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## Modern Wicca and the Witchcraft Movement

Wicca is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States and has followers across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, there is a distinct lack of public awareness that Wicca exists at all. Accurate numbers of practitioners are particularly difficult to gauge because most surveys lump Neo-Pagans all together, sometimes they combine all alternative religious traditions, and sometimes it is categorized only as “other.” Furthermore, many individuals are not comfortable self-identifying as Wiccan and thus either do not respond to such surveys or claim some other religious affiliation. According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, a frequently quoted survey of religious adherents, there were about 600,000 Neo-Pagans in the United States, with somewhere near half of them identifying as Wiccan.<sup>2</sup> Their estimate is conservative compared to the website Religious Tolerance which estimated in 2018 there might be three million Wiccans in the United States<sup>3</sup> The most reliable estimates we have come from the Pew Research Center who in 2008 found .4% or roughly 1 to 1.5 million Americans identify as either Wiccan or Pagan, although that number is likely to be significantly higher due to under-reporting.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the multitude of Wiccans worldwide, it is still a religion many find mysterious and sinister, while others are unaware it even exists. In this paper I endeavor to give a brief overview of what Wicca is in order to challenge pre-conceived notions based on ignorance or fear. Next, I situate the history of Wicca by assessing the link between the Burning Times and the development of Wicca. The fear of witches and the association of women with evil led to the deaths of millions of people across Europe and resulted in the Salem Witchcraft Trials. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> Gary F. Jensen and Ashley Thompson, “‘Out of the Broom Closet’: The Social Ecology of American Wicca,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 4 (2008): 753–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5906.2008.00439.x>.

<sup>2</sup> Barry A Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008),” 2008, 26.

<sup>3</sup> “How Many Wiccans Are There?,” Religious Tolerance, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/estimated-number-of-wiccans-in-the-united-states-7.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> “How Many Wiccans Are There?”

today, Salem boasts a flourishing Wiccan community. By exploring the history and practices of wicca and witchcraft, I will help breakdown stereotypes and misinformation. In this paper I argue for a rebranding of the term Witch that recognizes the positive influence of Wiccans on society. Secondly, I encourage members of the Wiccan community to reclaim the term Witch and embrace their full identity.

Wiccans frequently refer to themselves under the broader term of Pagans or Neo-Pagans. Wiccans frequently refer to themselves under the broader term of Pagans or Neo-Pagans. The word "Pagan" itself comes from the Latin *paganus* meaning "someone who is not from the city, rather from the country," which can have a pejorative connotation when used by non-Pagans as someone who is uncivilized and uneducated.<sup>5</sup> Neo-Pagan is used to denote a modern recreation of indigenous beliefs and practices. This is a recognition their beliefs are inspired by ancient traditions but not directly descended from those practices. Wicca is the largest subgroup of Neo-Pagan religions.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the most contested name for Wiccans is witch. This moniker is a reflection that most, though certainly not all, Wiccans engage in Witchcraft as part of their overall religious practice. Furthermore, even those Wiccans who do not practice the magickal aspects of Witchcraft, most often refer to their religious practice as "the Craft." According to Erin Drangonsong from *Wicca Spirituality* the word craft is significant because it "derives from a Germanic word meaning strength...A craft implies artistry. And that's what being a Witch is. It's something you practice, thus gaining skills and strength - spiritual and personal empowerment. It is an artistic expression

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<sup>5</sup> Wren Walker, "Intro: Pagans, Heathens and Recons," *The Witches Voice*, September 15, 2018, <http://www.witchvox.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Manon Hedenborg-White, "Contemporary Paganism," in *Controversial New Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aa. Petersen, Second (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 318–19.

of being human.”<sup>7</sup> There are also individuals who do not identify as Pagan, but who practice Witchcraft solely as a magickal art. Among Pagans it is common to spell magick with a k to differentiate it from acts of illusion and stage magic.

One of the major reasons Wicca is not widely accepted is ignorance. Old stereotypes of witches persist in the American imagination and many people associate witches with devil worship.<sup>8</sup> For others it conjures up images of The Wicked Witch of the West and other pop cultural representations.<sup>9</sup> Even positive representations of witches in popular culture tend to depict them as supernatural with inherent magical abilities, instead of it being a religion. This has led to persecutions and resistance to recognizing Wicca as an official religion, thus protected by the First Amendment.<sup>10</sup> Some Wiccans use the word Witch to intentionally confront stereotypes and raise awareness of what Witches are really like in order to recast the term in a positive light. However, while some have reclaimed the term Witch and wear it as a badge of pride, many see it as a derogatory term and avoid either being labeled or self-identifying as a Witch. The fear of negative backlash is one reason for the lack of awareness about Wicca, as many adherents practice in secret or do not talk about their beliefs with friends and family. In fact, the act of publicly admitting you are a witch is often referred to as “coming out of the broom closet.”<sup>11</sup>

The reason that we do not have a better count of how many Wiccans live in the United States is precisely because when filling out the census or answering polling questions, many

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<sup>7</sup> “Being A Witch: Wicca & Witch Craft Today,” Wicca Spirituality, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.wicca-spirituality.com/being-a-witch.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Austin Cline, “Persecuting Witches and Witchcraft,” ThoughtCo, October 25, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/persecuting-witches-and-witchcraft-4123033>.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey B. Russell and Brooks Alexander, *A New History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Chas S. Clifton, “Fort Hood’s Wiccans and the Problem of Pacifism” (American Academy of Religion, Nashville, Tennessee, 2000), <http://www.chasclifton.com/papers/hood.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Jensen and Thompson, “Out of the Broom Closet.”

Wiccans abstain from admitting their true religious identity. For some, it is simply a matter of wanting to keep their religion private, but for many there is an element of fear.<sup>12</sup> This reaction is partially justified, there have been cases of people being insulted, denied services, discriminated against in housing, being fired, and losing custody of their children because they are a Witch.<sup>13</sup> However, this fear of persecution results in a smaller amount of known Wiccans and thus the continued belief that Wicca is a small fringe movement and not a legitimate religion.<sup>14</sup> Polling results are further skewed because many questionnaires lump Wiccans with Paganism more broadly, all new religious movements, or even as just “other.” Therefore, even those who would choose to identify as Wiccan are not being specifically recognized and counted as such.<sup>15</sup> This method of grouping Pagan religions fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of Wicca as well as its widespread practice.

Due to the decentralized nature of Wicca, it is difficult to make general claims about specific beliefs and practices which can differ widely among adherents. However, there are some broad generalities that apply to the majority of practitioners. As an earth-based or nature religion Wicca focuses on the connection between humanity, nature, and the divine. The general understanding is that the divine is present in humans and in all aspects of nature creating a web of mutual interaction.<sup>16</sup> Most Wiccans conceive of the divine as being manifested as “two deities- Goddess and God-who appear in different forms in different seasons of the year.”<sup>17</sup> Sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> Neela Banerjee, “Wiccans Keep the Faith With a Religion Under Wraps,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2007, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/16/us/16wiccan.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Diane Smith, “Keeping Silent or Telling the World: The Wiccan Dilemma,” *Dummies* (blog), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.dummies.com/religion/paganism/keeping-silent-or-telling-the-world-the-wiccan-dilemma/>.

<sup>14</sup> Summer Song, “Modern Day Persecution of Witches,” *Witch Digest*, April 22, 2015, <https://witchdigest.com/184/modern-day-persecution-of-witches/>.

<sup>15</sup> “How Many Wiccans Are There?”

<sup>16</sup> James R. Lewis, “Introduction,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Vivianne Crowley, “Wicca as Nature Religion,” in *Nature Religion Today Paganism in the Modern World*, ed. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 170.

the Goddess and God are believed to be different aspects of a cosmic oneness. If only one deity is worshipped, it is almost always the Goddess which is then reflected in an emphasis on the divine feminine.

Wicca advocates for celebrating personal identity and shared humanity. It is a creative and life-affirming practice. Some adherents are members of a coven, or small group. Covens maintain their own unique traditions and hierarchal structure. Most Wiccans are solitary practitioners, thus providing maximum flexibility in individualizing the religion. Wiccans are encouraged to adopt the elements that best suit their needs and to modify or discard others. It is seen as a living religion; thus, rituals and beliefs may evolve over time. There are, however, a few core tenants that are recognized by (almost) all Wiccans: (1) The feminine being at least as important as the masculine, (2) The importance of preserving the environment, (3) Moral behavior as determined largely by the individual, (4) Positive attitudes towards human sexuality as a gift of the Goddess, (5) Celebration of the passage of the seasons.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most widely accepted beliefs is to live in accordance with Craft Law which is summed up in the *Wiccan Rede*: “an it harm none do what ye will.”<sup>19</sup> In other words an individual may engage in any act that is pleasing to them. However, if doing so will negatively affect others, Wiccans are compelled to stop and weigh the consequences versus the benefits of doing so.<sup>20</sup> There are no set rules for how to live in accordance with this creed; instead individuals are empowered to make their own moral decisions based on their empathy for others. The *Wiccan Rede* is related to another guiding principal, the belief in the Rule of Three, which

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<sup>18</sup> “An Introduction to Wicca,” Religious Tolerance, accessed November 26, 2018, [http://www.religioustolerance.org/wic\\_intr.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/wic_intr.htm).

<sup>19</sup> “The Wiccan Rede Explained | Wiccan Universe Home Site,” accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.wiccanuniverse.com/blog/the-wiccan-rede-explained/>.

<sup>20</sup> “The Wiccan Rede Explained | Wiccan Universe Home Site.”

states that whatever energy you put out into the universe will come back to you threefold.

Wiccans interpret the *Rede* and the Rule of Three as advocating not just avoiding harm but actively seeking to help others, preserve the environment, and spread love.

Therefore, Wiccans don't practice "black magick" that harms others because that would ensure their own suffering. Which is not to say there are not other Pagans who may engage in such magickal workings. Additionally, magick is not the supernatural force depicted in fantasy and science fiction. The goal of magick is the channeling of positive energy.<sup>21</sup> Magick is the ritual use of words and actions to send positive energy into the universe in order to affect change; as such, it operates in the same way as prayer.<sup>22</sup> Spell work often involves ritual tools and may call upon the elemental powers as well as the gods, and similar to prayer is used both for thanksgiving and to request blessings.

Starhawk, prominent author, high priestess and co-founder of the reclaiming Tradition of Witchcraft, offers one of the best descriptions of Wicca. She asserts that Wicca "is not a religion with a dogma, a doctrine, or a sacred book; it is a religion of experience, of ritual, of practices that change consciousness and awaken power-from-within. Beneath all, it is a religion of connection with the Goddess, who is immanent in nature, in human beings, in relationships."<sup>23</sup> Another description of Wicca is proposed by Vivianne Crowley, an author, university lecturer, psychologist, and a High Priestess and teacher of the Wiccan religion, who describes how in Wicca, the divine is seen as a "force" or "energy" that is manifest in the world of nature. The

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<sup>21</sup> Vexen Crabtree, "Prayer Is Magic, and Prayers Are Spells," [www.humanreligions.info](http://www.humanreligions.info), accessed February 26, 2019, [http://www.humanreligions.info/prayer\\_is\\_magic.html](http://www.humanreligions.info/prayer_is_magic.html).

<sup>22</sup> H. S. Versnel, "Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion," *Numen* 38, no. 2 (1991): 177, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3269832>.

<sup>23</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982). xii

divine does not exist in a different plane of existence, like heaven for example, but is fully present in the world at all times.<sup>24</sup>

In Wicca individual expression of personal beliefs and performance of rituals is encouraged. As Starhawk reminds us, “because the Goddess is here, She is eternally inspirational. And so, [Wicca] is eternally reinvented, changing, growing, alive.”<sup>25</sup> Wicca has connections to ancient practices but also adapts to meet the current needs of practitioners. There are numerous books, articles, and websites that discuss the basic tenets of Wicca and lay out step by step instructions for various rituals and spell work. However, these simply offer structure and guidance; none of these are held to the level of scripture or taken to be definitive or necessary. While some other religions present their beliefs as monolithic and unchanging, lack of a textual history and centralized authority means that for Wiccans the emphasis is on individual interpretation and experimentation which allows for adaptation, so practices remain relevant.

Unlike other religions Wiccans “do not view release from the physical world as the goal of religious life. Rather than a burden, life in the body is viewed as good, and physical pleasure is a blessing that should be sought rather than avoided.”<sup>26</sup> What is not sought is perfection. Many Pagans regard the gods “not as perfect but as evolving just as humans are.”<sup>27</sup> In Wicca members have elected to “live in the world rather than attempt to overcome or escape from it.”<sup>28</sup> People do not join Wicca because they see humanity as dysfunctional and the world as broken, yet they are also well aware of the problems of life. Hence many are active in social and political causes such

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<sup>24</sup> Crowley, “Wicca as Nature Religion,” 170.

<sup>25</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics*. xii

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>27</sup> Joanne Pearson, “Assumed Affinities: Wicca and the New Age,” in *Nature Religion Today Paganism in the Modern World*, ed. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 49.

<sup>28</sup> Pearson, 47.

as supporting feminism, ecological protection, tolerance, and human rights. Making the world a better place is seen as a spiritual act. Wicca does not claim to solve all problems through magick but engaging with the magicks of this world is a way to elicit positive change.<sup>29</sup>

The growing popularity of Wicca is due in part to a large influx of teenagers and young adults “who are rejecting what they feel is the autocracy, paternalism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and insensitivity to the environment that are found in the conservative wings of some of the larger religions.”<sup>30</sup> Another major draw for people is that they see it as a way to connect with their heritage and the traditional practices of their ancestors. There are branches within Wicca who look to Greece, Rome, Egypt, Italy, Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, the UK, and Native Americans for influence. James Lewis, a scholar of New Religious Movements and New Age religion states that “most serious participants would say that they were *born* pagans rather than converted—that the movement made immediate sense to them, and they felt at home from the very beginning of their involvement.”<sup>31</sup>

Acts that other religions consider sinful or taboo, such as the use of mind-altering substances, nudity, sexual intercourse, and magick are viewed as a celebration of life and acts of worship. In Wicca any action that makes an individual feel alive and happy, as long as it does not harm others, is considered positive. Such behaviors are not just self-fulfilling, they are viewed as an act of worship. This sentiment is echoed in *To Ride a Silver Broomstick* in which Silver Ravenwolf a prominent writer and practicing Witch herself, declares “Witchcraft is definitely an enjoyable practice. There is no fear, no hatred, no cowering at Divinity.”<sup>32</sup> For Wiccans morality

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<sup>29</sup> Pearson, 47–48.

<sup>30</sup> “An Introduction to Wicca.”

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>32</sup> Silver RavenWolf, *To Ride a Silver Broomstick: New Generation Witchcraft* (St Paul Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1994). xv

is not based on fear of divine punishment. Instead of being viewed as the root of evil as the Christian story of Adam and Eve suggests, in Wicca women are hailed as keepers of ancient knowledge and revered for their power. Wicca can be understood as a practice of self-love as well as self-empowerment.

Despite Wicca's call for good works, it still faces charges of devil worship. Margot Adler, author, journalist, and practicing Witch, discusses how Wicca is difficult for others to understand, especially if they come from a Christian background. This is because there is no sacred book, few creeds, and no prophets, and it has a much more diffused organizational structure. Instead it is composed of "seasonal celebration, the cycles of planting and harvesting, on custom and experience rather than the written word."<sup>33</sup> This encourages a focus on personal practice and a return to nature. This anti-structure is a foreign concept for many and can seem like the antithesis of Christianity with its focus on scripture and ecclesiastical authority. When ideas are unfamiliar they are often met with suspicion and persecution. Since its inception Witchcraft has been a mysterious practice that has been characterized by some as evil.

In the next section I will discuss the development of Wicca in conjunction with the raising fears about witches that dominated the Early Modern period. The history of those who practiced the Old Religion, also known as Witchcraft, is inextricably tied to the fate of thousands of women the Christian Church declared to be witches. One of the earliest recorded uses of the term "witchcraft was in 900 CE, when the Catholic Church published the canon *Episcopi*, which described witchcraft as Devil-worship. Initially this cannon condemned belief in witches and witchcraft claiming they did not exist but would later be used to punish practitioners of witchcraft. The popular image of witches as evil devil worshippers who flew on broomsticks to

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<sup>33</sup> As quoted in, Dennis D. Carpenter, "Emergent Nature Spirituality," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 41.

midnight satanic orgies and drank the blood of babies, created by the Christian Church in the 1400s, shapes many people's notions about Witchcraft today.<sup>34</sup>

Until the 1980s, most Wiccans saw their religion as directly related to pre-Christian rituals and beliefs. The “Myth of Wicca” as Adler has coined it, links modern practices of Wicca to Goddess worship and fertility cults dating back to Paleolithic times in an unbroken succession. Witchcraft was a way of life. Initially, Christian beliefs and practices were blended with Pagan traditions in an effort to ease the transition to conversion. Churches were built on already sacred sites; festivals were changed in meaning but kept the same dates. When this became not sufficiently effective at converting the masses, “the Church took the god of the old religion and—as is the habit with conquerors—turned him into the devil of the new one.”<sup>35</sup> The Celtic Connection website further explains this process of demonization. The founder Herne writes, “By making the witch into a diabolical character and turning the old religious deities into devils and demons, the missionaries were able to attach fear to these beliefs which aided in the conversion process.”<sup>36</sup> The Christian Church could then justify their claims that the Old Religion was dangerous and needed to be rooted out.

The Christian Church in the 15th through 18th centuries branded anyone who continued to practice the Old Religion as a witch, who was in league with the devil and must be put to death.<sup>37</sup> The church also solidified its power by accusing anyone who disagreed with orthodox church teaching as a heretic who had to be killed. Anyone could be accused of witchcraft, and

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<sup>34</sup> “The History of Wicca | Wiccan Universe Home Site,” accessed March 1, 2019, <http://www.wiccanuniverse.com/what-is-wicca/wiccahistory/>.

<sup>35</sup> Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 43.

<sup>36</sup> “What Is Wicca?,” The Celtic Connection, n.d., <https://wicca.com/celtic/wicca/wicca.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist’s Perspective,” *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 1 (1980): 1–31.

with no evidence against them could be condemned to death. Witchcraft became a scapegoat for religious dissenters as well as a way to place blame for societal ills such as famine, plagues, wars, and all general misfortunes.<sup>38</sup> Due to fears about women's sexuality and potential power, they were disproportionately affected by the church's practices.<sup>39</sup> Wise women and healers who had previously been venerated for their skills were automatically suspect.

Some of the accused would be considered a Witch in today's understanding of the word, those who practiced the Old Religion that would become Wicca. However, most were God-fearing Christians who were simply victims of the hysteria. None of those killed fit the definition of witch as proclaimed by the Church—evil Devil worshippers actively trying to subvert the Church and cause harm to others. During the Witch Craze, the period from 1400-1650 in Europe that was characterized by witch hunts, the Old Religion was forced underground.<sup>40</sup> Over a three hundred year period, thousands of people were put to death by the Church, 85% of them women.<sup>41</sup> It was unsafe to practice the Old Religion openly, or to even mention disagreeing with official teachings or practices of the church.

The “Myth of Wicca,” which was the popularly believed history of the religion, contends that despite persecution Witchcraft religion and sacred knowledge was kept alive within families. This allowed it to be passed down through the generations in its pure form.<sup>42</sup> In 1951, the Witchcraft Acts of England, which defined witchcraft as a crime punishable by death were repealed. Shortly thereafter these secret religious teachings began to resurface. Individuals

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<sup>38</sup> Russell and Alexander, *A New History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics, and Pagans*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> “The History of Wicca | Wiccan Universe Home Site.”

<sup>40</sup> Ben-Yehuda, “The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries,” 1.

<sup>41</sup> Donna Read, *The Burning Times* (National Film Board of Canada, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 43.

claiming to have been initiated into this religion began publishing books and proclaiming their identity as members of a tradition who could trace their lineage back to the time of the Celts.<sup>43</sup>

At this point the myth began to branch of in many directions. Different Wiccan traditions or sects each have their own version. Many practitioners will mention the work of Margaret Murray, whose *Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921) popularized the notion that the pre-Christian Witchcraft religion has existed in a continuous line as being foundational to their lineage. Another common figure in the history of Witchcraft is Gerald Gardner who was convinced the Witch cult had been successfully passed down but was currently dying. He claimed to be an initiated member of a coven and with their permission, published *Witchcraft Today* and *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, both which detail core beliefs and ritual practices. Ravenwolf posits that Gardner “understood that the young need the Craft as much as the Craft needed a new generation to survive.”<sup>44</sup> Many covens trace their lineage back to Gardner and he is seen as the founder of the new revival of Wicca.

There are currently a number of Wiccans who believe the “Myth of Wicca” is a fully accurate account of their history, but this is becoming less common. Nobody disagrees about the unjust murder of thousands of people during the Burning Times, but whether the Old Religion was able to survive has been a contested issue. For most, authenticity is less important than efficaciousness. Stewart Farrar, one of the most respected Wiccan scholars, describes how it is not the form of a ritual that is significant, but the spirit. He notes how “No coven which has found a given ritual to be effective is going to abandon it just because a scholar proves it was invented.”<sup>45</sup> All traditions were invented at some point, and they have all been shaped by outside

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<sup>43</sup> Adler, 44.

<sup>44</sup> RavenWolf, *To Ride a Silver Broomstick: New Generation Witchcraft*, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart Farrar, *What Witches Do: A Modern Coven Revealed*, 4th ed. (London: Robert Hale, 2010), 20.

influences. Practitioners of Wicca used the work of philosophers, writers, and other religious traditions to create a cohesive a new tradition from what may have originally been a few specific rituals that had managed to survive. However, we have no conclusive evidence for which if any rituals are pre-historic. Wicca reflects an amalgamation of a variety of inspirations. The term Neo-Pagan is an acknowledgement that what is being practiced now is new, it is a revitalization of a former tradition. In the end, most practitioners have come to agree the origin of Wicca is not what grounds their own practice of the Craft.<sup>46</sup> Silver Ravenwolf best captures the notion of change as inevitable,

Wicca, as you practice the religion today, is a new religion, barely fifty years old. The techniques you use at present are not entirely what your elders practiced even thirty years ago. Of course, threads of 'what was' weave through the tapestry of 'what is now.' ...in no way can we replicate to perfection the precise circumstances of environment, society, culture, religion and magick a hundred years ago, or a thousand. Why would we want to? The idea is to go forward with the knowledge of the past, tempered by the tools of our own age.<sup>47</sup>

Today Wicca is practiced worldwide. Persecution of Witches in the U.S is reducing but is still prevalent enough to make intentional communities of Wiccans rare.<sup>48</sup> The largest Wiccan communities are in San Francisco, California and Salem, Massachusetts. Travel writer Lori Erickson notes, “There’s a certain amount of irony in the fact that while Salem’s infamous reputation was formed as a result of its fear of witches, today it is a place where witches gather openly.”<sup>49</sup> At the tail end of the Witch Craze in Europe, Salem was struck by a wave of mass hysteria, and accusations of witchcraft ran rampant. This resulted in the hanging of nineteen

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<sup>46</sup> Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 64–65.

<sup>47</sup> Silver Ravenwolf as quoted in “An Introduction to Wicca.” Quote initially appeared in Bernyce Barlow, *Llewellyn’s 1999 Magical Almanac* (Llewellyn Publications, 1999). 2

<sup>48</sup> Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times: Paganism Revived* (Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1995), 59–61.

<sup>49</sup> “The Witches of Salem Today,” *Spiritual Travels*, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://www.spiritualtravels.info/articles-2/north-america/salem-massachusetts-americas-witch-city/the-witches-of-salem-today/>.

women and one man who was pressed to death. Of course, in 1692 none of the women were witches, and the Witches of today are all Wiccans or other Pagans. There are also some residents who practice Witchcraft not as a religion but solely as a magical art. Today there are between 800 and 1600 Witches in Salem.<sup>50</sup> How has this site of persecution (specifically directed at supposed witches) transformed into a desired location for Wiccans to live?

This populace of Wiccans is not due to Salem trying to forget its history: Salem's economy is based predominantly on tourism and they consciously emphasize their reputation as the "witchy town" to attract visitors. Attractions include the Salem Witch Museum, Salem Museum, Salem Witch Village, Witch History Museum, Witch Dungeon Museum, Nightmare Factory, Corwin/Witch House, Salem Witch Trials Memorial, and the Salem Witch Walk. Visitors can also see the oldest cemetery in Salem, which contains the grave of a Mayflower pilgrim as well as witchcraft trial judge John Hathorne. For visitors who want to get into the witchy mood, there are multiple downtown shops that "are operated by Wiccans and sell herbs, charms, talismans, and other magical equipment. Even in the off-season, the Witch business keeps the money coming into the city."<sup>51</sup>

For the practicing Witches of Salem, the place's magic transcends its history. Margaret McGilvray, who runs "The Witchery, equal parts magic shop and experimental performance art space, says that — despite the innocence of Salem's original "witches" — she's always felt a preternatural connection to the place."<sup>52</sup> Having visited the Witch Museum as a young girl, she sympathized with the accused but also began to realize her own connection to the Craft. She

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<sup>50</sup> "The Witches of Salem Today."

<sup>51</sup> Haley ED Houseman, "The Real Witches of Salem, Massachusetts," *Broadly* (blog), March 2, 2016, [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wnwvqn/the-real-witches-of-salem-massachusetts](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/wnwvqn/the-real-witches-of-salem-massachusetts).

<sup>52</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, "There Weren't Any Witches in Salem in 1693. But There Sure Are Now.," *Vox*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/10/30/16560092/salem-witch-trials-magic-halloween-witchcraft-arthur-miller-crucible-past>.

acknowledges that “part of the draw is ‘commercialism’ — if you’re a witch, Salem is a great place to make a living — but part of it is more profound.”<sup>53</sup> McGilvray finds Salem to be a spiritual home, where she can connect with other like-minded individuals.

What started as a small community of Wiccans has continued to blossom. Many were attracted to the energy of the town. In 1970, Laurie Cabbot was named "Official Witch of Salem, Massachusetts" by Governor Michael Dukakis to honor her work with special needs children. Her store Crow Haven Corner officially brought Witches to Salem.<sup>54</sup> Salem was able to blend 70s-era New Age spirituality with left-wing activism and performative rebellion to become a hipster haven. This influx of millennial Witches became increasingly apparent in 2015 when “Salem’s more eclectic, cluttered-looking witch shops were joined by the sleek, minimalist HausWitch (which itself started as an Instagram), where activist hours are on the schedule alongside Tarot salons and meditation classes.”<sup>55</sup> Cheryl Rafuse from HausWitch notes that “people visit out of interest in the ‘Witch City’ only to fall in love with the place and joke about moving. ‘And then they end up moving here a year later.’”<sup>56</sup>

In 2005, Salem also began to regulate “commercial witchcraft, including protocols that regulate tarot readings and advertising, setting standards for the industry to keep a level playing field.”<sup>57</sup> Salem even has a public relations effort called the Witches Education Bureau. At this time there was a core group of active Wiccans, but their practice focused mostly on tourism and solitary practice. There was not an integrated community performing public rituals. In 2012 Erica Feldmann started HausWitch as a place for local Witches to “find community at regular

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<sup>53</sup> Burton.

<sup>54</sup> “Walking with Witches,” *The Weekly Standard*, October 21, 2018, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/chris-r-morgan/salem-massachusetts-then-and-now-walking-with-witches>.

<sup>55</sup> Burton, “There Weren’t Any Witches in Salem in 1693. But There Sure Are Now.”

<sup>56</sup> Burton.

<sup>57</sup> Houseman, “The Real Witches of Salem, Massachusetts.”

events and workshops. Its contemporary, non-denominational Witchcraft is built around empowerment and inclusion, forming a coven of hipsters and riot grrrls.”<sup>58</sup> HausWitch does not cater to any specific Witchcraft tradition, making it welcoming to all practitioners. The shop attracts locals and tourists alike and has become one of the major centers of Witchcraft in the city.

When this small but increasingly visible group of Wiccans reached a critical mass, many Wiccans flocked to Salem to be a part of this burgeoning community. Even solitary practitioners felt Salem was a place that was supportive of their beliefs.<sup>59</sup> Some came to make a political statement, others simply to find a place they felt accepted. Additionally, they appreciated living in a place where they had easy access to ritual goods and supplies. There is an intentional reclaiming of their history and the term Witch. Here locals are publicly engaging with witchcraft all year long. Cai Radleigh, a Wiccan resident of Salem, declares, "The people are Salem are ready to take [Witchcraft] back for themselves. The magic is here in the everyday vibrations of this town."<sup>60</sup> The Witch community also inspired those who were interested in environmental activism and social justice to come to Salem. Salem commemorates the past and celebrates the present.

Writer Chris Morgan remarks about a visit to Salem that, “Soon enough, Salem seems to me less like Witch City and more like *The American City*. It is the birthplace of part of our national character—the part in which every individual is a seeker, every community a counterculture, every conflict rife with the highest moral stakes.”<sup>61</sup> In Salem history is alive. As a town Salem promotes many of the values inherent in Wicca: a connection to the past, community

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<sup>58</sup> Houseman.

<sup>59</sup> Houseman.

<sup>60</sup> Houseman.

<sup>61</sup> “Walking with Witches.”

engagement, critical thinking, progressive social values, a strong sense of personal identity, and an embracing of creative self-expression. This sentiment is best captured by Lori Erickson who writes,

But it's also possible, I think, to appreciate the fact that Salem today is a measure of how far our nation has come. While we still struggle with religious intolerance in various forms, its most virulent forms have been vanquished. The thriving pagan community in Salem is a testimony to religious freedom in America—freedom which in part was forged in the fires of the Salem Witch Trials. The horror with which the larger nation reacted to the trials led in no small part to our constitutionally protected right to religious freedom and to the separation of church and state.<sup>62</sup>

By acknowledging our nation's history, we can better shape society today. We have seen the result of living in a state of fear, we need to learn from this. We are able to draw inspiration from our roots while also looking to the future and determining what we want our national identity to be. We do not have to approach differing beliefs and practices as something that is bad or dangerous. Diversity is something to be celebrated. Salem is an example of the benefits of Wiccans being more open about their religious identity. They are able to practice their religion without fear of persecution and can connect with like-minded individuals. Furthermore, they have easy access to ritual supplies and other resources need for practice.

As Wicca becomes more visible, there are more opportunities to dispel the myths that still plague modern notions of Witches. Much of the prejudice is based on ignorance rather than malice. Just as Salem has reclaimed its view towards Witches and become a haven for Wiccans, Wiccans everywhere need to reclaim the word Witch. Taking pride in this label is a way for Wiccans to fully embrace their religious identity. In fact, "Some Wiccans feel that living in fear of discrimination or conflict is contrary to their beliefs and limits their ability to practice their

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<sup>62</sup> "The Witches of Salem Today."

religion. Being open and honest about Wicca builds self-confidence, which in turn makes magical work more effective and makes ritual more fulfilling.”<sup>63</sup> Reclaiming the word Witch is a declaration of the beauty and benevolence of Witchcraft and Wicca. Attempting to disassociate from the word Witch, only adds to the assumption it is something evil. Furthermore, I hope that through a better understanding of what Wicca and Witchcraft are, non-Wiccans will come to see this term in a new light.

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<sup>63</sup>Diane Smith, “Keeping Silent or Telling the World: The Wiccan Dilemma,” *Dummies* (blog), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.dummies.com/religion/paganism/keeping-silent-or-telling-the-world-the-wiccan-dilemma/>.

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