Wicca in America:

The Transformation and Struggles of a New Religion in the United States

It is likely that the religion of Wicca was created by Gerald Gardner and his associates in the 1950’s. The first key text, and its revelation to the world, was entitled *Witchcraft Today* [Clifton, 14]. Penned by Gardner, the text introduced its readers to what Gardner claimed was the “Old Religion”, a religion which had existed prior to Christ and had gone underground due to the hysteria and fear created during the Inquisition.

Originally a creation of the European culture, Wicca arrived on the shores of America by the 1960’s, officially introduced by Raymond Buckland. Buckland was an initiate of Gardner’s Black Forest Coven, and was granted the title of official Gardnerian Wiccan representative to the United States. Little did Wicca’s creators realize the dramatic transformation this new religion would make once reaching America.

Wicca considers the Goddess as central and primary to their beliefs. The Goddess is associated with nature and may or may not have a male God counterpart [Barner-Berry, 32]. The divine is immanent and either viewed as supernatural beings, forces of nature, symbols, or internal aspects of the self [Berger, 5]. In Wicca, there is a religious consciousness of earthly life, procreation, and the passing phases of life and the seasons. Wiccans tend to accept the necessity and inevitability of death. As an experiential religion, focused on mystical experiences, Wiccans tend to follow the motto, “if it works, use it” [Barner-Berry, 32].

Arriving during the Second Wave Feminist Movement, Civil Rights Movement, and a new awareness of environmentalism, Wicca soon became known as an “earth-based”
religion. While considered primarily a magical practice in Europe, the American Frontier Myth, love of getting back to nature, and interest in shamanism, moved Wicca away from its ceremonial magic and Cosmic Nature emphases and more toward an appreciation of Earth as the Mother Goddess [Clifton, 45-52].

Tying into the American propensity to “get back to nature” through camping, Pagan outdoor festivals began popping up across the United States. These festivals created a loose knit community of individuals that often practiced as solitaries or in small groups called covens. The nature of the festivals loosened the rigid ceremonies of the Gardnerian tradition into inventive and creative rituals [Orion, 127]. An incorporation of shamanism, the concept of the Earth as a living divine entity, and political activism also led to an American Wicca that was less formal and less hierarchal than the religion practiced in Europe [Orion, 142].

It is likely that most “average” Americans encounter a number of Wiccans throughout their life, perhaps even their day. Wiccans are predominately Caucasian, female, heterosexual, and college educated [Berger, 27-32]. Most scholars studying Wiccans claim that this group tends to be rather “bookish” in nature, and individuals rely on text to learn a great deal about their religious practices [Clifton, 13].

The hidden nature of Wicca is primarily a result of harassment and even violence directed towards its adherents. Unlike the Christian majority in the United States, Wiccans often must fear vandalism of their sacred sites and fears that their presence at worship will expose them to physical and verbal attacks, loss of jobs, and the loss of their children [Barner-Berry, 99]. Students have been suspended from school for wearing pentacles, the symbol of the Wiccan faith, while other students wore the Star of
David or crosses. Other students have been suspended because students or teachers have claimed that the student placed a hex on them [Barner-Berry, 132]. Carol Barner-Barry’s book *Contemporary Paganism* details countless cases of Wiccan and Neopagan experiences of harassment, violence, job loss, and even suicide; all results of their choice to follow a non-mainstream religion.

In addition to outright harassment, Wiccans must navigate a Christian privileged culture in the United States. Due to its lack of interest in hierarchy and its belief that each individual is responsible and capable of a relationship with the divine, clergy in the traditional sense are rare within Wiccan practices. However, in order to officiate at weddings, chaplain for the military and minister in hospitals and prisons, Pagans must fit into the Christian mold of clergy to meet standards and prove worthiness. Some cities even require that chaplains be followers of Jesus Christ [Barner-Berry, 106]. In other cases, hospital patients have been refused service by staff because of their religious choice or have not been allowed to list Wicca as their religion of choice during their hospital stay [Barner-Berry, 106].

When landing on the shores of America in the 1960’s, Wicca quickly found a welcome home among the counterculture, merging primarily with the feminist and environmental movements. However, even after more than four decades, it is a religion that has not been welcomed or accepted by the American majority. Wiccans must still consider carefully to whom they reveal their religious affiliation, at times spending their entire life in the “broom closet”.


