

INTRODUCTION

“A thing of spirit, not of heritage”¹

This quote refers to the phenomenon of “elective affinity”, whereby Celtic ancestry in paganism is seen “as a quality or a matter of choice rather than an issue of geography, history, lineage or language”². I intend to argue that this “spirit”, the human will, the intention and ability to choose, has overridden the need for a truthful “heritage” in the emergence and development of the modern pagan witchcraft religion known as Wicca³.

Two statements exist about Wicca’s history. First, that Wicca dates from at least the Paleolithic era and survived the persecution of the Witch Trials of the 15th to 18th centuries as a secret society, and was rediscovered by Gerald Gardner in the 1940s. Second, that Wicca is only 53 years old, an invention of Gardner as a result of his interest in various occult orders, magic, naturism and folklore. Both statements cannot be true in a positivistic sense, they are mutually exclusive, and since the 1980s Gardner’s claims have been widely dismissed by historians and Wiccans alike.

I will argue that Wiccans have adapted to cope with the falsification of their religion’s ‘sacred history’, the ‘myth of the Old Religion’ by emphasizing “spirit” above “heritage”. I propose that this has resulted in the development of an imaginative and creative “crafted spirituality, a new, thoroughly ‘modern’, approach to aspects of ‘traditional’ religion. These include their comprehension of the divine entity, its relationship to the individual and nature, ritual, morality, and the organizational structure of the religion itself. Further, I believe that Wicca will be shown to exemplify the major trends of modern Western culture and religiosity as noted by sociologists such as Hervieu-Leger, Bloom, Berger and Bellah.

Wicca

First, it is necessary to understand some of the basic characteristics of Wicca as understood by sociologists and Wiccans themselves. Defining Wicca within a typology of religions has proved problematic because of its eclecticism and diversity. Without going into questions of what a religion is, a notoriously difficult and expansive debate, we may see that within its protean forms Wicca contains many familiar characteristics of religious practice and belief.

Melissa Raphael sees that there is a celebrated divine principle, placed within a cosmology of spirits, elementals and matter itself, and considered to be “radically immanent”⁴. There are forms of social organization (e.g. the coven) and a priestess-hood. Wicca is also highly ritualistic, involving rites for purification, passage and initiation, along with associated sites, texts and festivals. It expresses moral and ethical values as seen in the widely adopted ‘Wiccan Rede’: “An it harm none, do what thou wilt”. She also sees that the story of Wicca’s prehistoric origins has become a ‘sacred history’, our primary concern in this investigation⁵. From these factors she argues that it is a valid religion with its own “thealogy”⁶.

¹ Gannon and Field (1992)

² Bowman (1995).

³ In modern pagan witchcraft there are divergent views on what names are appropriate, however, here, “Wicca” will be used for the religion, a “Wiccan” being an individual member. “Witchcraft” and “Witch” will be used of any movement or individual believed to have been of the ‘Old Religion’ before Gardner’s initiation.

⁴ Scarboro and Luck (1997)

⁵ Raphael (1996)

⁶ Goldenberg (1987), used to refer to Goddess or “thea” focused religions and their self-reflections.

How do Wiccans themselves define their religion? Vivianne Crowley, a Wiccan and psychologist, sees Wicca as “a pagan mystery religion of Goddess and God” and also a “nature religion”⁷. However, even this definition ignores Wiccan groups who are actively monotheistic, e.g. Dianic Wiccans who only worship the goddess. A broader approach may be necessary in order to include these variant forms, seeing Wicca as a protean organism of various relativized elements rather than a Church with a dogma and tradition “set in stone”. This amoeba like nature is perhaps Wicca’s only true defining characteristic and parallels may be drawn with the structure and fluidity of the New Age movement, leading to debate as to whether Wicca is a part of it.

Paul Heelas describes the New Age movement as including “an exceedingly wide range of practices- Zen meditations, Wiccan rituals, enlightenment intensive seminars...”⁸. Michael York counters this inclusivist view, seen also in Tanya Luhrmann’s study of magic in England⁹. He distinguishes the New Age’s eclecticism from the more organic structure of Wicca. York also sees the New Age as less ritualistic and less openly sexual than Wicca and subsequently it has much more establishment appeal even though overtly a counter-culture movement. For example, the use of New Age therapies in management training¹⁰ has furthered the movement’s relationship with society, and, as Margot Adler argues, its capitalistic tendencies¹¹. York’s view is that Wicca is a “Subliminal religion”, only consciously recognized by a minority whereas the New Age is attempting to bring the esoteric into the mainstream¹².

However, while Wicca ostensibly predates the New Age expansion of the 1960s, it was caught up in it, to the extent that it shares some of its tendencies. Both aim to bring about a positive change, or a paradigm shift, in society. Raphael sees that Wicca “is founded within a modern political struggle to bring about the demise of Patriarchy”¹³ and therefore cannot be limited to the “subliminal” arena. Its adherents are often notorious for their political activism over issues such as mistreatment of the environment and women, primarily because of their “thealogy”. We may conclude that the New Age is a cultural milieu that facilitated the development of Wicca during the 1960s and beyond, and this is an important consideration in our investigation of the history of Wicca.

Wiccans

There has been a tendency amongst some academics to consider the desire for the return of enchantment and spirituality in the world as an irrational expression of infantilism or inherent neuroses¹⁴. Wiccans with their belief in magic in the face of the rational world of modernity are often characterized as anti-intellectual, backward and simple. Similarly, sociologists of the Weber, Troeltsch and Niebuhr traditions have seen the emergence of religious movements to be a response to feelings of disadvantage. However, recent studies have refuted this caricature of the religious believer and in particular, the Wiccan. Ronald Hutton sees that the 213 individuals he met in the course of his investigation into Wicca had higher than average amounts of

⁷ Crowley, V. (1997)

⁸ Heelas (1996a) p1

⁹ Luhrmann (1989) p 32

¹⁰ Heelas (1996a) pp. 62-66

¹¹ Adler (1997)

¹² York (1995)

¹³ Raphael, M (1996) p202

¹⁴ See Prince (1974). The classic example of this argument is Freud’s antagonistic description of religion as a “universal obsessional neurosis”

“independence and self-organization” and had “a great love of reading and a commitment to self-education”¹⁵.

Luhrmann also notes that “magic is a literary culture” and as such there is a tendency of its practitioners to spend much time reading, digesting stories, traditions and educational texts¹⁶. She characterizes them as “urbanite middle class”, not so disadvantaged, or even as counter-cultural, as suggested. While these two studies have small test groups it is fair to say that Wiccans come from many backgrounds, social and educational, and although further study of their sociological composition may be necessary, to describe them as anti-intellectual is inaccurate. In fact Luhrmann’s study concludes that there are specialized intellectual activities in magic that give it a rationality of its own comparable to that of experimental science¹⁷. With this acknowledgement of the intellectual capacity of Wiccans in mind we must now consider the falsification of Gardner’s claims and how Wiccans have dealt with the invention of their religion’s heritage.

HERITAGE

Gardner’s Fallacy

During the 1950s Gerald Gardner, a former civil servant, began to claim that not only was witchcraft the original ‘Old Religion’ of Europe but had continued to exist as a hidden hereditary practice for hundreds of years until the present day when he had made contact with it. According to his biography, during his retirement in the New Forest he encountered a group of Rosicrucians and they in turn introduced him to a wealthy local lady, “Dorothy Clutterbuck”, the leader of a real witches coven. He then claims he was initiated at her home in September 1939, during which the word “Wica” was first mentioned: “and then I [Gardner] knew that that which I had thought burnt out hundreds of years ago still survived”¹⁸.

Then he says that the coven gave him permission to publish their rituals, but as fiction so as to keep the truth hidden, he result was *High Magic’s Aid*. In 1951 the repeal of the Witchcraft and Vagrancy Acts allowed him to publish further ‘factual’ books without fear of prosecution for ‘advertising’ his services. In 1954 and then in 1959¹⁹ he published accounts of this ‘Old Religion’, which he now called “Wicca”, from the perspective of a “disinterested anthropologist”²⁰ encountering a dying pre-Christian religion. His witches were “followers of an ancient religion, already disappearing” and who “are following the ways of their fathers, knowing the Church disapproves of their practices, but finding physical and psychological satisfaction”²¹. Although historians have never taken Gardner’s claims seriously, it is only since the 1980s and the exponential growth of Wicca have attempts been made to ‘debunk’ Gardner’s claims, perhaps to undermine it. These efforts have focused on two areas, examining the existence of the coven or noting influences on his writings. The search for the New Forest Coven has tended to focus on the figure of “Dorothy Clutterbuck”. Doreen Valiente, an initiate of Gardner’s has proven that a woman by that name did in fact live to the south of the New Forest²². However, in 1986 Dorothy Clutterbuck’s private diaries from the period mentioned by Gardner were discovered, and none of them mention the ‘Old Religion’, witchcraft or Gardner’s “Wicca”. This throws real doubt on

¹⁵ Hutton (2001)

¹⁶ Luhrmann 1989, p 259

¹⁷ Luhrmann 1989.

¹⁸ Bracelin (1960)

¹⁹ *Witchcraft Today* and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* respectively.

²⁰ Hutton (2001) p206

²¹ Gardner (1954) p25

²² Farrar, J and S (1984) pp. 282-93

Gardner's claims. Therefore, I propose that the influence of prior hypotheses and literature about witchcraft was responsible for the evolution of Gardnerian Wicca and modern Wicca's attitude to adopting other sources as its own.

The Murray Thesis

The most obvious of these influences is the "Murray thesis". Though primarily an Egyptologist Margaret Murray wrote several books and articles on the idea that witchcraft was a pre-Christian religion that had survived as Gardner suggests above. She studied 19th Century reprints of the Witch Trial reports and early modern pamphlets and works of demonology and interpreted witchcraft as a fertility cult that emphasized a male horned deity. She deduced that the horned god was the basis of early representations of the Devil in Europe. Further, she identified basic categories of rite used by the covens of thirteen members, including paying respect to an individual manifesting the deity, meeting at equinoxes, acts of magic and the sacrifice of animals and children. In later works she extended her thesis's range to the Paleolithic era, hypothesizing a universal matriarchal religion and society, a view supported, she believed, by various cave paintings.

The Murray thesis was however flawed; she looked at very few trial reports and ignored any source that contradicted her thesis. Norman Cohn, a proponent of the opposing 'witchcraft as a delusion' thesis, noted that when she was doing her research, "the influence of *The Golden Bough* was at its height", thus he sees that she developed the 'Old religion' along Frazerian lines²³. However, *The Golden Bough* is not investigating single, organized, religion but is a work of comparative mythology, involving many traditions. Sir James Frazer's aim was to discredit Christianity as just one of many such religions, to be surpassed once man was truly 'civilized'²⁴. Keith Thomas says "in England there can be little doubt that there was never a "witch-cult of the type envisaged by contemporary demonologists or their modern disciples", referring implicitly to Murray²⁵. However, those who disagreed with Murray's theory of a singular pagan 'Old Religion' she accused of being "unscientific" or simply unaware of material she alone was privy to.

The Murray thesis was very popular in spite of its limitations, perhaps because the opposing view, that belief in witchcraft had been a mass 'delusion' had too many upsetting implications for mankind's rationality. Her theory was presented as proven fact when the Encyclopedia Britannica invited her to write its entry on witchcraft, which remained there until the 1960s when academics began to question its validity. However, before this began her theory influenced many occultists, historians and archaeologists, but importantly, it appears to have had the most effect on Gardner, the true father and creator of Wicca.

The Creation of Wicca

I have chosen to use the words "creator" and "creation" rather than "re-discoverer" because all the evidence points to Gardner having invented Wicca rather than being introduced to it as he had claimed. The similarities between the Murray thesis and Gardner's fallacy are obvious, however, where Gardnerian Wicca differs from the thesis we find 'borrowings' from other occultists and authors. The 'high magic' elements in Wiccan rituals are taken from *The Key of Solomon*, as a note Gerald Yorke made in his copy of *High Magic's Aid* testifies. Gardner's use of the names "Artemis" and "Airdia" for deities echoes Charles Godfrey Leland's gospel of the witchcraft

²³ *Europe's Inner Demons* (Basic Books, 1975) cited in Adler (1997)

²⁴ Ackerman (1987) pp. 1-32, 164-7

²⁵ Thomas (1971)

religion, *Aradia*. In Gardner's 1953 *Book of Shadows*, a text he claimed to be taken straight from the New Forest coven, his primary source of knowledge for the 'Old Religion', we find similar examples of plagiarism. A study of the Book's precursor, the magical notebook *Ye Bok of Ye Art Magical*, reveals passages taken from four grimoires including *The Key of Solomon* and *The Goetia*, three different books by Aleister Crowley, a work on the Cabbala, and the Waite-Smith tarot deck²⁶. While in actuality a contemporary piece, it is designed to resemble a true early modern grimoire.

Thus "beneath this label of the 'Old Religion' an extremely novel one was taking shape", says Hutton²⁷. Gardner combined previous traditions and the belief in witches to create something entirely new and beyond the limitations of historicity and truth. However, when Doreen Valiente approached Gardner with these criticisms he claimed that the tradition he had been initiated into was fragmentary after years of transmission and that he had used his knowledge of magic to supply words and rituals that gave the right atmosphere. However, Gardner did not present Wicca to the public as a recreation; as with his *Book of Shadows* where he used a mock 17th Century writing style²⁸, it was given the appearance of being a very old, unified entity when it was in effect a fraud and an invention.

Therefore Aiden Kelly believes "with 99% assurance" that Gardner did not have access to an original coven or Pagan tradition²⁹ and even amongst Wiccans most agree. There is simply no historical or archaeological evidence that there was an 'Old Religion' that continued almost unchanged for centuries as a hereditary secret society. Thus Elliot Rose says "let them form their own coven to prove their own points: it will be as traditional, as well instructed, and as authentic as any there has been these thousand years"³⁰. This has led to very divergent responses from the Wiccan community.

For many this tale of the origins of Wicca has become the 'sacred history' of the religious community and is often repeated verbatim without concern for historicity. For example, in Vivianne Crowley's book, *Principles of Wicca*, her "History of Wicca" reiterates much of the above 'myth of the Old Religion', and cites sources from Murray's *The Witch-cult in Western Europe* to prove that goddess worship existed in pre-Christian Britain. She further perpetuates the myth by saying that Wicca "is a pre-Christian religion originating in the *mists of time*"³¹, a mythopoetic term and highly misleading. She does admit that "just how ancient the tradition was [that Gardner made contact with] is a subject of much debate"³² but gives this debate and its various resolutions no attention whereas I argue these are of supreme importance.

One such resolution has been to accept the 'history' of Wicca as a 'myth', symbolic truth rather than literal truth, blurring the distinction between the two fields. Luhrmann sees that the world of the Wiccan is one "of images, myths, symbols and their associations in which poetic evocation is more highly valued than analytic evaluation, and the force of a poetic analogy is strong"³³. For feminist Wiccans the myth satisfies a need for the acknowledgement of the role of women that no other culture has given. It may be seen that this myth continues to permeate Wicca because of its efficacy and potency, though now the burden of proof has been placed on personal experience.

²⁶ Hutton (2001)

²⁷ Hutton (2001) p 236

²⁸ Luhrmann (1989) p. 262

²⁹ Kelly (1991)

³⁰ Rose (1989) p 230

³¹ My emphasis.

³² Crowley, V (1997)

³³ Luhrmann (1989)

How the myth makes the individual feel and act in response is more important than its validity. Therefore, heritage is considered as secondary to spirit, as per our definitions of the two terms above.

I now intend to examine the factual historical development of the 'myth' of the 'Old Religion' and Wicca itself as various historians have proposed it. I believe that this will show that the myth of the 'Old religion' and new attitudes to the truth and the authority of the self, all unintentionally grew out of the rationalism project of the Enlightenment and had a profound affect on the development of Wicca as a religion.

The Development of the 'myth of the Old Religion'

According to Hutton's seminal work on the development of modern pagan witchcraft³⁴, during the 17th and 18th Century there was a paradigmatic shift in collective thought about the reality of magic and witchcraft. The witch was no longer considered to have malicious powers but was seen as a fraud. Belief in magic diminished as rationalism became more dominant. However, if witches had never really "existed", never performed the satanic acts they were accused of by the Church and State, thousands of innocent people had been put to death. This was an opportunity for Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire to attack not only the Roman Catholic Church but also mankind's "unenlightened" beliefs, including religiosity, which they thought should be left behind in the march of progress.

I propose that these anti-religious views ironically resulted in the 'myth' of the 'Old Religion'. In the 19th Century two Catholic apologists, Karl Ernst Jarcke and Franz Josef Mone introduced the idea of an age-old organized pagan religion in order to support the Church's actions during the witch-craze. Jarcke and Mone believed that witchcraft was a "degenerate remnant" of this religion which had been accused of satanic acts by Christianity and eventually had eventually acted accordingly. The Church's actions were therefore in response to a real heresy and were justified. Although not supported by any evidence Jarcke and Mone's theories were influential and the idea of an 'Old Religion' underlying the Witch Trials and witchcraft spread³⁵. The witch was no longer seen as an individual figure of malice but part of a religious community.

The strongest response to the work of Jarcke and Mone was that of Jules Michelet. In 1862 he wrote *La Sorciere* which represented witches as a magical collective opposed to the oppressive feudal system of the Middle Ages, and surviving into the 17th and 18th Centuries to aid women and the working classes. He emphasized the role of women, whereas they were commonly seen as subordinate to the leader of the coven, usually a man or male devil figure. He believed that it was only when the nobility became involved in the cult that it became corrupted into the satanic form of the witch trials. He had effectively turned Jarcke and Mone's theories on their heads, the witch was the source of truth and equality, not perversion and heresy. His counter-argument to the theories of these Catholic apologists had the result of perpetuating their creation, the 'Old Religion', while also using it to promote his liberal ideals and his dislike for the Church and the State. This however did not prevent it being very influential on the development of the continuation of the 'myth' of the 'Old Religion', particularly when it crossed the Atlantic to America.

³⁴ Hutton (2001)

³⁵ Adler (1997) pp.49-53

The 'Old Religion' In the USA

In the USA, where the hysteria of the Witch Craze had already been felt in New England in 1692, witchcraft scholars were of the opinion that the cause was a collective delusion, basing their arguments more on the trial reports and accounts than Jarcke, Mone or Michelet. However, *La Sorciere* did influence the American author Charles Godfrey Leland. Like Michelet, he intensely disliked the Church and the remnants of Feudalism and believed that man's future lay in an affinity with nature, writing, "Nature is eternal, and while grass grows and rivers run man is ever likely to fall again into the eternal enchantments. And truly until he does he will have no new poetry, no fresh art".³⁶

Leland's contribution to the evolution of the concept of the witch religion was his book, *Aradia*. Purporting to be a gospel, or 'Vangel' of the ancient witch religion described by Michelet, it contained a creation myth, spells and invocations and described how witchcraft was a gift from the gods to be used to fight oppressive regimes. However, although Leland spoke of the book as being of the 'Old religion' it appears to represent neither anything 'old' nor a 'religion'. Leland himself admitted that it represented "something more than sorcery less than a faith"³⁷. Beyond the obvious similarities with the 'political witchcraft' of Michelet, *Aradia* also has the dubious origins and claims to historicity. Leland already had a reputation as an unreliable scholar; adding details that he felt should be there³⁸. With his hostility towards the feudal system it may have seemed logical to him that such a movement should have existed and thus with Michelet's *La Sorciere* as a "source", perhaps he felt it possible to recreate his witchcraft. As we have seen, this trend of liberal recreation did not end with Leland and *Aradia* and is exemplified in Gardner himself and remains a constant factor in the development of Wicca even today.

Pan and The White Goddess

Society at this time was changing dramatically with the Industrial revolution. At the beginning of the 19th Century there were less than two dozen cities with populations of 100,000 in the UK, by 1900 there were more than 150³⁹. Urban life resulted in a form of nostalgia where paganism came to be associated with "the alluring, the abandoned and the amoral"⁴⁰. Pagan customs were recorded by the Folklore Society and people harked back to a timeless rural utopia. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* at this time presented pagan survivals, and combined with the new theory of evolution these customs could be seen as 'fossils' of a lost 'Old Religion'⁴¹. The witch was seen as the "successor of the Druid Priestess"⁴², the surviving pagan heart of the country.

Literature also responded to this nostalgia, the god Pan became a popular character in English poetry and the English poet, Robert Graves, wrote of a matriarchal religion in his novel *The White Goddess*. Influenced by the work of Michelet and the theories of Jane Ellen Harrison, a Cambridge Classicist⁴³ whom had postulated a triple goddess⁴⁴, he developed poetic images of the religion and its deities. These included a dualistic version of Frazer's vegetation deity, the Kings

³⁶ *Gypsy Sorcery and Fortune Telling* (1889) p 221, cited in Hutton (2001) p 142

³⁷ *Etruscan Roman Remains in Popular Tradition* (1892, reprint Phoenix Publishing, 1999) cited in Hutton (2001).

³⁸ His obituary (1903) in *The Journal of the British Folklore Society*, written by F. York Powell, makes this accusation.

³⁹ URL: <http://www.mars.wnec.edu/~grempel/courses/wc2/lectures/industrialrev.html>

⁴⁰ Hutton (1995)

⁴¹ Bennett (1994) pp. 23-37

⁴² George Lawrence Gomme (1892) *Ethnology in Europe* cited in Hutton (2001)

⁴³ *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903, reprint PUP, 1991) cited in Hutton (2001)

⁴⁴ Containing the sacralized feminine roles of Maid, Mother and Crone.

of the Waxing and Waning year, still seen in Wicca today. However, Graves presented these deities as 'real' in a limited sense, only existing when believed in. This may be a form of the relativism of objective truth, which has become a dominant force in Wicca as we shall discuss. Similarly, *The White Goddess* was primarily a work of imagination, not truth, as Graves declared: "Literal truth is comparatively unimportant, as an artist can tell the truth by a condensation and dramatization of the facts."⁴⁵ This is a more honest version of Leland's creative re-constructions in *Aradia*. Therefore the legacy of Grave's book for Wicca, along with its imagery, is Grave's attitude to the truth and its inferior status.

The "Fin De Siecle"

With the Victorian era came a "mixture of technological progress and romantic yearning"⁴⁶. Science and technology were seen to be undermining religious faith and trust in God, as with Darwinism, and yet, new societies that claimed to be both spiritual and scientific were appearing. It is during this period that many historians find the origins of the resurgence of interest in the occult, or indeed as Heelas does, the origins of the New Age itself. He argues that the "Fin de Siecle" counter-culture included all the elements seen later in at the height of the New Age⁴⁷.

In particular both he and Luhrmann cite the influence of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded in 1887 by three Freemasons at a time of interest in spiritualism and psychical research, seeing it as responsible for the appearance of similar ritualistic groups. Heelas also notes the influence of the form of 'scientific spiritualism' epitomized by Madame Blavatsky and Henry Olcott's Theosophy movement, whose adherence to the ideal of a scientific approach is still apparent in the 'magical rationalism' of the subjects of Luhrmann's study. One of the offshoots of this particular movement was the Rosicrucian Fellowship, a group of which first introduced Gardner to the coven in the New Forest according to his account, and some of these ideas and styles of practice may well have been adopted by Gardner for his Wicca. Thus we may note that this "mixture" of science and spiritualism produced ritual magic, "an odd but filial offspring"⁴⁸.

The Enlightenment of the Self

Along with the development of the 'myth' of the 'Old Religion', I believe that the Enlightenment has had another unforeseen consequence, the emergence of the self-ethic in magic and religion, particularly seen during the early 20th Century in the works of Aleister Crowley. Kant believed that, "All people have a duty to think for themselves; a duty which, by virtue of its individuation, has to contest the control of the authoritative, collective, traditions"⁴⁹. In traditional religion authority was considered to come from external sources, God, scripture, the Church. As the rationalism project progressed there was a turn away from these and a turn towards the self. For some this was seen to be secularization, while others noted new forms of detraditionalized religions and faiths. Within Wicca we must note the influence of the occultist Aleister Crowley, an associate of Gardner's, former member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and leader of the Ordo Templi Orientalis.

Heir to "the greatest of Victorian ritual magicians"⁵⁰, Crowley was obviously influenced by the Hermetic Order, whose initiation included the lines, "I may at length attain to be more than

⁴⁵ Cited by Hutton (2001) p193

⁴⁶ Luhrmann (1989) p41

⁴⁷ Heelas (1996a)

⁴⁸ Luhrmann (1989) p41

⁴⁹ Cited in Woodhead and Heelas (Eds.) (2000) p 321

⁵⁰ Hutton (2001) p 172

human and thus gradually raise and unite myself to my higher and Divine genius". In this context this unification meant having the same claim to authority as the 'divine'. In 1904 he claimed that Aiwass, a spirit, had revealed *The Book of the Law* to him. It detailed "The Age of Horus", which signified the end of humanitarianism and the beginning of an aeon of individualism. Prior to this had been the Age of the Father, embodied in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which had succeeded the Age of the Mother, the universal matriarchy and the 'Great Goddess'. Now, the Age of Horus offered "Complete moral independence" and freedom from "altruism, fear and the consequences of sin"⁵¹, from religion and its authorities external to the Self.

Thus in 1911 he declared that it was time to start again by doubting all religions and taking charge of one's own mind⁵². This was to be achieved through "Thelema", the "Will", the force behind all magic, the decisive power of the Self. With this Self-authority the individual was as a god, and all religions impotent, reduced to useful symbols for magical acts. Thus: "There is no law beyond do what thou wilt"⁵³, and all actions are permitted. The Wiccan Rede, or ethic, "And it harm none, do what thou wilt" must surely have indirectly evolved from Crowley's extreme views on Self-authority, as has contemporary Wicca itself.

This turn to self-authority and the consideration of literal truth as lesser than symbolic truth were both the result of Wicca's true history and relationship with the Enlightenment project of rationalization. Wicca is truly "a thing of spirit not of heritage". In the following section we will first consider how this has been explained by sociologists in relation to wider trends in modernity. Then we will consider what these characteristics have meant for the development of Wicca's religious attributes besides its 'Sacred history', i.e. its comprehension of the divine, its rituals, its moral propositions and its structure.

SPIRIT

Wicca as a "Surrogate Memory"

One way of viewing new religions is suggested by the sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Leger. She argues for a definition of religion as a specific mode of believing, versus the traditional functionalist approach. The latter often concludes that religion may become outmoded, performing only a limited social function that no longer exists in a modern, rationalized world. In contrast, Hervieu-Leger's "Ideal Type" approach implies that religion can still be visualized by postulating "the existence of a believing community; either concrete or imaginary, linking the individual believer to something beyond him or herself". This community takes two main forms, the first the social group, which exists in Wicca as the coven structure. The second is an "imaginary genealogy, which maps out the generation of believer both in the past and in the future"⁵⁴.

Religion is the method by which this "chain" of believers is maintained. Hervieu-Leger suggests that Western religiosity is changing because we are suffering from "collective amnesia", the loss of these "chains of memory". Instead appear "surrogate memories" which are formed from various sources and may even be invented. Wicca could be considered one such surrogate memory, by noting the "various sources" evident in Wicca's protean forms and the role of "invention" in its history and nature. The latter means that Wicca can also be seen to have an "imaginary genealogy", Wiccans claim an ancestry that is symbolically, rather than literally, true.

⁵¹ Greenwood (1995)

⁵² Hutton (2001) p 174

⁵³ Crowley (1938) p 400

⁵⁴ Davie (1996)

Gwydion Penderwwen, a Wiccan, says, “It doesn’t matter whether the grandmother [or “the ancestor”] was a physical reality, or a figment of our imagination. One is subjective, one is objective, but we experience both”⁵⁵. Wicca has become primarily an experiential religion, where strict ideas of authority and positivism have become weakened. The invented tradition has helped to produce this aspect of Wicca, making it “a good example of a detraditionalized religion”⁵⁶.

A Detraditionalized Religion

If we understand tradition to be a corpus of belief with an implied continuity with the past, we can see that detraditionalized religions by definition are free of this continuity and the external organization it brings with it. “Detraditionalization involves a shift of authority: from ‘without’ to ‘within’... individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority”⁵⁷. This is an obvious parallel to the sacralization of the self, seen in the works of Crowley and subsequent occult writers. However, in comparison to ‘traditional’ religions, detraditionalized religions can look very “empty”. They do not contain the same emphasis on doctrine, ethical commandments and narratives, worship is often informal and rituals are created to individual specifications⁵⁸. Whereas in the traditional religion, “the individual personality is lost in the depths of the social mass”⁵⁹ in the detraditionalized religion the individual’s liberty is emphasized.

Hervieu-Leger sees the emergence of these detraditionalized “emotional communities” as a part of a greater paradox to do with the nature of modernity itself. While modernity is “corrosive” of traditional religion, the two being incompatible, she nevertheless sees that modern society cannot function without religiosity. Thus there is the generation of “innovative expressions of religious life”, such as Wicca perhaps, which are often very different to traditionalized religions according to Hervieu-Leger.

The first stage of this paradox is essentially the secularization thesis: the idea of the gradual removal of religiosity from the society into the private realm preceding a complete disappearance, the rationalization or a “disenchantment” of the world according to Weber. Secularization theory is a very linear approach to history, “the idea that society moves from some sacred condition to successively secular conditions in which the sacred evermore recedes”⁶⁰. Hervieu-Leger acknowledges that there has been a fall in attendance of traditional religious practice, e.g. attending Mass and therefore that historical modernity is corrosive of traditional religion. And yet she points to the increasing popularity of less traditional or in fact detraditionalized religious expressions and the persistence of “religion populaire” including shrine and saint veneration. Religiosity both waxes and wanes in different spheres. Similarly there is tension between those who look to the eventual secularization of society and those who support the counter-argument, the sacralization thesis, which states that while types of religiosity may change, the quantity of belief does not.

Hervieu-Leger’s conclusion is that there is no real incompatibility between these new forms of religious life and modernity, because the latter embodies utopian hopes in its need for progress, and these hopes are a requirement of any religiosity. For example, the eschatological belief in the coming of the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ in Christianity and in Wicca the more anthropocentric hope for a new age of sexual equality and union with nature. Therefore

⁵⁵ Adler (1997)

⁵⁶ Rees (1995)

⁵⁷ Heelas (1996) p2

⁵⁸ Woodhead and Heelas, (Eds.) (2000) p343

⁵⁹ Durkheim (1957)

⁶⁰ Hammond (1985) p1

Hervieu-Leger deduces a dialectical process of destruction and renewal in religion rather than a linear progression. While historical forms of modernity displace traditional religiosity, utopian forms create space for new religions, which in time become traditionalized and are again placed in tension with historical modernity. Wicca may therefore be seen as a product of modernity and its hopes, rather than a “backward and irrational step”⁶¹.

The “Second Language” of Religion

Bellah supports this idea of new religions, or “surrogate memories” being a necessary construct in modernity. He believes that we have lost the “second” language of mythology, which is needed to make moral sense of our lives. He calls for the “reconstruction of the social world” by means of the recreation of “communities of memory” based around narratives that locate individuals within the larger environment and community⁶². Wicca is presented by Wiccans as the religion of the archetypal ‘noble savage’, one with nature and himself, giving the adherent a very definite aim and position. It is also proactive in the recreation of mythologies, reviving old pantheons of gods and expressing the belief that we live in a world of animistic spirits, elementals and magic. Thus Scarboro and Luck see that “Wicca is an attempt at these communities of memory which reattach individuals into a resacralized world peopled by powerful actors, communities that attempt to put the *Habits* second language into practice”⁶³ with beneficial consequences for the individual, including their empowerment.

We can argue that the ‘myth’ of Wicca’s origins, serves just such a function, giving Wiccans a sense of their relationship with the world and their own nature. We have already noted the willingness of some Wiccans to accept the history as a myth because of its evocative nature. By declaring themselves a part of the invented heritage of Wicca they are creating a “community of memory” where there are shared feelings, senses, beliefs, rituals and an overarching structure. The fact that their “sacred history” is invented only serves to enhance Wicca’s detraditionalized status and emphasis the idea of the resacralized self where the individual is the only true authority, rather than invalidating Wicca as a religion.

“Personal Myths”

This use of mythology is also expressed in Krippner and Feinstein’s idea of “personal myths” which “explain one’s world to oneself, guide personal development, provide social direction and address spiritual longings”⁶⁴. Tension therefore arises between these personal myths and wider cultural forms such as traditional religions and the aims of rationalism. However, Kenneth Rees suggests that in Wicca there is less tension for the individual because Wicca’s eclecticism and romantic magical culture provide a hook for similar personal myths, they have “an allure latching onto the special predisposition’s of the quester built on his personal mythic concerns”⁶⁵. Therefore it is not surprising that in relation to becoming a Wiccan, practitioners often speak of a feeling of “coming home” rather than of “converting” as they are guided by pre-existing, and thus familiar, preferences. One Wiccan talks of this saying, “I had simply accepted, reaffirmed and extended a very old experience. I had allowed certain kinds of feeling and ways of being back into my life”⁶⁶.

⁶¹ *Vers Une Nouveau Christianisme* (1986) p9, cited in Davie (1996)

⁶² Bellah et al (1985)

⁶³ Scarboro and Luck (1997) p76

⁶⁴ Krippner and Feinstein (1989) p24

⁶⁵ Rees (1995)

⁶⁶ Luhrmann (1989) p252

The 'ancient' history of Wicca may be the "personal myth" of Wicca itself, its invented nature accepted when it is chosen by the individual to be their guiding narrative. However, when there is discontinuity between the individual's "personal myth" and "the composite myths of the sub-cultural segments of paganism" i.e. the myth of the origins of Wicca, ideologies may be seen to shift according to what may be seen as "consumer choice"⁶⁷. In the case of the 'myth' of Wicca its move from being considered a literal truth to being seen as a metaphor may be a result of changes in the "personal myths" of the adherents. I propose that a greater level of relativism and individualism in society as a whole has resulted in symbolism superceding literalism.

The Individualization of Truth

An emphasis on individual freedom in modern society has resulted in extreme what Harriet Whitehead calls "intellectual democracy"⁶⁸, the reality of truth-claims being seen as a matter of subjectivity and personal choice rather than objectivity and fact. Allan Bloom says that in modern society, "The relativity of truth is not a theoretical insight but a moral postulate... [This] is the modern replacement for the inalienable rights that used to be the traditional American grounds for a free society"⁶⁹. Bloom believes that we have been taught to fear absolutism, which is though to lead to fundamentalism and obeying dictates without questioning.

Berger is however a critic of this strong pluralism, which he sees resulting in a loss of stability and certainty as no one way receives strong affirmation. He says, "modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of homelessness... It goes without saying that this condition is psychologically hard to bear"⁷⁰. However, again, the results of this homelessness and uncertainty are the turn to the Self for authority, as seen in the sacralization of the Self, and the commodification of beliefs. Both are present in the culture of consumer choice mentioned above, where personal choice and satisfaction is of primary concern.

The Consumer

In the last thirty years the convergence of consumerism and 'self-religions' and therapies has been apparent in America and the New Age movement⁷¹, but in England, during the boom of Thatcherism and the 'Yuppie' culture, several 'foreign ideas' congenial to consumerism were adopted. The privatization of public industries resulted in a new concept of ownership, reflected in the ability of tenants to purchase council accommodation. The greater possibility of credit purchases also meant that almost no item was out of the range of choice. We may see that in modernity consumer freedom has replaced wage-labour as the driving force of culture and society, and that capitalism thrives on the basis of what Baudrillard called "Seduction rather than production"⁷². So we find modern religiosity fueled by the needs of the individual consumer, as Zygmunt Bauman says, "Rather than sharing their character with religious institutions, they are products and integral parts of the counseling boom... aimed rather at the training of perfect consumers"⁷³.

⁶⁷ Rees (1995)

⁶⁸ cited in Adler (1997) p12

⁶⁹ Bloom (1987), pp. 25-26

⁷⁰ Berger and Kellner (1974) p 73

⁷¹ Heelas (1996a)

⁷² Cited in Bauman (1992)

⁷³ Bauman (1998) pp. 70-72

The effect on Wicca is apparent in almost any bookshop, where Mind, Body and Spirit departments are growing exponentially⁷⁴. However, this commercial aspect of religiosity is not limited to Wicca, religion itself has become a commodity. According to Heelas, whereas religion “once served to regulate human passion”, it now is “increasingly a way of pleasuring the self, and one which can on occasion be purchased”. He also notes the increasingly common belief “that consumer choice can fashion individual identity rather than consumption being regulated by socio-culturally provided models of identity provision”⁷⁵. People are attempting to purchase their religious identity and style rather than developing it over time.

As per Baudrillard’s suggestion above, the seductive power of an option becomes the most important aspect, not its ultimate truth. Clifford Longley says, “The one measurement that matters is the quality of the spiritual high they give, as if worship was something you snorted through your nose”⁷⁶. The resultant ‘pick and mix’ spirituality of the consumer culture can be seen clearly in Wicca’s eclecticism⁷⁷. Similarly, Wicca’s “invention” may be considered insignificant, primarily because as a myth the false history satisfies the consumer by fulfilling nostalgic tendencies enhanced by contact with the various tensions of modernity, such as industrialization. Again this makes Wicca a very modern religion despite its detractors claiming that it is backward.

A Post-Modern Religion?

There are however, arguments for seeing both the consumer culture and the turn to the self, seen in detraditionalized religions as the main tendencies of the Post-modern era. Whereas modernity is often connected with the breaking of ties with the past, including the processes of secularization that resulted in detraditionalization, post-modernity is seen as the selective re-establishment of elements from all eras. Jencks sees post-modernity producing a “heap of broken images”, the essence of the eclectic and protean Wicca, or many “shining new styles”, the element of invention and originality seen in Wicca⁷⁸. Stark and Bainbridge criticized Wicca, saying that it had, “reacted to secularization by a headlong plunge back into magic....” And further, that “In our judgement, these cults are reactionary and have very little future... They will not thrive unless the modern world itself collapses”⁷⁹. However, the post-modern world represents the deconstruction of the “modern” world and therefore may be seen to allow Wicca to “thrive”.

Is Wicca therefore a post-modern religion? Beckford describes post-modernity as including, “a refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole or exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge” and a “willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives, and frameworks of knowledge”. The latter, “post-historical”, aspect is certainly what we have seen to occur since Wicca abandoned the factual validity of “overarching and triumphalist myth” of the ‘Old Religion’. And yet we may note that it is still accepted as on a symbolic level. Modern Wicca is founded on and in spite of the supposed victory of the Indo-European culture over the matrifocal, whether this actually occurred or not. A metanarrative is

⁷⁴ A search for “Wicca” at www.Amazon.com produces 543 books compared to Christianity’s 9,498, Islam’s 6,379, Judaism’s 4,535 or Buddhism’s 4,482. However, Wicca has only really been in existence for 53 years, whereas the youngest of the above traditions, Islam, is 1,382 years old. The growth in interest has been exponential.

⁷⁵ Heelas (1996) pp.5-6

⁷⁶ The Daily Telegraph 17th July 1995.

⁷⁷ Heelas (1996) p3

⁷⁸ York (1996)

⁷⁹ Stark and Bainbridge (1993) pp. 455-456

still employed. Raphael suggests that we see Wicca as a “late-modern reflexive” religion that displays the characteristics of detraditionalization we have discussed⁸⁰.

However, applying either the term “post-modern” or “modern” to Wicca implies a periodization of thought and history and is a generalization of many complex processes. There may instead be many dialectics, for example between modernity and post-modernity, secularization and sacralization, tradition and detraditionalization. In reference to the latter, if we recognize a world of choices, we must admit that the traditional is a possible option. In Wicca we can note the adherence of some to the concept of a family ancestry and inherited beliefs, legitimate or not. Though, as Wuthnow says, “No doubt people draw on traditionalized as well as detraditionalized religions to help construct their biographical religiosity, but all of this is detraditionalized in that it is (apparently) largely taking place beyond the authority of particular traditions”⁸¹. Perhaps underlying these dialectics is a more general shift to the detraditionalized, self-reflexive religion, encompassing the above trends and attitudes, rather than a strictly post-modern period.

How then does this detraditionalized, reflexive character affect the familiar dimensions of religiosity in Wicca? In order to answer this question we must examine each of the aspects previously identified by Raphael in her study of “thealogy”, the divine, ritual, morality, and structure.

The Divine

Wiccans see the goddess and god as “radically immanent”⁸² in and as the world, including its multiplicity of forms, contradicting the traditional view of God as totally other, the extreme transcendence found in the major monotheistic religions. This has several important consequences for how Wiccans view their external realities and even the deity itself. First, it must be recognized that as an imminent entity the goddess is available as an object of experience rather than faith. This challenges the traditional views of god as “distant, stern, judging, vengeful, universal and associated with the Law and abstract standards of justice”⁸³.

Second, the deity in Wicca is conceived in a multiplicity of ways because this reflects nature. Wiccans may be classically polytheistic, recognizing the pantheons of a specific culture or era, or a collective of many gods and goddesses from many cultures. Others look to a polarity of goddess and god, male and female energy that underlies these images and names. Others go still further and look to a monistic or non-dual reality behind this polarity, imagining an entity that is beyond all definitions and that encompasses all potentialities and yet is not envisaged monotheistically. In the novel *The Fifth Sacred Thing* by the Wiccan writer Starhawk, the goddess is described by the protagonist as “All Possibility”⁸⁴.

Third, the immanence of the divine in all aspects of the world includes humanity itself. In goddess orientated religion the body is sacralized, for the deity represents all aspects of humanity’s lifecycle and roles and therefore the “goddess enters puberty and menarche, she ages and she grieves”⁸⁵. This challenges the traditional religious motifs of the female and her body as less spiritual because of their attachment to the processes and changes of the world, and again the idea of the deity being totally other.

⁸⁰ Raphael (1996)

⁸¹ Woodhead and Heelas (2002) p377

⁸² Scarboro and Luck (1997) p72

⁸³ Scarboro and Luck (1997) p71

⁸⁴ Starhawk (1994) p207

⁸⁵ Scarboro and Luck (1997) p72

We may also observe that these conceptions of the divine, the “theologies” of Wicca, may shift with the mood of the individual adherent. As Starhawk says, “It all depends on how I feel. When I feel weak She is someone who can help and protect me. When I feel strong She is the symbol of my own power. At other times I feel Her as the natural energy in my body and the world”⁸⁶. There is a strongly utilitarian feel to the way in which Wiccans describe their deities. As with Graves’ *The White Goddess*, literal belief in these deities is not necessary, though some Wiccans still proclaim this. Different viewpoints co-exist, for, “even within the same coven it is left up to the individual members to solve the apparent problem according to their choice”⁸⁷. Caitlin Matthews, a Wiccan, says “the only criteria for finding a myth of the goddess is does it work for you”⁸⁸. This freedom of choice is a part of the sacralization of the Self, a remnant of Aleister Crowley’s ideas and the fourth consequence of the radical immanence of the divine in Wicca. This recognition of the divine within each individual implies that, as we have noted above, the power of external authorities is denied.

“Priestess and Witch”

With this sacralization of the Self, the practitioner’s role is viewed differently in Wicca. In ritual and worship a Wiccan is not an idle witness but a magus, changing reality while maintaining a strong bond with it, in essence and practice a divinity. Scarboro and Luck note the participative nature of Wicca as opposed to traditional religion, which emphasizes “the need, and insufficiency of the religious practitioner”⁸⁹. They draw attention to how Wicca empowers the practitioner in contrast to the traditional passivity involved in the relationship between the clergy and laity of many religions. The disintegration of the traditional Western distinction between religion and magic is expressed in the title given to new initiates of “priestess and witch”. We may note the etymology of “Wicca”, from Indo-European roots “wic” and “weik”⁹⁰ meaning “to bend or to shape” or as the pagan writer Isaac Bonewits would have it, “to will”⁹¹, supporting this view of Wicca as a religion of empowerment. For Adler ‘spiritual’ means, “The power within oneself to create artistically and change one’s life”⁹².

This “shaping” is also evident in the role given to creativity in ritual. The utilitarian approach continues with any books available, such as the many *Books of Shadows*, being seen as a starting point for ritual, in the same category as any other source. There is a “primacy of ritual and experience over conceptual and doctrinal structures”⁹³ and personal taste or emotion often dictates the processes for the formation of ritual. Luhrmann talks of one ritual she participated in where “there was also the sense that the group had written some of the ritual together and that some of the ritual was spontaneous”⁹⁴. This aspect of ritual has resulted in Wicca’s protean and eclectic nature, as individuals have the freedom and the authority to choose from many pre-Christian sources for their images. This can therefore be seen as continuing a tradition of invention and the acquisition of sources started by Gardner, Leland and Michelet.

⁸⁶ Starhawk (1979)

⁸⁷ Hutton (2001) p392

⁸⁸ Raphael (1996) p200

⁸⁹ Scarboro and Luck (1997) p74

⁹⁰ Some contest this, seeing it as from the root “wit”, meaning “wise” as in “Druid”.

⁹¹ Adler (1997) p10

⁹² Adler (1997) p12

⁹³ Hutton (2001) p 398

⁹⁴ Luhrmann (1989) p 56.

The Wiccan Rede

However, Lasch sees this prevailing move to self-authority and self-gratification in religion and society as the “New Narcissism”. Similarly, Wicca has been criticized for its “disdain” for rationality and objectivity, the result being a new amoral relativism⁹⁵. Bauman asks, “[Can one] legitimately recognize the orgasmic experience of the post-modern sensation-gatherers as essentially religious?”⁹⁶. I argue that however invented, eclectic or self-determined Wicca may have become, it was always intended as a religion and with this intention comes an attitude of acting in ways considered normative to a religion, the moral collective. Thus even Wiccans see that there must be at least some unifying moral beliefs underlying any diversity. In 1985 the Pagan Federation determined three statements of core belief, including respect for nature and other individuals. However, without traditional religion’s salvation history or a transcendent law-giving deity, the moral and ethical element in Wicca may be limited to the Wiccan Rede, “An’ it harm none do what thou wilt”.

Although Aleister Crowley’s version of this ethic, “There is no law beyond do what thou wilt”, may aptly apply to Lasch’s “Narcissists”, the first half of the Rede is an attempt at drawing together the diversity of voices in Wicca behind a moral element that limits selfishness. Narcissus was so enraptured of himself that he spent days gazing at his own reflection while Echo pined for him and finally died. He gave no thought to the results of his actions, and this is exactly what the Wiccan Rede warns against. It cannot therefore be called a part of the “New Narcissism”. Built into Wicca is a concern for others that, while not entirely limiting freedom of choice, does ensure concern for cause and effect, the basics of any magical system. The benefit to its adherents is a freedom that they feel is at least not possible in the monotheistic tradition and in extreme cases actively prevented.

“A Body without a Skeleton”

The lack of external authority in Wicca and detraditionalized religions as a whole presents problems for sociologists attempting to classify or understand them as organizations. While there are certain characteristics that Wiccans tend to share, the lack of dogma or a hierarchical clergy suggests that it should not survive as a system at all. As James Huneker said in *Painted Veils*, “Without dogma a religion is like a body without a skeleton”⁹⁷. Some try to classify Wicca as either a sect or a cult. Sociologists tend to see sects as having rigid, disciplined hierarchies with strict distinctions between “us” and “them”. Cults are considered to be much more ephemeral with members drifting in and out and being attracted by strong personalities or “charismatics”. However, while Wicca can be seen to be equally casual in its membership of specific groups, the term ‘cult’ has too many negative connotations and while Gardner may be responsible for the creation of Wicca he was hardly a charismatic leader. Instead York suggests that we should consider Wicca as a SPIN, a Segmented, Polycentric Integrated Network, a concept introduced by sociologists Gerlach and Hine in their studies of political movements⁹⁸.

By “segmented” Gerlach and Hine mean that the social movement is cellular, composed of many different groups and “polycentric” because it has many leaders or ‘centers of direction’. These segments and leaders are then “integrated” into “networks” through various structural, political or ideological ties. While the SPIN has been used most often in reference to the structure of terrorist groups, it may also partly explain Wicca’s survival in spite of its invented status. According to

⁹⁵ Harris (1974)

⁹⁶ Bauman (1998)

⁹⁷ Cited in Gardner (1954)

⁹⁸ Gerlach and Hine (1970)

York, “the boundary diffuse replicating cell structure and over-lapping network arrangements of the SPIN are a successful way of surviving in an otherwise hostile environment”⁹⁹. By containing diverse forms a religion may survive changes and challenges in the outside world, including hostility from rival belief forms, as per the success of organisms in evolutionary history¹⁰⁰. Wicca is sometimes still considered to be connected to the satanic hag of witchcraft by the public and some hostility still remains from Christian groups who uphold the spirit if not the word of Exodus 22:18¹⁰¹.

Within Wicca this organic structure also allows the survival of the religion in the face of internal conflict. Amy Simes sees that new groups form and dissipate like “bubbles on a cauldron” and yet Wicca itself, the overall network remains due to this flexibility¹⁰². Luhrmann notes that “witches speak of an amoeba like fissioning wherein one or two members leave the group to set up a coven of their own. They call this ‘hiving off’”¹⁰³. As numbers increase so does the number of individual voices and this may result in the formation of new groups.

Wicca has also subsequently undergone a polarization into those who are comfortable with group workings, be they discussion or ritual groups, and those who remain solitary practitioners or “hedge-witches”. The latter may join groups for a while but when conflict occurs they will return to their solitary status and similarly, “groupies” always seek out new groups¹⁰⁴. As a detraditionalized religion Wicca has no external authority to counter this fluidity and constant change. Thus Wicca is a paradox; it encourages social behavior through the concept of the coven, while at the same time pursuing individual creativity. It therefore provides the individual with a structure or tradition to adhere to but unlike traditional religions allows for greater freedom and the use of imagination within it.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that Wicca’s invented tradition has resulted in a highly detraditionalized religion where “heritage” is of lesser importance than “spirit”. Such a “spirited” religion places the evocative effect of an experience for an individual above questions of validity and subsequently makes the truth relative. The locus of authority is displaced from its traditional external position to an inner spirituality. The individual reigns supreme, given the status of a divinity and in turn there is the freedom to alter both the world through magic and the traditional character of religion.

This is in direct conflict with traditional religious motifs where the radical transcendent character of the divine, symbolized for Wiccans by the masculinized metaphors, ensures the lesser status of the adherent. The relationship between God and man in traditional religions is seen as domineering, restrictive and harmful by Wiccans. Subsequently there are some Wiccans who deny that Wicca is a religion in any of the traditional senses of the word in order to distance themselves from a form of culture that they consider to be overtly dogmatic, expansionist and authoritarian¹⁰⁵. Instead they consider Wicca to be religion as it should be, giving the freedom to the individual and respect for the natural world that they consider to be lacking in traditional and patriarchal religions. Wicca may be an outwardly “immature” religion for all its creativity and

⁹⁹ York (1995) p 163.

¹⁰⁰ Lester (2002).

¹⁰¹ “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”

¹⁰² Simes (1995) p 169.

¹⁰³ Luhrmann (1989) p 41.

¹⁰⁴ Simes (1995).

¹⁰⁵ Raphael (1996) p 199

apparently backward approach to magic and myth, but to its adherents it is the maturation of mankind's religiosity.

I believe that the project of the Enlightenment has come to fruition in many unexpected ways. Religion may not have been extinguished as predicted but the immaturity associated with it may well have. By impressing the idea of human reason as a duty the project removed power from over-arching constructs such as "Church", "tradition", and even "history" and placed it in the hands of man himself. Magic and ritual have not vanished but been employed by man as always, in order to cause changes in his world. The difference now is that they are approached not with fear or the need to placate supernatural beings but with reason. They are tools, as Aleister Crowley described magic, "the art or science of causing change in conformity with will", and should be used without fear or superstition. In Wicca we can see that this pragmatic attitude to magic and ritual was employed to the aforementioned "over-arching constructs", and further, truth itself.

Finally therefore, I argue that Wicca is an exemplary contemporary religion, expressing the trends of detraditionalization, self-authority, commodification, creativity, and having a diffuse, organic structure, characteristics that have come to typify modern religiosity in the West. Despite debates about actual numbers of adherents we must be aware that Wicca and similar New Age or pagan religions continue to grow exponentially in numbers and popularity in modern society. This investigation has attempted to show that these contemporary expressions of religiosity, however apparently deviant from the norms of traditional religion, are very important to theology. They provide us with insights into how our ideas of religion and validity are changing from the aeon of heritage, to the 'new age' of spirit. Wicca may truly be seen as "a religion for a modern world in transition"¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁶ Simes (1995) p188

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