

Exegesis on the *Rede*

All religions began with somebody's sudden flashing insight, enlightenment, a shining vision. Some mystic found the Way and the words to share the vision, and, sharing it, attracted followers. The followers may repeat those precise and poetic words about the vision until they congeal into set phrases, fused language, repeated by rote and without understanding. Clichés begin as great wisdom - that's why they spread so fast - and end as ritual phrases, heard but not understood. Living spirituality so easily hardens to boring religious routine, maintained through guilt and fear, or habit and social opportunism - any reason but joy.

We come to the Craft with a first generation's joy of discovery, and a first generation's memory of bored hours of routine worship in our childhood. Because we have known the difference, it is our particular challenge to find or make ways to keep the Craft a living, real experience for our grandchildren and for the students of our students.

I think the best of these safeguards is already built into the Craft as we know it, put there by our own good teachers. On our Path, the mystic experience itself is shared, not just the fruits of mysticism. We give all our students the techniques, and the protective/supportive environment that enable almost every one of them to Draw the Moon and/or Invoke the God. This is an incredibly radical change from older religions, even older Pagan religions, in which the only permissible source of inspiration has been to endlessly reinterpret and reapply the vision of the Founder (the *Bible*, the *Book of the Law*, the *Koran*, ...). The practice of Drawing the Moon is the brilliant crown of the Craft.

But notice how often, in the old myths, every treasure has its pitfalls? I think I'm beginning to see one of ours. Between the normal process of original visions clotting into cliché, and our perpetual flow of new inspiration, we are in danger of losing the special wisdom of those who founded the modern Craft. I do not think we should assiduously preserve every precious word. My love for my own Gardnerian tradition does not blind me to our sexist and heterosexist roots. And yet, I want us to remain identifiably Witches and not meld into some homogeneous "New Age" sludge. For this, I think we need some sort of anchoring in tradition to give us a sense of identity. Some of the old sayings really do crystallize great wisdom as well, life-affirming Pagan wisdom that our culture needs to hear.

So I think it's time for a little creative borrowing from our neighbors. Christians do something they call "exegesis." Jews have a somewhat similar process called "midrash." What it is is something between interpretation and meditation, a very concentrated examination of a particular text. The assumption often is that every single word has meaning (cabalists even look at the individual letters). Out of this inspired combination of scholarship and daydream comes the vitality of those paths whose canon is closed. The contemporary example, of course, is Christian Liberation Theology, based on a re-visioning of Jesus that would utterly shock John Calvin.

Although our canon is not closed - and the day it is is the day I quit - I'm suggesting that we can use a similar process to renew the life of the older parts of our own still-young heritage.

So, I'd like to try doing some exegesis on an essential statement of the Craft way of life. Every religion has some sort of ethic, some guideline for what it means to live in accordance with this particular mythos, this worldview. Ours, called the *Wiccan Rede*, is one of the most elegant statements I've heard of the principle of situational ethics. Rather than placing the power and duty to decide about behavior with teachers or rulebooks, the *Rede* places it exactly where it belongs, with the actor.

Eight words the *Wiccan Rede* fulfill: An it harm none, do what you will

I'd like to start with the second phrase first, and to take it almost word by word.

- **do what YOU will.** This is the challenge to self-direction, to figure out what we want, and not what somebody else wants for us or from us. All of us are subject to tremendous role expectations and pressures, coming from our families, our employers, our friends, society in general. It's easy to just be molded, deceptively easy to become a compulsive rebel and reflexively do the opposite of whatever "they" seem to want. Living by the *Rede* means accepting the responsibility to assess the results of our actions and to choose when we will obey, confront or evade the rules.
- **do what you WILL.** This is the challenge to introspection, to know what we really want beyond the whim of the moment. The classic example is that of the student who chooses to study for an exam rather than go to a party, because what she really wants is to be a doctor. Again, balance is needed. Always going to the library rather than the movies is the road to burnout, not the road to a Nobel Prize. What's more, there are other values in life, such as sensuality, intimacy, spirituality, that get ignored in a compulsively long-term orientation. So, our responsibility is not to mechanically follow some rule like "always choose to defer gratification in your own long-term self interest," but to really listen within, and to really choose, each time.
- **DO what you will.** This is the challenge to action. Don't wait for Prince Charming or the revolution. Don't blame your mother or the system. Make a realistic plan that includes all your assets. Be sure to include magic, both the deeper insights and wisdoms of divination and the focusing of will and energy that comes from active workings. Then take the first steps right now. But, beware of thoughtless action, which is equally dangerous. For example, daydreaming is needed, to envision a goal, to project the results of actions, to check progress against goals, sometimes to revise goals. Thinking and planning are necessary parts of personal progress. Action and thought are complementary; neither can replace the other.

When you really look at it, word by word, it sounds like a subtle and profound guide for life, does it not? Is it complete? Shall "do what you will" in fact be "the whole of the law" for us? I think not. The second phrase of the *Rede* discusses the individual out of context. Taken by itself, "DO WHAT YOU WILL" would produce a nastily competitive society, a "war of each against all" more bitter than what we now endure. That is, it would if it were possible. Happily, it's just plain not.

Pagan myth and modern biology alike teach us that our Earth is one interconnected living sphere, a whole system in which the actions of each affect all (and this is emphatically not limited to humankind) through intrinsic, organic feedback paths. As our technology amplifies the effects of our individual actions, it becomes increasingly critical to understand that these actions have consequences beyond the individual; consequences that, by the very nature of things, come back to the individual as well. Cooperation, once "merely" an ethical ideal, has become a survival imperative. Life is relational, contextual. Exclusive focus on the individual Will disables our empathic sense of connection with other people and with all of life. This is a lie and a deathtrap.

The qualifying "AN IT HARM NONE," draws a Circle around the individual Will and places each of us firmly within the dual contexts of the human community and the complex life-form that is Mother Gaia. The first phrase of the *Rede* directs us first to be aware of results of our actions projected not only

in time, as long-term personal outcomes, but in space - to consider how actions may effect our families, co-workers, community, and the life of the Earth as a whole, and to take those projections into account in our decisions.

But, like the rest of the *Rede*, "an it harm none" cannot be followed unthinkingly. It is simply impossible for creatures who eat to harm none. Any refusal to decide or act for fear of harming someone is also a decision and an action, and will create results of some kind. When you consider that "none" also includes ourselves, it becomes clear that what we have here is a goal and an ideal, not a rule.

The Craft, assuming ethical adulthood, offers us no rote rules. We will always be working on incomplete knowledge. We will sometimes just plain make mistakes. Life itself, and life-affirming religion, still demands that we learn, decide, act, and accept the results.

For more about the history and development of the Rede, visit ["The Wiccan Rede: a Historical Journey"](#) by John J. Coughlin.

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