

What is a Witch?

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Come this time of year when one hears the word "witch" certain notions and images are conjured up. Most likely the stereotypical Halloween witch comes to mind. Perhaps some of the images invoked might include conical hats, black cats, broomsticks, and magic. But, just who is a witch and what do they do?

When someone is a witch, it is presumed that he or she, usually it's a she, has magical powers or is an evil spirit incarnate. The source and nature of these powers, their witchcraft, is thought to be supernatural and can include an array of abilities such as flying, reading minds, and casting spells. Almost every culture has some sort of witch in its mythology and historical lore. The ancient Greeks, Romans, and Babylonians as well as African, Asian, and Native American cultures all believed in the existence of witches.

Currently, in American and northern European societies, there are a growing number of witches. These witches are not the stereotypical archetype. They are not bad witches casting evil spells or turning people into newts. Most modern witches practice a non-malevolent form of witchcraft known as Wicca or the Craft.

The word witch has its roots in Old English and comes from the word wic meaning to bend or to transform. Closely associated with the word witch is the word wicca, which is also derived from wic. The word wicca means to be wise. It is thought that a practitioner of Wicca is seeking wisdom and does so through some form of magical transformation. In the days of pre-Christian Europe, most people practiced some sort of Wiccan lifestyle, commonly referred to as the Old Religion. Once Christianity was established and rose to power, the Old Religion became known as pagan. The word pagan originated from the Latin word meaning country folk, one who lives rurally. The country folk or pagans were the last to convert to Christianity.

Modern witches are seemingly average people just like you or me. In day to day life, they don't necessarily stand out. Many modern witches practice Wicca to satisfy their spiritual needs while also trying to honor the

earth and the environment. Wicca involves white or green magic, which has no ill intentions. Part of the creed for Wiccan witches includes to a large part a vow to do only good with their practice. There is no worship of deities in this practice and it's not exactly a religion. It's a spiritual practice and lifestyle. Intention and invocation, amulets and talismen, incense, herbs, precious stones, feathers and shells are a few of the accoutrements of the Wiccan witch.

Wiccan or Neo-Pagan activities are closely tied to the circular celestial year, not the linear Gregorian calendar year. Some of these rituals include celebrations on the equinox and solstice. These are often community gatherings that celebrate the fertility that comes with spring, the warmth and bounty of summer and fall, and the time of introspection brought on by the darkness of winter. These rituals date back further into our human past than written language itself. Learning about this history helps one to better understand modern day Wicca.

The Old Religion honored the feminine and placed a high value on female characteristics unlike contemporary male oriented religions. The physical and mystical connection that the ancients had to the feminine was through agriculture and the rotating seasons. The feminine aspect, the full and ripe pregnant female, came to represent fertility and rebirth. Along with that came a high value placed upon the tangible environment; other animals, the earth, air, water, sun, and seasons.

Over time, the rituals evolved specifically incorporating aspects of the feminine and the environment, rituals that by today's standards would be considered constituents of a religion. One might equate these rituals to native peoples who utilize shamanic practices to reach the spiritual element of the Divine.

As a result, the modern Wiccan movement is closely associated with Goddess worship. It isn't worship per se, moreover it is a reverent Earth-based world view focusing upon favorable feminine characteristics, ones that are nurturing, kind, powerful, just, fertile and as such, abundant.

It was the sad and misogynist events of the European Witch Burning era during the Middle Ages that solidified the negative connotations associated with witches and witchcraft. Negative connotations that obviously still persist today. During that time, up to 9 million people, the majorities of which were women, were accused, tortured, and most often were executed as witches and heretics of the Church. The reign of terror lasted several hundred years and was aimed at those who refused to con-

feared. Modern witches struggle with the word "witch" and for this very reason some choose to not use the word at all.

Modern day witches can be found practicing alone or in groups. Since it is not organized, there is room for individuality and creativity. There is no need for alarm when encountering a Wiccan witch. People who subscribe to Wiccan values are not associated with the dark side of occultism nor do they worship satan. Instead, a Wiccan witch might be found creating a blessing ritual for a new child or home, or they might be found dancing around the May pole, or delivering a Yule log to friends during the winter solstice, or simply they may be found sitting under a tree enjoying the beauty of Mother Nature. Blessed be! Happy Samhain! (That's pagan for Halloween).

*Hey ho for Hallowe'en,
When all the witches are to be seen:
Some in black, and some in green,
Hey ho for Hallowe'en*

A free lecture and discussion on the Witch Burning era will be held at In Other Words Bookstore on 3734 SE Hawthorn Blvd. in Portland at 503/232-6003 on Monday, November 1 at 7PM.



form to or to those who challenged the Church in any way. This holocaust was especially aimed at people who went by the old ways, the Old Religion. The long lasting sociological imprints of this carnage left us with the impression that all witches are evil and should be

Flying from page 6

and in fact you should "never do magic in anger."

In one respect, Phillips and her fellow witches do meet a popular stereotype: Halloween is a sacred holiday for them, as are Ground Hog and May Day (known to witches as Soow-Winn, Imbolc and Beltave, respectively) and the solstices and equinoxes. On these occasions, Phillips and four other witches, who call themselves

Strand by Strand, have held mass ceremonies that have attracted up to 100 people. They're giving it a rest this year, but the curious can find out more about contemporary witchcraft through the newsletter "Open Ways," available at the Goddess Gallery and Moonshadow on Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard. They can also visit the web sites www.aracnet.com-raving/index-atml, or www.witchvox.com.

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