

Witchcraft: Commonly-Asked Questions, Straightforward Answers

Q. What is a Witch? What is Witchcraft?

"Witch" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wicce* (meaning witch), which in turn derives from an Indo-European root word meaning to bend, change, or do magic/religion (making it related to "wicker," "wiggle," and even "vicar"). It is possibly also related to the Old Norse *vitki* (meaning wizard), derived from root words meaning "wise one" or "seer." "Warlock" (rarely used for male Witches) is from the Old Norse *vardlokkur*, "spirit song" (not "oath-breaker"). Related words are "Pagan," meaning a country dweller, and "Heathen," a dweller on the heath, both of which peoples were the European equivalent of the Native Americans and other indigenous, nature-worshipping people.

Today, a Witch is a woman or man who practices a life-affirming, Earth- and nature-oriented religion, honoring Divinity in female as well as (or instead of) male aspects, and practicing Magic (which some Witches spell "magick," to distinguish it from stage illusions). There are many different traditions of Witches, encompassing many beliefs in addition to these. Some traditions are practiced by women only, and recognize only the Divine Feminine, the Goddess. Others include men and recognize a male god in addition to the Goddess. Some traditions may date back to before the Spanish Inquisition, others have been in existence for only a few years. The strength of the Witches' religion (also called "the Craft" or "Wicca") lies in its diversity; it is a living, growing religious tradition.

Witchcraft today may be seen as the sum total of all a Witch's practices, including but not limited to: spellcasting, divination ("fortune telling"), meditation, herbalism, ritual and ritual drama, singing and dancing to raise energy, healing, clairvoyance and other psychism, creative mythology, and more.

As a religion, the Craft is a revival and/or reconstruction of the pre-Christian religions of Europe, especially Northern Europe (giving us Celtic or Norse traditions), sometimes elsewhere (giving us Graeco-Roman, Egyptian, or Levantine traditions). Many of us have turned for inspiration to the still-living indigenous traditions of other lands, such as Australia, Asia, India, and the Americas. Some of us, recognizing that we are American Witches, work with deities and land-spirits of

local Amerindian tribes, though we do not claim to be members of any Amerindian tradition. As Margot Adler, a Witchcraft authority, has written, "The real tradition of the Craft is creativity."

Q. Do you pray? To whom do you pray?

Some Witches pray (in the popular sense of the word), some don't. Some Witches regularly meditate on the deities of their choice; some only invoke deities to empower a ritual or work of Magic.

As to who or what our deities are, you will get nearly as many answers as there are Witches. Consensus opinion seems to be that there is a transcendent Divine, the sum of all that is and more, and that everything that is partakes of that Divinity. However, that Divinity is more than the human mind can encompass or experience. So the idea of Divinity is broken down into few or many "mind-sized" pieces. One cannot look at the sun but through a filter; one can only experience a piece of the Divine. These pieces are conceived of in many forms. One of the primary forms Divinity takes for us is the Goddess, the Divine Feminine. She can have many names and many aspects; some Witches worship only the nameless single Goddess, and others worship Her under all the names by which she has been known to the ancients: Ishtar, Diana, Ceridwen, Athena, Amaterasu, Brigantia, Venus, Hecate, Isis, Demeter, and more. In addition, the Goddess can be seen in three aspects: the Maiden (youth, self-sufficiency, often love), the Mother (nurturing, fulfillment), and the Crone/Wise Woman (wisdom, mystery, initiation, and death/rebirth). The Moon, the Sea, and the Earth can all be personified as Goddesses.

Some Witches stop there. Other Witches include the Divine Male, the God. Our God is not limited to the Father aspect, though there are Divine Fathers. The Sun is often personified as a God, as is plant life; the dying and reborn Grain God is common to nearly all agricultural myths. Some name Him merely "the Horned One;" others call him by the names he had of old: Apollo, Osiris, Dionysos, Odin Pan Freyr, Adonis, Tammuz, and many others.

When we invoke deities and/or manifest them in ourselves, where do they come from? Are they somewhere "out there" and do they come in? Or are they inside us, in our psyches, and do they come out? Do we "put on" a deity, or do we remove our shell of humanity to let the divinity show through? Nobody has the answer, nor do we pretend to. Deities may be archetypes, they

may be nature spirits, they may be forces outside our ken. Who or whatever they are, they are. Our deities are both transcendent ("out there") and immanent ("right here").

Q. Are you Satanists?

No. To be a Satanist, one must believe in Satan. Witches do not believe in Satan, as such. The popular image of the goat-hooved, pointy-horned devil is a deliberate corruption by the early missionary church of the European Pagan .Horned God, who has been depicted in Greece as Pan, and in ancient Gaul as Cernunnos (who is pictured having a stag's antlers). Making indigenous gods into evil beings was the early church's most reliable method of gaining converts. Some missionary Christian groups continue the practice to this day, in areas that have retained their old religions.

Our Horned God is neither evil nor a source of evil; He is the energy of nature, of plant and animal life, which energy manifests for people in music and dance, intoxication and ecstasy, and all joyous activities, including lovemaking.

Q. What about evil? What are your ethics/morals?

We believe that life is essentially good, and creation and destruction are part of natural cycles. Clearly, though, there is evil in the world. We believe its source is not any kind of devil or demiurge, but human action (not human nature). Evil is also subjective: what is good for one may be evil for another and vice versa. For example, a tiger kills an antelope - the antelope's death is bad to the antelope, but good to the tiger, who does, after all, have to eat. The deities of the Craft, if they have any inclination at all, incline towards the positive; most are neither "good" nor "evil," they just are, in the same way any elemental force, like fire or the weather, is. Our deities give us power; how we choose to use that power is up to us.

That use is directed, first and foremost, by the Witches' Rede: "If it harms none, do what you will." It is also directed in part by the Law of Threefold Return: what you give out returns to you threefold. If you work ill, threefold ill comes back to you. If you work good, threefold good comes back to you.

Witches (and members of other indigenous religions) have known all along what science is only beginning to acknowledge: that all systems on the planet are

interconnected, all life is one. When imbalance is caused in one area, the whole system is thrown out of balance. Acts of evil cause imbalance. The works of Witchcraft aim toward balance and harmony. We are healers and protectors; we will act swiftly and forcefully in defense against aggression, but we do not ourselves attack.

Q. Do you do animal/human sacrifices?

No. Our own internal life-force is sufficient to whatever task we may require; we have no need of stealing the life-force of another. As offerings to our deities, Witches may burn incense or candles, pour out libations, place sacred herbs or food in some outdoor spot, bury talismans or money, or compose or recite poetry. Some female Witches use their own menstrual blood in spells; other Witches may prick themselves (in these enlightened days, usually with sterile lancets) and offer a drop or two of their own blood. But the only blood a Witch has a right to offer is her/his own. The sacrifice of another's is against the Rede.

Q. Do you have gurus, leaders, priests, masters?

Every Witch is her or his own priest/ess. That's part of the point of the Craft. We need no intermediaries between us and Divinity; each of us can have our own personal "revelation." Mostly, the Craft is too diverse and anarchic to follow any one leader. We all partake of Divinity, and no one person has exclusive knowledge of the Divine or sole power to decide the directions of our lives. We have no infallible leader, no Grand High Exalted Poobah, no dogma. Nobody can have all the answers. So many of us have our own ideas about what the Craft should be and how it works, that we can rarely agree on points of religion - the idea of all of us agreeing to follow one person is manifestly absurd.

Each Circle or Coven may have a High Priestess or High Priest, or it may be democratic and operate by consensus. There will always be people with leadership tendencies; these are people who tend to do outreach work, such as networking between Wiccan groups or outside the Craft, or teaching.

Q. What do you think happens after death? Do you believe in heaven and hell?

As it has been said, Witches don't believe in life after death, we believe in life after birth. The emphasis of the Craft is on working to make this life good for as many

people as possible, oneself included.

We do not believe in a hell, sin, or redemption. As mentioned above, evil is imbalance. But we have no concept of original sin for which we must be redeemed - indeed, that concept has been the source of oppression and even killing of women for centuries, since medieval Christian philosophy had it that woman was the source of all sin and evil. Witches are reclaiming Eve as the one who gave us self-knowledge through her courage and curiosity. Nor, for that matter, do we believe in a heavenly reward for good behavior. Spiritual bribery is not the way of the Witch; the results of good or evil acts are felt in this lifetime--no celestial carrot or infernal stick.

On the other hand, Witches have quite a few opinions about what does happen after death. Most believe in reincarnation of some sort. Some have it that between death and rebirth the soul undergoes some sort of transformation (for which there are a number of metaphors) to prepare it for rebirth. Others believe that the dead join the Blessed Ancestors, who watch over, protect, and advise their descendants. Still others have it that the souls of those who chose pain or evil when they were alive may be trapped after death in a state of suffering because that is all they can understand. Most Witches are honest enough to say, "We don't really know, and there isn't any way to know."

Q. What is your magic? Does it work? How?

There are a number of sayings about Magic. It is "the act of changing consciousness by Will." It is "the science of coincidence." As the root word of "Witch" indicates, we are shapers and changers; what we shape and change is our own life force, our own consciousness, our health and that of the planet. We believe that we can change our lives by spiritual as well as physical means. Very little is preordained, except that we will die some day. In the meantime, many Witches do divination to find out the possible directions their lives might take, and then act on the information accordingly.

It works. We can't turn people into frogs or levitate tables by mind-power; we can work healing, change our lives for the better, and discover the workings and balance of the whole system. Our Wills are our tools. "Faith without works is meaningless," and we work in the world, too; we are active in our communities and for the environment, but we back up our actions with

magical intent. It is a potent combination.

Q. Do you do Black Magic?

No. Some of us do not even recognize "black" or "white" Magic; Magic is Magic, and what its nature is depends on how we use it. Remember that we try to temper all our Magic by the Rede.

Q. Do you cast spells?

Yes. That's part of being a Witch. There are those who wish merely to worship the Goddess (and God), observe the turning of the seasons with ritual, and honor the Earth. These are what may be called "Neo-Pagans" (to distinguish them from indigenous, aboriginal pagans). Nearly all Witches are Neo-Pagans (believe it or not, a few Witches are Christian or Jewish); not all Neo-Pagans are Witches.

For us, spells and rituals are a matter of arranging elements to encourage a frame of mind conducive to working Magic. This may involve burning candles and/or incense, making talismans of stone or wood or paper, chanting rhymed formulae, using herbs or essential oils, turning down the lights and playing some atmospheric music, or whatever the imagination of the Witch can devise.

Threefold Return works powerfully here: if someone wishes to curse someone else, the curser must first build up the curse within her/himself - guess who gets to feel it first? Acts of healing, on the other hand, are acts of profound love, and the healer often finds her/himself healthier after healing someone else. It is always easier to cast a spell on oneself than on another. Only in very limited circumstances, if at all, should a spell be cast on another without that person's knowledge and consent.

Q. How do you worship? What are your holidays? What do you do then?

There are as many ways of worship as there are traditions of the Craft. Most rituals involve consecration of the ritual space in some way, invocation of a Deity or Deities, and a communal meal. Rituals can include music and/or dancing, poetry, masquing and drama (often in enactments of myth), and even props and special effects. Again, creativity is the watchword here. There are eight holidays.

1 November, Samhain

Popularly known as Hallowe'en. The Feast of the Ancestors and Witches' New Year. Trick-or-Treating evolved from Pagan "Souling," when children representing ancestors collected food and blessed the houses they visited.

22 December, Yule/Midwinter

The Winter Solstice. longest night of the year, Feast of the Rebirth of the Sun, after which the days begin to grow longer again. Many Christmas customs have a Pagan origin: the Yule Log, Christmas Tree, Evergreen Decorations, Wassailing.

1 February, Imbolc/Brigid

Feast of Returning Light. Also called Candlemas. In honor of the Irish Brigid, Goddess of holy wells, fire, healing, smithcraft, and poetry. Brigid's Fire warms the Earth after Winter.

22 March, Eostre

Named after the Anglo-Saxon Goddess of the Dawn; origin of the word "Easter." The Vernal Equinox, Feast of Planting and Rebirth.

1 May, Beltaine

Also called May Day. The first day of Summer, the beginning of the light half of the year. A feast of fertility and burgeoning life.

22 June, Litha/Midsummer

The Summer Solstice, the longest day of the year. Feast of the Sun on High or the Solar Hero; activities are mostly those to do with civilization/culture.

1 August, Lughnasadh/Lammas

"Feast of Lugh," or "Loaf-mass." Feast of the Hero-God Lugh, who undergoes a shamanic death-rebirth initiation, and/or the Barley God, who dies and is transformed into beer. Festival of the First Fruits, the first harvest.

22 September, Harvest Home or Mabon

Celebration of the Harvest. Has its analog in the American Thanksgiving, which was indeed originally a harvest festival.

Q. How many of you are there? Do you raise your children in this?

Conservative reckonings estimate 200,000 Witches and/or Neo-Pagans in the US alone. There could be many more, who are simply more private about their

religion, for the very real fear of persecution. Witches are still working hard for our First Amendment rights. Most Wiccan parents allow their children to become involved in the Craft or learn about Paganism if the child wishes; few, if any, require of their children adherence to any particular path. There are indeed Pagan/Wiccan children and young adults. They're just like other kids. They go through adolescent rebellion and life crises just like other kids; they may even be slightly more well-adjusted than non-Pagan kids, if only because the Craft provides rituals and/or recognitions of Life Passages.

Q. How do you become a Witch?

The Craft does not actively seek converts. We do not proselytize. We are willing to inform when asked, and training is available in varying degrees of formality. Some Witches believe that one must be born with the talent to become a Witch. Others believe that all people have the ability, and that becoming a Witch is simply a matter of training. Some people know from an early age that they are Witches; others come to the Craft as adults - most of us grew up in a religious tradition other than the Craft. And there are many out there who do what we call Witchcraft who have no idea what to call it, or even that there are others like them in the country or the world. Being a Witch, like doing Magic itself, is "a matter of symbolism and intent."

Q. Where can I find out more?

There are a number of good books available on the Craft. Here are a few of them:
Adler, Margot, *Drawing Down the Moon*.
Farrar, Janet & Stewart, *What Witches Do*.
Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*.
Matthews, Caitlin and John, *The Western Way, Vol. I: The Native Tradition*.
Valiente, Doreen, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*.
Weinstein, Marion, *Positive Magic*.

The Covenant of the Goddess, a non-profit religious organization incorporated in California in 1975, can also advise you on contacts and reading material, and provide information. CoG has members in the United States, in Canada, Britain, New Zealand, and Australia.

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