



Recreating alternatives

B Y W. C. M c R A E

What does the word "witch" mean to you? Or the word "paganism"? Chances are that you were raised to believe that both words have negative — even evil — connotations.

Not unlike the connotations that "faggot," "dyke," or "queer" have for some.

All these words' shared connotations of "threatening" or even "sinsiter" are not accidental. According to some historians of spirituality, gays and lesbians have been associated with ancient and alternative religions since pre-history. Within traditional Western culture, however, the association of gay people and alternative spirituality has been used to devalue both.

Reclaiming history

Traditional terms of derision like "faggot" or "dyke" have been reclaimed by gay men and lesbians. Modern followers of alternative spirituality are now affirming the meanings, and the religious impulse, behind "witch" and "pagan."

In *Drawing Down the Moon*, Margot Adler defines a pagan as a "member of a polytheistic nature religion. [Paganism is] an attempt to retain the humanistic, ecological, and creative aspects of old belief systems. Neo-Pagans see divinity manifest in all the processes of nature." Witches, according to Adler, "consider themselves priests and priestesses of an ancient European shamanistic nature religion that worships a goddess who is related to the ancient Mother Goddess. Many see themselves as modern-day heirs to the ancient mystery traditions, as well as the more popular peasant traditions of celebratory festivals and seasonal rites."

Dieties of Witchcraft and Paganism function as symbols of the divinity both in nature and in ourselves. The religion, and the ritual or "craft" associated with it, are celebrations of power from and unity with the earth, the natural cycle, and our bodies. It is important to note that the "Old Religions" as they are now practiced, are both ancient and newly invented. Re-emergence of the ancient traditions are as much due to spiritual creativity as the survival of historic covens or pagan ceremonies.

According to modern practitioners, both

witchcraft (or Wicca, from the Old English root of witch, meaning "wise") and paganism are religions that pre-date Christianity. However, they have been purposefully obscured and misunderstood by Christians. To present day adherents, ancient systems of thought offer a spiritual alternative to those men and women whom traditional culture and religion have alienated, and at whose expense patriarchal institutions have been erected. These groups, which include women and gays and lesbians, were at the center of ancient earth-centered religions.

However, the reconstruction of an alternative spiritual history within the European culture is difficult because the Western religious and academic tradition has been at pains at first to obscure and later, to obliterate any alternatives to its orthodoxy.

In the beginning

Arthur Evans, in *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, contends that when the Roman Christians subdued the indigenous peoples of Northern Europe, they did so by instituting a patriarchal religious structure over existing Celtic cultural norms that advocated a high status for women; that was open to sexuality; that freely embraced homosexuality.

Using evidence from art, anthropology, church history, and folklore, advocates of paganism describe an idealized pre-Christian earth religion. This religion was aware of the world and everything in it as alive; it honored the spirits imminent in forests, streams, and forces of nature. It saw a weaving dance of transformative power enacted in the cycle of the seasons, the patterns of the stars, in the cycles of life. Human sexuality was celebrated as flesh infused with spirit. Celtic deities represented the earth, its seasons, imminent nature (the Great Mother, the Goddess), and the impulsive and serendipitous (The Horned One, the male counterpart of the Goddess).

Celtic ceremony was a celebration of song and dance. Evans suggests that all forms of sexuality — and male and female transvestism — played a role in the Celtic religious and cultural ritual. Priestesses of the Goddess enjoyed high social status, as did women in general. The Celts were notorious among the early Romans (who were not easily shocked) for male homosexuality and transvestism.

Under Christianity, the old religion was demeaned, and its deities demoted. The elements of goddess worship that were not transferred onto Mother Mary were forced underground, and surfaced again around the fairies of folklore. The sexually anarchic Horned God was relegated to hell and became Satan, cosmic evil personified (a more benign derivative was Puck or Pan, who was only mildly obscene).

Repression of the indigenous religions of Europe went hand in hand with repression of gay people and women. The Emperor Constantine (4th Century A.D.) declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire; he also declared pederasty a capital offense. Early church theologians claimed that women represent nature, darkness, sexuality, all attributes no longer viewed positively when compared to "God's pristine abstraction." (Starkhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*).

As an increasingly repressive Christianity became the religion of the European urban upper classes, the old religion persisted in rural areas (the word "pagan" simply means country dweller). "Long after city dwellers had converted to Christianity, the Witches were the wise women and cunning men of the country villages. They were the herbalists, the healers, the counselors in times of trouble." (Starkhawk). When the church went through the long process of ridding itself of "heretical" elements, and later through its persecution of witches, Evans contends that it was not moving against isolated movements or individual witches. Rather, he says, the church was trying to suppress the old religion that still thrived in the countryside outside the capitals. The Inquisition was as interested in sexual nonconformity and sex role reversals, as doctrinal lapses. When heretics or witches were brought before the Inquisition, they were asked about ritual sex, or transvestism, about the practice of allowing women a role in religious ceremony, about lesbianism and gay male sexuality. To the Inquisition, in its pursuit of absolute conformity in matters of spirit and flesh, a gay lifestyle (or allegations of it) led to accusations of witchcraft, and vice versa.

Survival and re-creation

"The history of patriarchal civilization could be read as a cumulative effort to break [the] bond, to drive a wedge between spirit and flesh,

culture and nature, man and woman" (Starkhawk). The suppression of alternatives is in many ways the story of Western culture, and in modern history we are all familiar with the oppression of gay people, women, and racial minorities — to say nothing of witches.

Witchcraft has managed to survive both historically, and imaginatively. "The Craft survived however — secretly, silently, underground, in small groups called covens whose members were related by blood or deep trust," (Starkhawk). Among rural peoples especially, vestiges of the old craft remained, to be discovered and (some say) re-crafted by writers and practitioners in this century.

Besides survival of traditions, others point to social reasons for a resurgence of interest in ancient systems of thought. The environmental movement has awakened in many a spiritual affinity with nature that renounces the objectification and exploitation of the earth. Feminism, and feminist critiques of history, have pointed out the bankruptcy of traditional cultural norms, not the least of which have to do with religion. Paganism and witchcraft allow women to explore their spirituality within forms that do not automatically pre-structure the quality and degree of their participation. Likewise, within paganism and witchcraft, gays and lesbians can explore spirituality in a forum that welcomes diversity. Also, renewed interest in midwifery and "non-medical establishment" methods of healing and wellness have led to re-examination of herb lore and peasant medicine: traditions — and philosophies — associated with witchcraft.

In a larger sense, the growth of alternative spirituality can be seen as a breakdown in the world order that we have been taught to accept and not question. That there are no alternatives is the "big lie" of patriarchy, which has up till now succeeded in "naturalizing" its own structures. This realization is inherently political, as well as spiritual. Starkhawk: "[There is] a growing realization among many strata of people that the dead world of mechanism, the world of domination, cannot sustain our inner lives, nor our lives in community with each other, nor the life of the planet. The rebirth of earth religion is a part of a broad movement that challenges domination."

As one Portland witch stated, "The world is close to perishing, and it is crying out to be saved." ●