

Goddess-Talk: Creating a Thealogy of our Own

It's about fifty years now since Gerald Gardner published his books; about forty since the Bucklands emigrated from Britain to America, carrying seeds of contemporary Witchcraft to our continent. From those beginnings, our numbers have increased, and so has our geographical dispersion. Some say we are the fastest growing religion in North America. Hopefully, we have grown in more than just numbers. Half a century of re-learning and practicing the Old Ways together has given us a shared base of knowledge and experience, a strong foundation upon which we can build.

Time and growth challenge us to reflect upon what we do, to seek a deeper understanding of the core values that undergird our Path. This understanding will guide us as we further develop and refine our practices. If we also want to be heard and respected by our neighbors of other religions -- and that is a matter of some debate among us -- we will need to learn how to explain ourselves in terms that they can understand.

This doesn't come easily. Some of us think we follow a new religion or one newly reconstructed from hints and fragments. Others believe our religion is ancient, although newly emerged from centuries underground. Either way, only a very few of us were raised in this faith. It is new in *our* lives. We are just learning the ways of European Paganism, polytheistic nature mysticism, through patient trial and error. We don't yet feel ready to work out coherent explanations. Many of us also feel diffident because we lack formal theological education and the analytical and descriptive skills that this might provide.

But all that daunting word "theology" means is rational discourse about our Gods and our Ways. Surely we can do that better than some uninvolved academics. Who knows our Ways better than we ourselves do?

In fact, formal theological education would not be all that applicable or helpful for us. Bible-based male monotheism is the common denominator of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the mainstream religions of the West. Understandably, this worldview shapes academic theology on this continent. But our Ways do not fit easily into such standard categories as theodicy, eschatology or salvation. We are more different than that, different way down to the roots.

I think we need to start with something truly rudimentary: our understanding of the word "religion" itself. The Latin root of the word "religion" means re-connection. I understand religion to mean activity of many different kinds intended to restore or sustain the connection between humankind and the Sacred (however any particular culture or religion conceives or models the Sacred). Through religious activity we

work toward clarifying our understanding of the Sacred, developing conscious contact, and living our lives in growing accordance with that understanding and that deeply felt connection. In simpler and more poetic words, we seek "to see You more clearly, love You more dearly, follow You more nearly day by day."

One very simple and basic way of understanding religions come from the work of Dr. Leonard Swidler, Professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University in Philadelphia. Swidler, who is a very important leader of the Interfaith movement, describes religions in terms of four components: creed, cult, code, and community. He calls these the "four c's." These four components certainly can be described in our religion and just about any other.

Our community is so diverse and so decentralized that nobody can or should speak for all of us. I can only speak for my own personal understandings and the twenty year collective experience of Proteus Coven.

1. Creed

Creed refers to the belief system, what Swidler calls the "cognitive aspect," a religion's concepts of the Sacred, its values, its general worldview. For me, this would also include the stories, symbols, myths, and metaphors used to convey this understanding.

Wicca is not a religion of the Book. No one sacred Scripture defines Wicca or neo-Paganism. Instead, we are free to choose among a kaleidoscopic array of poetry, story and symbol. More important, we are taught that we will ultimately find what we seek within ourselves or nowhere. Lived experience is the base upon which our inherited structure of written and oral traditions is built and the standard against which those teachings should continually be tested.

We might be mistaken. At best, our understanding is necessarily partial. In all humility, we must hold our concepts and metaphors lightly. Neither our understanding of our Gods nor our sense of appropriate behavior should ever become reified and static. Instead, we hope and work for lifelong personal growth and continuing evolution of our traditions across the generations.

I'm wary of making descriptive statements about the Sacred, since I believe it to be a Reality far beyond human comprehension. However, like most Witches, I relate to the Sacred primarily as Immanent rather than Transcendent. If the concept of transcendence means anything to me, it is that the Whole is greater than the parts, perhaps even greater than the sum of all the parts. So, as the wave does not presume to define the ocean, I make no attempt to define the Infinite and Ineffable. What I share is simply my perceptions, not facts and certainly not immutable Truth.

From the perspective of Immanence, I experience the Sacred as a very present Source, the life within my every living moment, rather than as a long-ago and far-away Creator. I neither perceive nor acknowledge any kind of division between the Creator and Creation. Instead, my quest is to encounter power and beauty, meaning and value within the everyday and the ordinary - in these bodies, on this Earth, here and now - and to let that Sacred encounter guide and empower my life.

I am also a polytheist. This is not because I presume to define the Sacred as either plural or singular, but because of my understanding of the human religious imagination.

Pure monotheism is all-inclusive. Since it leaves no one out, it does not oppress anyone. However, history shows that only a few gifted individuals have ever been able to sustain that pure abstract consciousness of an all-pervasive Divinity. Most of us, in order to relate to the Sacred, in order to pray at all, need to stick a face onto God.

Once we do so, the one all-inclusive God usually devolves into one face, one model -- and whichever face you choose, stern white-bearded Father, loving giving Mother, or any other, most of us are left out. This was quite recently demonstrated, when certain religious leaders explicitly cited their exclusively male models for Divinity as their rationale for refusing to ordain gifted and dedicated women to their clergy. So, as I see it, on-the-ground monotheism is usually exclusive rather than inclusive, and just about always oppressive.

Instead, our Pagan faith tradition honors the diversity of Divinity and the divinity of diversity. Our many Gods, or, if you prefer, many models of the Sacred, show us an inclusive holiness that crosses all lines: gender, age, occupation, whatever. Balance and integration are also important to us, so we often use marriage myths to model the reconciliation of apparent opposites into dynamic complementarity. This multivalent model of Divinity is very different from simplistic dualism. We do not perceive good and evil as an absolute dichotomy without shading or nuance, nor do we personify them accordingly.

So, although Witches have for centuries been depicted as Devil worshippers, in truth we do not even acknowledge a God of absolute evil, let alone worship one. We do not invert the values and symbols of Biblical religion, nor is our primary religious motivation rebellion against the traditions into which most of us were born. We do not understand or define ourselves in contradistinction to any other faith. Instead we reach back to older and simpler forms, those we believe to be the ancient shamanic ways of tribal Europe, rooted in the living Earth, our beautiful and generous Mother.

Some Witches worship the Goddess exclusively; most also worship Her consort, the wild, free God of animal life, perhaps most widely known as Pan. Some covens and groups of covens concentrate on a particular ethnic pantheon: Celtic, Greek, Egyptian or whatever. Others are more broadly eclectic in their practice. Still, it's fair to

describe us as Immanence-based polytheists who offer primary devotion to the Goddess, Mother Earth.

This is not in any way to deny the existence or power of other Deities, and in fact we address Them when we feel the need. But we are born of Mother Earth, nourished throughout our lives from Her bosom, and return to Her in death just as the leaves return to the forest floor. Embracing Her as our primary contact with the Sacred emphasizes the Immanence aspect of our theology, the interpenetration of Deity with this ordinary and everyday life that we are living.

In addition to our understanding of Deity, most Wiccan covens use two major symbolic systems to represent the wholeness of life. These are the Quartered Circle and the Wheel of the Year.

The Quartered Circle represents wholeness in terms of space - the four cardinal directions, onto which we map seasons, human developmental stages, and many other things. To me, the most important of these are four aspects of human function: knowledge, passion, wisdom and skill. We try to place ourselves at the balance point, in the Center, and draw on these capacities as needed.

The eight-spoked Wheel of the Year represents wholeness in terms of time -- the interacting cycles of Earth and Sun, which produce the seasons of the land. We use this as a metaphor for the endless rhythm of dreaming, doing, harvesting and letting go that moves through the great and small changes of our lives. This is the pulse of day and night, summer and winter, life and death. We aspire to dance gracefully within that rhythm.

2. Cult

Cult is not used here in its recent pejorative sense. Instead, it means ritual, spiritual practices, prayer, ceremony -- all those activities that establish and nurture the participants' relationship with the Sacred and guide and empower participants to live their lives accordingly. This is the two-way path between belief and behavior, which passes through the worshipper's deep mind.

Witches dance, sing, feast, embrace, make music, share poetry, all in the cherished presence of the Ancient Gods. We inherit ritual practices from our predecessors. As we learn from both practice and study, we continue to both refine and develop this goodly heritage, seeking to express our core religious values with increasing clarity. We contribute the fruits of our own research and creativity, constantly enriching the legacy we will pass to younger Witches.

The Wheel of the Year forms the basis for our Wiccan ritual calendar. There are eight festivals, which we call Sabbats, in our year. The Equinoxes and Solstices represent the cycles of the Sun. The four cross-quarter days of Samhain, Brigit, Beltane and

Lunasa, which marked major turning points in the old British agricultural calendar, are more closely Earth related. Taken together, these festivals connect us with all nature, via the ever-turning seasons that directly effect all living things, and also stand for us as symbols for human life stages: birth, adolescence, marriage, death, etc.

Witches also celebrate the rhythms of the Moon, Earth's lovely daughter, bringer of dreams and poetic inspiration. Traditionally, the solar and terrestrial Sabbats are times for community-wide celebration and attunement with natural cycles, the exoteric aspects of our religion, whereas the Moons are for more intensive personal and small-group focus on inner work and conscious contact with the Sacred.

In all faith traditions, ritual - solitary or collective - brings our lives into closer alignment with our Gods. Collective worship also brings us together as a community of people who share similar values and similar models of the Sacred. Although perfection may be forever beyond us, deepening understanding and developing wisdom is a normal expectation. Our ritual patterns - our cult - links our Sacred contact with our ordinary behavior in a double spiral of intertwining growth.

3. Code

Code means the behavioral guidance that all religions provide, both ethics and etiquette. I believe that the central purpose of religion is to sustain, amplify and clarify the connection between our everyday, ordinary lives and our core values, thus nurturing our conscious contact with the Sacred. So, for me, the essential religious question is "what does it mean to live by this?" Lacking a concern for ethics, ritual observance becomes at best a feel-good exercise, a cheap, safe and legal high -- or, at worst, an excuse for blasphemous hypocrisy.

Typically, religions have some core ethical statement, some "golden rule" that summarizes our sense of what conduct is appropriate. Witchcraft is no exception. We call ours the "Wiccan Rede." ("Rede" is an archaic word, derived from the Middle English *reden*, which means to guide or to direct. "An" is an archaic equivalent of "if.")

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

This is a simple, powerful statement of situational ethics and radical freedom. Witches accept no arbitrary restraints on our freedom of choice. We have no universally- applicable set of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt nots." Any harmless behavior is permissible to us. For us, the term "victimless crime" is an offensive oxymoron. Neither does our religion seek to regulate the minutia of our daily lives in order to maintain our collective sense of identity. We follow a "high-choice" ethic.

This may seem like permissiveness, but in fact our way is far more demanding than the most stringent set of commandments. Without rules, the burden falls on each of us to discern and to avoid or minimize any harm that may come from our actions. Without any absolute standard of good and evil, we are each required to think and feel our way through all the complexities, weigh all the probable results and implications of our choices. In the crises and choice points in our personal lives and in our responses to community and social issues, no authority figure directs us. We are on our own.

We have no "orthodox" rulings on marriage, sexuality, divorce, military service or its avoidance, assisted suicide, and the like, although certainly we think and talk about such subjects. When I, as a priestess, am asked for counsel, my proper role is to make sure that the inquirer has explored in full depth, considered many perspectives, used both their minds and their hearts in coming to a conscientious choice. Ultimately, each of us must take our own responsibility and experience the outcomes of our actions. In a world of cause and effect, there is no need for contrived retribution.

Some of us believe that cause and effect, which we call "karma," can play out over many lifetimes. Others understand reincarnation as a metaphor for all the cycles and changes within this life, each felt as a little death or a small rebirth. We are also taught the principle of "threefold return." Some of us take the quantity literally, others understand this as a metaphor pointing to the reality that whatever goes around comes around *amplified*, and in utterly unpredictable ways. These differences of detail aside, Wiccans understand that we ourselves will reap the rewards, and bear the consequences, of both our actions and our omissions.

The Rede is basic, a common starting point. First, do no harm. Second, tolerate no restrictions unless the behavior they seek to proscribe is demonstrably harmful. Third, when you see harm done, take what action you can to protect and heal, while respecting the free will of those you would aid. These good rules offer us maximal freedom and full responsibility, but little guidance for personal growth and development.

And here is where polytheism gets really interesting. Each of us is a unique individual with a special set of potentials to develop, gifts from the God/dess for us to bring to the community and the world. We also go through some very different developmental phases during our lives.

So we typically work with one, or a very few, God/desses at a time, those whose energies, stories and symbols seem related to the current stretch of our growth path. We seek Their guidance through ritual invocation and apply it in our daily lives. It follows that Priestesses of Athena, Aphrodite, or Hestia would behave quite differently. This might very well extend to symbolic trivia like our choices in clothing or food, quiet reminders of Whose energies we are working with at this time. None of

these is seen as holier or more ethical than the other, simply different. Through all our stages and phases, we live by the Rede.

Our code is clearly not the same as some others, but we have a code. Live in accord with your own core values. Be careful about what energies you call into your life. Take heed of the voices on the wind. An it harm none, do what you will!

4. Community

Community means the whole web of human relationships that support and nurture us, large and small, intimate and extended, formal and informal, all the ways in which we connect with people of like mind and common interest. Here, we are specifically discussing religious community, the human context for each person's spiritual growth.

Most Witches, most of the time, work in covens. A coven is a small, close-bonded Wiccan group that works intensely together over a long period of time. Traditionally, covens have no more than thirteen members. Covens may be all female, all male, or mixed. Some have leaders, an individual or a couple, others are non-hierarchical collectives. All of them are primary, intimate support groups in which people learn, work, worship and grow together.

Although most of us are coveners, solitary Witches certainly exist. Covens dissolve. Career moves or other life changes take people far away from their covens. Some Witches find occasional solitary phases to be important to their growth, and still others feel called to be life-long solitaires. Our religion offers many choices and honors many Paths.

Probably the majority of North American covens are bootstrap operations. A group of friends became interested in the Old Ways of Nature. They began to research and study, and to pool their knowledge. Eventually, this knowledge flowed into the creation of rituals that worked for the members. The process of study and experimentation became self-reinforcing, and the members eventually reached the point where they felt comfortable calling themselves priest/esses. That's all it takes. Perhaps by the Goddess' own grace, righteous covens certainly can self-generate.

Other covens - Proteus happily included - grow out of Traditions and lineages. For us, our Traditions and lineages are not just our historical roots, they are external support systems for our covens. The term "Tradition" means to us much the same thing as "denomination" means to a Protestant: a subdivision of our faith, a cluster of covens and/or individuals with their own theological interpretation or ritual style. "Lineage" refers to the direct historical relationship between covens.

Sometimes an experienced member of a coven wants to try some innovations. Sometimes covens just get too large for our comfort. When either (or, more often, both) of these things happen, a "daughter coven" forms. We call this process "hiving

off." Leaders of daughter covens are autonomous, but still enjoy the right to seek the advice and consent of their elders.

All covens, whether they are self-generated or part of a lineage, are nurtured by additional, community-wide circulatory systems. There are literally hundreds of small, amateur magazines, where information, recipes, rituals, poetry, etc. can be shared. Gatherings and festivals, regional and national, let us meet one another, worship together, and share information through formal workshops and casual conversations. The Internet has become a powerful medium for exchange of ideas. And, of course, there are informal networks, and even coven leaders' peer support groups in some localities.

There are also some more institutional supports. Organizations such as Covenant of the Goddess exist to secure us the legal benefits of other churches. They also engage in interfaith outreach and public education, hoping to dispel the old images, and help our neighbors understand us better.

What we don't have, and don't want, is a unitary, pyramidal structure which centralizes authority and distances the people from the Sacred. What we don't have, and don't want, is a religious bureaucracy that would divert our financial and human resources to its own self-perpetuation. What we don't have, and most certainly don't want, is anyone daring to try to intervene or mediate between us and our Gods.

Conclusion:

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that there is an ongoing debate among Witches about whether or not we want to make ourselves known to our neighbors of other religions. On an individual level, this is a personal choice, one that nobody has the right to make for anyone else. Being known as a Witch is still risky in certain areas, certain occupations. Violations of confidentiality are almost always also violations of oath, and, in any case, will not be tolerated in our community.

But without compromising any individual's privacy, we can choose to be better known as a collective entity, as a newly emerging religion. Those of us whose life circumstances permit it can participate in public education and Interfaith work. As our neighbors learn the truth about us, old stereotypes can be corrected, suspicions and fears can be dissipated. We can gain the normal constitutional protections of our freedom of religion. All of us will be safer. More of us can then come out. This spiralling growth of freedom is already in process, much faster than any of us would have imagined even twenty years ago.

And that's not even the most important reason for our emergence.

I'm a priestess, deeply involved in this emerging religion, and so I wonder. Why, after nearly two millennia of brutal suppression and long after most people believed they

were dead and gone, are the Old Gods and the Old Ways now coming so rapidly and so exuberantly back to life. Why now ? Why us? Here's what I think:

There is a sort of conversation going on in our culture between religions, with everyone else listening in. That ongoing religious conversation gives society an important part of its guidance, its values. All the well-known religions have a place at the table, and some of the newer ones are gradually beginning to gain places as well.

Some of the voices at the table argue for repressive and retrogressive actions. A few even call for the establishment of a theocracy in our land. Others, like the much-mourned Martin Luther King, sound a more gracious note. But the conversation is still incomplete. Perhaps there are many voices, many views still left out. The omission that appalls and terrifies me is this: *who at that table speaks for our wounded and threatened Mother Earth?*

Religion connects the Sacred with our everyday behavior in many different ways. Since at least the time of the great Biblical prophets one way has been to offer correction, to "speak truth to power." So, through centuries of history, religion has been the cry of the oppressed, the soul of a soulless situation, the heart of a heartless world. That has not changed, nor should it. What has changed is the terrifying scope of the present crisis.

Modern industrial society having lost its heart and soul, now turns to devour its own body. Blind, psychotic greed, directed against the Earth Herself, throws Her into a life-threatening crisis. She needs Her guardians, advocates, companions and healers. She needs us right now. She calls us to Her. As all our lives depend on Hers, so this need must be met. We must learn what we forgot: to see Her once again as a Sacred living thing. We must share this knowledge with others, not to change the way anyone worships, but to change the way we all live.

Now, the Earth is a Witch, and the greedy burn Her
stripping Her down with mining and poisoning Her skies.
But to us the Earth is a healer, our teacher, our Mother,
the weaver of the web of life that keeps us all alive.
She gives us the vision to see through the chaos.
She gives us the courage. It is our will to survive.
---(adapted from "The Burning Times" by Charlie Murphy)

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Note: This article is heavily adapted from one called "Explaining Wicca," which appeared in Gnosis #48 (Lammas, 1998) pp. 22-26.