Witchcraft Essay, Research Paper

This paper will provide a general survey of witchcraft, past and present. The paper will also discuss contemporary witches, and how they practice their craft. It will also include the history and myths of werewolves.

Most experts agree that witchcraft represents “the old, pre-Christian, tribal religion of Europe” (Starhawk Truth or Dare 7). Although witchcraft is commonly associated with the use of magical spells and other anti-social behaviors, experts also agree that true witchcraft is actually nothing more than “a form of nature worship that has long been popular in alternative circles” (Catala 2). However, it is also acknowledged that there are two basic types of witches. According to the occult writer Marion Weinstein, witches may choose to follow either a negative or positive path in the practice of their craft. The negative path relates to the traditional stereotype of witches who use demons and magical spells in order to harm others and thereby manipulate reality for their own selfish gain. On the other hand, the positive path relates to the original practice of witchcraft which dates back to prehistoric times in European history. In this original form of witchcraft, the practitioners spend their time worshipping nature and goddesses as opposed to casting spells against others. According to Starhawk, a modern authority on witchcraft, magic powers can be raised for the purpose of changing consciousness and improving one’s spiritual life. Thus, in her own words: “Witchcraft is a mystery religion, based on ritual, on consciously structured collective experiences that allow us to encounter the immeasurable” (Truth or Dare 7). The positive form of witchcraft is based on ancient practices of nature worship in which rituals are used to align oneself with the cycles of nature. Thus, as noted by Starhawk, “witchcraft takes its teachings from nature, and reads inspiration in the movements of the sun, moon, and stars, the flight of birds, the slow growth of trees, and the cycles of the seasons” (Spiral Dance 2-3).

Witchcraft as it is known in modern times can be traced back to the pre-Christian beliefs of ancient Europe. In those days, the people were for the most part farmers who lived off the land. Those people generally worshipped the gods and goddesses who were associated with nature in the hope that such worship would help them to have successful harvests each year. During the 1920s, a British anthropologist named Margaret Murray conducted research into the origins of European witchcraft. Murray discovered a definite link between modern witchcraft and the pagan religious cults of ancient times. She noted that the goddess-worshipping aspects of ancient witchcraft predated such patriarchal, monotheistic religions as Judaism and Christianity. Thus, Murray concluded “that witchcraft had its primitive beginnings in Europe over 12,000 years ago during matriarchal times” (Weinstein 82).

The origin of the term “witch” can be traced to the Old English word “wicca,” which is in turn related to an Indo-European word meaning “to bend or shape” (Gadon 235). This refers to the witch’s interest in magically changing reality at will, as well as to the transformation in consciousness which occurs as a result of the rituals used in practicing the craft. The term witchcraft it translated to craft of the wise ones. In ancient and early medieval times, witches were generally accepted because the people believed that they served an important role in society as a whole. Thus, as noted by Starhawk, “healers, teachers, poets, and midwives, they were central figures in every community” (Spiral Dance 5). In the late medieval period, the practice of witchcraft in Europe was virtually wiped out by the Christian Church. During that time, witches and suspected witches were hunted down, tortured, and forced to confess to horrible deeds such as casting spells on their neighbors or having sex with the devil. During that period, it has been estimated that 9 million people, mostly women, were executed for the crime of witchcraft (Spiral Dance 5). In many cases, the accused witches were executed by being burned at the stake. This bloody persecution against witches continued in Europe for more than two centuries. The witch burnings which began in the late fifteenth century “reached their peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Gadon 211). Although most of the accused witches during that time were women, there were some reports of eccentric men being rounded up and executed as well. By the late seventeenth century, the persecution of witches reached the level of hysteria. For example, in the British colony of Salem, Massachusetts, hundreds of accused witches, most of them actually innocent, were hunted down, tried, and executed. At its height, the witchcraft hysteria caused people to begin turning against any neighbors who were different from themselves.

The persecution of witches began in 1484, when Pope Innocent VIII issued his Summis Desiderantes, a papal bull “ordering a holy war for the extermination of all witches and magicians” (Tompkins 52). With the help of the Dominican theologians Heinrich Kramer and Johann Sprenger, Innocent VIII established a reign of terror known as the Inquisition. The primary goal of the Inquisition was to remove the perceived threat against the Christian Church which was posed by the nature-worshipping practices of European witches. In Spain, the Inquisition was especially notorious under the leadership of Torquemada, the “Grand Inquisitor.” In 1484, Kramer and Sprenger published a book entitled Malleus Maleficarum, or “Hammer of the Witches.” In it, they described the official rules to be used by Inquisitors throughout Europe to detect witches. Unfortunately, the instructions in this book could be easily exploited by corrupt interrogators. For example, the Inquisitors were instructed to search the suspect’s nude body for marks which could be described as “devil’s marks.” These marks were supposed to have resulted from having sex with the devil, and were therefore considered to be proof of witchcraft. However, the Inquisitors often accepted a birthmark or bruise or even a freckle as being a “devil’s mark,” thus persecuting many innocent people. In addition, many Inquisitors used the search for devil’s marks as an excuse to “examine” any young woman they might choose. Often, the examination itself was frightening enough to force the young suspects to confess to almost anything.

One of the rules of the Malleus Maleficarum was that a devil’s mark would feel no pain. Therefore, the late medieval period saw the rise of the corrupt profession of “witch-prickers” who would determine if a woman was a witch or not by seeing if a mark on her skin was sensitive to pain. These witch-prickers used retractable picks which could either cause pain or not. Thus, “the pricker, having painfully, and visibly, drawn blood from several spots on a naked victim, would painlessly plunge the substitute bodkin to the hilt, astounding the crowd, and ensuring his fee for a witch delivered to trial (Tompkins 391). The Malleus Maleficarum was also subject to corruption because it contained a section on how to force witches to “confess” to their crimes. Because of the rules contained in Kramer and Sprenger’s book, the witch hunts were conducted in a manner which allowed many innocent people to be arrested, tortured, and executed. By the early 1700s, this type of persecution came to an end in Europe and the American colonies. Nevertheless, it was not until 1951 that the medieval laws prohibiting the practice of witchcraft were finally stricken from the books in England (Tompkins 389). This shows that the fear and unofficial persecution of witches has continued even into modern times.

As a result of the Inquisition, a number of misconceptions about witchcraft arose which have persisted to the present day. For example, many people believe that witches are Satanists who worship the devil. In actuality, the majority of witches today worship nature goddesses. However, there was an ancient pagan god of nature who had horns and was very similar to the modern conception of the devil. During the medieval persecution of witches, this ancient horned god came to be a symbol for evil in the Christian Church. As noted by Marion Weinstein:

The Horned God already constituted a threat to Christianity because His worship stood in the way of mass pagan conversions. If he were renamed the Devil (Satan)–if He came to personify pure evil in the minds of the people–they would have to turn away from His worship. Especially if such worship was considered a crime punishable by death (Weinstein 83).

There are many customs and practices which are associated with witchcraft, although not all of these are actually engaged in by real witches. It is true that many witches make use of candles, spells, herbs, and fortune telling by crystal ball or tarot cards. In addition, some witches keep a cat or other pet as a “familiar” to the spirit world, and some keep a “Book of Shadows” or “magical diary” to record their experiments in witchcraft (Weinstein 78-79). However, there is no evidence that witches ride on broomsticks or have sex with the devil. In addition, the majority of today’s witches are more interested in worshipping nature and attaining spiritual growth than in casting spells on their neighbors.

The worship of nature through a goddess of the earth is an important aspect of the witchcraft tradition. Since ancient times, witchcraft has been practiced mainly by women. Thus, it has traditionally been associated women’s “celebration of what is considered female divinity, embodied by Mother Earth whose seasons mirror the distinctly feminine powers of reproduction in their own cycles of birth and death” (Wiccan 1). The practice of witchcraft is also concerned with the use of magical powers. However, modern witches see the use of such powers as associated with the transformation of consciousness rather than with the manipulation of reality. According to Starhawk, magic is related to the use of the body’s natural energy: “In ritual, we raise it and shape it into patterns that set in motion forces that can bring about what we envision. Although energy is less tangible than matter, we can learn to be aware of it, to sense it, sometimes to see it, and to consciously direct it” (Truth or Dare 100).

The rituals of witchcraft help to transform consciousness by creating trance states and ecstatic visions. However, despite the emphasis on consciousness which is found in modern witchcraft, Starhawk notes that such altered states may “also be used to achieve material results, such as healings, since in the Craft there is no split between spirit and matter” (Spiral Dance 14). Witches generally practice in small groups known as covens. A coven never has more than thirteen members, and each new member must be initiated into the group by the others. As in the ancient practices of nature worship, modern witches have special rituals for certain times of the year. Witches generally arrange their rituals to follows the cycles of the moon as well as those of the seasons. As noted, these cycles correspond to the natural reproductive cycles of womens’ bodies. Thus, “witches cluster under new moons and gather to celebrate the changing seasons, the equinoxes and solstices as well as points in between that are considered sacred” (Wiccan 2). Witches often practice their rituals outside at night, in a natural setting. The rituals are sometimes practiced in the nude in order “to allow the magnetic current to flow more freely” (Tompkins 104).

In her book The Spiral Dance, Starhawk describes a typical witchcraft ritual. Upon arriving at a natural setting where the ritual is to be conducted, the participants must first “cast a circle” around the area. This involves incantations which will help create a “sacred space” or “temple” for the magical work which will follow (14). The participants in the ritual then invoke certain deities of nature–gods as well as goddesses–to come join in the work. These deities “are considered to be physically present within the circle and the bodies of the worshippers” (14). The participants then engage in some form of group activity which is designed to help raise their magical powers. According to Starhawk, this activity may include “chanting, story telling, dancing, meditation, drumming, or visualization” (Truth or Dare 100). Through one or more of these means, the witches attempt to alter their consciousness, and to experience either trance states, visions, or out-of-body experiences. Following this part of the session, the participants often share food and drink and “at the end, the powers invoked are dismissed, the circle is opened, and a formal return to ordinary consciousness is made” (Spiral Dance 14).

In the late Middle Ages, the leaders of the Christian Church made a concerted effort to wipe out all the witches of Europe. In addition, the Church leaders tried to destroy anything that pertained to witchcraft or to the worship of nature. This action represented the Church’s bid for power and control at the time. However, despite this period of persecution, the practice of witchcraft has survived into modern times. since medieval times, small groups of witches have met secretly in order to pass down the mysterious traditions of the craft. Today, the practice of witchcraft is resurfacing, with covens being formed around the world and numerous people practicing rituals on their own as well. According to one recent estimate, there are currently

“100,000 active pagans, men and women, a live subculture, who call themselves witches, Druids, Goddess worshippers” (Gadon 237).

As the number of witches increase, the old superstitions about witches begin to fade. There are, of course, some people who still associate themselves with the negative forms of black magic and witchcraft today. However, for the most part, modern witches are concerned only with the worship of nature and those deities which represent it. They generally regard magical power as a form of energy which is best used for the transformation of consciousness and the experience of divine states. There is no validity to the negative stereotype of witches “riding on broomsticks and consorting with the devil” (Gadon 234). As Starhawk has noted, practicing witchcraft today means being part of a noble heritage of “spiritual leaders, priestesses, healers, and midwives birthing human life and culture” (235). Contemporary witchcraft is a modern-day form of the worship of goddess and nature which was common in ancient times but was violently suppressed by the Christian Church.

Werewolves and witchcraft have been around longer than Christianity. As time passed, the myth of werewolves remained and grew stronger, but witchcraft developed into a religious belief, leaving werewolves as a myth.

The most interesting fact about werecreatures is that almost all cultures have a myth about a werething. The American Indians, the tribal Africans, the English, and the South Americans all possess some belief in people who are either cursed with or blessed with the ability to change their shape. This is strange considering that none of these cultures came in contact with each other for a very long time. The common belief in werewolves in America is due to our link to European ancestors. When England, Spain, and France began to conquer the world their beliefs were spread throughout their colonies and eventually to the natives in that land. Because of these countries colonizing the world we have a more uniform belief in wereanimals (Horrorfind 2).

There is even a mention of ?weres? in an unpublished gospel. It is that St. Patrick came across a race of people, that when he tried to preach the word of Christ to them they howled at him as if they were wolves. He said they did this in order to mock him and discourage him on his quest. St. Patrick prayed to God ?Let judgement be passed upon these peoples and their descendants forever remember their disobedience.? So God sent his punishment, ?all men of the culture are wolves always at a certain time, and run into the woods and take food like wolves; and they are worse in that they have human reason, for all their cunning, and such desire and greed for men as for other creatures? (Man to Werewolf 2). These men are said to become wolves every seven years and that they are men the rest of the time or that they are wolves for seven years then they are become human again and remain human (Werewolves 1).

There are many different types of ?weres? depending on what country you are in. I America we have werewolves, China has wereowls, Peru has several; weretigers, werepanthers, werejaguars, and even weresnakes. In the Congo there are werejackels. The difference in ?were? animals can be blamed upon the fact that each on of these areas has different wildlife. Each one of countries mentioned above also has unique beliefs on how one goes about becoming a shifter. Some of these cultures believed that the changes could be performed through the use of and the consumption of certain magic potions. The English believed that a witch or spirit had cursed a person who became a werecreature. The American Indians, tribal Africans, and some of the tribes in South America view those who can change shape as great spiritualists. Those that were attributed with the ability or gift of shape shifting were usually the Shaman or wise ones of the tribal communities (Horrorfind 4).

Some scientists believe that the actual ?shape shifter? never actually changes shape. The ?shape shifters? simply enter a hypnotic state in which they imagine themselves taking on the physical aspects of the animals. These people may not change shape but they do begin to take up the characteristics of the creature that they are thinking about. These people can become as dangerous as the real animal because they believe that they actually are that animal. In their meditative state they act as that animal would in their minds. If they believe, for instance, the animal they are becoming likes to eat fruit, then they will seek out fruit. This action may be completely uncharacteristic of the animal that they are trying to become but because they believe it to be so they act this way (Man to Werewolf 4).

There are modern scientists and psychologists that recognize a disorder which causes a person to believe that they are a wereanimal. The disorder is called Lycanthropic Disorder. It is a mental condition in which the patient believes that he or she is a werewolf. The subject does not change shape but takes on the characteristics of the animal. These people are treated by psychiatrists (Werewolf 5).

The belief in werewolves and their counterparts, the werecreatures, of the world has yet to diminish even after thousands of years. This could be based on common human stubbornness or to the fact that we have yet to prove that they do not exist.

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