ALLEGHENY COLLEGE

Andrew Huff

Enchanting Identity:

The role of gender and sexuality in religious conversion and the art of witchcraft

Submitted to the Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies
In partial fulfillment of the Senior Comprehensive Project Requirement
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies
April 30, 2021



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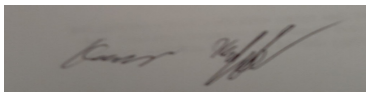
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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.

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Introduction

Witchcraft is, and was, not… for everyone. Unless you have an attraction to the occult, a sense of wonder, a feeling that you can slip for a few minutes out of the world into the world of faery, it is of no use to you.

- Gerald Gardner, *Book of Shadows*[1]

Conversion theory has been a hot topic in religious studies for several decades, with several theories, models and interpretations being brought forth on the experience of conversion, as well as the cultural tendencies that bring about religious conversion. Beginning with interpretations of arguably the most famous examples of religious conversion being the conversion of Saint Paul to Christianity who converted after a fate encounter with God while traveling.[2] This religious experience that altered the life and beliefs of such an important biblical figure became the framework for early theories on religious conversion, noting a single religious encounter leading to an abrupt religious change, such as the theories of conversion noted by Saint Augustine.[3]

Over time, conversion theory evolved to take more consideration into the personal role in a person's conversion. The Lofland-Stark model (1965) of conversion, for example, takes into

[1] Gardner, "Book of Shadows".
[2] Grotz, "The conversion of Paul" *New England Review 40,* 2019.
[3] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin," 46.

consideration two motives for conversion: predisposing conditions and situational contingencies.[4] Predisposing conditions can be divided into three steps. First, a pre-convert feels some sort of tension between their perceived ideal and their current situation. Next, that tension leads the pre-convert to believe that some sort of change to their religious identity could be necessary. Finally, pre-converts look for a new religious identity that fits better with their perceived ideal in an attempt to alleviate that tension. This part of the Lofland-Stark model places emphasis on the personal feelings and experiences of the individual.[5]

The second aspect of the Lofland-Stark model- situational contingencies, focuses on the community around an individual, as well as the recruitment efforts by the new religious movement. First, a pre-convert comes to some personal turning point before coming into contact with the new religious movement. Next, the pre-convert creates an "affective bond" with a member or members of the new religious movement. Third, other competing networks or groups are reduced or gotten rid of. Finally, the pre-convert is exposed to "intensive interaction" with other recent converts that ultimately brings them to the new religious movement.[6] Thus, the Lofland-Stark model paints religious conversion as a psycho-social experience, considering the personal aspect of religious conversion, but also takes into consideration the pressures and social desires that play into that personal experience.

Ines W. Jindra relates religious conversion to religious experience in her book *A new model for religious conversion: beyond network theory and social constructivism*.[7] According to Ann Taves in *Religious Experience Reconsidered,*[8] religious experience is something that is *sui*

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[4] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin," 47.
[5] Lofland and Stark, " Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective" *American Sociological Review,* 1965, 864.
[6] Lofland and Stark, " Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective" *American Sociological Review,* 1965, 865-867.
[7] Jindra, *A new model for religious conversion: beyond network theory and social constructivism,* 2014.
[8] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: a Building-Block approach to the study of Religion and other Special Things,* 2009.

generis. According to Ines, that is to say that "religious or mystical experience is not attributable to anything else, but is 'inherently religious or mystical.'"[9] Taves notes that "experiences deemed religious" is potentially more accurate than "religious experience"[10]. That is to say, essentially that the religiosity of an experience is under the discretion of the individual and their perception of that experience. Religious conversion, according to Lewis Rambo is:

A process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and experiences. It is assumed that a) conversion is a process, rather than a single event, b) conversion is contextual and can not be extricated from the fabric of relationships, processes, and ideologies which provide the matrix of religious change; and c) factors involved in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. While there are unique aspects of particular conversions, it is also assumed that there can be broad descriptions of conversion that are useful in the comparison and assessment of conversion theories.[11]

According to Ines:

[Religious] conversions [are] changes in a person's belief that can happen suddenly or gradually. These changes are accompanied by an alternate view of reality and of self, and in general entail a "deconstruction of one's biography."[12] … [Religious conversion includes]

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[9] Jindra, *A new model for religious conversion: beyond network theory and social constructivism,* 8.
[10] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: a Building-Block approach to the study of Religion and other Special Things,* 8.
[11] Rambo, "Conversion Toward a Holistic Model of Religious Change" *Pastoral Psychology 38,* 48.
[12] Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion" *Annual Review of Sociology*, 167-190.

changes from one religion to a new one, a shift from no religious commitment to religious faith, and a renewal of one's religious faith within one religious group.[13]

Therefore, religious conversion is a change in someone's personal identity that can be quick or gradual and is unique from person to person, and is therefore inherently tied to a person's experience and those experiences each person deem as religious.

Robert Wuthnow notes a fundamental change in the general attitude many American's feel towards religion. This shift is from the traditional idea of religion as "dwelling" to religion as "seeking." According to Wuthnow, dwelling "emphasizes *habitation*." He writes, "God occupies a definite space in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit a sacred place is to know its territory and to feel secure."[14] In other words, dwelling spirituality emphasizes sacred places and existing within those sacred places. It romanticizes places like heaven, the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land and emphasizes the importance of action to get to and eventually dwell within those places. On the other hand, seeking "emphasizes *negotiation.*" In other words, people seek for experiences and moments that reinforce a person's beliefs or convictions. According to Wuthnow:

For some people, the shift is experienced as living no longer within a sacred place but between sacred places. At one time, people were residents of their communities; now they are commuters. Thus images of stable dwellings have increasingly been replaced by images of those who have left home: the migrant worker, the exile, the refugee, the drifter … the dispossessed or homeless person. The same is true of spirituality. At one time, people identified their faith by

[13] Jindra, *A new model for religious conversion: beyond network theory and social constructivism,* 10.
[14] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s," 3.

membership; now they do so increasingly by the search for connections with various organizations, groups, and disciplines, all the while feeling marginal to any particular group or place.[15]

As a result, spirituality has become much more fluid for Americans since the 1950s. Instead of existing within a singular religious identity, people are constantly searching for stimulation and new religious experiences to develop their own beliefs and faith.

This fundamental change in how Americans treat spirituality gives so much room for new religious movements to come into the picture because people are so much more willing to explore new religious ideas that fit their identity. New religious movements then flood the market, giving these seekers opportunities for spiritual growth and development. Furthermore, due to increased connectivity as a result of the internet and especially social media, people are able to share and learn about other ideas and religions with ease. As a result, when people's religious identities are called into question, it's never been easier for them to search new ideas and reach out to new people in exploration of a new religious identity that better fits their needs.[16]

Disenchantment and persistence of magic

In contrast to the theory of seekers and a shift in spirituality is the theory of secularization brought about Max Weber. This theory notes the "disenchantment" of understanding the world through science and rationalism, rather than through magic and mysticism.[17] Essentially, secularization states that through our advancements of scientific knowledge and advancements,

[15] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s," 7.
[16] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s," 38.
[17] Fenn, "Max Weber on Secularization: A Typology" *Review of Religious Research 10,* 159-170.

and as a result of this religion will be less significant in society. Despite this trend, however, religious movements traditionally associated with magic such as Wicca, druidry and other forms of neopaganism have continued to grow in numbers and witchcraft remains in public interest, though often with superstition or negative stigma. The early modern era saw a lot of persecution towards witches.In his book titled *Making Magic: Religion, Magic and Science in the Modern World,* Randall G. Styers writes:

> One point on which there is a wide degree of scholarly consensus is that the persecution of witchcraft flared only when notions of simple sorcery and popular magic were overlaid with demonological theory in which these practices were seen as involving socially threatening, diabolical, and heretical pacts with Satan. There are long traditions of Christian condemnation of magic, but through the early medieval period it appears that secular and religious authorities were relatively unconcerned with practices of simple sorcery or folk magic.[18]

Historically, though negativity existed around the use of magic in Christian society, it was largely ignored and left to exist in the fringes. Feelings of intrigue, wonder and even awe also frequently accompanied feelings of fear regarding magic. During the Enlightenment, when secularization began to take hold, many people started to disprove or disbelieve in the practice of magic altogether, causing the practice of magic to fade out of the public eye and return to the fringes of society.[19] Interest in magic has not exactly vanished, however. New religious movements have continued to pop up and take hold and witchcraft remains popular in many alternative cultures.

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[18] Styers, "The Emergence of Magic in the Modern World," *Making Magic: Religion, Magic and Science in the Modern World,* 6.
[19] Styers, "The Emergence of Magic in the Modern World," *Making Magic: Religion, Magic and Science in the Modern World,* 17-40.

However, the attitude towards magic and spirituality may have shifted as a response to secularization. This understanding is based around magic as more symbolic rather than a literal understanding of magic and the metaphysical. For example, many Wiccans believe in the Goddess not as a literal being, but as a spiritual representation of certain values and aspects of the feminine that the practitioner finds important to them. When asked during a Q&A on TikTok if witches actually believe their practice is real, user @mercury.spit- who is also a practicing witch and philosophy of religion student, basically said "no, I don't think it's real." She elaborated:

> I view witchcraft and my practice as a psycho-spiritual drama that I put on for myself for the purpose of healing and inspiration. A lot of witches in the real world feel this way … Most of us just see [the deities] as powerful archetypes that we can learn from and call upon when we need more of that energy in our lives.[20]

Religion and spirituality still seem to have their place in society despite secularization, the understanding of those things are just what has changed, which is also reflected in the shift from dwelling to seeking in American spirituality.[21]

Deprivation, identity, and legitimacy

Large neopagan communities also exist all over the country, such as the Ár nDraíocht Féin (ADF)- a fellowship of druids based in Illinois and is closely related to Wicca in history and tradition. Translated from Irish, Ár nDraíocht Féin means "our own magic." The organization

[20] @mercury.spit, TikTok, 2020. https://www.tiktok.com/@mercury.spit/video/6909526141845998853?
[21] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s," 1-19.

exists as a neopagan fellowship of druids that encourages the cultivation of one's own practices and beliefs while also existing within a supportive community. Membership is open to anyone and the organization places special emphasis on community, environmental stewardship, and social justice; as well as a large scale community and network of druids across the United States.[22] The community has been steadily growing since its founding in 1983. According to a case study conducted by Michael T. Cooper, the narratives surrounding many of the converts to ADF fall into one of three categories: religious deprivation, religious identity, or questions of religious legitimacy.[23]

Religious deprivation refers to when an individual is missing "something" from their previous religious identity. This "something" can be anything and can vary from person to person; but for whatever reason their previous religious identity was not fulfilling to them. In the United States, about seventy percent of people consider themselves to be some sort of Christian identity.[24] However, Christianity is such a massive influence in American society, that even a large portion of people who don't identify with Christianity are still influenced and affected by it. As a result, many religious converts come from an identity that is at least partially related to Christianity. In the case of ADF, Cooper notes that many converts to the fellowship did so because they felt deprived by many aspects of Christian life. For example, according to Cooper, many people regard Christianity as patriarchal and oppressive for women, and so ADF provides an alternative identity where women are instead encouraged and empowered.[25]

Issues of religious identity refer to when there is some perceived disconnect between a person's religious identity and the other parts of their identity. Because people's identities are

[22] Féin, ADF. 2021. https://www.adf.org/about
[23] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin," 47-54.
[24] Religious Landscape Study," 2021. https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/
[25] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin,"48-50.

complex and multifaceted, sometimes different aspects of identity can seemingly be at odds with one another. For example, Cooper mentions that a lot of women and queer people feel at odds with Christian identity due the history of persecution of those people within the church, while ADF provides a safe space and many opportunities for these people.[26]

Finally, issues of religious legitimacy relates to the perceived legitimacy of a religious movement for various reasons. Cooper cites the historical precedent of druidry existing for thousands of years being embedded in Celtic and pre-Christian European culture being a draw for people coming to druidry.[27] Because religious conversion is a deeply personal experience for a lot of people, conversion narratives can look vastly different from one another, while also following certain patterns and trends. These three trends help categorize and understand the many reasons why people might feel disconnected from their religious identity to the point where conversion feels necessary for an individual.

Similarly to ADF, another neopagan group to gain popularity in recent years and is more closely associated with Wicca is the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco- a coven of witches based in San Francisco, California that places heavy emphasis in their practice on feminism and political activism. Founded in 1979 by Starhawk, these witches blend the beliefs and practices of several woman-centered versions of Wicca that came before it- including Dianic Wicca, as well a variety of political movements including feminism, environmental justice, and social justice. They place heavy emphasis on the recognition of intersectionality.[28] The Reclaiming Witches as a result place heavy emphasis on personal practice, as well as on community service. Sociologist Rachel Gormain writes:

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[26] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin," 51-52.
[27] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin," 53-54.
[28] Salomensen, *Enchanted feminism: Ritual, gender and divinity among the reclaiming witches of San Francisco,* 1979.

For my research, I have attended Reclaiming events as participant-observer over several years. At this time, I live among reclaiming members, joined classes, workshops and retreats, helped organise and (at times) lead rituals, and spent social time with others from the community. I read publications and discussed ideas, conducted interviews and passed out surveys. But more central to the insights I gained, for these many months I was deeply immersed in community life. … And, while Reclaiming teachers emphasise practice over belief, and routinely eschew doctrinal approaches to religions, a substantial core of written material has been developed, both as books published by Reclaiming authors, and in blog posts and articles. Along with liturgical elements such as ritual chants, these reflect a body of ideas on divinity, sacrality and religious ethics that, while not entirely systematised, are certainly coherent.[29]

While not entirely mainstream, the Reclaiming movement in San Francisco certainly exists as a full-fledged religious community with its own set of traditions, rituals, theology and ethics. With its emphasis on feminism and other social issues, the Reclaiming movement surely presents itself as an attractive option for people who find meaning and purpose in these issues and feel these issues have been deprived from them in their previous religious identity. Furthermore, the social and community based structure of the Reclaiming movement has been a draw for many members, as well.[30]

Feminist movements have been associated with Wicca for years. The historical belief systems and cultures that are generally believed to have evolved into Wicca over time were

[29] Morgain, *The Alchemy of Life: Magic, Anthropology and Human Nature in Pagan Theology,* 6.
[30] Salomensen, *Enchanted feminism: Ritual, gender and divinity among the reclaiming witches of San Francisco,* 1979.

generally held women to very high regard.[31] Furthermore, many feminist or woman-centered movements have emerged from within Wicca, including the Goddess Movement[32] and Dianic Wicca.[33] Furthermore Wicca has become a much more sex-positive religious movement than contemporary Christianity with movements like Sex Magick[34] and the Radical Faeries.[35] This has made Wicca popular for not only women, but also for members who identify with the LGBTQ+ community.

Many people who convert to Wicca feel a sense of instant belongingness in what Wiccan scholar Margot Adler called the "coming home" narrative.[36] In a sense, when learning about Wicca or any religious movement that fits their identity, the converts feel as if they have "come home." They might have always had a sense of their beliefs, but never knew that it had a name or a title to it. In relation to experiences deemed religious as referenced by Ann Taves,[37] these "coming home" moments or moments of an intense feeling of belongingness can be an example of one of these moments. Adam Anczyk and Matous Vencalek respond to Adler's homecoming hypothesis by arguing that these individual experiences are simply a microcosm of the return of "old" religions that are painted as "neo," or new.[38] Essentially, they argue that Wicca and other forms of neopaganism are simply reconstructions of old religious movements and belief systems that have existed for centuries, and the "coming home" narrative is simply a return to that identity.

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[31] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft" 23.
[32] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 49.
[33] Coleman, " Re-riting women: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine" 15.
[34] Thomas, "Sex Witch: Magickal Spells for Love, Lust, and Self Protection"
[35] Radfae "About," radfae, February 17 2021, http://www.radfae.org/about
[36] Adler, "Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America," 13.
[37] Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: a Building-Block approach to the study of Religion and other Special Things,* 2009.
[38] Anczyk and Vencalek, "Coming Home to Paganism: Theory of Religious Conversion or Theological Principle?" *Studia Religiologica 60,* 161-171.

Despite remaining an extremely small portion of United States population- only about 0.03% of Americans identify themselves as Wiccan[39], that number is growing. Furthermore, not every person who practices what is traditionally considered witchcraft necessarily identifies as Wiccan.[40] Of the witches in America, the vast majority of them are women and/or queer people- although there have been a growing number of men, as well.[41]

With the number of Wiccans on the rise in the United States, and with various neopagan movements and organizations taking hold in American spiritual life, it is clear that Wicca is commonly viewed as an attractive alternative for many people. With the change in the spiritual landscape in the United States leading to more of a willingness for people to explore and learn about new religious movements, many women and members of the LGBTQ+ community feel that Wicca provides them with the empowerment, representation, and community that they are otherwise deprived of in a predominantly Christian culture and society. In my comp, I will explore religious conversion involving Wicca through the lens of religious deprivation, identity and legitimacy,[42] as well as examine the aspects of gender, femininity and sexuality that exist in Wiccan belief and practice. I will examine specific movements, covens and organizations centered around feminism as well as explore the personal spiritual journeys of Wiccan converts as documented on public blog posts, video essays, and podcasts and consider the various experiences, beliefs and social pressures that play a role in those conversions.

[39] "Religion in America," 2021. https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/
[40] McShee, "Estimating growing numbers of US pagans," 2019. https://wildhunt.org/2019/01/estimating-growing-number-of-us-pagans.html
[41] Singh-Hurtz and Kopf, "The US witch population has seen an astronomical rise," 2018.
[42] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin," 47-54

Chapter 1:

Wiccan belief, theology, and feminism

Thou wast the mountain top- the sage's pen-

The poet's harp- the voice of friends- the sun;

Thou wast the river- thou wast glory won;

Thou wast my clarion's blast- thou wast my steed-

My goblet full of wine- my topmost deed:-

Thou wast the charm of women, lovely Moon!

- John Keates, *Endymion*[43]

The word "Wicca" refers to a form of modern paganism that was founded in England in the mid-twentieth century whose tradition dates back to pre-Christian Europe.[44] It is a tradition with a rich history that pulls from a lot of pre-Christian European thought, folklore, and theology. It's adherents are called "witches," and are often portrayed as an esoteric cult that practices magic and has a history of persecution due to being perceived as dangerous. It has become a popular religious movement in America, with several large covens and organizations tying their identity to the practice of witchcraft, such as the Council of American Witches[45] and the feminist Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco.[46] Throughout the history of Wicca, gender is something that has been inherent to its belief and to its practice. The culture in which much of witchcraft is

[43] Keates, *Endymion,* Book III, 166-171.
[44] Melton, "Wicca," 2021. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wicca
[45] Wigington, "American Council of Witches," 2018.
[46] Salmonsen, *Enchanted feminism: Ritual, gender, and divinity among the reclaiming witches of San Francisco,* 2002.

derived from- Celtic culture, while not entirely matriarchal certainly did hold women to a high regard. Wiccan belief often holds the Goddess as its highest deity and uses the feminine in reference to the natural world- especially the moon. In this chapter, I will explore the place gender and feminism has in Wiccan theology and consider the role that can play in the conversion of women to the craft.

Defining the craft

Witchcraft is not exclusive to Wicca. Some witches consider themselves to be Wiccan, while others do not. Some people don't even consider themselves to be witches, but rather just practitioners of the craft. Witchcraft is a very personal practice that can look vastly different from person to person. In an attempt to categorize the practice of witchcraft, Issac Bonewitz divided the practice into two main categories: classical witchcraft and neopagan witchcraft[47] According to Bonewitz, a classical witch is defined as "a person (usually an older female) who is adept in the use of herbs, roots, barks, etc., for the purposes of both healing and hurting (including midwifing, poisoning, producing aphrodisiacs, producing hallucinogens, etc.) and who is familiar with the basic principles of both passive and active magical talents, and can therefore use them for good or for ill, as she chooses."[48] Therefore, classical witchcraft to Bonewitz is viewed as a sort of skill held mostly by women that's use is entirely up to the discretion of the woman practicing. The woman's agency in their practice is therefore an inherent aspect of their craft.

Bonewitz uses the terms "Wicca" and "neopagan witchcraft" interchangeably, estimating that several thousands of Americans identify themselves as neopagan witches when he published

[47] Bonewitz, *Real Magic: An introductory treatise on the Basic Principles of Yellow Magic,* 1971.
[48] Adler*, Drawing down the moon: witches, druids, goddess-worshippers and other pagans in America*, 66.

Real Magic in 1971- a number that has only increased since.[49] Of the neopagan witches that live in the United States, Bonewitz estimates that about ten percent of them consider themselves to be some sort of feminist witch, defined as those who employ aspects of feminism and empowerment to their craft.[50]

Modern witchcraft is a neopagan religion; pagan meaning its beliefs and practices stem from pre-Christian European religion, and neo meaning that something new has been added to the movement. The origins of modern witchcraft are unclear and up for debate, with one popular theory being the witch-cult theory. This theory says that witchcraft as a movement is something that survived throughout the centuries in Christian Europe and modern Wicca is just an extension of that survival. As noted by Ethan Doyle White- one of the major scholars of witchcraft in Medieval Europe, paganism existed on the fringes of society even after the Christianization of Europe in various forms. The most famous of these paganisms was the "witch cult," which was an esoteric order of individuals who practiced magic and worshipped the Horned God[51].

The witch cult was heavily persecuted in medieval Europe because it was a perceived threat to Christian hegemony. Witches were written off as "devil worshippers" and many witch hunts occurred that resulted in the deaths of many of its followers. Therefore, many members of the witch cult would go into hiding, practice in secret, or even blend their pagan practices with Christian ones. The witch cult continued to exist for centuries, especially in rural communities (In fact, the word 'pagan' is derived from the Latin word *paganus*, meaning "those who reside in the country[52]). The witch cult theory was popularized by Margaret Murray in her book "The Witch Cult in Western Europe" published in 1921.[53] Being one of the major anthropologists in

[49] McShee, "Estimating growing numbers of US pagans," 2019.
[50] Adler*, Drawing down the moon: witches, druids, goddess-worshippers and other pagans in America*, 67.
[51] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft" 13.
[52] American Humanist Association, "PAGANISM A brief overview of the history of paganism" 1.
[53] Murray, "The Witch Cult in Western Europe"

the study of witchcraft, Murray argues that the modern Wiccan movement is the natural progression of the witch cult that has existed as an esoteric community for centuries, despite persecution and attempts to get rid of it by Christian rulers and leaders. According to Margot Adler, some witches believe the words "witch," or "pagan" are offensive due to their history being used as words to incite fear towards members of the occult, while others treat those words as words meant to be reclaimed by the community for the sake of empowerment[54].

Another theory on the origins of Wicca states that Wicca is a revivalist movement of the same pre-Christian religion. Gerald Gardner- who is often referred to as "the father of modern Wicca" by scholars, wrote of his encounter with a coven in New Forest, England after returning to his home after World War II. This experience encouraged Gardner to study the occult and ultimately become a practitioner. Gardner played a pivotal role in making witchcraft mainstream in the public eye at the time- something that was both met with resistance by Christians but also intrigue by others[55]. Gardner wrote multiple books on the topic of witchcraft, including the "Book of Shadows," which acts as a religious text and instructional guide for practitioners[56]. This book allowed for access and knowledge for the craft to be widespread, which made Gardnerian Wicca something distinct from the original witch cult, as an important aspect of the witch cult was its esoteric nature. Therefore, Gardnerian Wicca can be considered the first 'neopagan' form of witchcraft.

Gendered theology and the Goddess Movement

Witchcraft traditionally is considered a bitheistic or a duotheistic religion, meaning there are two major deities worshipped by Wiccans. Historically, the major deity worshipped was known as the

[54] Adler, "Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America," 39-42.
[55] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 25-27.
[56] Gardner, "Book of Shadows".

Horned God. He represents nature, life, hunting and aspects of the masculine. He is usually depicted as a tall and slender human with deer antlers and sometimes an entire deer head. Other depictions include a goat head and wings instead of a deer head, which also the imagery associated with Satan in Christianity (many people believed that the Horned God and Satan were one in the same[57]). In Celtic society, men were often the ones who hunted and were also seen as the ones who perpetuated life. Some statues of the Horned God depict him holding a torc in his left hand representing his strength and status as a ruler, and a snake with a ram's head in his right hand representing life and the earth[58].

The other major deity is the Triple Goddess, who represents unity, compassion, life and aspects of the feminine. Sometimes called simply the Mother Goddess, the Goddess of the moon, the earth and the child, or simply as the Goddess, she has become a much more popular figure among witches today than the Horned God. She is depicted as the three different stages of a woman's life: the maiden, the mother and the crone. Sometimes she is depicted as all three as different women, but she is normally believed to be all three women as one single entity. She is also sometimes depicted as a waxing crescent, full, and waning crescent moons next to each other.

While the Horned God was the popular deity in the traditional witch cult and in Gardnerian Wicca, many witches today worship the Triple Goddess as their primary deity today. With images of the Horned God being fashioned into depictions of Satan in Christianity,[59] and the Triple Goddess representing women adherents more positively, she simply has become more popular among practitioners of the craft- especially women. Some witches believe the Horned

[57] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 49.
[58] Tremain, "1620 - Sculpture - Cernunnos: Horned God Figure," Museum of Witchcraft and Magic. Copyright © Museum of Witchcraft and Magic (2017). February 16, 2021. https://museumofwitchcraftandmagic.co.uk/object/sculpture-cernunnos-horned-god-figure/
[59] Chignell, "Early History of Satan," *Evil: A History*, 2019.

God simply represents different aspects of some whole, that whole being represented by the Triple Goddess. For example, some witches worship goddesses from other pantheons believing them to be a part of the Triple Goddess that speaks to them. Brighid from Celtic mythology or Diana from Roman mythology are often believed to be the maiden, Isis from Egyptian mythology is the mother, and Kali from Indian mythology as the crone[60]. To others, the Triple Goddess is simply a powerful archetype for which they can model their lives, while other witches are entirely atheist and don't believe in any deities at all. Though not historically being the case, the Horned God has been twisted into an image of evil in Christian society, while the Triple Goddess has remained a more positive figure. Furthermore, with efforts to make neopagan witchcraft a more feminist and gender inclusive movement, the Triple Goddess and her feminine attributes work better as a sort of figurehead to be represented as the main deity within the craft rather than the masculine attributes of the Horned God.

An important aspect of Wiccan theology comes from the idea of unity. The maculine Horned God and the feminine Triple Goddess represent two halves of a whole (that whole is often interpreted as nature or the universe), and as a result we can see that Wiccan theology is inherently gendered. As noted by Ethan Doyle White, "while Wicca can therefore offer a panoply of deities, both male and female, for the practitioner to venerate, it has nevertheless been noted that the faith's traditional bitheistic system is rooted in a gender essentialist paradigm."[61] With an emphasis placed on the unity between the two genders and the aspects of each gender, as well as rejecting male hegemony and providing spiritual opportunities for women, witchcraft presents itself as an attractive alternative for women and those disenfranchised by a Christian hegemony rooted in patriarchy.

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[60] "Maiden, Mother and Crone: The Wiccan Triple Goddess," Wicca Living. Copyright 2020 — Wicca Living. February 16, 2021. https://wiccaliving.com/wiccan-triple-goddess/

[61] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 90.

The Goddess movement is Wicca has been popularized by many feminists, and the Triple Goddess has become a symbol for spiritual empowerment in feminist circles. To many, however, becoming a witch was not about religion or belief, but was about forging a person's own identity as a woman separate from traditional gender roles and expectations- something that has become known as functionalist Wicca[62]. According to Ronald Hutton, by the 1970s witchcraft became a "symbol without practice" within feminism[63]. Witchcraft itself came to symbolize liberation for women within the feminist movement, and as a result witchcraft to many has become more associated with feminism and the experiences of women rather than the belief, practice and history of an ancient religion.

Eclecticism and multicultural Wicca

The most important feature of witchcraft to many witches is not right belief, but is rather right practice. This makes Wicca distinctive from many mainstream religions that say that the way to reach spiritual fulfillment is to believe in some higher power or some divine plan, such as Christianity. As such, there has been an effort for Wicca to distance itself from some of these perceived male-centered monotheistic religions. This distance- along with a woman-centered attitude, has allowed for practitioners to pull from a variety of pantheons, worldviews and religious movements from all over the world. While traditionally associated with Celtic and indiginous folk religions from the British isles, Wicca has evolved into a religious movement that is inclusive of all faiths- with Roman, Greek, Hindu, Native American and African folk religions being influential to many witches. In the woman-centered and monotheistic Dianic approach, the Goddess is represented by the Roman goddess Diana- who is an all powerful deity herself

[62] Lady Sabrina, "Exploring Wicca: The Beliefs, Rites and Rituals of the Wiccan Religion" 15.
[63] Hutton, "The Triumph of the Moon: a History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft" 344.

representing many of the same aspects of the feminine represented by the Celtic Triple Goddess. However, some adherents of Dianic Wicca have adopted a sort of "quasi-polytheistic" approach according to White, which is the belief that the various goddesses around the world are merely different embodiments of the Triple Goddess[64]. In essence, each and every goddess around the world is in some way representative of the feminine and women's experiences, and therefore can be interpreted as simply a cultural variation of the Triple Goddess and what she represents.

This quasi-polytheistic way of thinking has evolved and become more inclusive over time. Many witches today believe that not just goddesses, but all women are a part of the Goddess. In the words of Starhawk- a spiritual neopagan feminist and one of the main figures in the Goddess Movement, "in the craft, we do not believe in the Goddess - we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all. She is the full circle: earth, air, fire, water and essence- body, mind, spirit, emotions, change."[65] This approach places an emphasis on "experiencing" the Goddess rather than simply believing in her. This is believed to be done through nature, relationships, sex, the mind, and our emotions- all very human experiences that are given spiritual significance through the Goddess.

Dianic Wicca

In the 1970s, a group of women gathered in northern Los Angeles to learn about a new religious form that differed vastly from the mainstream from Zsuzsanna Emese Budapest, or simply Z. Z was a political refugee from Hungary who taught women a form of worship that was notably

[64] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 94.
[65] Starhawk, "The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess 10th Anniversary Edition" (2011).

unobstructed by doctrine or the inclusion of men. Z pioneered the feminist spiritual movement and is credited with started the movement that came to be called Dianic Wicca[66].

Dianic Wicca is a form of witchcraft that specifically centers around feminism, the goddess Diana, and the experiences of women- in other words believing that Wicca is a "woman's religion." Dianic Wiccans only acknowledge and worship female deities. Followers of Dianic Wiccans are either called Amazons, Dianic witches or Goddess Women. The main focus of Dianic Wicca is women's sovereignty and historically only included women. The Temple of Diana currently exists as a nonprofit organization and place of worship in Los Angeles, California and was co-founded in 2001 by Ruth Barrett and Falcon River. Ruth Barrett was a woman who was ordained as a follower of Dianic Wicca by Z in 1980. Many groves, or branches of the Dianic Temple exist all over the United States[67].

Dianic witches deviate from traditional occult beliefs by worshipping Diana of the Roman pantheon as their primary deity instead of the Triple Goddess. To them, Diana is an all-encompassing deity closely associated with the moon as well as the hunt. Dianic witches largely adhere to the "Aradia", which is a collection of poems published in 1899 by Charles Godfrey Leland that account the experiences of Diana and her mother Aradia who was considered to be the first witch- which seems contradictory that a coven of women base their practice off of a poem written by a man.. It also seeked to provide guidance on how to serve and worship Diana[68]. These poems and texts were believed to be used by a coven of Diana worshippers living in Tuscany for centuries and includes a variety of spells for various purposes, as well as incantations for her.

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[66] Coleman, " Re-riting women: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine" 15.
[67] Barrett, "Our Her-Story," Temple of Diana, © 2021 by Temple of Diana, Inc., February 16 2021, https://www.templeofdiana.org/
[68] Leland, "Aradia Or, The Gospel of Witches"

Today, Dianic Wicca has evolved to become more inclusive, as well as to better reflect the ever changing goals of feminism. The Temple of Diana is now open to people of all genders after historically being closed to men and transgender women. Furthermore, some Dianic witches worship some all encompassing genderless deity- or even no deity at all rather than Diana. Though traditionally defined as a cult of the goddess Diana, Dianic Wicca today is more seen as being a form of witchcraft centered around women. As feminist movements have shifted to be more inclusive of all gender identities beyond just women, Dianic Wicca has evolved accordingly to be just as inclusive as the movement that inspires it.[69] It has become a place for women and other people who are left out by the patriarchal nature of a Christian culture.

Wiccan ethics

As noted by the Wiccan scholar and priestess Margot Adler, in Wicca there is "an exception to everything.[70]" Wicca can look vastly different from coven to coven, or even witch to witch. As such, there is no true universal code of ethics within witchcraft because American Wicca is such a personal practice as opposed to the "witch cult" practice historically honored in Europe- likely due to the individualist attitude in America. Furthermore, the "seeker" attitude of spirituality as presented by Wuthnow leaves room for individuals to develop their own practice influenced by one another.[71] There are, however, some generally accepted ethical guidelines that exist in most Wiccan circles. One such guideline is the Wiccan Rede, called the "Wiccan golden rule" by Wiccan priestess Lady Sabrina- an author and practitioner of Wicca who has written a variety of guides and tips for developing one's own practice.. This rule says to essentially do as you will, as long as it does not harm others and is often accompanied by the Law of Threefold Return, which

[69] Ros Velasco, *Feminism : Past, Present and Future Perspectives,* 2017.
[70] Adler, "Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America," 105.
[71] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s," 1-19.

says that all of your actions- both good and bad will be "returned to you with three times the intensity."[72]

In 1974, the Council of American Witches met in Minneapolis to discuss and ratify the principles that are to be held as the cornerstone of Wiccan thought- and while the council disbanded later that year, many witches hold these principles as the closest thing to an ethical code that exists within Wicca. Thirteen principles were decided upon that focus upon themes and issues such as,rituals and rites in accordance with the wheel of the year, environmentalism and stewardship, and the existence of magic. Furthermore, Wiccan ethics emphasize the rejection of authoritarian hierarchies, as well as the union of all beings and the cultivation of the self. It also explicitly rejects the ideas presented by certain Christian beliefs, such as there being "one way" to salvation and the existence of an absolute evil.[73] These principles, though not universally held to the same regard by every adherent, culminate to create a religious movement that stands in contrast with popular Christianity- something that is made apparent to be on purpose from some of the principles themselves. For instance, the rejection of authoritarian hierarchies along with the historical and theological relevance of women in the practice make it virtually impossible for any form of patriarchy to take hold within Wicca. Instead, Wicca is attractive for so many individuals because of this freedom and lack of authoritarianism within the practice allows for opportunities for spiritual cultivation and empowerment that they might not get in other religions. Wendy Griffin, a sociologist of religion refers to feminist Wicca and specifically the teachings of pagan "radical lesbian feminist" Mary Daly[74] as an "Exodus against patriarchal religion[75]."

[72] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 107.
[73] Lady Sabrina, "Exploring Wicca, Updated Edition: The Beliefs, Rites and Rituals of the Wiccan Religion" 22-25.
[74] Daly, "Outercouse" (1992)
[75] Griffin, "The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity" 35.

It's not doubt that witches have historically been extremely influential and active within feminist movements. As noted by Ethan Doyle White, many feminist Wiccan were active in cases of abortion and domestic violence[76]. They have also been active in other political movements in accordance with their principles such as environmentalism, racism, and LGBTQIA+ rights to name a few. In discussing these important political issues to many witches, Ronald Hutton writes, "Pagan witchcraft travelled from Britain to the United States as a branch of radical conservatism; it returned as a branch of radical socialism."[77] During the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, witches took to the streets and especially to social media to show their support for the racial justice movement. Some witches shared their hexes and spells online in an attempt to punish corrupt officers and protect protesters on the ground[78]. Witches also have a history with environmental activism, with various forest covens existing around the country with the goals to protect the natural world in the name of the Goddess.[79] The Radical Faeries is a neopagan movement that focuses on blending the lines between spirituality and sexuality, and have an activist presence in issues like transgenders and other LGBTQIA+ rights, while also being active in environmental and feminist politics[80]. The "right action" attitude present in Wicca surely leads many witches to participate in activism for the ethical issues that are important to them as not only part of their politics, but also their spiritual practice and ritual.

[76] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 172.
[77] Hutton, "The Triumph of the Moon: a History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft" 361.
[78] Gulino, "TikTok Witches Are Using Their Power for Black Lives Matter," Refinery 29, © 2021 VICE MEDIA GROUP, February 17 2021, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/06/9855064/tiktok-witches-black-lives-matter
[79] Mohdin, "'Waking up to our power:' witchcraft gets political," The Guardian, © 2021 Guardian News & Media Limited, February 17 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/08/witchfest-croydon-magic-occult-feminism-witches
[80] Radfae "About," radfae, February 17 2021, http://www.radfae.org/about

Wicca as spiritual feminism

Wiccan belief and folklore is rich with feminist symbolism and iconography, with many witches worshipping a single female deity and looking to her as an archetype for strength, compassion, love, and truth. This was not always the case, however, as original Gardnerian Wicca seemed to hold the masculine to a higher standard and worshipped the male Horned God as its main deity. As noted by Ronald Hutton, however, pagan cults related to witchcraft existed long before Gerald Gardner became a prominent figure in Wicca, and many Wiccan circles have greatly distanced themselves from Gardnerian Wicca since then as well,[81] likely due to its conservative values and the lack of inclusion within the movement. The cult of Diana and the development of Dianic Wicca under the teachings of Z greatly progressed the occult forward towards its feminist nature it is well known for today. As noted by Margot Adler, there is no "universal" Wicca, but there remains a reputation for it as a form of spiritual feminism pioneered by women such as Z, Mary Daly, Lady Sabrina and many others while continuing to exist in the fringes of a patriarchal Christian society that in many ways stand in total contrast from one another. In many ways, the existence of Wicca itself is an embodiment of the Goddess and testament to the perseverance and power of the women and other adherents that make her.

[81] Hutton, "The triumph of the moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft" 287.

Chapter 2:

Practice, magic, and ritual

The dandelion lights its spark

Lest Brigid find the wayside dark,

And Brother Wind comes rollicking

For joy that she has brought the spring

Young lambs and little furry folk

Seek shelter underneath her cloak

- Winifred Mary Letts, *Saint Brigid* (1882-1972)[82]

A major component of Wiccan identity is the power and agency one has in their own practice. One witch's practice can look vastly different from another witch that might even belong to the same coven. Traditionally Wicca has been closely associated with ideas of magic, although recently a lot of the major voices in Wicca have distanced themselves from the idea of magic and its use[83]. To other witches, the idea of magic is more about symbolic action than it is about seeking some paranormal outcome, while some witches have a very literal idea of what magic is and how it works. Spells and rituals provide meaningful action for practitioners to enrich one's own life, as well as grow and develop their own personal life and relationships- especially sexual and romantic relationships in ways that Christianity does not provide.

Spells are concocted using a variety of natural elements, including things like herbs, minerals, seeds, leaves and other parts of nature that all have different traits representing different things- both positive and negative. For example, sage is a plant that represents cleansing

[82] Letts, *Saint Brigid*, 1882-1972.
[83] White, "Wicca: History, belief, and community in modern pagan witchcraft", 111.

and purification and is often included in spells or is burned outright to cleanse an area. Rose quartz is a pink stone that symbolizes love and romance, and is used in spells for love and sex and is sometimes given as a romantic gift. The components of spells are believed by some to hold some spiritual correspondence between the natural world and the Goddess or other deities, and spells are ways to tap into and essentially manipulate that spiritual energy[84]. Spells can be cast for one's self or for someone else. They can be cast for things like luck, peace, love or romance, easing anxiety, or just about any tangible emotion the caster desires. Spells can also be cast to protect one's self or to protect someone else, so a witch might cast a spell of protection before something potentially risky like a long car ride or a surgery. Same spells can be cast through specific actions such as incantations. Spell jars are small jars that hold spell ingredients and are often given as a gift. Altars are also often constructed for certain deities and offerings are left in the hopes of receiving blessings.[85]

Spells can also be cast simply to enrich a person's life or experiences. For some witches, sexual liberation is a part of their spiritual practice and attempts to embrace sexuality by normalizing things normally considered taboo. Self proclaimed sex witch and author Sophie Saint Thomas writes in her book "Sex Witch:"

There are witches and there are sex witches- those of us who love to flirt with the edge, with the abyss, with what society would often consider 'indecent' or 'immoral.' But the truth is that witches have always lived in the margins.[86]

[84] Hutton, "The triumph of the moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft", 66.
[85] Brondwin, "Clan of the Goddess: Celtic Wisdom and Ritual for Women"
[86] Thomas, "Sex Witch: Magickal Spells for Love, Lust, and Self Protection", II.

Sex witches embrace things like kinks and sex that exists outside of heteronormative constraints, as long as the sex is consensual and moral within that own witch's definition, which is often a little bit looser than society's definition. Sex itself can be a ritual practice, and some witches will cast spells for things like more enjoyable orgasms. Cultural scripts surrounding sex often prioritize the pleasure of men, while leaving the pleasure of women as an afterthought. According to a study conducted by Osmo Kontula in 2016, many women perform sex with the goal of the man's orgasm in mind and not their own.[87] As a result, women often have much less pleasurable sex because the cultural script surrounding heterosexual sex does not demand it.[88] Sex magic gives the witch more power in their pleasure and encourages even more indivuality in Wiccan practice, while also creating a sex positive place that is inclusive of more sexuality and gender identities. It seeks to bend that cultural script surrounding sexual pleasure and instead emphasize the experience and pleasure of all participants.

Furthermore, there is a negative stigma associated with women and sex- one that does not exist nearly to the same degree for men. Women are often "slut-shamed" for engaging in sexual activities or even simply presenting themselves in a way that is perceived as provocative. In response, many feminist activists have performed in "Slut Walks" across the United States and the United Kingdom in an attempt to be free within their own sexuality and emphasize their own autonomy over their own body.[89] Sex magic puts forth a similar goal of sexual liberation and exploration free from the confines of traditional cultural scripts surrounding sex. Some sex

[87] Kontula and Miettinen, "Determinants of female sexual orgasms", *Socioeffective Neuroscience & Psychology* Volume 6, 2016.
[88] Rubin, Conley, Klein, Liu, Lehane, and Dammeyer, "A cross-national examination of sexual desire: The roles of 'gendered cultural scripts' and 'sexual pleasure' in predicting heterosexual women's desire for sex", *Personality and Individual Differences* Volume 151, 2018.
[89] Ringrose and Renold, "Slut-Shaming, Girl Power and 'Sexualisation': Thinking through the Politics of the International SlutWalks with Teen Girls," *Gender and Education* Volume 24 no 3., 2011.

witches seek to reclaim words that have historically been used to shame women, and instead use those words to empower themselves.

Sex itself is something that is often symbolic within Wicca, as the idea of 'union' is something that is a common theme in Wiccan theology. According to witch blogger and tumblr user Itchy Witchy, "[Sex magic can be] For evoking a god and goddess or deities, who are the same sexes as the lovers, into the partners during the ritual and have sex during ritual essentially while possessed to reenact the sacred mystery and empower a rite."[90] While sex magic can be a very personal experience, it can also be used to invoke aspects of deities and essentially reenact sacred unions. Sex magic holds a lot of spiritual meaning while also providing a sense of empowerment for those who are often left out in conversations about sex and pleasure or are shamed for being a part of it. Furthermore, sex magic presents sex as simply "something we do," rather than something to be ashamed of. [91]

While spells to protect and enrich exist, so do spells to harm- sometimes called hexes. The ethics of using these hexes might vary from person to person or coven to coven. Some witches will never cast a hex, while others might only cast a hex if they or someone else has been wronged or hurt first. In 2016 after the sentence for Stanford swimmer Brock Turner was set for six months for sexual assault, a lot of witches voiced their disgust in the lenient sentence on social media. One of these witches was Melanie Hexen, who created a Facebook event inviting over a thousand witches to hex Turner, as per Rachel Dicker from US News[92]. Likewise, during the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, witches encouraged each other to hex cops amidst the public outrage surrounding police brutality[93]. Tumblr user littlewitchygreen was

[90] Itchywitch, https://fuckyeahitchywitch.tumblr.com/post/22787143829, 2012.
[91] Thomas, "Sex Witch: Magickal Spells for Love, Lust, and Self Protection"
[92] Dicker, "Witches Hex Brock Turner, Stanford Swimmer Convicted of Rape", https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-06-08/witches-hex-brock-turner-stanford-swimmer-convicted-of-rape.
[93] Gulino, "TikTok Witches Are Using Their Power For Black Lives Matter, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/06/9855064/tiktok-witches-black-lives-matter

one such witch, who compiled a list of protective spells to cast for protesters, as well as a separate list of hexes, jinxes, and curses to cast on police officers or other officials. In accordance with the Law of Threefold Return, some witches will take it upon themselves to enact their own form of justice for people they deem deserving. The caster can be inversely affected by this law, however. The author leaves a reminder to follow one's own ethics and use discretion when casting spells or hexes, and notes that more experienced witches should be left to handle more complicated spells and hexes[94]. Some witches take extra caution when casting spells, hexes, or curses because they believe that they can essentially rebound and affect the user worse than they would have affected the intended target.

Magic, while not something that every witch believes in or participates in, seeks to give witches a sense of control and agency within their lives and experiences. It gives a witch meaningful and symbolic action to invoke some emotion or sense of protection, or to harm those they deem deserving. Magic gives a witch their own agency and empowers them to enrich their own lives while interacting with the Goddess or deities as well as with others and with the natural world. Sex magic allows witches- especially those who are women and/or queer, to enrich and empower themselves sexually in a way that they normally wouldn't be able to.

Wheel of the Year

The Wiccan calendar consists of eight periods of celebration called the Wheel of the Year following the summer and winter solstices, as well as the spring and autumn equinoxes. The first celebration of the year is Samhain, followed by Yule, Imbolc, Ostara, Beltane, Litha, Lughnasadh, then finally Mabon. Each holiday has a specific celebration, but not all witches

[94] littlewitchygreen, "Protection Spells (And Hexes) for the BLM Movement", https://black-raven200.tumblr.com/post/622667180070289408/protection-spells-and-hexes-for-the-blm-movement

celebrate every holiday and some don't celebrate any at all. Some celebrations are also much bigger and more widely celebrated than others with Imbolc, Samhain, Beltane, Mabon and Yule being the most well known and celebrated.

The Wheel of the Year begins on October 31st with the celebration of Samhain- sometimes called November's Eve or the Celtic New Year. Samhain is a celebration of the beginning of winter and is sometimes celebrated with music and a large dance called the Witch's Ball. It is commonly associated with a celebration of the dead and is often credited for influencing Halloween.[95] It has been celebrated for centuries, originating in Ireland but now being celebrated all over the world and especially in the United States. Many witches who celebrate Samhain view it as a time to reflect on the cycle of life and death, and will often call upon the deities for wisdom and peace regarding issues of life and death. The Wheel of the Year is sometimes associated with the life cycle of the Goddess, with Samhain representing the death and subsequent rebirth of the Goddess.[96] Some rituals included in the celebration of Samhain are the crafting of altars, nature walks, visiting and blessing the dead in spaces like cemeteries, bonfires, and attending various festivals, parties or celebrations with some of the largest festivals being held in Salem, Massachusetts and Salem, Oregon.[97]

Celebrated during the winter solstice starting on December 21st, perhaps the most well-known pagan celebration is Yule. Some believe that Yule represents the Goddess giving birth to the Sun Goddess, which is why the days begin to get longer starting during Yule, with some alternative beliefs being that Yule marks the beginning of the Holly King's rule until midsummer. Yule is a time marked with a lot of symbolism from the natural world including

[95] Halloween 2020, 2009. https://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween
[96] Hutton, "The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain", 1-14.
[97] "The Alternative Halloween Celebration: 13 Ways to Celebrate Samhain", https://www.gaia.com/article/modern-paganism-13-rituals-celebrate-samhain

holly, ice and snow, and famously the yule log which is ceremoniously decorated with various herbs, fruits and spices and burned little by little over twelve nights. Many traditions associated with Yule historically have been adopted and adapted for the Christian celebration of Christmas, with some traditional foods and drinks such as gingerbread and wassail originating from pagan celebrations of Yule.[98]

The first signs of spring are honored on February 2nd with the celebration of Imbolc. Broadly speaking, Imbolc is celebrated as an "awakening" of mother earth after winter has ended. It is a time of purifying and cleansing. In fact, the concept of "spring cleaning" may have originated from pagan ritual cleaning during this time.[99] The holiday has also become largely associated with an important Irish figure in Saint Brigid. One of the patron saints of Ireland, Saint Brigid of Kildare famously is attributed for playing a major role in bringing Christianity to an otherwise pagan Ireland. She also famously was believed to have a same-sex lover and was rather open with her romantic life and her sexuality- something that was not very common from Catholic saints and clergy at the time. To many Irish people who despite converting to Christianity kept ahold to a lot of their pagan beliefs, Saint Brigid was commonly believed to be a direct incarnation of the pre-Christian Celtic goddess Brigid, or Bride- the goddess of springtime, fertility, smithing, and poetry[100]. As a result, Imbolc was often revered by smiths and poets and is often celebrated to honor craftspeople and artists. Due to Brigid's association with sex and fertility, ritual sex is sometimes used to celebrate Imbolc. To some witches, the goddess Brigid and by extension Saint Brigid are believed to be the maiden in regards to the Triple Goddess.

[98] Reiss, "Yule: A Celebration of Light and Warmth," 2000.
[99] Mikhailova, "February 1st in Ireland (Imbolc and/or LáFhéile Bride): From Christian Saint to Pagan Goddess," 2020.
[100] Freeman, "The Life of Saint Brigid," 94-128.

March 20th marks the celebration of Ostara- a celebration of the spring equinox. Sometimes called the "Festival of New Life," witches and pagans honor the coming of spring. This is the time where the Goddess fully wakes up and covers the earth in a blanket of life. Ostara is also a celebration of life and fertility. Sex and sex rituals are encouraged during this time perhaps even more so than during Imbolc. A lot of the traditions and symbolisms associated with Christian Easter likely were influenced by pagan celebrations of Ostara. It is also revered as a celebration of the relationship between mother and daughter.[101]

The beginning of summer is celebrated on May 1st with the holiday Beltane. One common interpretation of Beltane views it as the time where the Goddess became pregnant with the Horned King, while other interpretations view it as the time where the Horned God is actually born. Regardless of which interpretation is honored, major emphasis is placed on birth and honoring women's ability to create life. Some common pagan icons such as the maypole are associated with the celebration of Beltane.[102]

The famous midsummer celebration, or Litha, occurs on the summer solstice on June 20th. It is a celebration of the longest day and the shortest night and is believed to be when the Goddess dances her "dance of life," and a sort of contest is sometimes held to see who can dance for the longest amount of time before collapsing, with some contests lasting the entire day. Litha is also a celebration of the middle of the life cycle of the Triple Goddess, representing the mother.[103]

Lughnasadh is a holiday that isn't commonly celebrated by witches or pagans today. Occurring on August 1st, Lughnasadh historically was a celebration of the harvest season and the

[101] Sermon, "From Easter to Ostara: The Reinvention of the Pagan Goddess," 2013.
[102] McRae, "Beltane," 1995.
[103] McRae, "Litha," 1995.

Goddess of Fortune. It was typically celebrated with some sort of sacrifice to offer the deities in return for a bountiful harvest.[104]

Finally is Mabon, celebrated on September 22nd during the fall equinox. It is a time to celebrate the Goddess as the "lady of abundance," and to honor her life as it begins to come to an end. Mabon is often associated with the crone aspect of the Triple Goddess, as she is approaching the end of her life cycle before it starts again.[105]

Cycles are extremely important symbols in Wiccan thought, whether that be cycles of life and death, cycles of the moon, or cycles of seasons. Each stop along the Wheel of the Year represents a different point upon the cycle of life and death of the Goddess, but can easily be applied to the lives of witches. With Imbolc representing the maiden, Beltane the mother, and Mabon the crone, there is a reflection to be found between the cycle of the earth and the cycle life, which is just one more example of people's connection with the natural world and with the Goddess through the natural world in the eyes of adherents. The Goddess is often viewed as a parallel and a reflection of humans, and in celebrating divine aspects of her, they are able to celebrate those aspects of themselves, as well. Therefore, Wicca provides a place where women are honored and celebrated.

[104] McRae, "Lughnasadh," 1995.
[105] Hutton, "The triumph of the moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft"

Chapter 3:

The art of the craft

Painting and magical arts seem very similar to me.

- Ursula, *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989)[106]

Witchcraft and the arts have complimented each other for centuries- even well before its introduction to North America as a neopagan movement. Many deities representing the arts- such as Bride, the goddess of poetry, have been chosen as the patron deity of many practitioners.[107] Music, dance, poetry and art have become ritualized and are often used to celebrate and honor the deities, especially during certain times of the Wheel of the Year.[108] In this chapter, I will explore the impact of arts, media, and aesthetics have played in the role of conversion and how the internet has flooded the market with new beliefs, ideas and discourse that lead to the formation of neopagan witchcraft as a new religious movement.

Witchcraft in entertainment

Despite historically being a movement existing only on the fringes of society, witchcraft has truly rooted itself into contemporary American alternative culture, with some aspects of the religious movement even finding its way into the mainstream. Wiccan activists have made headlines for their roles in modern protests and political movements, such as the Black Lives Matter protests in summer of 2020.[109] Certain Wiccan symbols have been implemented into

[106] *Kiki's Delivery Service,* 1989.
[107] Freeman, "The Life of Saint Brigid," 94-128.
[108] Hutton, "The triumph of the moon: a history of modern pagan witchcraft"
[109] Gulino, "TikTok Witches Are Using Their Power For Black Lives Matter, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/06/9855064/tiktok-witches-black-lives-matter

alternative fashion and witchcraft has frequently been portrayed in popular media- painted both negatively and positively. [110] Certain practices, rituals and pseudosciences have also made their way into public consciousness. One example of this is astrology, which historically refers to all sciences regarding the cosmos, including the perceived magical nature of it. Likely influenced by Keith Thomas's book *Religion and the Decline of Magic,*[111] astrology became largely seen as purely an intellectual science and the idea of magic in the field was largely discarded. However, many of the magical aspects of astrology- such as horoscopes, fortune telling and matchmaking remained a popular pseudoscience that was frequently associated with witchcraft due to its perceived magical nature. Despite this association, astrology remains a popular activity.[112]

Witchcraft and magic are also common themes all over the entertainment industry, with works of fiction often being people's only exposure to the practice. Witch and pagan cults are a fixture in many horror movies like *The Blair Witch Project* surrounding the local legend of a mysterious witch who kidnapped and killed seven children.[113] The film portrays the witch as a dangerous hermit and mixes elements of paganism with elements of horror. A more recent horror film surrounding paganism to gain popularity is *Midsommar*, which follows a group of college students invited to a Litha celebration in rural Sweden, only to slowly realize that they have been lured to join the festival to become ritual sacrifices.[114] The film's horror elements contrast its bright colors and celebratory tone. The film has also resonated with many women and feminists for its portrayal of matriarchy and empowerment, pulling influence from real neopagan cults.[115]

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[110] Silver, *Solitary Witch: The Ultimate Book of Shadows for the New Generation," 2003.*
[111] Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England*, 2012.

[112] Hill-Curth, *English Almanacs, Astrology and Popular Medicine, 1550-1700,* 106-111.
[113] *The Blair Witch Project,* 1999.
[114] *Midsommar*, 2019.
[115] Kennedy, "Monstrous Womanhood and the Unapologetic Feminism of 'Midsommar,'" 2019.

Some films portray witchcraft in a more playful and lighthearted way, such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which follows a young witch-in-training and her cat as they set out into the world for the first time on their own[116]. With a simple message of believing in one's own abilities and own worth, *Kiki's Delivery Service* has been noted to resonate with a lot of young women who grew up with the film. Gabrielle Bellot from the Atlantic writes on the film:

Sometimes, being trans can feel like coming of age a second time, flying off to find yourself in an unfamiliar place, like Kiki, and hoping you will land without crashing. You learn the contours of the new world you've landed in—the catcalls, the fear of walking in certain places when you are alone, the people who will talk down to you out of the old assumption that prettiness and intelligence do not coexist, and the other subtle things that come to casually define your life. Sometimes, I do crash. Sometimes, I cry when I think about the child I can never give birth to, an element of motherhood I wish so much I could share. Yet, as *Kiki's Delivery Service* reminds viewers, if we can conquer the things that make us cry, we can find other ways to smile.[117]

For some, *Kiki's Delivery Service* is the first exposure to a young girl protagonist making it on her own and discovering her own abilities, encouraging young viewers to do the same. In an interview conducted in the months leading up to the release of the film in 1989, Miyazaki himself talks on the intention of the film:

[116] *Kiki's Delivery Service,* 1989.
[117] Bellot, "Hayao Miyazaki and the Art of Being a Woman," 2016.

I feel that this film will fulfill its goal of reaching out with a feeling of solidarity to our young viewers: the young girls living in today's world who do not deny the joy of youth, nor are carried away by it, torn between freedom and dependence (because we were all young men and women once, and the young members of our staff have these very problems now). At the same time I feel that the basic potential of this film as entertainment lies in this point and that it will inspire sympathy in the viewers.[118]

With the case of the film, this experience of independence is inherently tied with being a witch. In the world of the film, witches not only practice magic and create potions, but also have unique talents they use to help others and make a living on their own. The film has also become popular recently for its "cottagecore" aesthetics- an aesthetic that emphasizes natural elements, earthy colors, and organized clutter to put together a sense of "coziness," and has become extremely popular within alternative and witch circles.[119] It is an aesthetic that has become closely associated with neopagan witchcraft, painting a sort of independent lifestyle where one is growing their own food, chopping their own wood and largely living off the grid in a way many classical witches were believed to have lived historically in places like Ireland and England.[120] It is an aesthetic that is largely feminine, and romanticizes the fantasy of living away from society- and away from the control of men, in order to live humbly and independently. Tumblr user lofistudygirl writes on the aesthetics of the film:

Kiki's Delivery Service was the first [Studio Ghibli film] I watched and I loved it. I was introduced to Ghibli because of my love for Cottagecore, several people recommended these

[118] Miyazaki, "The Hopes and Spirits of Contemporary Japanese Girls," 1989.
[119] Reggev, "What Exactly Is Cottagecore And How Did It Get So Popular?" 2020.
[120] Heathcote, "What is cottagecore? 'Your grandma but, like, hip,'" 2021.

movies because they have a similar aesthetic in more than one film. *Kiki's Delivery Service* was so sweet and wholesome feeling, like coming home after a long day. Kiki was a bright and cheerful young heroine and I really enjoyed her journey. As someone creative and artistic who struggles with depression I found myself really connecting to her story of losing and finding herself again. The tone of the film was very lighthearted on the outside and yet so deep on the inside. So far this has been my favorite Ghibli film.[121]

Recently many films, shows, books, video games and other stories have used witch and pagan imagery and themes to empower and to portray the Wiccan lifestyle in a more positive light from its horror counterparts. Disney's *The Owl House*[122] is an animated kids show about magic and witchcraft that has been celebrated for its LGBTQ+ representation,[123] and the upcoming video game *Little Witch in the Woods*[124] has already gained a following as a life simulation game where the player creates spells and potions, grows food, and fights enemies- romanticizing the life of a humble witch living on her own in the woods, similar to the cottagecore aesthetic.[125]

This romantic exposure to witchcraft common in modern media surely has left an impact on individuals searching for new spiritual moments and identity. Thus, this romanticized idea of witchcraft has influenced witches and those who have become interested in witch culture. For young women who grew up inspired by Kiki, the idea of being a witch could be a part of their identity. Seeing queer representation as the lead in media about magic and witchcraft can lead one to associated witchcraft as being a place where queer people exist, but also where queer

[121] Lofistudygirl, 2021.
[122] *The Owl House,* 2016.
[123] Smith, "Disney finally makes queer history with bisexual lead," 2019. https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/08/10/owl-house-bisexual-luz-amity-disney-channel-sexuality-lgbt/
[124] *Little Witch in the Woods,* 2021.
[125] Wesley, "Becoming Enchanted with Little Witch in the Woods," 2020. https://medium.com/vistas-mag/becoming-enchanted-with-little-witch-of-the-woods-c4df58b0c5b0

people thrive.[126] In gaming culture- a culture that has been noted to be male-dominated and has documented issues of misogyny, transphobia and homophobia,[127] *Little Witch in the Woods* and similar games like *Stardew Valley*[128] have created inclusive spaces and sub-communities with more positive representation.[129] The media we consume can leave lasting impressions on us and influence our relationships with ourselves and our own identities, and can extend to and influence religious identities, as well- both positively and negatively.[130]

Witchcraft and social media

The rise of social media has played an integral part in the spread of different new religious movements since its creation. Information about ideas, beliefs, and practices have never been more accessible and with the attitude surrounding spirituality shifting from "dwelling" to "seeking," people are more and more open to exploring those ideas and finding an identity that best fits their needs as noted by Robert Wuthnow in his book *After Heaven*.[131] Wicca is no exception, with witch blogs existing all over the internet and sites like Tumblr or Pinterest having particularly active witch communities.[132] Witches from all over the world are able to be in contact with one another in an instant, sharing rituals and spells and celebrating the full moon together. As noted by the Lofland-Stark model of conversion presented by John Lofland and Rodney Stark in their journal entry "Becoming a World Saver," a person's relationships and communities are a vital aspect of a person's conversion, since people are more willing to explore

[126] Provance, "Why Queer Representation Matters," *University Wire,* 2018.
[127] Cote and Mejeur, "Gamers, gender, and cruel optimism: the limits of social identity constructs in *The Guild*," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, 2018.
[128] *Stardew Valley,* 2016.
[129] Shaw, "Gaming at the edge: sexuality and gender at the margins of gaming culture," 2014.
[130] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin,"48-50.
[131] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s," 7.
[132] Lundahl, "The Rise of the Internet Witch," 2017.
https://sacredmattersmagazine.com/the-rise-of-the-internet-witch/

different ideas and movements if they are exposed to those ideas by someone they are close with,[133] and the internet makes those relationships easier to cultivate and maintain. The term "baby witch" has become synonymous with people exploring witchcraft, and many experienced witches have taken upon themselves to create and publish helpful guides for new converts to begin to create their own craft. On becoming a witch, Tumblr user joannethewitch writes:

Being a new witch is terrifying. Some of us start early and don't realize it until much later. We were the little children that dug up worms and gathered flowers and collected nice rocks and that read to many books and didn't believe a single word we read in the Bible (This last thing is a personal statement and experience). And then with sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-five we rediscover magic as a part of our lives. Some of us don't start until we think that it is already too late to start with something new. We have been doing the same practice for over a decade and it never felt quite right. We have a start-stop relationship with magic. We think it might just not be for us at all. But now we want to start again from the very beginning and do it right this time.[134]

The author then goes on to create a list of tips and words of encouragement for baby witches, ending the post with a quote from contemporary witch artist and hobbyist J.S. Morrigan, "Now go out there and be a witch."[135] This is just one of thousands of examples of an experienced witch reaching out and helping new witches on Tumblr alone. Religious seekers exploring neopagan witchcraft are able to connect with practicing witches immediately. Due to the loosely

[133] Lofland and Stark, " Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective" *American Sociological Review,* 1965, 864.
[134] Joannethewitch, 2018. https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/joannethewitch
[135] J.S. Morrigan, "Artist // Hobbyist // Traditional Art," 2017. https://www.deviantart.com/j-s-morrigan

organized nature of neopagan witchcraft, currently practicing witches are extremely important resources for potential converts to learn more about and develop their craft. They also provide a valuable support system for the potential convert as they go through a process of conversion that can no doubt be very difficult- but exciting, for the pre-convert.

One platform that has recently gained popularity with a flourishing witch community is TikTok, identifiable by the hashtag "#WitchTok," which collectively at the time of writing this had 12.4 billion views on videos with the tag. The tag is full of thousands of people posting content related to their own practice, to providing help and advice for people developing their own practice, and for general content related to Wicca, witchcraft, and paganism. The tag is even officially recognized by TikTok as a community with the caption "Here's to everyone feeling a bit witchy."[136] On a platform where anything can be a tag to represent a community, there are only a handful of tags actually recognized by TikTok itself with an official caption, meaning that "#WitchTok" is one of the most popular tags on the entire social media platform. What results is a unique blend of personal beliefs, cultures and practices that form a specific brand of witchcraft that could not exist without the help and interconnectedness of the internet and social media.[137] As a result, there are sometimes conflicting opinions and discourse between users over disagreements on practices and beliefs. Some examples include whether or not it is okay to use hexes or spells, what the witch community's role in certain political movements should be, and whether men- especially straight men, have a place within the witch community.

The internet has become a valuable resource for people exploring all facets of their identity. Pamela Dickey Young and and Heather Shipley write in their book *Forging Identities* on

[136] TikTok, "#witchtok," https://www.tiktok.com/search?q=#witchtok&lang=en
[137] Tillman, "Review: Johanna Mutzl (2005). "Die Macht von Dreien ..." Medienhexen und moderne Fangemeinschaften. Bedeutungskonstruktionen im Internet ["Three's Power"—Media Witches and Modern Fan Communities. The Construction of Meaning on the Internet]," 2006.

the role that the internet has played in the cultivation of identities for a number of young survey participants:

For respondents, the internet served as a reference point- in general and around religion and sexuality- and as a place to seek out communities and understandings. For some, the internet affirmed their religious values and beliefs; for others, it challenged their ideas and expectations. But across the board, it was a reference, whether in exploring sexuality or in learning about religious diversity.[138]

Not all witches look at the internet with such optimism, however. For some witches, their craft is defined by a practice that might be seen as more primitive and more closely attuned to the ancient religions witchcraft is related to. When asked in an interview by Margot Adler for her book *Drawing Down the Moon* about whether or not she believed we as a culture have a heavy reliance on technology, Oakland resident and Irish-American member of the Craft responds:

We live in a society where technology is used to diminish human faculties. That is why I say this is an age of darkness. People are turning away from their faculties generally, not because of technology, but because of the head-set of the present society, the present exploitation-oriented culture in which goods are the measure of personal achievement, not the development of faculties. In ancient Ireland … we had a tremendous burst of artistic and intellectual expression. And the reason we had it is that people's honor was defined not by how many cows they had, or goats, or boar tusks, or gold coins; their honor depended on how well they could sing, how well they could produce poetry, how well they could make things of incredible beauty. It was those

[138] Young and Shipley, "Forging Identities: The Influences of Parents, Peers, the Internet and Religion," 86.

things that brought status. The arts of poetry and music became important because they were detached from goods.[139]

For some, the internet and social media are inherently related to materialism and other side effects of a neoliberal society that has placed less and less value on things such as the arts that have historically been held to a very high regard- especially in Irish culture and other cultures that have influenced neopagan belief.[140] On the other hand, the internet can also be seen as a means for creativity. Sharing art, poetry and music is easy, with tools and support accessible to anyone. Internet witches have a strong sense of creativity, selling creations on Etsy or sharing poetry on Tumblr while encouraging people to support artists and local artisans.

The internet has become a vital part of the creation of modern witchcraft, with many practicing witches using the internet to hone and develop their craft. Spiritual seekers use social media as a tool to learn and communicate, as well as teach. The market for ideas and religious movements has been flooded as a result of the creation of the internet, so people are always trying to find their niche and figure out what religious identity meshed best with other aspects of their identity.

[139] Adler, "Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America," 155.
[140] Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 610,* 2007. 22-24.

Conclusion

Not all converts to Wicca do so out of some religious desire or aspect of their identity. Some are raised within the craft, and some simply come across the craft on their own. However, the emphasis on feminism that the craft has historically placed on its community, as well as the promise of independence and individuality are no doubt very positive draws to the craft for many converts- especially when the alternative hegemony lacks so much inclusivity. The internet and media have also played a huge role in the development of neopagan witchcraft as a new religious movement, with current connectivity making it so easy for converts to explore other religious ideas and come into contact with current practitioners that can act as a sort of guide through their process of conversion.

Men also exist in the craft- which has been somewhat of a topic of debate between many feminist witches,[141] and have also held significant roles within the craft, including Gerald Gardner who founded Gardnerian Wicca,[142] and Charles Godfrey Leland,[143] whose works inspired Dianic Wicca- an especially feminist order of the craft. Despite the existence of men within the craft, the narrative surrounding witchcraft remains that it is a woman's practice and is a place for women to be empowered and independent. Regardless, there is certainly more research to be done about the place men have within the craft and what things draw men to the craft.

Religious conversion is a phenomenon that requires a lot of external factors. These factors vary from person to person, but largely follows the trend that a) there is a disconnect between a person's ideal and their current situation, b) a person explores options to alleviate that

[141] "Regarding Men: The Insuffiency of the Current Early Modern Witchcraft Paradigm," 2005.
[142] Gardner, "Book of Shadows".
[143] Leland, "Aradia Or, The Gospel of Witches"

disconnect, and finally c) a person converts to a new religious identity that better suits their perceived ideal.[144] The change can be quick or can happen over a long period of time. A person's experience through the conversion process is entirely contingent on their identities and on the various aspects of that identity. Thus, people tend to make changes to their religious identity if it is not compatible with other aspects of their identity.[145]

For those who have felt a tension between Christian patriarchy and aspects of their personal identity- especially sexuality and gender, Wicca has provided an attractive alternative with a history of feminism, empowerment and matriarchy. The historical and current beliefs surrounding witchcraft offer a pantheon of diverse figures for adherents to worship where both genders are represented and honored. Various movements have risen within the Wiccan community that represent different goals related to feminism and gender and sexuality inclusivity- existing within the means of their own belief and practice. Magic, ritual and other forms of the practice of the craft allows for followers to have the agency and independence to have their own set of practice, spells, and beliefs that fit into their needs and desires as spiritual seekers,[146] as well as as individuals.

[144] Lofland and Stark, " Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective" *American Sociological Review,* 1965, 865-867

[145] Cooper, "Pathways to Druidry: A Case Study on Ár nDraíocht Féin,"48-50.

[146] Wuthnow, "After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s."

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