**Wicca and the Church of Satan: A Comparative**

**Analysis**

Soc 151 Sociology of Religion and Ideology / Prof. L. Kaelber

**Introduction**

Wicca and the Church of Satan are two new religious movements that are often extremely controversial and misrepresented. Both movements are often misconstrued as devil worshiping cult-type religions, where in fact neither one do. In fact, Satanism does not even worship any kind of god or deity, while Wicca is more focused on nature and its two deity figures. Though controversial, both of these movements are actually harmless, and preach ideas such as a variation of Karma (in Wicca) and indulging one's self (in Church of Satan).

**History of Wicca**

The classification of Wicca as a new religious movement is somewhat controversial. Many members and supporters of this movement claim that, as Wicca incorporates many elements from ancient pagan practices dating back thousands of years, that the religion itself is one of the oldest religious movements around. However, as a modern movement, Wicca has only been around since the early 1900s. In the 1920s, Dr. Margaret Murray compiled several books that documented the practices of those who were burned as witches in early modern Europe, and debunked the notion that these were Satanic practices, but rather showed elements of ancient paganism. Several years later, a British civil servant, Gerald Gardner, wrote several books about his personal experiences in a Wiccan coven, detailing modern Wiccan practices and their relation to the ancient practices (Bahnisch 2001: 5). Gardner created his own branch of Wicca in the 1950s, which became what we know today as modern Wicca, through his works *Witchcraft Today*, in 1954, and his “Craft Laws,” in 1956 (Clifton 2006: 7). Gardner was one of the first to dispute the origins of Wicca, claiming that it is the continuation of ancient Celtic, Druidic and Pagan practices, that had to “go underground” to survive the Christian persecutions in the 1700s. This movement has gained popularity rapidly over the last 30-40 years, partly due to a growing media portrayal of witchcraft, leading to an increased interest. In fact, in surveys conducted between 1990 and 2000, Wicca and other Pagan religions are growing faster than any other religious category (Jensen 2008: 753-754). This increase in popularity has not been particularly well received by traditional Wiccans, as it is partially due to an inaccurate popular media portrayal.

**Beliefs and Practices**

Wicca is one of the modern practices of magic. It has, as most religions do, a central deity (two, in this case), however, in Wicca, this figure is not a specific one. Wiccans believe that there are two god figures, one male and one female, that provide balance to the world. These god figures are not represented as specific gods, and can in fact be represented by the gods of other religions (for example, using the Egyptian goddess Isis as the female, and Osiris as the male, or other religious figures) (Vergara 1998). The female god has three forms, referred to as the “Triple Goddess,” which are the maiden, the mother and the crone, each which represents different traits and aspects of a woman's life. “The Maiden exemplifies innocence and adventurousness, the Mother embodies compassionate love, and the Crone represents wisdom.” The male god, often referred to as the “Horned God,” often stands for hunting, strength and virility (Vergara 1998). In addition to belief in these deities, Wicca also has its own view on the afterlife. Rather than a Christian heaven of hell, Wiccans believe in reincarnation, with some believing there is an end to the reincarnation cycle, such as in Buddhism, and some believing that reincarnation is endless, “in accordance with the cyclical nature of the universe” (Relgionfacts.com 2005). Wicca also places a strong emphasis on the elements of nature (earth, air, fire, water, spirit), and often incorporates them into their rituals. These elements are also incorporated into the main holy symbol of Wicca, the Pentagram, which represents each of these five elements (Grimassi 2003: 163-164). Most Wiccans also believe in and practice magic, which they see not as a supernatural force, but a force within nature that allows them to cause subtle changes to create a desired result. A Wiccan source of mine explained that any magical spells one casts will come back to you threefold, for example, a helpful spell can give you great fortune, but a harmful spell could effectively be your own undoing. In fact, this concept applies to all actions, not just magical ones, and can mean either an effect you cause will return to you with three times its force, or that it will affect you in mind, body and spirit. This reminded me somewhat of the concept of Karma, with a more literal aspect. One of the draws of Wicca that separates it from most other religions is its stance on morality. There is very little in the way of a code of ethics for Wiccans, leaving them to act and practice how they choose, with one key statement in the Wiccan Rede (a very loose code of actions) which states, “if it harm none, do what you will” (Bahnisch 2001: 3). In practice, there is much variation between Wiccans, as there is much freedom to practice how you wish. The religion is set up by covens, which are small groups of Wiccans that practice together, occasionally with a High Priest or Priestess leading, which seems to be the extent of organizational structure, as there is no formal hierarchy, and many Wiccans practice alone, leaving some to categorize Wicca as a “living room religion” (Jensen 2008: 755). Wiccans usually carry out rites within a “magic circle,” which is supposedly purified. These rites are often carried out on full moons, but there aren't really any formal guidelines to practicing.

**History of Satanism**

Although Satanism is in fact an extremely ancient religion, a certain, more quantifiable branch of it, known as the Church of Satan, is a recent and rapidly growing religion. The Church of Satan was created in 1966 by Anton LaVey, who was the High Priest of the church until 1997, when he passed away (Smulo 2002: 239). LaVey created the Church of Satan as an alternative to traditional religions, which he criticized for their strict rules and regulations, which caused “unnecessary guilt and remorse” (Abrams 2000). The creation of the Church of Satan had a huge backlash in popular culture, as most people feared it and its practices, most notably a period in the 1980s known as the “Satanic Panic,” where crimes were pinned on Satanism, specifically abuse of children and the causes of teen suicides (Beyer). Anton LaVey also wrote the main text of the Church of Satan, *The Satanic Bible*, which continues to be the most important text in the Church, as well as keeping the legacy of LaVey alive (Lewis 2001). In fact, in many cases *The Satanic Bible* is the main draw of the religion, with as many as 20% of recent members claiming that this writing introduced them to the religion and sustained their beliefs (Lewis 2002).

**Beliefs and Practices**

The Church of Satan is an extremely interesting religion because, while it has a fairly traditional religious set up (ex., holy text, churches and priests, a clearly defined set of rules), it does not worship any god or deity, despite the name. Most of its members are atheist or agnostic, and the current High Priest of the Church of Satan, Peter Gilmore, stated that atheism or agnosticism was the first step in Satanism (Shankbone 2007). The Church's use of Satan as a figurehead, according to LaVey, has more to do with rebelling against the conformist, Christian society. Like in Wicca, an emphasis is placed on power, virility, strength, and other such pagan beliefs (Abrams 2000), and the power of the individual is strongly emphasized (Beyer). In fact, one of their phrases, “no redeemer liveth,” supposedly indicates that each member is their own redeemer, responsible for their own lives and actions. Satanists are taught to value life, fight against their enemies, and to not restrain themselves in indulgence; they are often viewed as hedonistic. The nine main tenets of the Church of Satan sum up their beliefs:

* Satan represents indulgence, instead of abstinence!
* Satan represents vital existence, instead of spiritual pipe dreams!
* Satan represents undefiled wisdom, instead of hypocritical self-deceit!
* Satan represents kindness to those who deserve it, instead of love wasted on ingrates!
* Satan represents vengeance, instead of turning the other cheek!
* Satan represents responsibility to the responsible, instead of concern for psychic vampires!
* Satan represents man as just another animal, sometimes better, more often worse than those that walk on all fours, who, because of his "divine spiritual and intellectual development, has become the most vicious animal of all!
* Satan represents all of the so-called sins, as they all lead to physical, mental, or emotional gratification.
* Satan is the best friend the church has ever had, as he has kept it in business all these years! (Roleff 2002: 6)

The first of these two tenets can be said to sum up the values of the Church of Satan, as Satanists practice indulgence and realism as opposed to spiritualism (Petersen 2009: 29-30).

In terms of actual practice, it seems that meetings are very infrequent. They have temples, known as grottoes, where they meet for special events, but there is no regular weekly meetings of any sort. When there are gatherings, magic rituals are performed to achieve certain desired goals. “Sexual rituals [are performed] to aid in attaining physical ecstasy, compassionate rituals to help loved ones, and destructive rituals to release anger and hatred” (Abrams 2000). The Church of Satan is structured in a fairly typical religious way; there are several key figures that essentially rule the Church, with a High Priest at the head, as well as priests to lead all of the local grottoes. Most members wish to keep their membership secretive and often practice alone, so the actual number of members is unknown, though the Church of Satan states it to be over 10,000 (Robinson).

**Comparison**

Wicca and the Church of Satan, though harboring some very key differences, seem to preach a fairly similar philosophy. Both religious movements emphasize the individual, and one's right to practice religion how it fits them personally, as well as some magical elements that are not seen in many other religions. However, they go about achieving this philosophy in very different ways, and have many major differences. Wicca is a very ritual-centered religion that places heavy emphasis on the spiritual, magic, and its central deities. Wicca follows a much more traditional religious structure in terms of dealings with the supernatural, as it has gods, though not necessarily specific ones, as well as beliefs about the afterlife, and a moral code of ethics (between the rule of threes and the Wiccan Rede), though not a very strict one. They way Wicca emphasizes the individual is that it does not have any strict rules about how one goes about practicing it, and is without any strict rules or regulations. The Church of Satan, in contrast, achieves a similar philosophy in pretty much the opposite way. There is no god or deity to be worshiped in the Church of Satan, and atheism or at least agnosticism is encouraged among its members. There are some rituals and magic performed as a part of this religion, but these are not emphasized very much, and are certainly not the central focus of the religion, as in Wicca. The Church of Satan focuses on indulging in desires and even what traditional religions perceive as sins, in order to obtain self-gratification. The Church of Satan is all about accepting yourself as an individual, doing the things you desire to do, and essentially taking responsibility and control of your own life.

 Both of these religious movements are not readily accepted by traditional religions within society, but with varying degrees of severity. Wicca, as a form of pagan magic, is, in fact, often confused with Satanism by many, and any magic that it involves is often misinterpreted as being devil worship. In my research, I found several Christian websites that did not quite fear Wicca as a religious movement, but certainly were not accepting of it. In fact, one of them even had an extensive section about what to do if you discovered your child was practicing Wicca, which was mostly just “pray for them and teach them the Bible.” I found it interesting how little is actually known about Wicca among these traditional groups, and how often it was perceived as threatening, when it could be summed up (over-simply, perhaps) as Buddhism with magic and deities. The Church of Satan, on the other hand, is extremely controversial, not only among traditional religions, but in society in general. Christianity and other popular monotheistic religions do have some good reason to be skeptical of the Church of Satan, as its creation was essentially in defiance of the traditional religious structure, and preaches almost the exact opposite values. The belief that it practices dangerous devil worship is untrue, but is often the way the Church is seen by outsiders, and the way they are often portrayed in mass media.

**Conclusion**

In the end, both of these religious movements are controversial, but ultimately not violent or dangerous. Their teachings are not ones of destruction, but ones of individualism and strength. While their practices or non-conformist ways may frighten many who adhere to traditional religion, if more was known about Wicca and the Church of Satan, perhaps they would become more accepted.

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