore, the God represents potency, desire, pleasure, energy, creativity, renewal, and lust. For Starhawk, this means that the God as Lover is liberating, for He puts one in touch with one's own body and physical pleasure. She writes,

The God is phallic. He is the maypole, the hermstone, the penis - the dying and reviving God... But the God is more than just physical fertility. As phallus, He says, 'Experience this - pleasure. Know, in your own body, how it peaks and fades, and give way to it, not as the pleasure of performance, of mastery, but as the deeper pleasure of the enfolded body, the deep desire you can know again when you no longer deny the dark.' The penis, when it is no longer the instrument of control, becomes the emblem of vulnerability, of feeling. As such, it is freeing to men - because the penis-as-weapon is a dead, wooden instrument that brings no true pleasure.<sup>xii</sup>

Like the Goddess, the God is a multi-faceted figure. And like the Goddess, the God is invoked in his aspects that bring both life and death. Within the Wiccan understanding of divinity, there is no division made between a "good" God or Goddess who brings only life, light, love, etc., and a "bad" God or Goddess who brings only death, darkness, hatred. Each aspect of the Goddess

runs into the next, just as a woman's life cycle runs from maiden to mother to crone. Each aspect of the God also runs from one to the next, from the Hunter who becomes his prey in order to hunt, to the lover who joins with the Loved in order to love. Both the Goddess and the God, furthermore, are ultimately understood as male and female aspects of the same, single, unified divine force. All aspects, and all facets, of each of these figures, are simply aspects and facets of the universe, and of human beings.

### Organization

Some practitioners of contemporary Witchcraft practice on their own, and are referred to as solitaries or solitary practitioners. Others, however, join together to form circles or covens. A coven or circle is a small working and worship group, usually with thirteen or fewer members (sometimes as few as three). Contemporary witches stress the need for small groups because of the need and desire of absolute trust between members, as well as the desire to have worship groups that are made up of compatible personalities and shared interests. In a small group, it is possible to know each member well, and to share many of the same interests with fellow coven members. When a group gets too large, the coven will split or "hive," and form a new sister coven.

The organization of covens differ according to the preferences of the coven founders and members, but many covens follow the pattern, taken from the works of Gerald Gardner, of having three degrees of initiation. A newcomer might attend public rituals and one-on-one or small group discussion/training sessions for up to a year before being initiated into the coven at the first level, that of "witch." The term "witch," used throughout contemporary Witchcraft to apply to both men and women practitioners, identifies someone who has studied the theology, rituals, and ethics of contemporary witchcraft, and has undergone an initiation ceremony during

which they commit themselves to the beliefs and practices of the religion of Witchcraft. The word "witch" is usually understood to derive from the old English term "wicce" or "wicca," meaning wise. An alternate derivation is from the Indo-European root "wic," meaning to bend or shape. There has been some controversy within contemporary Witchcraft over whether to keep the word "witch" in usage, given the largely negative connotations of the word in popular perceptions - alternatives are "wicca" or "wiccan practitioner." To date, however, the term "witch" continues to be the most common term for a first degree initiate.

Following initiation as a witch, most covens have a second degree of initiation available. After a period of at least a year and a day, initiation into the second degree of witchcraft, that of "High Priest or Priestess," is available. As a high priestess or priest, one can lead a coven in rituals or teach lessons in religion and magic to novices and first degree initiates. If the coven has more than one high priest or priestess among its membership, leadership of the rituals can rotate among the membership, although often the leader remains the same from ritual to ritual. A third level of initiation, not always practised or recognized by all covens, consists of initiation into the level of coven leadership - sometimes called the level of "Queen or Lord of Witchcraft." For some covens, this third degree of witchcraft is conferred to specific individuals on the basis of communal recognition of knowledge and ability. In others, it is a recognition of status as coven leaders, and in others, it reflects recognition that the third degree witch has successfully completed a ritual of union as Goddess/God with the Goddess/God as embodied in another practitioner - a ritual reserved for those most dedicated to the religion of Witchcraft.

### Varieties of Witchcraft

Most witches organize in covens, incorporate several degrees of initiation, and follow the Wiccan Rede and the Law of Three, but there are some variations in how these and other

elements are understood and practised. In addition to these general elements, there are differences based within the tradition to which a specific practitioner or coven belongs. Margot Adler identifies six typical breakdowns of contemporary Witchcraft, and seven alternate breakdowns that she herself is familiar with. However, given that many of these categories represent simple variants of other categories, for our purposes there are really only three types or varieties of Witchcraft that we need to explore. These are Gardnerian, Wiccan (eclectic), and Dianic.

### Gardnerian Witchcraft

Gardnerian Witchcraft is based, either directly through connection to Gardner's original coven or indirectly through heavy reliance on Gardner's books, to the witchcraft of Gerald Gardner. According to Margot Adler, Gardnerian covens can generally be distinguished by their "traditional" style, including heavy reliance on set, formal rituals, concern with hierarchical organization of three degrees of initiation, the use of a symbolic scourge to purify members, skyclad worship, a standard nine-foot circle, the use of the "Great Rite," (symbolic or actual sex between the high priestess and high priest while embodying the Goddess and the God), a primary emphasis placed on the Goddess with the God as Her Consort, and the practice of the "Drawing Down the Moon" ceremony, and most are matrilineal - leadership passes from one high priestess to the next. One common variant of Gardnerian Witchcraft is Alexandrian witchcraft, named after Alex Sanders. Sanders founded his own coven following the death of Gardner, and many of his rituals are identical. Others are even more formal and elaborate. According to Sanders, he was taught his version of witchcraft by his grandmother, a hereditary witch.

Wiccan covens are more eclectic than Gardnerian ones. Although "Wicca" is the name for all contemporary witchcraft, including Gardnerian and Dianic forms, it also refers to a sort of

middle ground variety of witchcraft between these two forms. Wiccan covens frequently draw upon Gardnerian ritual practices as inspiration, they are rarely as strict in their interpretations. Wiccan covens frequently have only two levels of initiation, they rarely use the ceremonial scourge, usually practice in robes rather than skyclad (although skyclad worship is still acceptable and even desired, weather permitting), are more flexible about the size of a ceremonial circle, and rarely practice the great rite. They are still often matrilineally organized, and still practice the Drawing Down the Moon ceremony (although the wording and symbolism may differ from Gardner's own). There is a great deal of variation in terms of theological emphasis in Wiccan covens - some are primarily Goddess oriented, others stress the balance of Goddess and God. Even the seasonal festivals in Wiccan covens are open to reinterpretation depending on seasonal differences geographically. Liberal tolerance for variety seems to be key in Wiccan covens.

Dianic Wiccan covens, like Wiccan covens, are more liberal in organization, symbolization, and practice than Gardnerian covens. They are more restrictive than the majority of Wiccan covens, however, in terms of their theology and their membership. Dianic Wiccan covens are based primarily in the women's spirituality movement, that stresses in part a return to the worship of the "Great Goddess" of palaeolithic times. The Divine is therefore worshipped solely in Her female form. Like other Witchcraft varieties, Dianic Wiccans worship the Goddess as Maiden, Mother and Crone, but they also worship her as Queen of the Mysteries, symbolized by the moon, Queen of the Stars, symbolized by the sun, and Mother Earth, symbolized by the Earth. She is consequently all things, and the God is clearly subordinate, and in some cases, mortal, and therefore outside the bounds of worship. Some Dianic covens have no ranked

system of initiation - all members are simply "witches" - and most, although not all, Dianic Wiccan covens are exclusively female in membership.

Because many women are drawn to Wicca, and many Wiccan women are drawn to Dianic wicca, we are going to explore Dianic Wicca in a bit more detail than the Gardnerian and Wiccan (eclectic) forms just mentioned. According to Zsuzsanna Budapest, in the Manifesto of her Coven, "We are opposed to teaching our magic and our craft to men until the equality of the sexes is a reality."<sup>xiii</sup> This gives us some immediate insight into the focus for Dianic Wiccan covens: the feminist politics of women's religion. Dianic Wiccans are feminists, and they are almost invariably politically active feminists. They work for the equality of women, and they almost always unite that work with an emphasis on environmentalist politics as well. As the Goddess is the Earth, and as women are the Goddess, a link between feminism, religion, environmentalism, and politics is central to this form of contemporary Witchcraft. The exclusion of men is a political statement: not that men cannot be witches, but that until equality is reached, female religion should be separated out, and put on a par with, men's religion.

Many women come to Dianic Wicca from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which has a very masculine view of God. The only path to salvation, through the Judeo-Christian tradition, is through a man - Jesus. His mother, venerated in Catholicism, is holy in so far as she gave birth to a son, and only in her roles as Maiden (virgin) and Mother. The third aspect of the Wiccan Goddess - the Crone, one who is wise in the ways of earthly knowledge, power, and death - is entirely lacking from this single female figure in the overwhelming male religious hierarchy of Christianity. Many of the women who become active in Dianic Wicca have also had fairly negative experiences in their lives in terms of oppression or abuse by men. Because of these issues, worship of the Goddess in Dianic Wiccan covens tends to focus on the third aspect of Her

- the Crone, or Old Woman. It is in this figure that Dianic Wiccans find satisfaction and power in their own natures, including the angry side of ourselves, and in our inevitable turn towards age and death, so minimized and fought within mainstream society. As one woman expressed it,

As I see her, the Dark Goddess is a manifestation of those aspects of female divinity and power that have become distorted because they have been split off, repressed and suppressed by patriarchal culture... if we are to become wholly empowered as women and stand up to the life-denying patriarchal forces, the Dark Goddess may and must be faced in each of us, her powers reclaimed and made accessible.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Dark Goddess, or the Crone, as we mentioned, represents age, wisdom, power, darkness, and the death that is inevitably followed by life. Within the context of Dianic Wicca, her festival is celebrated at Samhain, the Wiccan New Year, when the veil between the worlds is thinnest and darkness and death approach before the future onset of spring. She brings gentle death to the aged and terminally ill, she is seen as a loving protective grandmother, who watches over her female grandchildren. She is death that brings life.

Because of the integral link between death and life within Wicca, one of the central myths within Dianic Wicca is the myth of Kore, the daughter of Demeter, in the Greek tradition. Kore is the Maiden, her Mother is the goddess of fertility and vegetation. According to the Greek Myth, Kore was enticed into the Land of the Dead by the cries of the dead, who were lost and afraid, and needed comfort. Kore goes to them, but the Lord of the Dead tricks her into eating some pomegranate seeds, so that she will be trapped with him in the Land of the Dead. In anger and grief, her mother refuses to let the land grow, and everything is barren until a deal is reached, that Kore will live with her mother during the growing seasons of spring, summer, and

fall, but return to be with the Lord of the Dead each winter. Kore then takes the name Persephone, to mark the truth that life can never be separated from death, and death never separate from life, the earth, the body. Within the context of Dianic Wicca, Kore tells Witches that age, anger, and death are part of life, and therefore to be welcomed and celebrated rather than denied. Another important symbol of Dianic Wicca is the Cauldron. According to Celtic mythology, the Goddess Ceridwen had a cauldron that conferred immortality on those who drank from it. The cauldron is a symbol of the womb, of fertility, of water, of transformation and birth. This again points to the link between life and death as a central emphasis in Dianic Wicca.

Another central myth within Dianic Wicca is that of Inanna, the Sumerian Goddess very similar to Kore/Persephone. Inanna travels to the underworld, or the Land of the Dead, to attend the funeral of the Lord of the Dead, husband to the Queen of the Underworld. The Queen of the Underworld is furious at the Queen of Heaven's desire to come into her domain, and ultimately kills her, and hangs her body up to rot. When Inanna fails to return to the Heavens after three days, her assistant goes in search of her, and tries to enlist the aid of the other gods to ensure her return. Only one, the God of Waters and Wisdom, responds positively, and he makes two figures from mud and clay, and sends them to the underworld to mourn with the Queen of the underworld over the loss of her husband. Erishkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, is grateful for the sympathy, and allows them to carry Inanna back to the Heavens, where her life is restored. Like Kore, Inanna then fuses life and death, beauty and ugliness. She represents youth and fertility and death. According to one account of a Dianic Coven, members find parallels to their own life stories in the story of Inanna - stories of being victim to anger, lust, pain, of losing children, jobs, lovers, of feeling anger, hatred, and despair. They then see in Inanna's return to life the hope of future rebirth or renewal. The cycle of life and death continues here.

## Rituals

Wiccan covens, whether Gardnerian, Wiccan (eclectic) or Dianic, meet on a lunar month cycle, usually at the full moon, but sometimes at the new moon. A lunar meeting is referred to as an esbat. They also meet at eight solar festivals - dates determined by the orbit of the earth around the sun - called sabbats. At both esbats and sabbats, the initial ritual format is the same. Unlike Christians, contemporary witches do not meet in Churches. Instead, they meet in private homes or in back yards, parks and fields. The sacred space of Witchcraft is the circle. One of the first and most basic rituals of Witchcraft, therefore, is the casting of the circle, by which a space, often nine or eleven feet in diameter, is set apart, consecrated, and made sacred, so that worship may be conducted there. The circle symbolizes the unity of life and the universe. It serves to keep outside forces from interrupting the ritual, and it serves to contain the energies raised by the ritual. Casting the Circle

The circle is cast by the high priestess, who first purifies the grounds with air and fire (through the burning of incense) and water and earth (through salt water). Then, beginning in the east, she walks deosil, or clockwise, around the circumference of the space she wishes to mark off, drawing an imaginary or psychic circle with one of her ritual tools (an athame). Once the circle is drawn but not yet "closed," the High Priestess invites the rest of her coven into the circle through the east "gate," welcomes them individually, then closes the circle by completing it with her athame. Members of the circle then join hands, and sing or pray to being raising psychic energy within the circle. The high priestess then goes to each of the four directions, east, south, west, and north, and invokes the four quarters. The wording of the invocation varies depending on the speaker. Dianic wiccan priestess Zsuzsanna Budapest gives the following invocations:

East: Hail to thee, powers of the East! Hail to the great eagle, corner of all beginnings! Ea, Astarte, Aurora, Goddess of all Beginning! Come and be witness to our rite as we perform it according to ancient rites!

South: Hail to thee, powers of the South! Corners of great fire and passion, Goddess Esmeralda, Goddess Vesta and Heartha! Come and be witness at our rite as we perform it according to ancient laws!

West: Hail to thee, powers of waters! Life-giving Goddess of the Sea, Aphrodite, Marianee, Themis, Tiamat! Come and guard our circle and bear witness to our rite as we perform it according to ancient rites!

North: Hail to thee, corner of all powers! Great Demeter, Persephone, Kore, Ceres! Earth Mothers and Fates! Great sea of glass! Guard our circle and bear witness as we perform our rite according to your heritage!<sup>xv</sup>

Once the powers of the four directions have been invited into the circle, the ritual can continue. If the circle has been cast for an esbat ritual, it is likely that the work of the group will be for specific purposes such as sending healing energies to someone who is sick, to bring peace to a troubled situation, to bless a birth, or a wedding, or to welcome a new member. Songs, prayers, and dances are offered to the Goddess with this specific goal in mind. A cone of power is raised, being a vortex of spiritual or psychic energies raised by will power, emotion, imagination, and the physical activity of dance. This cone of power is directed at the goal for which the circle was cast, so that the result desired can be achieved. Wine and food are then offered first to the Goddess, and then to the coven members, with thanks to the Goddess for Her bounty. As the meeting draws to a close, the four quarters are thanked, and the circle is opened by walking widdershins (counterclockwise) around the ritual space and stating "the circle is open." Often another ritual phrase is also said here, either "Blessed Be" or "Merry Meet, Merry Part, and Merry Meet Again."

### The Witches' Tools

In order to cast a circle or cast a spell, certain ritual tools are needed. The ritual tools of a Witch include a black-hilted knife (called an athame), a wand, a cup, and a pentacle. Other tools include a brazier or incense burner, a white handled knife (called a bolline), a bell, a broom (yes, a broom! called a besom), a work book or book of shadows, a sword, an alter, a cauldron, candles of different colours, various herbs and different kinds of incense, a statue of the Goddess and the God, as well as wine and bread, cakes, or cookies, and salt and water.

The wand is the symbol of air, and stands for imagination, thought, and the direction east. A wand can be made from a variety of woods (often oak, ash, or elder), and often has the owner's witch name inscribed on it, and can have semi-precious stones, metals, etc. as well. The athame is a symbol of fire or sometimes air, will power, and conviction, and the direction south. It is a black-hilted steel knife about five or six inches long, that has been magnetized by stroking the blade with a magnet. In some traditions is used for all cutting and carving of pentacles, candles, etc., as well as for casting the circle. In other traditions, the athame is never used to cut, only to cast the circle and to direct magical energies. In these traditions, the white handled knife, the bolline, is used for actual cutting. The cup is a symbol of water, life, birth, emotion, and the direction west. It can be made of any non-porous material such as horn, silver, glass, etc., and any shape, usually a goblet but sometimes a bowl or chalice. It holds salt, for purification rituals, and wine, for celebratory rituals. The pentacle is the symbol of earth, and is symbolic of power and stability, the body, and the direction north. A pentacle is a circle, often made of silver but sometimes of other things like ivory or even wax, that has a pentagram (a five-pointed star) inscribed on it.

In addition to these most significant of the witches' tools, there are a variety of others. Of the other tools, the brazier is used to burn incense during rituals, and the incense differs

according to the ritual conducted. The sword sometimes takes the place of the athame to cast a circle, the white hilted knife as mentioned is used for all non-sacred cutting or carving. The work book, or "book of shadows," records recipes and spells, and how successful they turn out to be. The alter holds the statues of the Goddess and God, the candles, the sword and wand, etc, and the ritual food of bread and wine, or ritual purification elements of salt and water.

### The Wheel of the Year

Circles for worship and spell casting that are held according to the phases of the moon, in recognition that the moon is the Goddess' primary symbol - a waxing moon for the Maiden, a full moon for the Mother, a waning moon for the Crone - are Esbats. Sabbats, on the other hand, are held according to the solar calendar, on what are referred to as the Quarter Days (shortest day of the year, longest day of the year, and spring and summer equinox days, where winter and summer are in balance), and the Cross Quarter Days. These rituals celebrate the seasons of the earth, yet another symbol for the Goddess. The eight solar festivals are known as The Wheel of the Year. They include Samhain (Oct. 31), Yule (Dec. 21), Candlemas/Imbolc (Feb. 2), Eostar/Vernal Equinox (Mar. 21), Beltane/Mayday (May 1), Midsummer/Summer Solstice (June 21), Lammas (Aug. 2), and Harvest Home/Autumn Equinox (Sept. 21). Imbolc, the vernal equinox, and Beltane are fertility festivals. Lammas, the autumn equinox, and Samhain are harvest festivals. The summer solstice, sometimes called Mid-Summer's Day, is the peak of the Goddess' power. Yule, Mid-Winter's Day, is the Peak of the God's power.

Samhain (Oct. 31.): Samhain is the celebration of the Wiccan New Year, which begins on November 1st. It is a festival which marks the end of the old year, and the end of summer, and the first step towards winter. It is the day on which the veil between the physical world and the astral and spirit worlds is thinnest, and is celebrated as the feast of the Dead. Rituals on Samhain

invoke the God, for the God's influence as Hunter grows here, and the Goddess-as-Crone, for this is both a time of endings and beginnings. Bonfires are lit, and New Year's resolutions made.

Yule (Dec. 21): Yule is the mid-winter festival. It marks the longest night of the year. This means it also marks the turning point towards spring, and so is a happy, celebratory holiday in which gifts are exchanged and family and friends gather together. An oak Yule log is burned (a log cut the previous Yule day and saved), and holly and pine used as decorations. The God as Hunter begins to give way to the God as Lover, and the Goddess as Maiden grows in strength.

Candlemas/Imbolc (Feb. 2): Imbolc is a fertility festival, the first of three, for the Maiden's power is turning towards that of the Mother. It is also called Candlemas. It is a festival of celebration and thanksgiving for the returning gift of spring, and for the birth of new life - lambs, calves, etc. This holiday is also known as the Feast of Brigit, the Maiden, goddess of knowledge and memory, wisdom and fruitfulness.

Eostar/Vernal Equinox (Mar. 21): The Spring or vernal equinox festival is the second fertility festival, and is often called Eostar. It is a celebration of fruitfulness of land and animal, and is symbolized by the egg - new birth. Seeds (both physical and metaphorical) are blessed. Cleaning (again, both physical and metaphorical) is carried out - getting rid of winter's clutter to make room for spring's new possibilities.

Beltane/Mayday (May 1): Beltane, or Mayday, is the third fertility festival, which marks the beginning of summer in the Wiccan calendar. Beltane is celebrated with bonfires, maypoles, and flowers, and is the festival for handfasting - the ritual pledging of two people who plan to marry the following year. The Goddess as Mother is growing strong here, and the God as Lover is also strong.

Summer Solstice/Midsummer (June 21): Midsummer is the longest day of the year, and represents the peak of the Mother's powers, and the turning towards the Crone and Winter. The God as Lover begins to turn towards the Hunter at this point also. This is the festival of life, and emotion, and passion. Couples often marry at mid-summer.

Lammas (Aug. 2): Lammas represents the first of three harvest festivals, and is centred on the gathering of fruits for preserving for winter, and on communal gatherings and games. It is a joyful celebration of harvest and bounty, with a recognition of the coming of winter.

Harvest Home/Autumn Equinox (Sept. 21): The autumn equinox is the second of three harvest festivals, and is often called Harvest Home. Again, there is a celebration of harvest's bounty with the recognition that winter comes. This festival is linked to the doctrine of reincarnation, for the sun has begun its journey away from the earth, and yet the return of the sun in spring is assured. This festival is one of contemplation, reconsidering lessons learned throughout the year, and making of plans for the new year.

Each of these festivals are celebrated by covens, often by many covens at once, and also by individual witches. The ritual form at these celebrations begins with the basic casting of the circle and invocation of the four quarters, but then differs depending upon what is being celebrated, and what aspects of the Goddess and the God are appropriate to the ritual. Although the rituals therefore differ, one ritual in particular is part of the Wiccan repertoire. This is the ritual of drawing down the moon, in which the Goddess is made manifest in the high priestess, and speaks to the coven members.

### Drawing Down the Moon

The drawing down the moon ceremony can be held at any esbat or sabbat, but is most often held at Beltane, when the Mother's power is growing towards full strength. Although the

words again can vary from coven to coven, two Gardnerian witches record the words as follows.

The words that the Goddess speaks in this ritual are known as the Charge of the Goddess:

The High Priest: Listen to the words of the great Mother; she who of old was called among men Artemis, Astarte, Athene, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Dana, Arianhod, Isis, Bride, and by many other names.

The High Priestess: Whenever ye have need of anything, once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, then shall ye assemble in some secret place and adore the spirit of me, who am Queen of all witches. There shall ye assemble, ye who are fain to learn all sorcery, yet who have not won its deepest secrets; to these will I teach things free, ye shall be naked in your rites; and ye shall dance, sing, feast make music and love, all in my praise. For mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and mine is also joy on earth; for my law is love unto all beings. Keep pure your highest ideal; strive ever towards it; let naught stop you or turn you aside. For mine is the secret door which opens up the Land of Youth, and mine is the cup of the wine of life, and the Cauldron of Cerridwen, which is the Holy Grail of immortality. I am the gracious Goddess, who gives the gift of joy unto the heart of man. Upon earth, I give the knowledge of the spirit eternal; and beyond death, I give peace, and freedom, and reunion with those who have gone before. Nor do I demand sacrifice; for behold, I am the mother of all living, and my love is poured out upon the earth.

The High Priest: Hear ye the words of the Star Goddess; she in the dust of whose feet are the hosts of heaven, and whose body encircles the universe.

The high priestess: I who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white Moon among the stars, and the mystery of the waters, and the desire of the heart of man, call unto thy soul. Arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature, who gives life to the universe. From me all things proceed, and unto me all things must return; and before my face, beloved of Gods and men, let thine innermost divine self be enfolded in the rapture of the infinite. Let thy worship be with the hearth that rejoiceth; for behold all acts of love and pleasure are my rituals. And therefore let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And thou who thinkest to seek for me, know that seeking and yearning shall avail thee not unless thou knowest the

mystery; that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee. For behold, I have been with thee from the beginning; and I am that which is attained at the end of desire.<sup>xvi</sup>

A similar ritual, in which the high priestess invokes the God in the high priest, is held at Samhain. The words of the God in that ritual are known as the Charge of the God.

#### Endnotes

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- ii Murray 1967:12.
- iii Murray 1967:238.
- iv Luhrmann, T.M. Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, 1989, pp. 307-323.
- v Quoted in Adler, Margot. Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today. Revised and Expanded Version. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989, p. 100.
- vi Luhrmann, 1989, p. 46.
- vii Starhawk, Dreaming the Dark. 15th Anniversary Edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, p.82.
- viii G'Zell, Morning Glory and Otter G'Zell. "Who on Earth is the Goddess," Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft. James R. Lewis, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, p.27
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- x Starhawk, quoted in Luhrmann, 1989, p. 46.
- xi Starhawk, 1997, p. 88.
- xii Starhawk, 1997, pp. 88-89.
- xiii Budapest, Zsuzsanna. The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries. Oakland: Wingbow Press, 1989, p. 3.
- xiv Luhrmann, Tanya. "The Resurgence of Romanticism: Contemporary Neopaganism, Feminist Spirituality and the Divinity of Nature," in Environmentalism: The view from anthropology. Kay Milton, ed. London/New York: Routledge, 1993, 219-232, p. 228.
- xv Budapest, 1989, p. 19.
- xvi Farrar, J. and S. Farrar. Eight Sabbats for Witches. London: Robert Hale, 1981:42-3. Quoted in Luhrmann, 1989, pp. 50-51.

